

The Silence Between Verses

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Dedication



*Some stories do not begin with us. They begin earlier,
In kitchens that smelled of turmeric and old prayers,
In hands that never stopped working,
In women who loved without making a sound about it.*

To my mother *Madhuri*, the first home I ever knew, who carried everything and made it look like nothing at all.

To my mother-in-law *Madhu*, who has known hardship and chosen, every time, to smile and dance anyway, because that is its own kind of courage.

To my Chooti maa *Shruti*, who walked into our family and became its most quietly brilliant light, who taught me that the pursuit of knowledge never has an age.

To my Naniji *Babui*, who became the matriarch of her family early and built her children's lives with her own hands, who lived alone in her village by her own quiet discipline, never a burden on anyone, and who always had love to give.

To my Ma Dadi *Saraswati*, who saw to it that her daughters went to school — even in the village, even in that era, even when no one else thought to send them.

*These women, the most beautiful I have known.
Not because the world told them so,
But because they carried culture, dignity and love
In everything they did, and asked for nothing in return.
Urmila lived in all of you
Before I ever put her into words.*

And to the men who loved these women well — my father *Akhilshwar*, my father-in-law *Sanjay*, my uncle *Amit*, my Nanaji *Roop Narayan*, who in his era gave his daughters the same love he gave his sons, and never caged the wife he loved, and my Baba *Chitranjan*, who left this world but never quite left me, who loved me as if I were the brightest thing in any room he entered, and who saw something in me long before I saw it in myself.

*This book is for all of you.
The generation that came before.
The ones who made sure I had something worth saying.*

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The cover of this book is its first poem, and you gave it form.

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Prologue



The verses had not yet begun. No arrows had flown. No silence had yet turned into story. But even then — there was a woman who waited.

They speak of Rama's exile. Of Sita's fire. Of Lakshmana's loyalty, etched in steel.

But in the folds of that epic — between battles and bows, between promises and poems — a name lay sleeping.

Urmila.

They remember her as the wife left behind. But she was never behind.

She watched the war. She bore its shadows. She dreamed the Ramayana into memory — and then woke, to live among those who never knew she had been watching.

This is not her revenge. Not her plea. This is her remembering. And finally — her voice.

Birth and Memory

*Some lives begin before they begin. Mine had been waiting in the
moonlight for me to arrive.*



Chapter 1:

Waves of Light



They say I was born the night the moon refused to hide.

Above the sandstone walls of Mithila, the full moon had risen — vast, luminous, almost trembling with its own weight. It pulsed silver across the stillness of midnight, turning every rooftop and courtyard into islands of light. Priests noted the sky with quiet awe; the astronomers debated whether it was a sign, a surge in lunar tides, or something else. Something more.

Later, they would record that the stars over the royal observatory had aligned in a rare configuration — Chitra crossing Rohini, an omen associated with feminine brilliance and disruptive clarity. They wrote it down in three different scrolls, in case the others were lost. I have seen one of those scrolls. The ink has faded to the colour of old turmeric, but the words are still there.

I was born in the eastern wing of Janaka's palace, where the marble floors stayed cool even in the height of summer. The birthing chamber was lit with ghee lamps and sandalwood flames. My mother told me later that the midwife had warmed a copper bowl over the flame before she touched me, so the cold metal would not startle a new soul into crying too soon. I did not cry.

They called me Urmila. *Urmī* — the restless wave. *Ila* — the radiant earth. My father chose the name himself. He liked, he said, that the two halves contradicted each other. He believed contradictions made a person interesting. My mother, who had to wash my hair and listen to my dreams and watch me staring at neem trees, was less certain.



My mother, Queen Sunayana, told me the moonlight touched my forehead the moment I cried.

"You didn't cry, though," she corrected herself often. "You looked up. Not at me, not at the nursemaids. You looked past us. At the ceiling. At the stars. As if you recognised something the rest of us had forgotten."

She would say this in the morning while combing my hair, the small ivory comb catching on the knots my sleep had braided into me. I remember the tug of it, and the warmth of her lap, and the smell of jasmine oil that she rubbed into her palms before she touched my head. Whatever I had seen at the ceiling on the night of my birth, I had forgotten by then. But she had not forgotten, and so it lived in me anyway — passed from her certainty into mine, the way a fire is passed from one wick to the next.

In Mithila, birth was never just an event. It was data. It was epiphany waiting to be translated. Royal births especially were recorded with meticulous attention to astrological configurations, omens, scent patterns, and even the vibrations of the conch blown at the threshold. According to the Vedic scholars, my birth marked a *return* — not a new soul, but a remembering.

The palace I grew up in was more than stone, more than symmetry. It breathed geometry. Its corridors curved inward, not to confine but to hum, as if sound itself had been stitched into the walls by ancient hands. The arches were carved in repeating yantras — geometric diagrams echoing divine balance — and every threshold bore mantra carvings so subtle they only caught light at a specific hour of day.

I spent hours crawling over polished black-stone floors, tracing those markings with my fingers. The stone was cool against my palms; the carvings warmed slightly where the afternoon sun fell on them through the latticework. No one taught me what they meant. But my bones remembered. Or my fingertips did. By the time I was four I

could recognise three yantras by touch alone, in the dark, the way other children recognise their mother's voice.



My earliest memories are laced with fragrance — turmeric and rose oil, frankincense in the women's halls, neem and ash wafting from the fire altars. Sound, too, layered everything: low-voiced hymns from distant courtyards, the rhythmic scrape of scrolls being copied in the scriptorium, the bell-like laughter of my sisters echoing through the atriums.

We were four — Sita, Mandavi, Shrutakirti, and I — spun not only from the same kingdom, but from the same breath of silence. Sisters not merely by blood, but by the secret rhythm tuned between the stars and our bones.

Sita, the eldest, was serenity made flesh. Her eyes held gravity. Her silences were sermons. Mandavi was fire and steel, always questioning, always pushing. Shrutakirti — the softest — watched everything, storing emotion like a well stores water, still on the surface, but endlessly deep.

And me? I was the quiet one. The one who watched.

The nursemaids said I was strange about it. I did not cry when I was hungry; I waited for someone to notice. I did not interrupt the older girls' games; I learnt them by sitting at the edge and copying the rules in my head. My mother once told a visiting rishi that I had been born already knowing how to wait, and that she worried about this. The rishi told her not to. He said some souls arrive with old work still inside them. He said I would understand my own self in time. I did not know then what he meant.

I do now.

I learned to read moods from the flutter of veils, the pauses in my father's footsteps. I learned to tell truth from illusion not through

evidence, but through echo — the subtle change in a room after something unspoken has happened.

And always, there were the dreams.



Before I turned ten, the dreams began — not like stories told at hearthsides, but like fractures in the fabric of sleep itself.

Silver forests. Forgotten names. Tears that belonged to faces I did not yet know. I would wake with my hands clenched, as if I'd been fighting sleep itself.

One morning, I woke with my palm covered in dried ink. I had been writing in the dark — not with my conscious mind, but with something deeper. A script I barely understood. Verses in a dialect only the oldest scrolls used. The ink had stained the bedsheet too. My nursemaid scrubbed at it for an hour with lemon and ash before she gave up, and the stain stayed. I kept that sheet for years. I do not know what became of it after I married.

My father studied the parchment without speaking.

"This is... Rigvedic Chhandas," he murmured.

"But it's not possible," the scribe said. *"She's never studied prosody."*

My father smiled faintly. *"It doesn't matter. Some knowledge isn't taught. It waits."*



From that day, I was allowed into the palace archives. Not like the other girls, who came on special days with tutors — I went alone. Daily. I sat beneath towering wooden shelves that smelled of camphor and oil. I turned scrolls so old they left powdered time on my fingertips. I copied prayers into secret journals. I wasn't seeking

answers. I was seeking textures. A way to feel the world more closely. To know what moved beneath the surface of things. To recognise what my dreams were trying to tell me.

One scroll, tucked in a cracked birch-bark wrapper, caught me by surprise. It spoke of ancestral echoes — that some souls are born with residual frequencies from past epics, like instruments vibrating in resonance with ancient songs. That dreams, if they repeat in exact forms, are not illusions, but mnemonic threads through time.

The verse said,

To dream the same war twice is not madness. It is inheritance.

I didn't know what it meant then. But I knew I was dreaming something larger than myself.

A boy with eyes like broken skies, A path that splits where rivers rise, A love that waits, yet walks alone, A silence deeper than the throne.

I wrote those lines in the margins of my prayer book. The prayer book is gone now — burnt, I think, in the long winter Ayodhya forgot to count. But the margins live in me. Years later, I would realise. I had written Lakshmana before I met him. I had seen the exile before it was spoken. I had carried Sita's fire in dreams long before it touched the earth.



When I turned thirteen, my mother caught me standing in the moonlight barefoot, murmuring something to the neem tree in the courtyard.

"What are you saying?" she asked gently.

"I'm just... asking it to remember me," I said.

She looked at me with a strange fear. *"Why would a tree need to remember you?"*

And I said — truthfully —

"Because I will leave no mark on the scrolls of men. But perhaps the leaves will remember my breath."

My mother did not laugh. She did not scold me. She looked at the neem tree as if seeing it for the first time. Then she took my hand and led me back inside without speaking. I think she understood, even then, that one of her daughters had already begun to belong somewhere the rest of us could not follow.

The neem tree is still there. I have not seen it in many years now, but the messengers who pass through Mithila tell me it still stands. Two more kings have ruled in my father's place. Children I will never meet now run beneath those branches and steal raw mangoes from the lower limbs in summer. They do not know my name.

But the leaves do.

The leaves remember everything.



Chapter 2:

Sisters of the Sacred Thread



Before the war. Before exile laced the air with sorrow. Before sleep wrapped me in her long, unbreaking cloak — I was simply a sister.

A thread among four. Not just sisters by blood, but by the rhythm of growing up in the same rooms, eating from the same brass bowls, hearing the same lullabies sung in slightly different keys by slightly different aunts. Born of the same sky, walking different stars. Each of us a direction.



The women's wing of Mithila curled around a sacred courtyard — a circle of stone, prayer, and blooming lotus patterns. High walls breathed mantras into the breeze. It was said Sage Vishwakarma had shaped the space himself, crafting a womb of light and listening.

I grew up there — among sandalwood gates, lattice windows that caught moonlight, and gardens that smelled of sweet lime and champa. The cooks knew which of us liked our rice with extra ghee and which would refuse anything that touched mustard seed. The gardeners knew which jasmine bush belonged to whom — Sita's was the one beside the temple steps, Mandavi's was the wild one no one could prune, Shrutakirti's was the small white-blossomed one that bloomed only in the early monsoon, and mine was the smallest of all, behind the lotus pond. We were divided by these small things long before we were divided by marriage or fate. They were the way the household held us — by knowing us specifically, by name, by preference.

My father was already the Janaka the world remembers — the philosopher-king, the rajarshi who debated sages and ran a kingdom by morning and the Upanishads by night. He had been famous long before he was a father. By the time I was a child, scholars from across Bharatvarsha came to Mithila seeking his audience the way one seeks a doctor or a teacher, and he received them all between the daily business of running a kingdom. He had one biological daughter — me. He had Sita, who had come to him from the furrow, whom he loved as fiercely as if he had given her his own blood. And he had taken in his brother Kushadhwaja's daughters — Mandavi and Shrutakirti — when their household needed shelter, and raised them alongside us with a tenderness that made the words "niece" and "daughter" lose any meaningful difference. He had no sons and was famously untroubled by the fact. I would learn, later, that this was rarer than I knew. Most kingdoms counted their losses in the absence of sons. Mithila counted its weather, its harvests, its scholars, and its girls, in that order. We were, by his careful arithmetic, never less than enough.

And in that place of fragrance and small particular knowing, I lived with the three souls who shaped me before the world ever did.



Sita — The Sun

Sita was born from furrowed earth. The king found her while ploughing sacred ground for a yajna. She was not born from a womb. She emerged — wrapped in mystery and silence, already holding the weight of story.

I was seven, perhaps, the morning I first understood she was different from us.

We had been sent together to fetch water from the household well — an errand assigned to the younger girls for the smallness of it, not the difficulty. Mandavi had been excused that morning for some reason

I have forgotten. So it was just Sita and me, walking the polished corridor barefoot, our brass pots empty on our hips.

A small bird had fallen from somewhere into the corridor. A sparrow. Its wing was bent the wrong way. It was not yet dead, but it was no longer trying to live — it had reached the part of dying where the body knows before the mind agrees.

I started to cry. I was seven; that is what one does at seven. Sita did not.

She knelt beside the bird and placed both her palms over it, not touching, just hovering. She closed her eyes. She did not pray aloud, but I could feel something moving in the air around her hands — the way a room shifts before a lamp is lit. The sparrow stilled. Not into death. Into a stillness that was somewhere further than death. Sita opened her eyes and looked at me and said, in the most ordinary voice in the world:

"It is all right. It went where it was going."

She picked it up then, and we carried it together to the garden, and we buried it beneath the neem tree. She did not look back at the spot afterwards. She did not need to. Whatever she had done — and to this day I cannot say what she had done — was complete.

People later called her divine. They had their reasons. But to me she was simply Sita-didi. The one who tucked my braid into my blouse so I wouldn't trip. Who never laughed when I cried. Who read scriptures aloud without looking at the page.

"The Vedas aren't read," she once told me. *"They're remembered."*

I never asked how she knew.



Mandavi — The Fire

I was nine the first time I watched Mandavi take apart a scholar in our father's court.

He had come from somewhere south — a man with grey at his temples and the careful manner of someone who had spent his life being agreed with. He was explaining to a circle of women the reason a particular ritual could only be performed by men. Something about purity. Something about the order of things. Something he had clearly said many times before to nodding faces.

Mandavi was eleven. She was sitting on the floor near my mother's knee, eating a guava in small, deliberate bites. She did not look up. She simply said, around the fruit:

"Is the rule that women cannot perform it, sir, or that no one has yet allowed us to?"

The scholar laughed the small startled laugh men used when they were preparing to explain something. He began to speak. Mandavi interrupted him, still not looking up.

"Because the first is scripture. The second is convenience."

My mother's hand stilled on Mandavi's head. The scholar's mouth opened and closed. He looked toward my father, expecting rescue. My father — and I have never forgotten this, because it was the first time I understood that fathers could be quietly afraid of their own daughters — simply nodded once, very slowly, and asked the scholar if he would like more water.

Mandavi finished her guava. She looked at me, briefly, with the conspiratorial half-smile that would later become her signature.

I think I loved her, in that moment, in the particular way younger sisters love the bravery of older ones — the love that is also a kind of permanent envy.

She did not seek out arguments. They found her, the way fire finds dry wood. When she was in a room, the air had a slight charge to it. When she left, the room felt safe again, but less alive. I would learn, eventually, that *less alive* was what most rooms were arranged to produce, and that *safe* was the word grown people used for it.



Shrutakirti — The River

I do not have a single scene of Shrutakirti the way I have of the others. That, I think, was the point of her.

She was the youngest. She did not enter rooms; she filled them by being already there before anyone noticed she had come in. She did not speak so much as she answered — questions that had not been quite asked, troubles that had not yet been quite named. You would find yourself, in the middle of some small ordinary unhappiness, sitting beside her without remembering when she had come to sit, and within a few minutes the unhappiness would have softened, and you would not be sure whether she had said anything or merely been beside you.

Once, when I was eight, I had been sent to bed without supper for a thing I had done that I no longer remember. The punishment had been just. The shame of it was the bigger wound. I lay on my mat in the dark trying not to make crying sounds. After some time — I had not heard her come in — I felt Shrutakirti settle beside me on the floor. She did not lift the blanket. She did not ask what had happened. She did not tell me it would be all right.

What she did was this. She put one small folded piece of paper into my hand, the way you might put a seed into the hand of someone who has forgotten how to grow things. Then she left. I unfolded the paper in the dark. I could not read it then — the room was too black — but I held it through the night, and in the morning I unfolded it again and it said, in her careful child's handwriting:

Even trees listen. Why don't we?

That was Shrutakirti. She had been listening to me through the closed door, and she had decided that what I needed was not comfort but a small instruction, slipped under the wood, asking me to do what she did.

I kept that paper for years. I do not know what became of it. I do know that for a long time afterwards, when I was unhappy, the first thing I would do was sit still and try to listen, the way she had taught me. Not to anyone in particular. To whatever the room was trying to say.



And me?

I was the tide between them. The one who shifted, who listened, who carried the hush between song and flame.

Not the sun. Not the fire. Not the river. But the breath that held them all.

"You don't interrupt," Sita once said to me. "You deepen the moment."

I wrote poetry in the margins of scrolls. I asked questions not to challenge, the way Mandavi did, but to listen harder. I believed dreams were not just illusions, but messages wrapped in metaphor. I believed even silence had a language.

We shared more than lineage. We shared nights.

Nights beneath the neem trees, where riddles floated like ancient prayers, and our laughter rose like lamps set adrift on water. Nights spent on the carved temple steps, our feet dangling above lotus petals and captured moonlight. Nights where we braided each other's hair — one behind the other — weaving ourselves into an unbroken thread of breath and memory.

Four names, four threads. Different fabrics, the same loom.

We had rituals of our own, separate from the priests and scrolls. Sita always woke before sunrise. She would walk barefoot across the marble courtyard to light the household's first diya, whispering a blessing only she knew. I used to follow her — not to help, but to observe. The flicker of her hands in the dawn always seemed to pull light into the world.

Mandavi would challenge me over breakfast.

"What is the one thing you can give away endlessly but still keep?"

"Love," I would guess.

She would snort. *"Wrong. Knowledge. Because love makes you foolish. Knowledge makes you feared."*

Shrutakirti would slip folded poems and sketches under my plate, smiling shyly.

And me? I recorded it all.

But not everything was spoken.

I never told them about the dream that came again and again.

A bow. Massive. Impossibly heavy. A hall filled with men and silence. A string being pulled until the sound shook the very bones of the earth.

I never told them that sometimes I woke with the scent of fire on my skin. That I heard names I didn't know whispered in my ears at night.

I never told them that I felt something coming. Something vast. Terrible. Sacred.

A story pressing against the skin of time, waiting to break through.



One evening, we sat by the temple pond. The sky was bruised purple, the moon rising slow.

Sita had just finished telling us one of her half-smiled stories — the kind with no clear ending, only lessons.

Mandavi turned to me and said,

"Come on, Urmila. Give us one of your strange ones. The kind that doesn't make sense until it's too late."

I closed my eyes. And without thinking, I spoke —

*A thread pulled tight, but never torn, A name forgotten, yet always worn.
A voice unheard, but ever near, A love that waits beyond the years.*

Silence followed.

Even Mandavi didn't laugh. Shrutakirti took my hand. Sita looked at me the way she always did before something important happened — as though she was reading my future in reverse.

At that moment, we all knew. Something was ending. Not loudly. Not violently. Just... ending.

Childhood. Innocence. Certainty.

That night, beneath a bruised sky heavy with unborn songs, we sat shoulder to shoulder, humming lullabies even the stars seemed to recognise.

We were still four. Still untouched by exile. Still whole.

I would carry that night like a living flame inside my ribs for years — a memory too sacred to rewrite. Because it was the last time we belonged only to ourselves.



A.S

Chapter 3:

The Bow That Remembered



They say the swayamvar began the day Rama lifted Shiva's bow.

But I know better.

It began earlier, in a silence so old, even stone had forgotten it.

Years before the sages gathered, before the princes arrived, before garlands were prepared and drums readied for destiny.

I was five. Sita was seven. The palace lay still beneath a full moon, the kind that turned marble into mirrors. We had snuck out of our chambers to play hide-and-seek among the pillars of the grand *sabha griha* — the Hall of Ancients.

At its centre, veiled in silk, stood a pedestal that no one dared touch.

Upon it lay *Pinaka* — Lord Shiva's bow.

Its surface shimmered with etchings that pulsed faintly in the moonlight. The air around it was always unnaturally still, as if time hesitated to move too close. The bow was not just an object. It was a myth that hadn't finished speaking. Even the guards averted their eyes as they passed.

But not Sita.

That night, something called to her. She stepped forward slowly, each movement deliberate, her breath held between this world and the next.

I crouched behind a pillar, too scared to speak, too curious to flee.

Sita reached out with both hands. And lifted it.

Only for a breath. Only for a blink. But I saw it.

The bow rose like a sleeping creature stirred by an old friend. No thunder, no resistance — only recognition. She placed it back, not as a child sets down a plaything, but as a priestess returning a relic to its altar.

Then she turned, met my gaze across the pillars.

We never spoke of it again. Something ancient had already passed between us. But I never forgot.

Some truths are not taught. They are remembered. As if the soul carries instructions, And the moment simply arrives.



Years passed. And now, that moment has returned — this time, with the weight of nations.

The Hall of Ancients had been transformed for the swayamvar. Canopies of gold-threaded silk hung from the high arches. Incense coiled in the air like invisible script. Pillars bore ancient yantras carved so deep they shimmered when the first light hit them. The scent of sandalwood, rosewater, and anticipation filled every breath.

And there, untouched by time, stood Pinaka once more, resting on its pedestal like a god waiting to be remembered.

The hall overflowed with kings and princes — some arrogant, some afraid, all adorned in their finest silks and most polished lies.

Sita stood to the side, dressed in gold and vermillion, poised like a flame waiting to be called upon. Her eyes gave nothing away.

I stood with my sisters, half-present, half elsewhere — caught in

memory, watching the unfolding of something as old as fate.

And then they arrived.

No procession. No banners. Just presence, walking into the heart of destiny. Just Rama, Lakshmana, and their guru, Vishwamitra.

Rama walked as if the floor had been built for him. Composed, golden, with eyes like the calm before monsoon rains. There was power in him, but a quiet one, like a lion that didn't need to roar.

Lakshmana followed — sharper, quieter, wrapped in shadow and duty. He moved like a soldier who had studied silence. Every gesture efficient, his presence controlled, eyes scanning, never lingering.

But as he passed where we stood, his gaze met mine. Just for a second. A glance. Nothing more.

But something shifted.

Not a spark. Not a storm. Something quieter. Recognition. As if he had seen me before — between dreams, perhaps, or beyond lifetimes.

I turned away first, unsure of the ground beneath my feet.



The ceremony began. Prince after prince stepped forward. Some postured. Some strained. One attempted a chant before nearly pulling his own shoulder from its socket. None succeeded. The bow remained unmoved. Unimpressed.

Ravana came forward late in the day.

The hall had grown restless by then. Many had tried, many had failed, and the gathered kings had begun to murmur — softly, then less softly — that perhaps the bow could not be lifted at all, that perhaps Janaka had set a test no living man could pass and meant to keep his daughter for himself. Then Ravana stood.

The murmuring stopped.

He was taller than anyone else in that hall by a full head. He moved with the practiced ease of a man who had bent gods to his will and remembered each one as a small private victory. He did not bow to the sages. He did not look at the bow with reverence. He looked at Sita.

I will tell you what I saw in her face in that moment, because no scroll has bothered to record it. She did not flinch. She did not lower her eyes the way the court expected. She looked back at him the way a doe looks at a hunter she already knows cannot run as fast as she can. Steady. Almost amused. Already gone from the room.

He approached the pedestal. The hall held its breath.

His hands were enormous. They closed around the haft of Pinaka with the certainty of a king claiming what was already his. The chandeliers above flickered, as though the air itself had stilled to watch. He pulled.

The bow did not move.

Not by a finger's width. Not by the thickness of a hair. Even a god could not have moved it without permission, and Pinaka had not granted his.

Ravana pulled harder. The veins rose along his arms; his ten faces gathered themselves into a single grim line. He pulled until the marble beneath his feet groaned. The bow did not lift.

He let go.

The whole hall had seen it. The whole hall would forget it. Memory, even then, was beginning its work of editing — already arranging the day into the version that would survive: that Rama had lifted the bow, that he had broken it, that the kingdom was won. The day Ravana could not even shift it would be polished out of every scroll

within a generation, the way a stain is polished from a marble floor.

But I was watching. And I would remember.

He left the hall without speaking. He did not look at Sita again. He did not need to. The hunger had only just begun.

And then Rama stepped forward.

No noise. No fanfare. He bowed — not to the princes gathered, nor to the watching kings, but to the sages first, and then to the bow itself, as one bows to memory. His hands did not hesitate. He grasped Pinaka with reverence and lifted it as though it remembered him.

The room went silent.

Then — *crack*.

A thunderclap echoed as the bow snapped in two, its divine string fracturing the silence of centuries.

The hall exploded into cheers.

But I wasn't watching Rama. I was watching Sita.

She stood bathed in golden light, unmoving, as if her soul had just returned to its rightful place.

She did not smile. She did not cry. She simply was — the moment made flesh.

I felt a lump rise in my throat.

And then the silence broke again — but not from joy. It came with the roar of a storm entering the hall.



Parashurama.

The warrior-sage. The axe-wielding incarnation of rage and righteousness.

He burst into the hall like a cyclone wrapped in flesh. His eyes burned. His voice thundered.

"Who has dared snap the bow of Mahadev?"

The crowd parted in terror.

Rama stepped forward calmly. *"I did."*

Parashurama's aura crackled. *"And who are you to touch what even kings feared?"*

Lakshmana moved before anyone else. Not with aggression, but with precision. He placed himself between Parashurama and Rama, his hand on his sword, his posture unwavering.

"Enough," he said. *"My brother lifted the bow as part of a sacred challenge. Your rage is misplaced."*

Parashurama turned on him. *"You would raise a sword to me, boy?"*

Lakshmana's gaze never faltered. *"Only if you forget who you are. Or who he is."*

Their standoff held like a string pulled too tight. I could feel the tension like heat rising through stone.

And then Rama spoke.

"Forgive me, great sage. I did not come to desecrate, only to obey. If your wrath is mine to bear, I will bear it. But I will not step back from dharma."

Something in Parashurama changed. His breath slowed. His eyes softened. He stepped closer, placed his axe down, and stared into Rama's eyes for a long time.

And then, he bowed.

"To break the bow without pride. To speak without fear. To love without claim... Perhaps Shiva does not mourn his weapon. Perhaps... he smiles."

And with that, he vanished.

The hall exhaled. Celebration resumed — but something had shifted. This was not merely a marriage. This was a turning of time.

A scroll was dispatched to Ayodhya with word of the victory. Days later, King Dasharatha arrived — resplendent in white and gold, flanked by Bharata and Shatrughna. When he saw Mithila's four princesses standing beside Sita, he smiled as though the gods themselves had written the moment.

"My sons," he said, turning to Rama. "You have brought home not just victory, but balance."

He turned to Janaka, my father.

"If your kingdom has four daughters, and mine four sons — shall we let destiny complete its symmetry?"



It was agreed.

Sita for Rama. Mandavi for Bharata. Shrutakirti for Shatrughna. And me — for Lakshmana.

I did not speak. I simply looked toward him. And for a moment, he looked back — not as a warrior. Not as a prince. But as if he, too, had remembered something old.

A possibility. A pattern. A wave returning to shore.



Chapter 4:

Night Before the Vow



The night before the wedding, Mithila did not sleep.

I did not sleep first. I lay on my back in my own room, staring up at the ceiling I had counted the beams of a thousand times.

I was fourteen. I should perhaps tell you that first, because the years since have given me language for that night which I did not have at the time. At fourteen I had only a kind of waiting. I had heard older girls describe the night before a wedding — the racing heart, the impossible-to-eat sweets, the tears that came without reason — and I had been ready for one of those nights. What I had instead was a kind of patient, flat curiosity, the way one watches water come slowly to a boil. I lay listening to my own breath and could not tell if it was excited or tired. I would learn, much later, that not feeling what you are supposed to feel is itself a feeling. That night, I only knew that something was different about me, and that the difference might mean I was wrong somehow — that I had failed at being a bride before I had even married.

Outside, the city was the opposite of me.

It breathed — heavy with firelight, marigold, and the hum of something ancient turning. The streets pulsed with music; the air thickened with rosewater, sesame oil, turmeric, and the warm scent of toasted cumin. A city exhaling lifetimes of waiting. The courtyard walls echoed with laughter. Children chased each other between silk-draped pavilions, their bare feet stained with petals. The scent of ghee lamps floated through the palace like a blessing half-spoken, half-sung.

From the highest terraces, you could see the entire city lit like a sacred mandala — every alley, every doorway outlined in ochre and jasmine. The river shimmered in the distance, carrying the hum of distant drums.

But I remember that night differently. Not in the blaze of song, but in the stillness where heartbeats spoke louder than drums.

I remember a room lit by a single brass lamp. The shadows were soft. The silence familiar. I sat beside Sita, threading jasmine into her braid.

Her eyes held no fear. Only light. Not joy, exactly — but something quieter. Peace wearing a crown of purpose.

"*You're not nervous,*" I whispered, half-smiling.

She shook her head. "*I was born for this.*"

Her voice was steady, but it did something to me, like striking a gong inside a cave. The sound of something ancient and echoing.

I didn't ask what she meant. I already knew.

Some lives walk toward destiny. Hers had always stood inside it.

And mine? I did not yet know what I was supposed to be feeling. I knew the colour of Lakshmana's eyes, and the shape of his hands, and the way he stood in a room as if listening for an arrow. I did not know what he ate for breakfast, whether he laughed at jokes, or whether his silences were the comfortable kind or the long kind. I had recognised him at the swayamvar — I remember the recognising, even now — but at fourteen, recognising is not the same as knowing, and I would not have words, for many years, for the difference. What I felt that night I would call something different at twenty, and something different again at forty, and by sixty I would

call it the beginning of my life — which is the way old women say *the beginning of suffering* when they are choosing to be kind.



That night, we did not sleep.

Mandavi danced barefoot in the inner courtyard, challenging the moon to outshine her anklets. Shrutakirti sang lullabies she barely remembered from childhood. The four of us circled each other like verses returning to the same melody.

We laughed until the moonlight blurred. We cried until silence settled into our hair. We painted each other's hands with henna — mandalas, fish scales, winding serpents and stories.

"*Hide Lakshmana's name in the design,*" Mandavi teased, her voice light, but her eyes knowing.

I did — not in letters, but in the curve of a broken bow, twined in vines only I would recognise.

We whispered childhood secrets like offerings, as if sharing them would protect what was about to end.



By dawn, the palace stirred — no longer a place of dreams, but of vows rising like smoke toward waiting gods.

The wedding chamber had been transformed into a golden forest. Silk drapes swayed between rosewood pillars carved with the stories of our ancestors. The floors had been washed with milk and sandal paste. Kalash pots stood at every threshold, their brims lined with mango leaves and coins.

We were dressed in flame.

Sita in a sari of deep crimson, Mandavi in amber, Shrutakirti in twilight blue. My own drape was saffron kissed with gold, its fabric whispering against the floor like an incantation. Our hands were weighted with bangles, our eyes rimmed in lampblack.

When I looked into the mirror, I saw someone I almost didn't recognise. Older — though I was so young still. Quieter. Lit from within by a fire I would not have a name for until decades later. My hands, when I lifted them to adjust my dupatta, looked like the hands of someone I had not yet met. I held one of them in front of my face for a long moment, turning it slowly, watching the gold border catch the lamplight. *These are my hands*, I thought. *Tomorrow they will be his hands too*. I do not remember being afraid of that thought. I remember finding it strange — a child's strangeness, the way a child finds it strange that her cousin's house has different smells. I did not yet know that some strangenesses become your whole life.

The ceremony began beneath the mandapa — a canopy held by four sacred pillars, each wrapped in banana leaves and marigold garlands. A square fire pit burned at the centre, its flames flickering like a pulse. The priest chanted mantras older than memory. The air was heavy with camphor and coconut husk, lotus petals and destiny.

We stood side by side —

Sita with Rama. Mandavi with Bharata. Shrutakirti with Shatrughna. And I... with Lakshmana.

He hadn't spoken to me since the swayamvar. But there had been glances — pauses woven between breaths — enough to speak a language no one else could hear. The kind of silences that feel shaped. Chosen.

Now, with the sacred fire between us, he stood close enough for me to feel his breath. Our eyes met. He did not smile. I didn't either. But neither of us looked away.

I had no words for what I felt then. I have words now. They are these:

that I felt the very specific, very physical sensation of being seen by someone who was not yet trying to know me — and beneath that, a smaller, stranger sensation of being *willing* to be known by him. The willingness was not yet love. Love would take years. But it was something — a small decision being made inside me, ahead of any vow. I do not know if a fourteen-year-old could have called it that. I think she might have called it simply *being chosen*, and not noticed that she was, in the same moment, choosing back. I notice it now. That was my first marriage vow. I made it before the priest had said a word.



I do not remember every mantra the priest chanted. I do not remember which flower I held or what sequence of grains was offered to the gods.

What I remember is this.

His fingers brushed mine during the fourth step — so lightly, the flame itself seemed to hesitate. And the entire world paused to let it happen.

What I felt then, I would only understand later: that there is a difference between *falling* and *being placed*. That falling is what happens when no one is there to catch you, and being placed is what happens when someone has decided you are theirs to set down carefully. At fourteen I had none of those words. I had only the sudden physical sensation of my stomach dropping the way it drops in a dream — and, in the same instant, the equally sudden knowing that I was not, in fact, in a dream. Someone had just touched me on purpose. Whatever was happening was not happening *to* me. It was happening *with* me.

There are threads not tied by hand, But by glance, by breath, By the moment between words.

Some unions don't roar like drums. They hum — like something long

overdue, finally remembered.

After the fire rituals came the celebrations — songs, flutes, conches, a downpour of rice and rose petals. Sita walked beneath a canopy of silken fans, her eyes lowered but glowing. Rama's calm wrapped the courtyard like a promise.

My sisters laughed and sang. Mandavi teased Bharata until he blushed. Shrutakirti shyly pressed a garland into Shatrughna's hands. And I? I moved through the joy like a moon through river light.

Watching. Remembering.



It was later, during a lull in the feast, that Lakshmana came to me again.

No longer a prince dressed for ritual. Just a man trying to find the right words in a palace that wanted too many.

"You seemed... far away," he said.

"I was trying to memorise the moment," I replied. *"Sometimes the present already feels like a memory."*

He nodded slowly, his hands behind his back.

"You speak like someone who's lived this once before."

"Maybe I have," I whispered, feeling the memory of a thousand unseen steps between us.

He studied me for a long moment.

"If that's true," he said, *"then maybe I've been chasing you all this time."*

Through lifetimes."

I looked away, but not before he saw my smile.



That night, I could not sleep. The stars burned low and close, like lamps hung outside a temple door. I lay in bed listening to the rustle of neem leaves and wedding anklets and something quieter still — a shift. A new shape forming in my life.

I didn't know what waited in Ayodhya. I didn't know what this bond would become.

But I knew this. There were no promises between us. No declarations. Only the thread.

And for now, that was enough.



Chapter 5:

Embraced by Ayodhya



Ayodhya was brighter than Mithila — but somehow quieter.

I was still fourteen when we arrived. The henna on my palms had not yet faded; the wedding silks were not yet put away in any chest. We rode into the city — Sita and Mandavi and Shrutakirti and I, with Rama's brothers and the great gathered procession of two kingdoms — within a month of the marriage. I do not remember whether it was a week or three or four. I remember only that the journey was the first time I had been outside the borders of Mithila, and that I had been outside them for too short a time before another country was being asked to be my home.

Its grandeur did not sing; it whispered. Wide courtyards stretched like rivers of stone, framed by trees older than memory. Palace walls shimmered not with joy, but with weight — a weight pressed into the very grain of marble and wood, whispering of battles won, of sons crowned and sacrificed.

Where Mithila had been alive with poetry and rebellion, Ayodhya was shaped by discipline. Slow, measured, enduring.

I missed Mithila the way only a fourteen-year-old can miss the only home she has ever had. It was not a single missing. It was a thousand small ones, arriving at unpredictable hours. I missed the scent of lime blossoms caught in the courtyard winds. I missed the warmth of the guards who had nodded when I passed since I was old enough to walk past them. I missed the soft rebellion that hummed beneath my sisters' laughter, and the particular pitch of my mother's voice when she was annoyed, and the way our cook always knew when I had

taken something from the kitchen and never said anything because she liked me. I missed the loose-toothed dog who lived by the south gate. I missed knowing where every cup belonged.

I did not say any of this out loud. I had been raised well. A daughter who arrives in her husband's house and then complains about the colour of its walls is no daughter at all. So I kept my missing inside me, where it ran along under everything else like a second pulse. I would learn, later, that this was the first thing a married woman is taught — not by her mother, who has already learned it, and not by her father, who has not — but by the body, which keeps two rhythms in a place that is not yet hers, and feels them disagree.

Here, in Ayodhya, even the air bowed to tradition.

It took me days to learn the rhythm of the palace. How the queens moved like light between chambers. How the servants never met your gaze but always knew what you needed. How every room carried the echo of Rama's name, as though the very air bowed to him.

No one demanded anything of me. Yet I felt watched — not by people, but by the city itself, as if Ayodhya, ancient and breathing, was waiting to see who I would become.

A new thread had entered its loom. And it was deciding if I would be woven in... or left loose at the edge.



It was on the third morning after our arrival that I was summoned to the Inner Sanctum.

A ceremony for the kingdom's prosperity was to be held — the first since our wedding. I dressed carefully in a sari of deep saffron, heavier than the silks I wore in Mithila. Here, even fabrics bore the weight of their purpose.

As I entered the shrine hall, I sensed the difference immediately. Mithila's prayers had been songs — lilting, half-laughter, half-surrender. Ayodhya's prayers were stone. Precise. Measured. Meant to hold the sky itself in place.

I took my place beside the other queens, a breath removed, an echo still learning its shape. The priests intoned ancient hymns. Ghee flames flickered in brass bowls. Sacred waters were poured over sandalwood altars.

I moved my hands where they moved. Bent my head where they bent theirs. But I could feel my pulse stuttering, a foreign rhythm, too fast, too eager. I was performing the gestures of a queen without yet being one, and I knew it, and I suspected everyone else in the room knew it too. A child mimicking elders is given affection. A bride mimicking a queen is given evaluation. I did not yet know how to tell the two apart, only that the room was looking at me a particular way, and that the looking required me to be still.

When the ceremony ended, I rose, heart heavy with the knowledge that I had not yet truly entered this city. But as I turned, I caught a glance from Mother Kaushalya.

Not a big smile. Just a small, slow nod — an acceptance that asked nothing more than patience.

And somehow, it was enough.



That evening, we ate together for the first time as a family — the whole household, the four brothers and their new wives, the three queen mothers, King Dasharatha presiding. I had imagined the meal often during the journey from Mithila. I had thought it would be grand. It was not. It was a long room with low tables and lamps along the walls, and food placed in front of us in the order tradition required — Rama first, because he was the eldest, then the rest of us, in carefully measured precedence.

But it was not the food I watched. It was the brothers.

Rama was served first. He did not eat. He waited. He waited for King Dasharatha to lift his own first morsel, and then for Mother Kaushalya, and then for the other mothers, and only then did he begin. He did this without performing it — without anyone but a careful observer noticing he was doing it. He was the eldest. He had decided, long ago, that being eldest meant being last.

Bharata served Shatrughna before he served himself. Shatrughna laughed and said something I did not catch, and Bharata laughed back, and they ate with the casual ease of two boys who had grown up half-merged. They were the inseparable pair. Even at table, they could not stop being a unit.

And Lakshmana? Lakshmana did not eat at all for some time. He watched Rama eat. He watched Rama's plate, and Rama's hand, and Rama's careful timing, as if by attending to Rama's eating he was confirming that Rama *was* eating, and that confirmation was itself a kind of meal. Only when Rama paused to drink water did Lakshmana begin to eat. He ate quickly, efficiently, like a soldier in a camp. Then he watched Rama again.

I understood, then, what I had been married into. I had not understood it fully at the wedding. I had thought I was joining a family of four princes. I was, in fact, joining a family in which one prince was the centre, and the other three orbited him at different distances. Bharata orbited far and devotedly. Shatrughna orbited close to Bharata. And Lakshmana — Lakshmana did not orbit. He was the moon, and Rama was his planet, and there were no other points in his sky.

I would not understand, until many years later, that I had been given a husband whose first loyalty would always be elsewhere. That night, I had no words for it. I only knew that the meal had taught me something, and that I would carry the something to my chamber and try to fall asleep around it.



Lakshmana was not a man of easy words.

He rose before the sun, prayed before the city stirred, trained before the birds dared to sing. He returned each evening bearing the scent of sweat and river water, his presence folding neatly into the corners of the palace like a blade returned to its sheath.

At first, we shared only space. We ate quietly in the same rooms, our hands reaching for the same vessels, our footsteps falling into accidental synchrony in empty corridors.

Then came the books.

One afternoon, wandering the old west wing of the palace, I found him in the library. The place smelled of camphor, dust, and slow learning — a forest of scrolls and forgotten treaties. He sat cross-legged on the floor, unrolling a palm-leaf manuscript with the kind of reverence others reserved for gods.

I chose a scroll of my own and sat across from him. He did not look up. Did not speak. But when he noticed me struggling with a particularly dense treatise, he slid another scroll toward me across the floor — one better suited to my query.

"*Try this,*" he said, voice quiet, without triumph or apology. Then he returned to his reading.

It wasn't romance. It was rhythm. A trust built one silent offering at a time.

Some loves are not lit by fire, But warmed slowly by quiet sun. Not sudden storms, But soft monsoon drizzles, That settle deep into the soil.

One evening, as we stood on the palace terrace, watching the river shimmer under the stars, he asked, "*Do you miss Mithila?*"

"*Every day,*" I answered honestly.

He nodded, thoughtful. "*I miss the forest sometimes. The wild places.*"

"*You don't strike me as wild.*"

"*Most people don't look closely.*"

I turned to him. "*And what would they see if they did?*"

He met my gaze, steady and unwavering. "*That my silence is not emptiness. It's... protection.*"

"*For what?*"

He hesitated. Then, softly, "*For the things I love.*"

In that moment, I felt something uncoil gently inside me. Not passion. Recognition. I was fourteen. I did not yet know that there are very few people in any lifetime who will tell you, in advance, that they have decided to keep you safe. I would learn it. I would learn it slowly, across all the years of his leaving and returning, and again across the long sleep he asked me to carry. But that night, on the terrace, the first quiet sentence of it had already been said, and I had been the one it was said to.



One day, Mother Sumitra summoned me quietly, without ceremony.

I found her sitting by a small oil lamp in her chamber, her hair loose, her sari plain. On a low stool beside her rested a small wooden box, unadorned, worn smooth by generations of touch.

Without a word, she opened it and drew out a simple gold ring, shaped like two vines twisting into each other. She pressed it into my palm.

No speech. No ritual. Only a look — steady, sorrow-tinged, profound — that said,

You are seen. You are wanted here.

I bowed low, feeling something loosen inside me. A thread catching, not unravelling.



It was during the festival of Sharad Purnima — the night of the full moon and white offerings — that Ayodhya softened its rigid edges.

The courtyards blossomed with jasmine garlands. Children wove flower crowns and threw them laughing into the river. Silk lanterns floated upward, carrying prayers like seeds on unseen winds. The palace glowed, not with grandeur, but with something lighter. Something almost childlike.

I stood at the edge of the eastern courtyard, watching the lights rise, when I felt him approach.

Lakshmana.

He carried no offerings. No garlands. Only a single lotus bud, still closed against the night air. He said nothing. Simply extended the flower toward me.

I accepted it with both hands — a gesture more sacred than any vow. As I tucked it into the braid at my shoulder, I caught, for the briefest flicker, a smile ghost across his face.

Not wide. Not bold. But enough. Enough to tell me that something had shifted.

Not seized. Not demanded. Offered — and accepted.

I began writing again. Not for scrolls or archives, but for myself.

Small verses scribbled on scraps of cloth, in margins of forgotten books. I would leave some by his side sometimes — half as a gift, half as a question.

He never said anything. But once, I found a single flower — frangipani — tucked gently between the pages of my poem. No note. Just presence.

And it was enough.



Ayodhya never truly embraced me in the way Mithila had — not with arms flung wide, not with songs and festivals spun in my name.

But Lakshmana did, in his own way. In the quiet evenings. In the glances across courtyards. In the way his silence no longer felt distant, but shared.

Ours was not a marriage of declarations. It was a slow unfolding, like rivers carving canyons — patient and deep, shaping without thunder.

And in that, there was a tenderness I would come to treasure more than any story sung loudly in the streets.

Some loves are not built with fire. They are stitched with breath. Quiet. Enduring. Unbreakable.

Storms and Exile

*The storm did not come from outside. It had been gathering, all along,
in the silences we had agreed not to name.*



Chapter 6:

Clouds Before the Silence



There are moments in history that feel like twilight — not because the sun has set, but because the world forgets it ever rose.

I have thought about that summer many times since. The answer is always the same: I should have seen it, and I did not. I was sixteen years old. I was carrying small joys in my hands like cupped water. I was learning how to be Lakshmana's wife — which is to say, learning how to occupy the spaces around a man who already belonged, fully, to someone else. I did not yet know that the work of my life would be losing things. I thought the work of my life would be learning to be loved.

Ayodhya, for a time, was sunlight. A kingdom in perfect rhythm. A home made of song and sandalwood. The kind of peace that seems eternal only because it has never been broken.

And then, it began to change. Not suddenly. Not loudly. But like clouds gathering at the edge of a summer sky.

I remember.

Before the wars, before the fire, before the silence — I remember Ayodhya's laughter. Its palace corridors bathed in golden light. Gardens thick with birdsong. The smell of ripe mangoes in brass bowls and ghee lamps flickering like tiny suns along the temple walls.

What I remember most, though, is the love between the brothers.

I saw them once, all four together, at dawn in the training ground. I had risen earlier than usual that morning — there had been a council meeting the previous evening, and I had not slept well, and the early courtyard light had pulled me out of my chamber.

They were practising. Not formally, the way they did when the master-at-arms was present, but loosely — the way brothers practise when no one is watching, when the work is half affection and half discipline. Rama stood in the centre, drawing his bow and releasing without ceremony, hitting marks with a precision that did not need to demonstrate itself. Bharata was on his left, calling out small corrections to Shatrughna's stance — gentle ones, half-teasing, the kind that an older brother can give a younger without bruising him. Shatrughna laughed and adjusted. Bharata adjusted his own stance after a moment, registering something Shatrughna had said back without saying he was registering it. They were the kind of pair who learn from each other quietly.

And Lakshmana — Lakshmana was at the far end of the ground, alone, doing what he always did. He was watching Rama. Drawing his bow, releasing, watching Rama. Drawing again. Watching again. He was not practising archery. He was practising being Rama's shadow. The arrows were almost incidental. The watching was the discipline.

That was the morning I understood the order of their love. Bharata and Shatrughna loved each other the way close siblings do — equally, in motion, with constant small adjustments. Rama loved them all the same, with a calm equality that did not single anyone out. But Lakshmana loved Rama the way I have, since, only ever seen one or two human beings love another: as if his entire existence were arranged around the other man's presence, and as if any moment spent not arranged around it were time spent in the wrong shape.

I did not yet know what that kind of love would cost him. Or me.



Once, just after we returned from Mithila, I found Lakshmana alone under the neem tree in the south courtyard. The city was quiet, dusk brushing the sky in violet and gold. He was polishing the hilt of his blade, absent-mindedly.

"You seem far away," I said.

"I was just thinking about him," he said simply.

"Rama?"

He nodded, then looked at me — not the quick glances of our earlier days, but a gaze steady as stone.

"You know what he is to me?"

I waited.

"He's the mirror in which I see who I must become."

He said it not like a revelation, but like something so natural it didn't need to be explained. I remember thinking, with the small private vanity of a young wife, that one day he would say something like this about me. I was wrong about a great many things that summer. That was one of them.

In those days, everything in Ayodhya bent gently toward Rama. The people loved him. The servants prayed for him. Even the children carved his name into banyan bark beside their games.

Among the queens, he was light itself. Mother Kaushalya blessed every dish twice if Rama would eat it. Mother Sumitra touched his feet as if he were already king. And Mother Kaikeyi — yes, even she — used to place her palm on his head as if shielding it from evil he hadn't yet faced. She loved him more than Bharata.

The city was preparing to exhale.

King Dasharatha had grown quieter. His walks slower. His gaze softer.

"It is time," he had said to the ministers and Mother Kaikeyi. *"Let the kingdom know peace under the hand of its truest son."*

Ayodhya wore celebration like a second skin. The air brimmed with turmeric and crushed marigold, with the fragrance of sesame sweets and sandalwood smoke. Music spilled through the streets like an untamed river — drums, flutes, temple bells echoing off the high stone walls. Silk banners unfurled from terraces, catching the sun like molten wings. Children raced through alleys tossing petals into the air, while women braided jasmine into each other's hair with hands sticky from festival oils.

The city pulsed, alive with hope. The news was on every tongue. Rama would soon be crowned.

I went down to the marketplace one afternoon to see it for myself. An old vegetable seller I had bought from since my first month in Ayodhya was weeping into her okra. When I asked her why, she said: *he will be a kind king to my grandchildren*. I had never thought before that a king could be measured in grandchildren. I have thought of nothing else, since.



Lakshmana moved through the festival preparations not as a prince, but as a shadow stitched to Rama's steps. Where Rama went, Lakshmana followed — a heartbeat behind. A devotion that ran deeper than the roots of the banyan trees that shaded Ayodhya's courtyards.

One evening, as the city prepared for another night of dancing and song, I found Lakshmana standing alone on the northern balcony, overlooking the Sarayu. The river caught the fading sunlight and threw it back in ripples of gold.

"You should be with them," I said softly, stepping up beside him. "With Rama."

He did not move.

"Everywhere I stand," Lakshmana said, voice low, "I stand with him."

I smiled, trying to tease the heaviness from his shoulders. *"Even here?"*

He turned to me, and for the first time I truly saw it — not the warrior, not the prince — but the brother whose every breath carried the echo of another's name.

"Especially here," he said.

Then he turned back to the river, the last light threading itself into his profile like a silent vow.



In those days, we did not know. We danced. We prayed. We adorned ourselves in gold and hope.

But the river knew. The banyan trees knew. The pigeons circling the spires knew. The stones themselves, cooling under the twilight sky, knew.

A change was coming. A blow that would land so deep it would echo not just through the corridors of the palace, but through the marrow of history.

And yet we — the heart of Ayodhya — stood blind beneath a sky already cracking at the seams.

I sensed it first in the way the air shifted. Not in conversations. Not in news. But in the way the world seemed to pause mid-breath. Birds startled from temple spires without cause. Dogs huddled near the

palace thresholds at dusk, whining. Even the city's stones seemed to hold their breath, as if waiting for something they could not name.

I told the head cook one morning that something felt wrong. He said it was the heat, but his hands shook slightly as he skimmed the ghee, and I think he was being kind. I think he had noticed too, and did not want to be the one to speak a shadow into existence.

I went to the garden more often, trying to trace the shape of what was happening, though no one would speak it aloud. Even Lakshmana didn't sense it at first. His eyes were fixed only on Rama. He didn't see the storm yet. But I did.

I think.

I do not know now what I truly saw and what I have layered onto that summer afterwards, knowing what was coming. Memory is a dishonest historian. She edits in retrospect. She writes prophecies into days that contained only weather.

At night, the palace changed. The corridors I once wandered freely now felt strained, pulled taut like the strings of an unseen instrument about to snap. Doors were left half-open, then slammed shut without reason. Oil lamps burned lower, flickering violently against stone walls that had once glowed with easy warmth. The silence that had once been a companion now pressed against the ribs. Unseen. Unnamed. But growing.

One evening, as I crossed the long eastern corridor that overlooked the outer gardens, I paused. Below, in the moon-bathed courtyard, Mother Kaikeyi stood alone. She wore a sari of muted silk, her hair not braided, no jewellery weighing her down. She seemed to be speaking — but no one stood nearby. Only the echo of her voice floated upward, too faint for words.

Something in the way she moved — sharp, restless, almost broken — made my chest tighten. A storm was brewing, but it had not yet touched the ground.

I told myself she was praying. Mother Kaikeyi often prayed alone. I told myself this several times, walking back to my chamber. I almost believed it.

That night, I went to Sita's chamber. She was folding a shawl, her hands slower than usual.

"*Do you feel it too?*" I asked.

She didn't answer at first. Then she looked at me. And I saw it — that same quiet storm I'd once seen in her the night before our wedding.

"*I don't know what's coming,*" she whispered, "*but something is... unravelling.*"



The next morning, the verdict arrived. Not through a royal announcement. Through tears. Through the echo of shattered lamps in the Queen's chamber. Through the silence that fell over the main corridor like a second death.

Rama was to be exiled. Fourteen years. Not for war. Not for crime. For obedience.

And Bharata to be the King. At Mother Kaikeyi's command.

Lakshmana stood frozen when he heard. I found him in Rama's chamber, sword drawn — not in rage, but in instinct. He had always been Rama's shadow. But in that moment, he became fire.

"*They will not do this to him,*" he said. "*I will not allow it.*"

But Rama — serene, as always — placed his hand on Lakshmana's shoulder.

"*I go with joy,*" he said. "*Because it preserves dharma.*"

"*But at what cost?*" Lakshmana whispered.

"*Whatever the gods require,*" Rama replied.

Bharata and Shatrughna were not in the city. They had gone to their maternal grandfather's palace. Unaware. Unarmed. The verdict was passed in their absence, like a blade drawn in the dark.



The city wept. The drums that were meant to herald a coronation fell silent. The garlands withered before they could be strung.

And me? I stood by the window, braid undone, trying to understand how joy could rot so quickly.

And then, there was a knock.

It was Mandavi who came first, eyes already red, hands wringing the ends of her veil into knots. Shrutakirti followed, quieter, her grief so heavy it seemed to press her smaller into herself.

They stood there, hesitating at the threshold of my chamber, until I rose and drew them in. We sat together by the dying fire, the way we had once huddled as girls, braiding each other's hair and whispering riddles into the night.

"*Remember,*" Mandavi said in a broken whisper, "*the festival of lights when we built a palace from lamps?*"

She gave a broken laugh. "*We swore we'd never leave each other. That no walls, no kings, no wars could part us.*"

Shrutakirti pressed her face into my shoulder, saying nothing.

I stroked her hair absently, my mind returning to that night — four girls wrapped in borrowed silks, dreaming of futures spun only in gold and laughter. How foolish, how tenderly foolish, we had been.

"*We are still here,*" I murmured, though the words fell flat between us, lifeless as dried petals.

None of us said the word that hovered in the room — exile — but it burned behind every glance, every silence.

"*She will follow him,*" Mandavi finally said, her voice brittle.

"*Sita?*" I asked.

She nodded. "*She's already said her farewells to Mother Kaikeyi.*"

Shrutakirti sat down beside me and simply laid her head in my lap, the way we used to as girls when the world still made sense.

"*And Bharata?*" I whispered.

Mandavi shook her head. "*He will never accept the crown. Not without Rama. I know him. He would rather walk away from everything.*"

She paused, then added, voice trembling, "*And if he refuses, who will they ask next? Lakshmana?*"

The air tightened around us.

I looked toward the doorway, where folded robes and a warrior's bow rested in quiet readiness.

Lakshmana hadn't said a word about leaving.

But in their sorrow, and in his silence, I could already hear it.

The gods had spoken. The path had opened. And I would not walk beside him.

Not this time.



A.S

Chapter 7:

The Choice to Stay



The palace was still in shadow when Sita came to me.

No one else was awake. No rituals had begun. No goodbyes had yet been spoken.

Only the silence of sisters.

I stood by the window, braiding my hair slowly — one strand for each unspoken ache in my chest. I did not hear Sita's footsteps. I only felt the warmth of her presence, like sunlight arriving just before the dawn.

She wrapped her arms around me from behind, resting her cheek against my shoulder. Neither of us spoke for a long time.

"I would have taken you with us," she whispered. "But your dharma... is heavier than exile."

My hands paused. My eyes burned.

"I would have gone," I said softly. "I would have slept on stones, eaten roots, walked barefoot to the ends of the world. But this — this staying — it feels like being erased."

Sita turned me gently, cupping my face with both hands. Her thumbs wiped away tears before they could fall.

"No one will sing your name," she said. "But they will live because you stayed."

Then she pressed her forehead to mine, her voice steady as wind, full of the old power that lived in women who knew how to wait.

May your limbs never tire. May your hands be as many as the needs around you. May time pass around you like water on stone. May your love hold this house together, even as the world forgets you were ever holding it.

My knees gave way, but Sita held me. In that moment, we were not princesses. Not queens. Just two women, two sisters, saying goodbye in a language older than words.

When we parted, neither of us looked back.

Some love walks into exile. And some... stay behind to carry everything else.



The palace was still asleep, but I was not. My eyes had not closed all night. I watched the oil lamp throw long shadows across the room, watched the stars fade slowly, as if the sky, too, could not bear to let go.

The air was thick with silence and the scent of ash.

Lakshmana stood at the doorway — already dressed for exile. Bark robes. A simple bow slung across his back. A satchel across his shoulder.

He looked like a monk. He looked like a stranger. He looked like the man I loved, walking away from me.

"I should have woken you quietly," he said. "But you were already awake."

I nodded. *"There's nothing quiet about what you're doing."*

He didn't argue. He rarely did.

For a moment, we simply looked at each other — the thousand things we could not say tightening the air between us like a knot pulled too

taut.

Then, without meeting my gaze, he reached into the folds of his tunic and pulled out a small, coiled thread — red and gold, simple as breath. He pressed it into my palm.

"To bind what we cannot carry with us," he said, his voice breaking once at the edge.

And then he turned away, not trusting himself to linger.

The thread burned in my hand. Not with heat, but with weight.

"I won't say goodbye," I whispered. *"Because this isn't that."*

He looked at me, eyes unreadable. *"Then what is it?"*

I stepped closer, adjusted the strap on his shoulder. *"This is me... setting you free."*

We stood without speaking. There was nothing left to say. Love, real love, is forged in these moments — not in declarations, but in restraint.

He reached out, placed his hand gently on my forehead, reverently. *"You are braver than I am,"* he said.

"No," I replied. *"I am simply the one who stays."*

Sometimes the leaving is easier than the staying. Sometimes the silence is heavier than the sword. And sometimes the most courageous thing one can do... is to say nothing, and let them go.



I followed him quietly, barefoot through the stone corridors of the palace. At the door to Rama's chamber, he paused, waiting patiently.

When Rama and Sita emerged, Lakshmana stepped forward and touched Rama's feet.

"If to go into exile is your dharma," he said, "then to follow you is mine."

Rama pulled him into an embrace.

Sita looked at Lakshmana then, her eyes warm, calm. *"We will look after each other."*

And then — I really saw her.

My sister. No longer draped in the silks of royalty, no longer adorned like a bride of state. She wore sage's robes. A single string of black beads. Her hair was tied simply, her ornaments modest — only the symbols of marriage remained.

She looked different.

And suddenly, the truth struck me. She had chosen a path of thorns.

I wasn't afraid for Rama, or for Lakshmana. They had seen this life before — in their youth, during their education, in the forests where dharma was born of discipline. But Sita... she had never known hardship.

And yet, she looked at us — at me, Mandavi, Shrutakirti — not with fear or sadness, but as if we were the ones who needed strength.

She placed a diya on the windowsill, anchoring it against the restless wind. The light quivered once, then steadied, casting long, fragile shadows against the walls.

"Guard the light," she said, her voice a hush softer than prayer. "Let it burn for us... when we cannot."

And we bowed our heads — not merely in obedience, but in coronation.

She came forward and embraced us. One by one. Softly. Fiercely. Eternally.

She placed her hands on my shoulders and spoke not as a sister, but

as one who had already crossed the threshold.

"Take care of Ayodhya. Take care of each other."

There was no sorrow in her voice. No bitterness. Only purpose.

I was being entrusted with more than waiting. I was being given the sacred labour of remembrance.



They left before the first bird sang. But Ayodhya was not asleep.

Word had spread. The people gathered in the courtyards, by the gates, in the streets. Men, women, children — some trying to stop them. Others simply weeping, heads bowed, hands clasped.

They watched the three of them pass — Rama in silence, Sita in light, Lakshmana in shadow.

And when the palace gates closed behind them. When their figures disappeared into exile, into duty, into myth.

I turned. Stepped back into the palace chamber. And quietly closed the door.

I knelt before the small diya Sita had left behind. It flickered once, as if uncertain, then steadied, golden and stubborn against the gathering day.

And I steadied too.

Outside, the sun climbed cold and bright into a sky that no longer belonged to us.

Inside, I kept vigil — not over absence, but over the memory of what still burned.



Chapter 8:

Nidra's Blessing



The night after Lakshmana left, I did not sleep.

Not because of grief — grief is loud and restless. What I felt was quieter, heavier, like water rising slowly in the lungs.

The palace had stilled. Even the oil lamps flickered more gently, as if they, too, mourned his absence. The corridors, once alive with song and sandalwood, now held only echoes pressed thin against the stone.

I sat alone in our chamber, the walls echoing with memory. His shawl still hung where he'd left it. His sandals, neatly placed by the door. Small things, untouched by exile. Small things that hurt more than the leaving.

I thought I would cry. I didn't. The tears felt irrelevant. He had left not because he didn't love me, but because he did. He left for Rama. For dharma. For something larger than either of us.

And still... my body felt empty, like a string pulled too tight for too long.

When he left, the world did not end. It simply went on without me. That is its own kind of death.



It was then that the air shifted.

A breeze entered the room, though the windows were shut. The lamp's flame straightened, steady and unmoving — as if it too recognised what approached.

And then she appeared. She did not glow, did not thunder. She simply arrived.

Her presence filled the room not like a storm, but like the long-held breath before rain. Her eyes were the colour of old lullabies. Her presence was vast, yet familiar. A mother, a star, a silence wrapped in form.

"*I am Nidra,*" she said.

Her voice was soft, but it rooted itself into my bones.

"*I know who you are,*" I whispered, bowing my head.

She came closer — her steps soundless.

"*Lakshmana has refused me,*" she said. "*He has vowed not to sleep for fourteen years.*"

I nodded. I had known, even without knowing.

"*But sleep cannot disappear,*" she continued. "*It must go somewhere. It must be held.*"

My heart already knew the answer.

"*You want me to take it.*"

Nidra inclined her head, and for the first time I saw not command, but sorrow etched into the lines of her form.

"*If you choose to bear his sleep,*" she said, "*you will not rest. You will not forget. You will dream his journey, his burdens. You will walk the exile in spirit. No one will see you. No one will sing of it.*"

"*No one needs to,*" I answered.

Something like reverence, something like mourning, crossed her face.

"*Then come,*" she said.

She reached out and touched my forehead — and the world dissolved.

Not into darkness. Into vision.



I stood in a forest — thick, wild, trembling with breath and song.

Rama walked ahead, his stride even but weighted. Sita walked beside him — her steps light, but her eyes shadowed. And Lakshmana — *my* Lakshmana — followed just behind, alert, focused, unsleeping.

I watched him gather wood, sharpen arrows, build shelters with hands roughened by devotion. I watched him wash their feet at night, when the stars blinked like shy witnesses overhead. I watched him hold the dangers of the forest at bay with nothing but his body, his vigilance, his vow.

Every moment of care, of vigilance, of unspoken worship — I saw it.

And through him, I walked the forest. Through him, I bore the exile. Through him, I stayed close...

Though I had never been farther.



But dreams are not the only life I lived.

Each day, I awoke — but only for a handful of breaths. A scattering of hours woven between endless drifting. In those waking hours, I moved through Ayodhya with steady hands and a hollow heart.

I prepared meals for the Queen Mothers. I brewed medicines. I stitched torn garments and listened to the brittle silences between courtiers.

The blessing Sita had whispered — "*May your hands be as many as the needs around you*" — had become not a blessing, but my breath itself.

I moved without exhaustion. Without hunger. Without complaint. I cared for the palace the way one cares for a fading lamp — cupping it gently against the wind.

And I sat beside the dying king.



King Dasharatha did not weep with dignity.

He howled — a broken animal sound that tore through the silk corridors at night. He clawed at the bedclothes. Sometimes, he screamed Rama's name and tried to rise, only to fall back, exhausted. Other times, he whispered, over and over, "*Shravan... forgive me.*"

I did not understand. Until one night, he held my wrist and began to confess.

"*I killed him,*" he said, "*with a bow meant for prey. A blind couple's son... and now, the gods take mine.*"

The shame poured from him like rot from an old wound.

"*I asked them to curse me,*" he moaned. "*But they only said I would understand... when it was too late.*"

He never saw Mother Kaikeyi again. Not after the verdict. Her wing

of the palace remained shut, its doors sealed by silence and guilt. Only the physician entered — and even he seemed to carry death clinging to his robes.

One morning, he came to us, pale and breathless.

"Send word to Bharata and Shatrughna," he said. "The king won't last."

We sent the messengers that same hour. But I knew — even if they galloped on wind, they would not reach in time.



So, each day, I bore Ayodhya in my waking hours. And each night, I bore Lakshmana's burden in my sleep.

I became the vessel. Of exile. Of memory. Of grief.

I cooked. I prayed. I comforted. I remembered.

And when my limbs grew too heavy again, when my body could no longer distinguish sorrow from sleep — I surrendered.

And the visions returned.

My body lay still in Ayodhya. But I — I became the thread between waking and wandering. I was the wick that held the flame steady. The keeper of Lakshmana's rest. The bearer of his unseen burden.

He would not sleep, Because I dreamed for him. He would not fall, Because I surrendered the ground beneath us both.

And so began my long slumber — not of forgetfulness, but of sacred seeing.

And I would dream for as long as he remained awake.

Loss and Dreaming

*When the world I knew was taken from me,
I learned that dreaming is another kind of staying.*



A.S

Chapter 9:

Ayodhya Mourns



The bells did not ring that morning. No conch stirred the dawn. The birds seemed to hush themselves. Even the river winds stilled, as if nature itself had knelt in grief.

I was sixteen. I should perhaps say that here, because the years between my wedding and that morning had felt like a long, slow opening — two years of learning the corridors of Ayodhya, the names of its kitchens and queens, the small daily geography of being someone's wife. And then in three weeks the kingdom had folded: Rama exiled, Sita gone with him, Lakshmana gone too, and now the king dead. A whole world I had only just begun to understand had decided to end before I had finished being introduced to it.

Ayodhya wore grief like a heavy cloak.

Drapes were drawn over palace balconies. Ash was smeared on foreheads. Fires burned low and slow, their smoke twisting into prayers too fragile to hold.

King Dasharatha was gone.

The city mourned not with wails but with a silence so deep it pressed against the stone walls like thunder withheld — a quiet that scraped the throat even without sound.

I awoke in fragments that day. Only a few scattered hours of wakefulness graced me, yet even in dreams, the news had reached me.

My father-in-law. My king. The man who once bent low to a trembling girl from Mithila, gathering me into his arms like a daughter he had waited a lifetime to find.

He had four sons, and no daughters, and he had told me — once, in a courtyard, on a morning I have never spoken of to anyone since — that he had been waiting for me to call him *father* since I came to Ayodhya. I had not known how to answer. I had only nodded, because at fourteen one nods. But the word *father* had been waiting on my tongue ever since, and now he was gone before I had ever quite found the courage to say it.

The man who smelled of sandalwood, silk, and something more — safety — had slipped beyond this world, folded into his own grief.

They said he had called Rama's name in his final hours. And when his voice failed him, it was not Mother Kaikeyi who held his hand, but Mother Kaushalya.

Mother Kaikeyi never entered his chamber again.



Bharata and Shatrughna arrived as the funeral fires were being prepared at the banks of the Sarayu.

Bharata stood frozen in the courtyard, his hand trembling where it clutched the edge of the funeral cloth. His face, once full of warmth and mischief, now seemed carved from disbelief.

"*No one told me,*" he whispered — a sound softer and more broken than any scream.

Shatrughna was the first to cry, falling against the palace gates as if his own body could not carry the news.

But Bharata — he did not shed a single tear.

He turned on his heel and strode, wordless, toward Mother Kaikeyi's wing. He did not knock.

"*You...*" he said, voice low, sharp, and splintering. "*You were his joy. His queen. You loved Rama more than you ever loved me.*"

Mother Kaikeyi stood there, silent, her hands twisting the edge of her sari until the silk frayed beneath her touch.

"*You traded love for ambition that was never yours,*" Bharata continued, stepping closer. "*And now – he's gone. They are gone.*"

Still, she said nothing. But her eyes – swollen, broken, hollow – spoke the ruin she could no longer undo.

"*I do not have a mother,*" Bharata said at last, his voice soft but cutting deeper than any sword.

And he left.

The silence he left behind pressed heavier than all the words ever spoken in anger.



They carried mighty King Dasharatha to the banks of the Sarayu, wrapped in white cloth and sandalwood. The priests intoned ancient chants, their voices wavering like reeds in the wind. The flames rose steady, devouring king, crown, memory.

And when his body turned to ash, Ayodhya's lineage felt, for a breathless moment, as if it had turned with him.

The next morning, Bharata stood before the royal court. His voice, when it came, was iron wrapped in mourning.

"*I will not sit on the throne,*" he declared.

Whispers rushed through the ministers like leaves blown across a dry courtyard.

"The kingdom has a king already," he said. "And he walks like sage in the woods."

He called for preparations. Not for coronation, but for pilgrimage.

"I will bring my brother, my true king home."



The procession that followed was unlike anything Ayodhya had seen.

It was not a march of victory. It was a river of penance.

Sage Vashistha walked barefoot at the front, carrying only a staff of ancient wood. The three queens rode in silence. Priests, ministers, villagers — all walked with heads bowed, the dust of the road clinging to their grief.

And we — Sita's sisters, Janaka's daughters — we walked behind. Our parents, the King and Queen of Mithila, came too. A whole nation folded into sorrow.

I remember the dust of that road on the soles of my feet. I remember Mandavi's hand finding mine and not letting go for the length of a kingdom. I remember that somewhere between the city and the forest, I understood for the first time that the women in this story were going to walk a great many miles together to reach men who would, in their turn, walk away again. I was sixteen years old. I think I aged a decade on that road, in the way young women sometimes age — quietly, internally, in a single afternoon, without anyone noticing.

I noticed Bharata, too, on that road, though I do not think he knew anyone was noticing him. He walked at the head of the procession

with Sage Vashistha, refusing the chariot prepared for him, refusing the bearers offered for the sandals, refusing food and water at the rest stops the others had to take. The road was long. We were all tired. He looked as though he had decided, somewhere inside himself, that tiredness was a luxury he was no longer entitled to. He did not look like a prince. He looked like a man performing a vow whose terms he had not been allowed to choose. Once, when we stopped at a stream to rest, I saw him kneel beside the water but not drink. He simply looked at his own reflection for a moment, then stood up again — as if he had checked something and found it unchanged, and that small unchangedness was enough to keep him walking.

The earth itself seemed to pulse beneath our bare feet. The sun scorched, but no one sang. The wind scattered petals and prayers in our path, but none dared lift their voices.

It felt less like a royal march and more like a kingdom on its knees.

We reached them deep in the forest, where trees arched like ancient temples and the air smelled of bark, moss, and the slow breathing of time.

Rama stood tall as we approached, his face serene but taut with an invisible ache. Sita, silent and luminous, stood beside him. And Lakshmana — who had once been the brightest blaze in Ayodhya — stood like a blade sheathed in restraint.

When Sage Vashistha spoke — "*Your father has passed*" — the calm cracked.

Rama's eyes welled. Lakshmana trembled, fists clenching and unclenching at his sides.

"*Why was I not there?*" he whispered. "*I could have —*"

He turned his face away, covering it with calloused palms.

Bharata fell to his knees in front of Rama.

"I loved you from my first breath," he said. "You are my crown, my King."

Silence wrapped the brothers, thick as monsoon clouds.

Bharata begged them to return, crying out that *"Ayodhya is not Ayodhya without them."*

Rama bent down, touched his shoulders — steady, sorrowful.

"I cannot," he said. "My father's final wish was my exile. I must honour that."

Lakshmana's voice came low but shaking. *"You would ask him to break dharma?"*

"No," Bharata said. "I ask him to come home."

"If you sit on that throne — " Lakshmana began.

"I won't," Bharata answered before he could finish.

The wind caught his words and carried them into the forest.

"I am taking these," Bharata said, kneeling.

He lifted a pair of wooden sandals — Rama's sandals — with both hands, as if they weighed more than any crown.

"Let them rule in your place. I will guard your kingdom from its edges."

Sita wept then, silently, the way rivers surrender to mountains. Not from sorrow, but from the weight of so much love folded into one gesture.

Even Lakshmana had no words.



Later, by the river's edge, I found Lakshmana sharpening an arrow that would never be loosed. The steel whispered against stone, restless and slow.

"*Lakshmana*," I said, my voice barely reaching him.

He did not turn.

"*I saw her*," I said. "*Nidra. She came to me. I carry your sleep. I walk the nights you cannot walk.*"

His hands stilled. The arrow fell from his fingers.

And in the hush that followed, he spoke.

"*I am yours*," he said. "*Even here. Even now. Even always.*"

He walked away before he could break — before I could shatter the thin line keeping him upright.



Kaikeyi stood far behind, a figure bowed under invisible chains. Her lips moved, a broken whisper lost in the breeze.

"*I loved him... I love him still... He was mine... more than Bharata... and I was blind.*"

Sita stepped to her side — silent, steady — and placed a hand on her trembling shoulder.

"*Then let your love begin again*," she said.

And for a moment, in the heavy heat of the forest clearing, the sun broke through the clouds overhead.



The procession returned to Ayodhya — not with sons, but with a pair of sandals in their place.

Bharata lived at the border, keeping watch like a flame in the wind. Shatrughna moved between the palace and the boundary, carrying news and prayers like offerings across the broken spine of the kingdom.

And the palace that once echoed with princely laughter now stood vast and hollow, its banners fading, its walls holding the ghost of songs no longer sung.

Only we remained. The women. The queens. The sisters.

The kingdom would be ours to hold — though we did not yet have the words for it, and the songs would not credit us when we were done. I would learn this slowly, across years, the way a body learns the weight of a thing it has been carrying long enough not to remember not carrying. At sixteen, I only knew that the palace was quieter than it had ever been, and that the silence had work to do, and that the women in it would do that work because no one else was left.

And I — half-asleep, half-awake — dreaming of a forest I had never touched, and a man who walked it without rest, carrying me in every unspoken breath.



Chapter 10:

Veins of the Forest



There is a kind of seeing that comes only in sleep.

Not the sleep of forgetting, but of remembering what has not yet happened. Of walking paths your body has never known, but your soul has traced in secret ink.

That is the sleep I live now.

Every time I close my eyes — he keeps his open.



At first, the dreams came in fragments.

A sky bruised into red. The crunch of dry leaves under bare feet. The slow scraping of metal across a whetstone in the dark. Rama's voice rising in mantra over a small fire. Sita's hands cupping river water in silence, her bangles dulled by the forest dust. Lakshmana's eyes, unblinking, his limbs moving even when others slept.

His hunger went unspoken. His body grew leaner with each day. His silence sharpened, honed thinner than the arrows he fletched by moonlight.

In dreams, I watched him bend, but not break. I saw exhaustion gather at his shoulders like ash — heavy, persistent — and yet he carried it without falling.



Some nights, the visions blurred into symbols.

A tree with no roots, dripping sap the colour of blood. A river flowing backward, carrying empty boats made from prayer offerings. A bowstring stretched taut across the heavens, unmoving even as storms gathered.

I wandered through these dreamscapes — barefoot, weightless — never certain if I was the watcher or the watched.

Once, in the hollow of sleep, I asked the forest itself,

Who dreams the exile?

And the trees whispered back,

All who wait.



When I woke — if it could be called waking — Ayodhya demanded its own kind of vigilance.

The palace was quieter than before, but life had not ceased. Work still needed hands. Grain accounts still needed balancing. The kitchens still needed oversight to prevent hunger from stirring unrest.

Each day, I walked the halls — checking the storerooms, meeting the steward, calming disputes among market vendors who came to the palace for judgment. I prepared herbs for the Queen Mothers, sitting beside Mother Kaushalya as she recited hollow prayers into her shawl, smoothing Mother Sumitra's silences, and leaving wildflowers anonymously at Mother Kaikeyi's door.

Sometimes, while arranging scrolls in the council room or lighting lamps in the shrines, I forgot whether I was awake or dreaming. The stone floor wavered. The scents of rice and ghee blurred with the smell of wet bark and river mud from my unseen forest.

But always, I finished my tasks. Always, I carried the kingdom

forward, even if no one saw.

No one asked why my gaze often drifted beyond the courtyard walls. No one noticed how my hands, steady as they were, sometimes trembled when no one was looking.

And I prayed daily at the inner sanctum, to Lord Shiva.

"Let them return one day closer," I whispered. "Let today be one less in the waiting."



In dreams, the forest grew stronger than marble walls.

I saw Lakshmana patching torn shelters, chasing wolves from the clearing, sharpening arrows until his fingertips blistered. I saw him sleep sitting up against ancient trees, never fully surrendering to rest.

Once — clearer than any other dream — I watched him carve my name into the bark of a sal tree.

Not for prayer. Not for longing. Simply to remember the sound of me — to hold a fragment of home where memory grew thin.

I did not weep. The dreams were too sacred for sorrow.

In those hours between sleep and duty, sometimes poetry found me, like a thread left on a doorstep —

My husband does not sleep; I dream his hunger.

He walks among thorns; I bleed from my heels.

We are not parted. We are the same vow — kept in two directions.

The people of Ayodhya measured time differently now.

Children marked the walls with chalk lines, one for every day their fathers remained away. Merchants lit lamps each dusk, whispering

Rama's name into the smoke. Mothers told their children bedtime stories, not of battles won, but of brothers who wandered the wilderness so the kingdom could sleep safely.

Each sunrise meant one day closer to their return.

And yet —

Famine threatened the northern villages. A fever bloomed near the old Sarayu river crossing. An ash storm blackened the skies for three long days.

Still, we endured. Still, I dreamed.



And one night — in the stillness between one breath and the next — Lakshmana turned during his watch.

In the dream, he looked directly at me.

I gasped. The trees seemed to hold their breath. The river stilled mid-current.

"*You see too much,*" he said — his voice as real as my own heartbeat.

And then he smiled. Once. A smile deep enough to hold the whole forest, the whole exile, inside it.

Then he vanished into the mist.

That smile was enough.

Enough to lift me the next morning. Enough to carry the grain tallies, the endless prayers, the growing cracks in the palace stones. Enough to wait. Enough to endure.

Because love does not always roar. Sometimes — it dreams in silence.

The Shadows of Desire and War

*A war begins long before the first arrow. It begins when
one heart decides another is owed to it.*



A.S

Chapter 11:

Desire and the Demoness



There is a kind of shadow that does not fall — it rises. It does not merely block the light. It swallows it whole.

That is how I first sensed her. Not with sight. Not with sound. But with a heat that gnawed through dreams like a blade through silk.

My dreams had never burned before. This night, they ignited — like dry fields under a summer storm.

The forest pulsed. The trees bled sap the colour of molten gold. The leaves curled inward, fists tightening against invisible blows. A scent — half-fruit, half-flesh — swept through the underbrush, thick enough to choke.

I stood barefoot in the dream-world, and the earth beneath me throbbed like a wounded heart.

Before I saw her, the trees bent backward, creaking under a pressure that had no shape.

Then she came.

Not walking. Not flying. Unfolding.

Her form shifted with every blink — woman, beast, flame, river — her shape sliding between skins as if flesh itself was a lie. Her eyes were not eyes. They were hunger given shape.

I knew her name before she spoke it.

Surpanakha.



She was desire untethered. Not the sweet longing of love, but the brutal ache of possession.

In my dream, she wandered toward Lakshmana — not gently, but with a storm in her hips and thunder in her breath. She reached for him like fire reaching for dry grass.

He did not see her. Not yet. But I did.

I tried to call out. My mouth would not open. I tried to move. My feet sank into the forest floor.

Surpanakha danced in circles, whispering praises to Rama, then turning to Lakshmana with eyes that burned redder than any sunset. Her voice coiled through the trees.

Want is a sharp thing, she sang. If it is not given — it will take.

And then the dream skipped.

I do not know how else to describe it. One moment she was reaching for him with her storm and her thunder, and the next I was somewhere later — Lakshmana's blade already lifted, already moving, already past the moment that mattered. I had been there for the *desire*, and I had been there for the *consequence*, but the *cut itself* the dream had refused to show me. Perhaps because some things ought not to be seen. Perhaps because the body of a sleeping woman cannot survive seeing them. Perhaps because the dream, like Lakshmana himself, was protecting me.

When the blade did move — and I felt it now without seeing it, the way one feels a stone dropped into a well long before the splash

arrives — it did not just cut flesh. It fractured something deeper.

Desire became rage. Rage became a scream. The scream shattered into a curse.

The forest broke under the force of it. Trees split open with hollow cracks. Roots tore upward through the soil. The river shuddered backward. Even the sky bent inwards, folding over itself.

Surpanakha did not fall. She exploded — into crows, into fireflies, into laughter that stitched itself into the trees.

The forest was no longer the same. The paths twisted. The winds lost their direction. The prayers Sita whispered seemed to scatter without reaching any god. Even Rama's voice, steady and golden, could no longer calm the woods.



Later in the dream, I saw Sita sitting alone by the riverbank. Her arms wrapped around her knees, her gaze locked onto her own reflection.

The river blurred and doubled her image. Two Sitas staring back. One who endured, and one who wondered how long endurance could hold.

She whispered aloud, though no one was nearby.

"Why do women always carry the burden of being seen?"

The river offered no answer. Only the slow weeping of its current. Or perhaps it was her own tears folding into the water.

I felt her tiredness in my own arms then. The way they had begun to ache from being wrapped around her knees too long. The way her shoulders, even in dream, were carrying a tension that had begun to feel permanent. I do not know how I felt these things in my own body, three thousand miles from where she sat. I only know I did,

and that I carried that tiredness into the next morning, and that for a long time afterwards I could not raise my arms above my head without remembering whose tiredness I had borrowed.

And Rama? He walked with calm. He lit fires. He meditated. But his silence no longer felt whole. It felt defensive. As if he knew something had changed. Something had slipped loose that no arrow could mend.

Lakshmana sharpened his arrows obsessively, even when no danger stirred. The hiss of stone against metal became a prayer — a prayer against the guilt that clung to him like smoke. He had done what needed to be done. But I saw it in his face — the torment of a man who had touched the fire to protect his family and now carried the scent of burning in his own skin.



I have not told you how I spent my waking hours in those years, because the songs do not ask. The songs follow the forest. They follow the war. They do not follow the woman who stayed behind to keep a kingdom from starving while its king walked barefoot in someone else's wilderness.

But I will tell you now.

Bharata ruled from Nandigram, at the kingdom's edge, with Rama's sandals on the throne and his own body refusing the comfort of the palace. He governed in grief — which is to say he governed the way a man holds his breath: correctly, and not for long. The decrees came from him. But a decree is not the same as bread. Someone has to decide how much grain leaves the eastern store before the monsoon, and whether the well in the potters' quarter is mended before the one in the weavers', and what to tell a widow whose husband's pension the treasury has quietly stopped paying because the man who signed for it is in a forest and cannot sign again.

Someone has to decide. For much of those fourteen years, that

someone was me.

No one appointed me. There was no ceremony, no seal pressed into wax beneath my name. It happened the way water finds the lowest ground — the questions simply began arriving at my door, because the queen mothers were drowning in their own grief, and Sita was gone, and Mandavi had the fire for grand decisions but not the patience for small ones. And the small ones are the kingdom. I learned the price of lentils. I learned which granary keeper skimmed and which only looked like he did. I learned that a kingdom is not held together by its king. It is held together by ten thousand unglamorous mercies, performed daily, by people whose names the poets never trouble to learn.

One morning, a clerk from the old minister Sumantra's office came to me with the eastern grain accounts. He had been bringing them for a month. The first time, the numbers had been rounded — softened, arranged to trouble me as little as possible. I had looked at them, and looked at him, and said nothing, only handed them back. The next month he brought the true ones. The real figures, ugly and unrounded, a kingdom's hunger written out in a careful hand.

He did not explain why he had changed. I did not ask. But I understood it as the highest courtesy anyone paid me in those years: he had decided I could bear the truth, and that I would do something with it. Most people, once they decide a woman is strong, decide also that they need not be gentle with her. He was the rare one who decided I was strong and stayed gentle anyway. He bowed a fraction lower each time he left my chamber. It was nearly the only thanks I received in those years, and I have never forgotten it.

That was the morning the city's fear reached me too. Strange dreams in the market. Restless sleep in every quarter. Shadows, people said, moving down the palace corridors with no feet. Some called it a bad omen. Some swore it was the demoness herself, come back for vengeance.

I did not tell them they were right. What good would it have done —

to confirm to a frightened city that the thing it feared was real, and that I felt it too, every single night, in dreams I was not permitted to refuse? A ruler does not hand the people her fear. She takes theirs, and holds it, and lets them believe the holding costs her nothing.

So I signed the grain order. I sent the larger share to the potters' quarter, where the children were thinnest. And when the clerk asked, carefully, whether I too had been sleeping badly, I told him it was only the heat.

He looked at me a moment too long. I think he knew I was lying. I think that was the morning he began to bow lower.

The fear did not frighten me the way it frightened the city. I knew the truth. Surpanakha had never truly left.

She had only folded herself into the air.



In the last dream of that night, I saw her again.

Surpanakha stood at the edge of a lake filled with shattered mirrors. Each mirror held a different face — hers, and mine, and others too blurred to name.

She looked at me. Not with rage. But with a sorrow deeper than hunger.

"You know what it means to hunger," she said. "You just learned to starve with dignity."

Then she smiled — a smile both pitying and knowing — and dissolved into mist.

I woke breathless. Sweating. Shivering. And for the first time since Lakshmana left, I was afraid — not of waking, but of dreaming again.

When I sat up in bed, I noticed something on the floor near my cot. A small black feather. Then another, a little further away. Then a third, almost beneath the bed.

Crow feathers. Three of them. I do not keep birds in my chamber. I do not know how they arrived. The maids, when they came, gathered them up without comment, as the maids by then gathered up many things they did not understand. They had grown accustomed to the small inexplicable evidences of my nights.

I never told them what I had seen.



Chapter 12:

Circles of Fire



The dream did not dissolve. It shattered — into flame that clawed at my skin and filled my lungs with smoke I could not expel.

I had grown accustomed, by then, to dreams that came in different weathers. Soft visions of Lakshmana at his evening fire. Long quiet ones where Sita sat by a stream and washed her hair. Sharper ones that arrived in the small hours and left me with the taste of forest air in my mouth. I had learned to receive them the way other women learn to receive rain — with no expectation of choosing when or how. The dream had become a kingdom I lived in alongside the waking one, and most nights, by then, I knew which kingdom I was in even while I was dreaming.

That night, I did not know.

That night, the dream struck like a blow.

I remember how the trees turned black in my dream, though no fire had touched them yet. The forest, once gentle, once humming with life, stood still. Too still. Even the birds held their breath.

Then came the wind. It howled — not through the trees, but within me. A hot, clawing wind that tasted of ash and sorrow. Though wrapped in the warmth of my bed, my skin felt exposed to something ancient and merciless.

I tried to wake. I could not.

And then I saw it.

A chariot — if such a thing could still bear that name. It was not drawn by horses, but by things that moved like shadows in air, their breath trailing flame. Its wheels spun like twin suns — molten, furious, cursed. Gold, yes — but not the gold of our temples, nor of our jewellery. This was the gold of fever dreams, of burning cities. The gold of conquest without mercy.

He stood at its helm.

Not merely tall. Crowned not by gold but by darkness so complete that even the sun recoiled. Ten heads — each bearing a different sneer: rage, ambition, hunger, cruelty, pride — all staring outward, all devouring. Eyes that did not blink. Eyes that consumed.

I knew him before I knew his name.

Ravana.

My throat tried to scream. It collapsed into silence.

He descended. The forest bent away from him — leaves curling inward like frightened children. The earth itself seemed to flinch.

I wanted to run to her. I wanted to scream her name. But the dream pinned me down, as surely as death pins the fallen.

Sita stood alone in the clearing.

Unarmed. Unafraid.

She looked serene, as she always did — like a flame that chose to burn quietly. Her hair was unbound. Her shoulders were straight. Her silence was not ignorance. It was strength.

He spoke. I could not hear his words. But the air bent around them — recoiling, unravelling.

She turned to face him.

And for a moment — a single flickering moment — I believed she would stop him. I remembered the girl who had lifted the Pinaka, the bow no man in Mithila could budge. I remembered that Ravana himself had once failed to even nudge it during her swayamvar.

How could he touch her now? How could he even reach her?

But he did.

With a movement faster than sight, he seized her wrist. And the forest — my forest — screamed.

Branches cracked. Roots buckled. The sky itself seemed to shudder.

She struggled. Oh gods, she fought. Her nails raked his skin. Her fist struck his chest.

And when she screamed — *Rama* — the trees did not fall. The sky did not split. Nothing came. I had believed, somewhere in me, that a moment like this could not actually happen in the world — that the world had been built with some quiet rule against it. The rule had not held. The rule, I understood then, had perhaps never been there at all. I had only assumed it, the way the young assume the floor beneath them.



Wings.

A blur of feathers and fury.

Jatayu came like a storm, talons stretched, beak bared, rage blazing from his eyes. He struck Ravana's chariot with the full wrath of the heavens. The sound of their clash shook the very roots of the world.

And for a heartbeat — I believed. I believed he would save her.

But Ravana drew his sword. It gleamed — not with sunlight, but

with the dark sheen of sacrifices long buried.

One swing. One terrible arc through the sky. And Jatayu fell.

I felt the cut in my own body — a wound not of flesh, but of spirit. I collapsed within the dream. Helpless. Watching.

The chariot rose, burning. Sita's cries grew distant. Then — nothing. Only the echo of fire remained.



I woke with salt on my lips. Tears. They had flowed freely, silently, while I slept.

I do not remember the next two days. Mandavi told me, much later, that I did not speak. The cooks said I did not eat. I have no record of those hours within myself. There is a hole in my memory exactly the shape of those two days, and inside the hole, presumably, I went on existing — but I cannot say how. There is one small thing I remember, or perhaps only think I remember: that when I came back into myself, my palms had a dusting of dry ash on them, and I could not say where it had come from. The maids cleaned my hands before I could ask. By then they had stopped asking too.

My limbs ached as if I had run for days. My throat burned from a scream I had never uttered aloud. Something inside me had changed. It was not grief. Not even rage. It was disbelief. A disbelief so sharp it felt like a splinter under the skin of the world.

Sita — the girl who had tamed the bow. The woman who had walked into exile without flinching. The sister who faced palaces and wilderness with the stillness of the moon.

How could she be taken? How could Ravana — who could not even lift the Pinaka — steal her away like a thief in the dark?

Was there no balance left in the world?

I could feel her absence like a hole torn through the fabric of being. Something precious had unravelled, and everything else would follow.

I wrapped myself in shawls and walked to the temple chamber. The oil lamps guttered, the wicks drowning in their own light. Outside, Ayodhya slept — but I could feel a storm waking.

I knelt. I closed my eyes. And I saw Rama.

Not the gentle smile that once lit the palace halls. But a face carved from grief and fury. I saw him find the dying Jatayu. Saw his hands tremble as he touched torn feathers. Saw his jaw clench against a roar he refused to release. His eyes — dry as drought-scorched earth — held a hollow so vast it devoured even rage.

And Lakshmana. I saw him punch trees until his knuckles split. Saw him bite his hands until blood welled between his fingers.

The thread of duty that had bound him had finally snapped. He wanted to burn the forest. Turn it to ash. But Rama caught him by the wrist. Held him steady.

"We must not burn the forest," Rama said. "Not until we find the flame that stole her."

I wept again. For Sita. For them. For a world that had betrayed its own gods.



Days passed like hours. Or hours like years. I no longer knew.

The dream returned, again and again, like a fever that refused to break. Each time sharper. Each time more unbearable. Each time, I saw her vanish. Each time, I saw only the broken clearing, the shattered feathers, the stain of silence.

There is no word for what it is to watch a person you love be taken, every night, in the same dream, knowing exactly how she will struggle and exactly which moment she will stop struggling, and being unable, every single time, to even reach for her. Something dies in you that you did not know was alive. Not a metaphor. It died. A part of me died on a specific night, in a specific bed in Ayodhya, while the palace slept and the lamps were guttering, and no one came to mark it, and no one would have known what to mark.

And always I asked the same question.

Why didn't the earth rise to stop him? Why didn't the skies split open? Where was the justice?

And slowly, I began to hear something else in the dream. Not just the scream. But the echo of it. An echo that did not fade — but circled. It circled like fire around the heart. Around Ayodhya. Around the forest. It would not stop.

This was not the end. This was the beginning of war.

A war not of kingdoms — but of truths. Of dharma tested. Of wounds made sacred.



I sat by the temple one evening as twilight fell. The bells chimed faintly. The sun slipped behind the clouds.

I told myself, then, that I would carry the scream as a promise — that this fire would return, that justice would rise from its ashes, that she would come home, that the forest would sing her name again. I told myself this because there are things you tell yourself at one point in your life that you cannot tell yourself later, and the telling matters more than the truth of it, because the telling is what gets you to the next morning.

What I carried, in the end, was not a promise. It was a wound. The wound has shaped what I have become. Some sorrows do not transform into anything. They simply make a place inside you, and live there, and you live around them.



A.S

Chapter 13:

Eyes on Lanka



That night, I crossed the sea without crossing it. The dream lifted me from my bed in Ayodhya and set me down in a place where the wind smelled faintly of iron, of old sorrow left to rot under a broken sky.

I stepped forward without stepping. My dream-self drifted like incense through a world I was not meant to enter.

Lanka towered on the horizon — not like a city, but like a challenge. Not like a home, but like a mirror — one forged to blind whoever dared to look. Its gates opened not with sound, but with surrender. And so, I passed through them.



The first thing I noticed was that the dream did not show me Lanka in any order I recognised.

I was in a corridor, then I was in a throne room, then I was on a rooftop looking down at the sea. I had not walked between them. The dream cut from place to place the way memory does — not narrative, but jumps between rooms one has wandered through a long time ago and cannot now string together. I would later try to describe Lanka to myself in waking hours and find that I could not draw it. I could only remember it in pieces.

Palaces of gold rose like frozen thunderclaps. Domes of crystal reflected light that felt borrowed, brittle. Courtyards bloomed with precision — gardens too symmetrical, ponds too still, lotus petals arranged in mandalas so perfect they frightened me.

Beauty should never be that quiet.

Even the shadows walked in rhythm. The courtiers I passed were cloaked in finery, their laughter measured, their faces carved into polite masks. No one looked at one another for too long. Their joy felt rehearsed. Even the air — heavy with rose, saffron, and something metallic — seemed to watch me breathe.

Then I was in Ravana's court without remembering crossing into it.

It opened like a wound lined with silk. Floors of lapis lazuli stretched underfoot, etched with scenes of conquest — Indra weeping, Yama kneeling, even Brahma cast in fading lines. Walls of obsidian held up domes where chandeliers wept light like slow-falling stars.

And in the centre of it all, seated upon a throne shaped like a golden flame — he sat.

Ravana.

Not the beast from bedtime warnings. Not the monster with ten snarling heads. Not even the form I'd seen in the nightmare where Sita vanished into fire. He was beautiful. Too beautiful.

His faces shimmered in and out of form — sometimes ten, sometimes three, sometimes only one. But every face bore the same eyes. Eyes like eclipses. Heavy with knowledge, dark with hunger.

His skin gleamed with the power of mantras absorbed, of gods defeated, of years spent conquering things not meant to be touched. Around his neck hung sacred beads. Upon his brow, a crescent mark of penance and power.

He had mastered the Vedas. He had defeated death. He had stolen fire from the gods and held it like a toy.

He was not just a king. He was a question.

What happens when knowledge forgets to bow?



Behind him stood Mandodari.

Not hidden, not bowed — but still. Still as twilight just before the first star dares to rise.

She wore emeralds like sorrow and silk like regret. Her beauty was not the dazzling kind that draws kingdoms. It was the kind that carries rivers within — silent, deep, inevitable.

She loved him. I could feel it — the ache of it in her breath. She loved him the way old trees love the sun — even when it scorches more than it warms.

And she tried. In whispers behind closed doors. In careful silences at council meetings. In small, desperate prayers folded into daily rituals, she tried to remind him of what he had once been.

"Let her go," she had begged him. "The wound you carve now will bleed beyond your kingdom."

But pride had deafened him long before Sita ever crossed into the forest. He smiled at Mandodari's sorrow and built his ruin, stone by stone, while she watched.

No scrolls praise her for it. No poets carve it into songs. But I saw it. In the way her hands trembled when Ravana spoke Sita's name. In the way her lips moved in silent apologies the world would never hear.

She wept without witnesses. And in her heart, she whispered a thousand sorries to Sita. Sorries that would never be enough.

She could not stop what had begun. She could only bear witness — a queen chained not by gold, but by grief.



The dream skipped again.

Now I was in a corridor I had not entered. Servants glided like smoke. Musicians played to no audience. Dancers spun in endless loops, their ankles chained with gold so heavy it sang. I followed nothing, and nothing led me, and then a door I had not opened was open, and I was through it.

Ashoka Vatika.

A garden carved from control. Not wild. Not soft. Not sacred. The trees stood too still. The grass shimmered green edged with red. Flowers bloomed as if compelled — not from joy, but obedience. The air was drenched in fragrance too rich to breathe.

And beneath the central ancient Ashoka, she sat.

Sita.

The dream did not let me see her face clearly. I saw her hands first — folded in her lap, still as folded light — and then her hair, falling in a dark river down her back, and then the curve of her shoulders, which I knew so well I needed nothing else to be sure of her. But her face the dream withheld. Or perhaps I withheld it from myself. There are things one cannot bear to see in full, and the face of a sister who has been imprisoned for months in someone else's garden is one of them.

She wore no ornaments. No silks. Only strength.

The demonesses circled her — sharp-eyed, cruel-tongued — but none dared touch her. She sat with her spine straight and her gaze steady.

Not as a prisoner. As a presence.

I knelt beside her, though I knew she could not see me. I whispered her name. I reached for her hand. My fingers passed through. But still, I stayed.



He came to her often. Ravana. Drenched in scent. Draped in charm. Some days with poetry. Some days with threats. Some days with offers too lavish for any mortal queen.

But Sita... never flinched. Her silence was sharper than his anger. Her gaze never truly met his — not out of fear, but because she saw beyond him.

She spoke rarely, but when she spoke, her voice dropped like stones into the hush.

"I am not yours," she said. "Not yours to break. Nor to barter. Nor to claim."

Each word bloomed in the air like a mantra. And the very wind seemed to still out of respect.

What I heard of her, in those middle dreams, came in fragments. She would be in the middle of speaking and the dream would lift me before she finished. I would hear the beginning of a prayer and never the end of it. I would catch the word *Rama* and lose what came after. The dreams were giving me her presence but refusing to give me her speech intact. I think the dream was being kind. I think it could see that I was carrying enough already, and that hearing every word of her hour-by-hour endurance would have undone me.



At night within the dream, I returned to her side. And I watched.

I watched her fast. I watched her pray. I watched her speak to the wind, asking it to carry her words to Rama and Lakshmana.

And always, always — she believed.

"They will come for me," she whispered once to the tree. "My Lord. My brother. I am never forgotten."

And that night, I saw it.

The Ashoka tree shivered once, and bloomed — not in petals, but in flames of light that gave off no heat, only hope. A garden of fire without smoke. A garden of faith without fear.

Sita did not burn. She shone.

She radiated a stillness more terrifying than any army. A knowing deeper than any throne could comprehend. A faith no kingdom could seduce.

And I, a watcher wrapped in shadows, whispered back.

"They will never understand what you endured. But I do. I carry your exile in my sleep. I have kept your silence warm."

For a moment, she smiled. A flicker. A breath of the divine breaking through the veil.

And then — Lanka faded.

The trees dissolved. The sea retreated. I awoke in my chamber, the scent of ash and jasmine still clinging to my skin.

And in my chest, the fire of that garden still bloomed. Not in pain. In promise.



I woke from Lanka into a colder kind of work.

There is a labour that leaves no record. It moves no grain, settles no dispute, appears in no ledger. It is the work of sitting with people who are coming apart, and holding them in place with nothing but your presence until they remember how to hold themselves. No one is taught this work. No one is thanked for it. But someone must do it, and in those years — in that palace full of the grieving — it fell, like most unrecorded things, to me.

Mother Kaushalya had stopped eating.

Not dramatically; she was far too dignified for drama. She did it in the small, deliberate way of a woman who has quietly decided her body is no longer worth the trouble of feeding. The trays came back from her chamber untouched. The rice went cold and stiff in its brass. Her women did not know what to do — they had been trained to serve a queen, not to coax one back toward the living — and so they came to me, because by then everyone came to me.

I did not bring her food the first time. I brought her nothing. I sat on the floor beside her bed and said nothing, because I had learned long ago, reading the oldest griefs in the oldest scrolls, that the cruellest thing you can offer a drowning person is a reason to keep swimming. They already know the reasons. The reasons are what have exhausted them.

So I only sat. The light crossed the floor. A long time passed.

"He used to bring me the first mango of every season," she said at last, to the ceiling, not to me. "Before anyone else was allowed to touch the tree. He would climb it himself — a grown prince, a future king — and ruin his good clothes, and bring it down to me with the leaves still on it." Her eyes closed. "I do not know if he is eating, out there. I do not know if anyone climbs trees for him now."

"Sita does," I said. It was the first thing I had spoken. "And Lakshmana climbs for both of them. I have seen it."

She turned her head and looked at me — truly looked, for the first time since the exile had taken her son. *"You have seen it."*

"In dreams," I admitted. *"But I have seen it."*

She was quiet a moment. Then: *"Then you will tell me. Whatever you see. You will tell me — so that I know he is eating."*

It was not a request. It was the nearest thing to a will to live that she had shown in weeks, and I would not have refused it for all the kingdoms of the earth.

"I will tell you," I said.

That evening, she took a little rice. Not much. But a little. And the next morning her women looked at me the way people look at someone who has done the thing they could not do — with a gratitude that is half resentment, because it reminds them of their own helplessness. I had grown used to that look. It is the one the strong are handed instead of thanks.

I did not mind. I had not done it to be thanked.

I had done it because someone had to climb the tree.



Chapter 14:

Silent Watcher



I do not know how many days passed between Sita's scream and the forest falling silent. In dreams, there is no counting. There is only feeling.

And I felt everything.

The terror of wings breaking mid-air. The tremble of Jatayu's last flight. The crack of silence left behind.

The exile had changed. It was no longer about survival. It was war now. And they did not yet know how to grieve.

Rama was the first to rise from shock. But something had broken within him — not his will, not his calm, but his quiet. It was no longer peace. It was the silence of something pulled too tight. He searched the forest like a god trying to remember where he left his creation.

Lakshmana, too, became breathless in urgency. His hands bled from clearing paths, his voice hoarse from calling Sita's name into trees that would not answer.

And they found it not in marks on the earth, but in what she left behind.

A shred of her sari caught on a broken branch. A single anklet glinting in the dirt — its bells crushed, as if silence itself had tried to scream. A fragment of her bangle, still warm with the memory of her wrist.

Lakshmana fell to his knees. Rama held the fabric close to his chest and whispered her name as if it could call her back.

That night, I felt their relief — sharp and short — as they knew now which way the shadows had moved. Her trail had not vanished. It had only gone farther than pain could measure.



Soon after, Hanuman came.

I had seen him once before in a dream, leaping through mist like a flame with a smile. But now he bowed before Rama — no longer just a messenger, but a devotee. A vow waiting to be spoken.

He led them to Kishkindha. To Sugriva. To the mountain kingdom of the vanaras. And there — at the mouth of that wild alliance — stood Bali. Golden, powerful, proud.

Rama did not seek war. But dharma walks strange, bitter paths. Sugriva needed help to reclaim his place. Rama offered it.

I watched from dream as Rama drew his bow. As Bali, unaware, stepped into the clearing. As the arrow struck him from behind. Lakshmana turned his face. Even Hanuman closed his eyes.

Bali fell slowly. Not like a warrior, but like a man whose last words were already prepared.

He turned his face toward Rama.

"You could have asked," he said. "I would have helped. Ravana feared me more than your arrows."

Rama's voice trembled. *"Forgive me. I acted by the letter of dharma, but not its spirit."*

And Bali, lying in the lap of dying light, said, *"Then walk its spirit"*

now."

And breathed no more.



With Bali's blessing, the search truly began.

I saw the vanaras spread across the kingdoms — climbing what was meant not to be climbed, crossing what was meant not to be crossed, calling her name into caverns and trees that had no answer to give. I will not tell you about every day of that searching. I do not remember every day. I remember only that it went on, and that some part of me wished, in those days, that I had no dreams at all — because the dreams insisted on showing me hope without yet delivering it, and hope without delivery is its own kind of hunger.

There were mornings during that searching when I would wake with my legs aching as if I had been climbing, though I had walked nowhere. My feet would be sore. My calves tight. The body cannot tell the difference between distance climbed in a dream and distance climbed in waking, or perhaps it can, but it chooses not to. I had been climbing the cliffs of the south alongside them in my sleep, looking for her. The body kept score.

And then — Hanuman. He soared. Not like a bird. Not like a god. But like a promise remembering its shape.

I followed him across the sea in dream. Watched the sky bow before him. Watched Lanka rise on the horizon. Watched him shrink in size, and enter Ravana's city like a whisper that would become a storm.

He reached her.

Sita. My sister. My flame. Still unbroken, still waiting, still shining beneath the Ashoka tree.



He had made himself small to enter the garden. The size of a fly, perhaps. He sat among the leaves at the base of the tree for a long time before he spoke, watching her. He had crossed an ocean to find her, and now that he had found her, he did not know how to begin. Sometimes the things you most need to say are the ones you forget the words for, in the moment you have arrived.

She knew, before he spoke. I do not know how she knew. Perhaps she had felt his arrival in the air. Perhaps the demonesses guarding her had stopped their muttering, and a different quality of stillness had settled around her. Perhaps she had simply, after all those months alone, learned to hear smaller things. She did not look up. She said, quietly, *"Who is there."*

He stepped out from the leaves and knelt.

"I am Hanuman, Lady. Servant of your husband. He sent me."

She closed her eyes.

I have thought, many times, about what passed through her in those moments. I think she did not believe him at first — not because she doubted him, but because she had spent so long imagining this exact moment that the real moment, when it arrived, felt at first like only one more imagining. The body learns, after enough waiting, to disbelieve its own hopes. It is a cruel adaptation. But it keeps you alive.

He must have seen it. He reached into the fold of his cloth and brought out the ring.

He did not put it in her hand. He laid it on the ground between them. He understood, somehow, that she needed to look at it first. That if he had pressed it into her palm she would not have trusted it. He gave her instead the small grace of having to choose to touch it.

She looked at the ring for a long time.

"*He is alive,*" she said. Not a question. A statement, addressed to no one.

"*He is alive, Lady.*"

"*He sent you.*"

"*He sent me. He has not eaten well in many days. He cannot eat until he knows you are safe.*"

She reached forward then. Slowly. Her hand was thinner than I remembered — captivity had narrowed her wrists, made her bones more visible beneath the skin. She picked up the ring with two fingers and folded it inside her palm.

She did not weep. She had wept, I think, the way women weep early in their suffering — hard and immediate. This was past that. This was the part of suffering where you have grown accustomed to disappointment, and a kindness, when it arrives, arrives like a wound you had not prepared yourself for.

"*Tell him —*" she began. Then stopped. Then began again. "*Tell him I have not broken. Tell him I have not let them touch me. Tell him I will wait.*"

"*Lady, I can carry you.*"

She lifted her eyes to him for the first time.

"*You cannot.*"

"*My size is no obstacle. I can grow. I can carry you across the sea before the moon has set.*"

"*You can carry my body, Hanuman. You cannot carry the part of me that needs to be reclaimed, not rescued. If I leave with you, I leave as a stolen woman who escaped. If he comes for me, I leave as a queen restored. The difference is what the world will remember of me. The difference is also what*

I will remember of myself."

He bowed his head.

"Tell him to come," she said. "Tell him I am here. Tell him I have kept the promise of being his even in a garden where my keepers count my breaths. Tell him to come – and to come quickly – but to come."

Hanuman touched his forehead to the ground. When he rose, his face had changed. He had come to rescue her. He left having met someone he did not have a word for. A devotion he would carry the rest of his life had been planted in that garden, in the few minutes between his arrival and his departure, and it would shape every battle he ever fought after.



I woke that morning and could not stand.

Not from grief, this time. From relief. My limbs would not hold me. The maid found me sitting on the floor beside the bed, my hands shaking too violently to hold a cup. She did not ask. By then, the maids had stopped asking. They had learned that some of my mornings were not the kind one could explain. She held the cup for me until my hands could take it.

I did not tell her what I had seen. I did not tell anyone. There are some things a kingdom is not yet ready to hear, and one learns to keep them, and to wait until the world has caught up.



He promised to return. And before he left – he burned Lanka. Not out of vengeance. Out of warning.

Ravana's court panicked. One of his sons fell in battle. And Vibhishana, his brother, stepped away. He walked to Rama's side with bare feet and open palms.

"*I do not serve kings,*" he said. "*I serve truth.*"

And Rama, without hesitation, embraced him.

The ocean still stood between them and Lanka. Rama knelt before it, asking it to part. The waves roared in silence. When patience wore thin, Rama drew his bow. And the sea rose — not in defiance, but in surrender.

"*Build your bridge,*" it said. "*Let faith become stone.*"

And so they did.

I saw stones blessed with Rama's name float. I saw monkeys carry mountains. I saw Lakshmana's hands crack from effort, and still he did not stop.

The bridge rose like a hymn sung with hands.



And Ayodhya?

It watched. Powerless.

Word had reached us — Sita was alive. But the armies could not march. Rama was in exile. Dharma forbade interference.

So we waited.

The queens lit lamps in silence. Mother Kaikeyi wept in her wing, guilt now her only company. Mandavi stood beside Rama's sandals and whispered prayers. Shrutakirti began fasting.

And I — woke only to tend to them. I prepared their food. I wrote letters that would never reach. I carried firewood. I lit incense.

Then I slept again. And dreamed the world shifting beneath my feet.



In dream, I reached the battlefield before the battle began.

I stood in the centre of two fates. One built of love. One built of pride.

I saw Rama's eyes — calm but hollowed by grief. Lakshmana's face — carved from determination. Hanuman's fists — curled with thunder. I saw Sita in the distance, still beneath the Ashoka tree, her face turned toward where she believed he would come from.

And I — I stood where no one would see me. Not even him. Not even now.

But I felt it. The war had not yet begun. But the world was already trembling.

And I, Urmila — half-asleep, half-awake — held the silence in which this story would roar.

Not a warrior. Not a princess. A silent watcher. The one who dreams what others dare not carry.



Chapter 15:

The First Blood



It didn't begin with the sound of war. It began with something quieter.

A shift in the air around my sleeping body. A silence that was no longer peaceful, but held its breath like someone bracing for impact. A weight in the dream, so dense it felt like walking into a room just after someone has screamed.

Rama had crossed the sea. The vanaras had entered Lanka. And something inside me — the part that watched, the part that endured — tightened.

This wasn't like the dreams I had known.

There were no metaphors tonight. No symbols to decode. No forests turning to flame or rivers flowing uphill.

Tonight, there was only blood.



Ravana had been given his chance.

I saw it unfold as if I were standing in that golden court. Angada, proud and fearless, stood before Ravana's throne and delivered Rama's final message.

Return her. Let this end without fire.

But Ravana did not bend. He laughed. Mocked the vanaras. Called Rama a forest-beggar. A prince unworthy of a throne.

Even when Angada planted his foot in the centre of the court and dared any of Lanka's warriors to move it, no one could. They tried. They failed. The marble cracked beneath his heel. I felt that crack in my bones.

And Angada left — head high, vow unbroken.

The gates of Lanka fell with the rising sun.

I saw vanaras swarm its walls like rivers of fur and fury. They climbed, leapt, screamed — names of their fallen, names of their king. Their anger was not vengeance. It was faith sharpened into action.

Ravana sent his commanders. Prahasta, Mahaparshva, Akampana. Names once inscribed on war scrolls with pride. Names that now fell like stone into fire.

The dream did not show me each death. It gave me one, and then another, and then a gap, and then the consequence — the way a battlefield itself does not show itself to anyone fully, not even those standing on it. I saw Prahasta's spine break and then I was somewhere else; I saw Mahaparshva impaled and then I was in a courtyard I had not been in before; I saw Akampana's illusion torn through and then I was watching a vanara child weep over a body I could not identify. The dream was giving me the war the way the body of a dreamer can bear it. In pieces. Out of order. With the worst things smudged at the edges.

Each time the dream did show me a death, I thought — *It didn't have to be this way.*

Each time I saw another soldier fall, I wanted to scream.

You could have stopped this. Ravana, you could have chosen differently.

You could have returned her. But you didn't. And now the earth is wet with the blood of those who believed in you.



Sita still sat beneath the Ashoka tree. Silent. Unmoved.

But today, something in her changed.

She had not spoken for days — not to the rakshasis, not even to Trijata. Her hands had remained still, folded in her lap. Her eyes, open but distant.

But now — there was a change. She lifted her head. Just slightly.

A breeze passed through the garden, carrying the scent of smoke. And with it — rumour.

The demonesses whispered among themselves, their tones half-fear, half-wonder.

"The gates have fallen." "There are monkeys on the rooftops." "Two men — taller than any vanara, eyes like fire."

Sita asked nothing. She needed no confirmation.

Trijata knelt beside her and whispered, *"They are here."*

Sita closed her eyes. And for the first time since her abduction, she smiled.

Not with triumph. Not with joy. But with the steadiness of someone whose waiting had been justified.

I felt that smile in my own skin. Not a flash of joy. But a slow loosening of something knotted inside me for too long.

In that moment, I remembered the girl who once lifted Shiva's bow

in a silent sabha hall. The girl no one expected, the girl Ravana himself had failed to move.

And yet he thought he could steal her.

What kind of blindness is this? To mistake silence for submission. To mistake love for weakness. To mistake waiting for powerlessness.

He had stolen her body. But not her will. And now, the cost of his delusion was being written in blood.



The fighting didn't stop. It spread. Through the streets of Lanka, through its courtyards, into its towers.

The vanaras moved like water through cracks. They bled, they fell, they rose again.

And then came Indrajit.

I felt it before I saw him. The dream grew colder. Thicker. The light dimmed, though no cloud passed above.

He didn't announce himself. He arrived like poison — undetected until it was too late.

Arrows flew from nowhere. Shadows twisted into weapons. Vanaras cried out, struck by things they couldn't see.

And then — two arrows, twin like fate, pierced through the dream.

Rama and Lakshmana fell. Bound by light that moved like serpents.

Nagapasha.

Their bodies were still. Their eyes closed. Even the dream seemed to stop breathing.

I reached for Lakshmana, crying his name. But he could not hear me.

Rama's chest moved, slow, laboured. Lakshmana didn't move at all.

And then — in my own body, in my own bed — I felt the breath in my chest narrow. Not stop. Narrow. As if something were tightening around it from outside. I gasped in my sleep. I did not wake. The dream-tether had reached into my waking body for one moment and pressed against my ribs the way one might test the strength of a wall. Then it withdrew. The breath came back. But the memory of its narrowing stayed in my chest for days afterwards, a small bruise no doctor could find.

For a moment — just a moment — I believed they were gone.

The vanaras faltered. The sky darkened. Even the winds pulled back.

And then — wings. Not bird. Not beast. Something older. Garuda.

The coils hissed and vanished. The light broke. The spell lifted. And the brothers rose.

The wind returned. And so did breath.

As Lakshmana opened his eyes, the dream tilted strangely for a heartbeat. I saw him not as my husband but as something older still — a vast bluish-black serpent uncoiling from the foundations of the world, Sheshnag, on whose hood the cosmos rested. Garuda above. Sheshnag below. The two halves of an ancient recognition. Then the moment passed, and he was Lakshmana again, bloodied and breathing.

But I had seen it. And I would not unsee it.



Back in Ayodhya, the palace was quiet — but something had shifted.

Shrutakirti left bowls of flowers outside every door. Mandavi walked barefoot to the temple and sat longer than she had in weeks. Mother Kaushalya opened every window in her wing. Mother Sumitra read from the scriptures — not for mourning, but for return.

Even Mother Kaikeyi stepped out into the garden. She stood beneath the peepal tree where the four brothers used to play, and stared at the horizon. Her lips moved. No sound. But I knew what she was saying.

Come back.

None of them knew what had happened. But they felt it. As I felt it. As the soil of this land feels its rain long before it falls.



I woke that evening trembling. My hands were cold. My chest ached. I could still see the blood on the stone, the way it pooled around the fallen, the way the sky refused to clear.

There was a taste in my mouth I could not name. Not blood. Something like blood. A metal that came from nowhere — perhaps from a dream that had not finished leaving me. I drank water, twice. The taste stayed.

Ravana could have ended it. With one act of humility. One act of recognition. One return. He didn't. And now the ground in Lanka would keep drinking blood until someone made it stop.

But there was no time to sit with that grief. There was never time. I had learned that grief, in a regent, is a luxury taken in stolen minutes — like water sipped between duties.

Because a fever had come to the lower city.

It had begun near the river three days before. A child first, then the child's mother, then the lane, then the lane beyond it. By the time it

reached my chamber it was no longer a sickness — it was a column of numbers that grew taller every morning. The physicians came to me, because Bharata was at Nandigram and someone had to say the words aloud, and the words were these: there was not enough. Not enough medicine. Not enough hands. Not enough of the bitter bark that broke the fevers. Enough, perhaps, for half the afflicted. Perhaps.

"Tell me where to send it," I said.

The chief physician — a careful man who had served three kings and buried two — would not raise his eyes to mine. *"If we send it all to the weavers' quarter, where the sickness is thickest, we lose the fewest. The numbers favour it."*

"And the potters' quarter?"

"The potters' quarter we would... let go. For now."

The potters' quarter. Where I had sent the extra grain. Where the children were thinnest. Where, a season earlier, I had already chosen them once, and thought myself merciful for it.

I understood, in that quiet room, a thing the songs never tell you about power. It is not the grand cruelties that break you. It is the arithmetic. It is sitting with a careful man and dividing the bitter bark of the world into those who will receive it and those who will not — and knowing that whichever way you point your finger, somewhere a mother will be left holding a child who did not have to die.

I pointed at the weavers' quarter. The numbers favoured it.

I have never forgiven the numbers. I have never once stopped obeying them. I do not know, to this day, which of those two facts shames me more.

The physician bowed and turned to go. At the door he stopped. He did not look back at me — I think he could not. *"You chose as a king would choose,"* he said, to the doorframe rather than to me. He did not

mean it as comfort, and I did not take it as one. Then he went to save the half that could be saved.

That night, I did not dream. I think my body refused. I sat instead in the temple corridor, wrapped in shawls, the oil lamp flickering beside me. No one came. No one spoke.

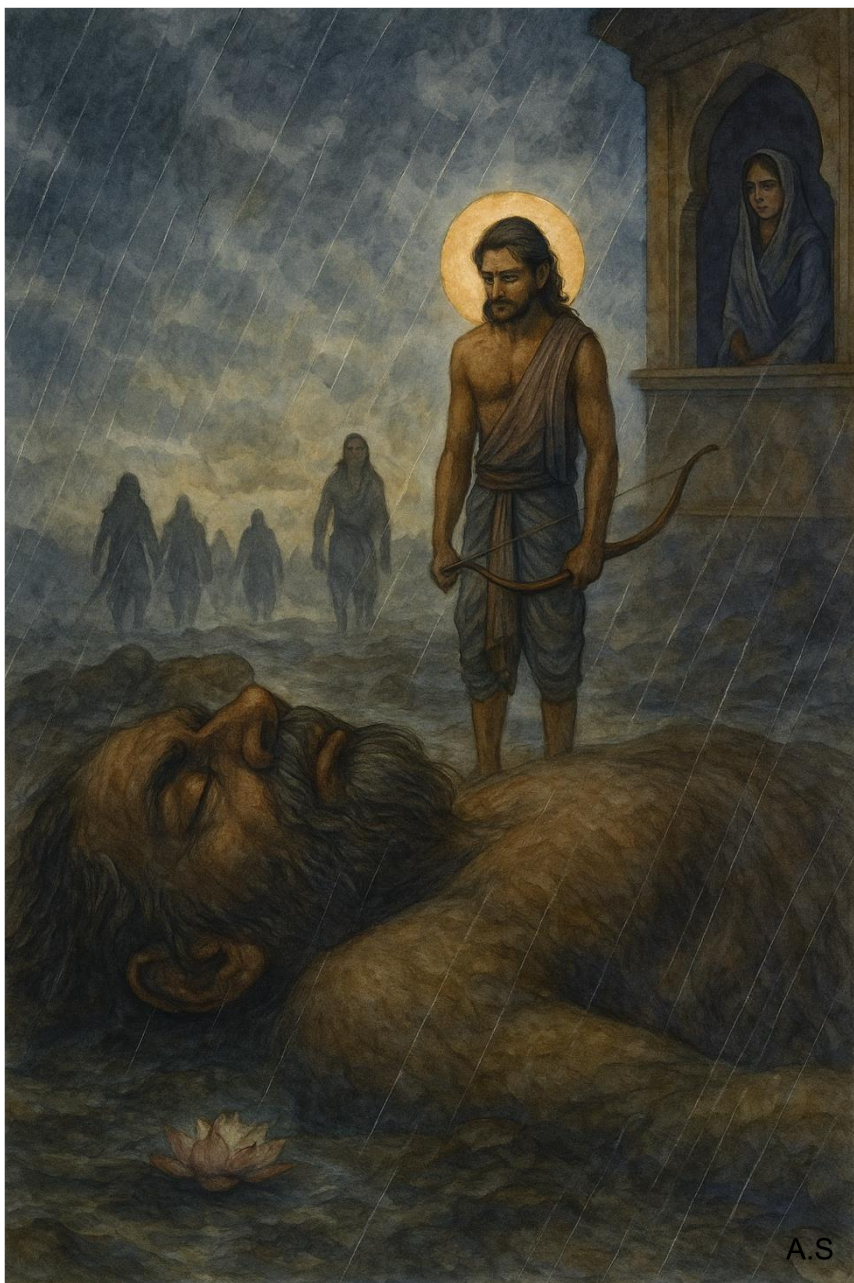
And for the first time in all those years, I did not whisper for the brothers in the forest, or for Sita beneath her tree. I whispered for the potters' children — whose names I did not know and would never learn, whom I had weighed on a cold morning's scale and found, through no fault of their own, lighter.

"Forgive me," I said to the flame. *"Let this not be for nothing."*

The first blood had been spilled — in Lanka, and in Ayodhya, and in the quiet room where I had done my arithmetic. And it would not be the last.

And I — I would bear witness to every drop.

Even the drops that were on my own hands.



Chapter 16:

The Giant Who Wept



Kumbhakarna didn't arrive in my dream like a shadow or symbol. He arrived like a presence. Heavy. Steady. Impossible to ignore.

He did not come charging across the battlefield like the others. No smoke or illusion followed him. There were no war cries, no chants in his name. Only a silence that felt deeply wrong.

Because he had never wanted to be there.

Before I saw him on the battlefield, I saw him asleep. It was not rest. It was escape.

His body stretched beneath the mountain, his chest rising and falling like the breath of the earth itself. He slept not as a demon, but as someone pulled out of time.

I could feel his sleep in my own. I had never met him and would never meet him, but the dream gave me the texture of his sleeping — a depth of unconsciousness no human is capable of, a long quiet older than mine. For a moment I wondered if we were sharing the same sleep, his and mine, only on opposite sides of an enormous breath. Then the thought passed. The dream is generous with such recognitions and is also, mercifully, brief in giving them.

Around him, the air carried old, forgotten stories. Not the ones people sing in halls, but the ones whispered when no one listens.

Kumbhakarna had once been a seeker.

He had walked beside sages. Debated with rishis. Fasted for days to understand how the world worked. He was no stranger to dharma, no stranger to self-restraint.

But he was Ravana's brother. And Ravana needed loyalty more than he needed wisdom.



I watched him being awakened.

Lanka was shaking. Its golden towers blackening. Its generals had fallen. The vanara army had breached the walls. Ravana had no choice left. He ordered his brother to be woken.

It took an army to do it. Drums, fires, ropes tied to his limbs — none of it worked.

But then Ravana himself arrived. He did not bring weapons. He brought desperation.

"Sita is the reason our kingdom burns," he said. "You are the only one who can stop it."

Kumbhakarna stirred. His eyes opened — not in rage, but in resignation.

He entered Ravana's court with no fanfare. No smile. No fire. He listened. And then he spoke.

"You should have returned her."

It was not an accusation. It was a fact.

"You've thrown our people into a war they cannot win. You seek death — but I will pay the price for it."

Ravana said nothing. They both knew. There was nothing left to say.

Kumbhakarna had come not to fight for pride, but because the city would fall without him, and to shield the ruins of what once was home. And though he disagreed, he would not let Lanka crumble alone.

He asked for armour. He asked for food. And then he walked to war.



The battlefield fell silent when he arrived. The vanaras stepped back. Even the wind shifted.

He didn't shout. He didn't threaten. He walked across the field like someone carrying a boulder he could no longer put down.

Lakshmana faced him first.

I saw it clearly. The first arrow hit Kumbhakarna's shoulder. It cut through skin, but he did not stop. He swung his mace once — and Lakshmana flew across the field.

Then Rama stepped in.

They looked at each other. And for a moment, they stood in silence. Two men who had no hatred for one another, only a duty to fulfil, and sorrow.

The battle was long. Each blow Rama landed seemed to echo deeper than steel. Each step Kumbhakarna took cracked the earth behind him.

He fought with strength, but not cruelty. He fought as someone who had accepted the outcome before the battle began. I felt it in the dream.

He didn't want to win. He only wanted to finish.

The final arrow struck him in the chest. He stumbled. And for the

first time, I saw him truly stop.

He looked up at the sky. And I could feel what he was thinking. Of the nights he had spent studying scriptures. Of the time he had laughed with Ravana before the weight of a crown. Of the peace he had once believed Lanka could bring.

And then he fell.

The ground shook, but not like an explosion. Like a mountain exhaling.

In my own bed, I felt the exhaling. Not the shaking — the dream spared me the shaking — but the long slow release of his last breath, somehow carried into mine. I sat up gasping, the way one sits up after a dream of falling. It had been the breath of a giant releasing what he had carried, and my chest had been borrowed to hold the end of it.



I woke sweating. Not in fear. But in grief.

I sat on the edge of my bed, my palms cold, the dream still burning in the back of my throat.

He didn't have to die. If Ravana had listened, if pride hadn't been heavier than wisdom, Kumbhakarna could have remained asleep, untouched by this war. But that choice had been buried under ambition long ago.

Later that night, I saw Sita in my vision. Trijata was speaking to her.

"He is gone," she said.

Sita didn't react for a long time. Then she closed her eyes and

whispered, "*He deserved better.*"



In Ayodhya, too, the air shifted. The wind carried something softer. Mandavi sat longer in prayer. Shrutakirti left a flower at the old courtyard swing. Mother Kaikeyi stood near the queen's shrine for the first time in weeks.

No one said his name. But something in the air had changed, and the earth felt his passing.

And me? I sat beside the temple oil lamp, watching its flame flicker.

Kumbhakarna had died as he lived — torn between what he knew was right and what he could not abandon.

Not a monster. Not a saint. Just a man who carried his loyalty too far.

And when he fell, he did not scream. He simply let go.



Chapter 17:

The Prince of Smoke



The dreams grew darker when his name was spoken.

Indrajit.

There was no wind that night. No fire. No symbol. Just a cold silence.

I felt it before I saw him. The shift. The dread that creeps under the skin before the sky breaks.

Ravana had lost nearly everything. And now, he sent his firstborn again. Not with rage. But with precision.

The next day, after Kumbhakarna's demise, the dream began in the forest again, but the trees were twisted. The battlefield looked different — blurred at the edges. And in that space of smoke and silence, I saw him.

Indrajit did not walk. He emerged.

The vanaras stopped at the sight of him. Even Hanuman paused, sensing it. He moved like someone not bound by time. A warrior. A sorcerer. A prince of illusions.

He carried no chariot. No flag. Only a long black bow and eyes that did not blink.

Lakshmana stepped forward. The clash was immediate.



The first arrow came before Lakshmana had fully drawn his own. It hit his shoulder. Not deep — but fast. Too fast.

Indrajit didn't fight like others. He blurred in and out of visibility. He chanted as he moved. Each mantra twisted the sky. Each arrow flew not along arc, but along thought.

Lakshmana fought back — relentless, breathing through pain — arrow after arrow. Swift. Precise. He kept his breath steady. His stance low. But I could feel him tiring.

In the dream, I was on my knees, clawing at earth that wasn't there.

"*Stop*," I whispered, but the battle raged.

Then it happened. A cry — not from pain, but from collapse.

Lakshmana fell.

The arrow was buried deep in his chest. The forest turned still. The vanaras ran forward. Rama's voice broke calling his name. Hanuman roared.

And I — I shattered.

In Ayodhya, my body jolted from sleep. I screamed so loudly the maidservants ran to my chamber. But they couldn't understand. I couldn't speak. Could not move.

It felt as if something had pierced me straight through. My breath rattled in my throat. I stumbled to the prayer hall. I tried to light a lamp. The matchstick slipped from my shaking fingers.

I saw Sita in my mind — sitting beneath the Ashoka tree. I saw him, my Lakshmana, crumpled on the ground, blood soaking the earth. I whispered his name until my voice broke against the silence.

They say Hanuman lifted an entire mountain that night. They say he

flew to the Himalayas, found the Sanjeevani herb, and brought it back before dawn.

But I saw none of that.

I only saw Lakshmana's chest rise again in my dream. And when it did, I collapsed beside him. In the vision, in the waking world — I don't know where anymore. I slept that night not from surrender, but from complete exhaustion.



The next day, or rather night, he returned.

Not Lakshmana. Indrajit.

He had begun another ritual, hidden deep in a secret chamber near Nikumbhila grove. If he completed it, they said, he would become invincible. Not even the gods could touch him.

But he needed time. Silence. Concentration.

Lakshmana gave him neither.

He arrived with Hanuman. They didn't wait. They broke the barrier. Entered the chamber. Interrupted the yagna.

Indrajit rose mid-chant, power crackling around him. He looked at Lakshmana — not with hatred, but with knowing. The two had seen each other's limits. Now, they would push beyond them.

The second battle was different. No illusions. No smoke. Only fury.

Lakshmana fought like someone who had come back from the dead and was carrying the weight of fourteen years of silence. I felt it in my chest with every strike. Every movement he made was not just his. It was mine too.

He had not slept for fourteen years. He had not touched comfort or desire. He was the only one who could kill Indrajit.

And he did.

He broke Indrajit's bow. Caught his wrist mid-chant. And when Indrajit raised his blade — Lakshmana stepped in.

One strike. Clean. Swift.

Indrajit's head fell from his body before his body knew it had been parted from him. And before it could touch the ground — Hanuman caught it. In the air. Mid-fall. With both hands. He held it there as if he had been waiting his whole life for that exact catching, and only later did I learn that there is a kind of woman in the world whose devotion is so complete that the earth itself cannot bear to take what belongs to her until she has had the chance to receive it. Hanuman had caught the head because the ground could not. He had been the only one fast enough to spare the world. He carried it from the chamber, wrapped in clean cloth, the way one carries something that has been entrusted to one and is not yet to be given away.

It was brought to Rama's camp. Not as a trophy. As a thing being kept safe. Meghnad had been a prince of illusions, and the camp needed proof that this death was not another one — that the Lanka they had been fighting had at last been confirmed to be losing. But it was also kept, even before it was confirmed, against the day when someone from Lanka would come to claim it. Rama said as much, in the hours after it arrived. *"Let it be wrapped. Let it be kept. Someone will come. We do not keep what does not belong to us, even in war."*



She came at dusk.

Alone. Dressed in white. Her hands were empty. She walked the length of the camp without a sound — and the vanaras stepped aside as she passed, the way one steps aside for a queen even when one

does not yet know she is one.

She came to a halt before Rama.

She did not bow. She did not weep. She looked at him with eyes so calm I thought, for a moment, she had not understood what had been done to her.

"My lord," she said. "My husband's head has been brought to this camp. I have come to ask for it back. I would like to perform his rites. I cannot perform them without him."

The entire camp held its breath.

Rama did not speak immediately. But what was on his face was not hesitation. It was sorrow. He had been waiting for her, I understood then. He had said *"someone will come"* in the hours after the head had arrived, and he had meant her, even though he had not known her name. The head had been wrapped and waiting for this exact moment — for a woman from Lanka to walk alone into a camp at war and ask for her husband.

"You have come alone," he said gently.

"I have come alone. There is no one left to come with me."

Rama turned, then, to his brother.

Lakshmana stood at his right, the way Lakshmana always stood. His face had hardened the moment she had spoken. He looked at her — at her white robes, at her empty hands, at her steady eyes — and something in his shoulders set the way a soldier's shoulders set when he is preparing to refuse an order.

"No," Lakshmana said quietly. *"Brother."*

The camp grew very still.

"Brother," Rama said back, just as quietly.

"He killed our soldiers. He created an illusion of Sita and beheaded her in front of our army to break us. He used every illusion he had been taught. He spared no one. Give her the body. The body is enough. The head we have kept for a reason."

"The reason was to confirm his death," Rama said. "His death has been confirmed. There is no reason now to keep what does not belong to us."

"She belongs to him. He belongs to Ravana. We have spent fourteen years —"

"Lakshmana." Rama's voice did not rise. It only steadied. "She is not Ravana. She is not Indrajit. She is a wife who has walked alone into the camp that killed her husband to ask for what is hers. She has come without weapons. She has come without anger. She has asked. We will give it."

Lakshmana did not move. His jaw worked.

"You may have killed him," Rama said, more softly now. "That was the war. But she has come to mourn him. That is not the war. We are not in the business of holding mourning back from women, Lakshmana. We have done enough of that."

There was a long silence. Lakshmana looked at her. She looked back. Neither of them looked away. And then, slowly — with the same hands that had taken her husband from her — Lakshmana stepped forward to the wrapped bundle that had been kept in the corner of the tent.

He picked it up. He held it for a moment, as though weighing whether he could, even now, refuse. Then he walked it across the small space between them and held it out.

She took it from his hands with both of her own. She did not look at what she was holding. She did not need to.

She bowed her head — not to Rama, who had granted, but to

Lakshmana, who had carried it for her without dropping it. The bow was the smallest bow I have ever seen, and it was the deepest. It said: *I know what your hand has done. I know what your hand is now doing. Both have been done in the same one day. I am leaving with my husband. I am leaving you with the rest of what comes from having been the hand.*

Then she turned, and walked back the way she had come.

The camp watched her go. No one moved until the dust had settled in the path behind her.

And me — watching through the veil of the dream — I knew her. She moved as though her bones were not the bones of a single life. She was naga-born, of the serpent line, a kinswoman of the same ancient water that lived underneath my husband's own remembering self.

She was Sulochana. Indrajit's wife. And, in the older reckoning, Lakshmana's distant kin.

It had taken me until that moment to understand that the wars of men kill not only the men. They kill, also, the small invisible kinships nobody had thought to write down — the relations that ran underneath the official names, in the older blood that the surface names had forgotten.



I did not see her again until two nights later, in the dream.

I did not see her clearly. The dream had begun, by then, to refuse me the worst of what it knew. I saw only fragments. A pyre on a beach where the sea sounded different than any sea I had ever heard. A woman seated, her back straight, her husband's head in her lap, her hands folded around it the way one folds one's hands around a sleeping child. Flames rising. The cloth I had seen wrapped around the head in Rama's camp — now visible only as a darker patch in the brightness, the fire taking it slowly. Her face I never saw. The dream

did not let me. I have wondered, since, whether it was kindness or refusal. I cannot tell, even now. I only know that I woke shaking, and that I sat for the rest of that night with my hands wrapped around an unlit lamp, not yet ready to ask anyone for a flame.

What she did would be praised by some, in the centuries that followed. They would call it devotion. They would carve her name onto temple walls. I do not know if they were right. I only know I watched her walk into Rama's camp alone, with empty hands, and walk out of it carrying what she had come for. The walking was what stayed with me. Not what she did afterward.



Mandodari wept again. First one son. Now another. Her palace, once lit with mantras and pride, echoed only with grief.

Ravana did not come to comfort her. He was preparing for the next battle. Still believing the gods would yield. Still believing he could win.

I knew then — Ravana had already lost.

I sat with my hands folded, facing the east. Lakshmana had lived. But something inside me still hadn't come back.

I whispered to the wind.

"I saw her."

The wind did not answer. But somewhere in the sky, the stars blinked slowly. And I knew they had heard.



Chapter 18:

The Fall and the Flame



The dream did not begin with battle. It began with absence.

Every prince. Every son. Every commander of Lanka — gone.

Meghnad, slain. Atikaya, Narantaka, Devantaka, all scattered like storm-torn leaves.

Only Vibhishana remained. And even he, I thought, stood in that war not as Ravana's kin — but as dharma's tool. A tool sharp enough to wound the one who forged it.

Lanka no longer looked like the city I had first seen in dreams. Its gold had dimmed. The streets were cracked. The flowers wilted. The soldiers, those who still breathed, moved like men waking from a nightmare they couldn't remember entering.

The sky, once thick with mantras and smoke, now hung grey. The sea surrounding the island had grown quiet, as if holding its breath.



And in the palace, Mandodari sat alone.

She had lost everything. Her sons. Her peace. Her place. She did not wail. She did not fall to the floor. She simply sat, staring at a courtyard that no longer bloomed. Eyes dry. Face still.

Grief like that does not cry. It calcifies.

I watched her through the veil of dream, and I felt for her a particular and unfamiliar tenderness. Not because she was innocent — she was not innocent; she had stood beside a husband for a long time without succeeding in stopping him. But because she had also *tried*. She had warned him. She had pleaded with him to return Sita. She had known, before any of us, that the war would come, and she had not been able to prevent it. The wives of powerful men learn a particular shape of failure that no one will ever name as failure — they will say she had no power to begin with, and she will know that she had some, just not enough.

She and Sita were not the same. But they were closer, that day, than either of them would ever know. Two wives. Two husbands. Two cities. Both ruined, in slightly different ways, by the men they had been given to. I have wondered, since, what they would have said to each other had they met as old women on neutral ground, with no kingdoms left to speak for. I think they would have understood each other before they had finished saying hello.



I moved through the palace in dream, through halls emptied of music. The chandeliers still burned — but their light was cold. The walls echoed only with the memory of grandeur.

Ravana stood in the throne room. He was not preparing for battle. He was preparing for death.

But still, he would not surrender. Not to fate. Not to the gods. Not even to the voice of his own brother.

I watched from behind a broken pillar. Rama stood at one end of the battlefield. Lakshmana beside him, silent, bloodstained. Hanuman farther back, arms crossed, gaze steady. And Ravana — tall, proud, worn — facing them.

He did not speak of Sita. He did not speak of dharma. He spoke only of power. Of choices. Of conquest. Of the humiliation of defeat.

Even in that last moment, he could not bow. Even now, stripped of his kingdom, his sons, his name — he still clutched his pride like it could shield him from the inevitable.



The final battle did not last long.

Rama was not cruel. He did not gloat. He aimed carefully. And when the arrow struck Ravana's navel — there was no fire. No thunder. Only silence.

Ravana staggered.

For a moment that felt longer than it was, he did not fall. He stood. He looked at his own chest as if he did not quite believe what was happening to it. The battlefield held its breath. Even the wind, which had blown through that war for many days, paused. There is a moment, at the end of any large being's dying, when the world holds itself still — not out of respect, but out of the simple physics of waiting. The world waited for Ravana.

And then, slowly, he fell.

Not like a monster. But like a mountain. A legend laid down. Not by hatred. But by consequence.

The vanaras did not cheer. Even the gods, whose presence had hovered over that battle for a year, said nothing. For a long time, no one moved. A man had fallen who had been larger than the men around him for so long that no one quite knew, in the moment after, what the world without him would feel like.

It would feel, I understood, smaller than they had expected. The thing that had been the shape of our dreams for years was gone, and what remained where he had been was a Ravana-shaped emptiness the size of which we had not anticipated. Hatred, when its object is removed, does not turn into joy. It turns first into a kind of

disorientation. It would take years before that disorientation gave way to anything else.

I did not cheer. I did not weep. I only felt stillness — the kind that comes after a long sickness, when the fever breaks but the body has not yet learned to trust it.



Vibhishana stood at Rama's side. His face unreadable.

He had chosen dharma. He had walked away from his family. And now — he would be king.

But even in dreams, I could feel it. People would not sing for him. They would not speak his name with warmth. His crown would weigh heavier than most. Because dharma, when it comes through betrayal, is never clean. It leaves a shadow, even if the act was right.

I saw it in his eyes. He would rule a city that would not fully love him. Because he had survived. Because he had remained. And sometimes, that's the loneliest path of all.



Sita.

She sat beneath the Ashoka tree, her hands folded in her lap. No one had reached her yet. But I saw her lift her head. Just slightly. As if something in the air had shifted.

She did not smile. She did not speak. But she closed her eyes.

And in that moment, I knew. She had felt it.

Ravana was gone. And though the war was nearly over, though she had not yet been brought back, though her name had still not been cleared before the world — she knew.

It was done. Her waiting had found its end. Not in rescue. Not yet in justice. But in truth.



Lanka stood hollow. Its palaces were unguarded. Its gates open. Its drums silenced.

It had once been more powerful than the heavens. Its walls had held the gods at bay. And now? Now it was a kingdom of widows. Of ashes. Of memory.

The last of Ravana's sons were gone. The royal line broken. Only Vibhishana remained — and the people too weary to celebrate.

In Ayodhya, the lamps were still unlit. But children began asking when the princes would return. Mothers knelt longer in prayer, but with steadier breath. Merchants left garlands at their doors — not in mourning, but in waiting. A few even smiled. Quietly. Cautiously.

Not because peace had returned, but because the wheel had finally stopped spinning. The long night, they felt, was nearly over.



And me?

I stood in my dream, barefoot in a city that had destroyed itself. I placed my hand on a fallen door. Felt the echo of what had been. Of what had been lost.

And I whispered — for no one, for everyone —

Let it end now. Let her return. Let them come home. Let the war sleep.



Chapter 19:

Ashes and Ashoka



Victory is quieter than I imagined.

I thought the fall of Ravana would echo like thunder across the three worlds. That the ground would crack open, the skies would rejoice, the oceans would rise in celebration and the heavens would rain flowers.

But when it finally happened — when the demon king fell and his last breath scattered into the scorched winds of Lanka — there was only silence.

Lanka stood smouldering.

Ash floated through the air, soft as snow but thick with memory. The city that had once shimmered like a second sun now crouched low under a sky that had no colour left. The towers that had sung Ravana's name now wept smoke. The golden domes, the lush courtyards, the jewelled halls — all of it bore the smell of war: metal, blood, and finality.

I felt no joy. Only an ache I couldn't place.



Sita was free.

But I could feel it in her breath, in the quiet curve of her shoulders, that freedom had not brought her peace. She stood beneath the same Ashoka tree where she had spent months imprisoned, surrounded

by demonesses who whispered venom in her ears and threats around her silence. But now they were gone, scattered or dead. The tree bloomed again, the air moved gently around her, but she remained still — as if waiting for a second war to begin.

I watched her through the veil of my dream, and in that silence, I sensed it clearly: that she had known from the beginning that victory would not mean vindication.

Rama arrived not long after Ravana's fall. I had seen him in many forms — beloved prince, exile, warrior. But I had never seen him like this. His armour was broken in places, dark with ash and blood. His face, streaked with grime and war, carried no relief. His gait was steady, but his eyes were distant. When he approached Sita, he did not run. He did not weep. There were no garlands, no embrace.

He greeted her like a stranger bound to the same past.

I watched as he spoke, his voice low but measured. The words, I could not hear, but I felt the coldness ripple across the dream. Then came the part I feared. He stepped back. He asked — not directly, not cruelly, but clearly — for her to prove herself.

Not to him, he said, but to the world. To Ayodhya. To the kingdom. To dharma.

My fists clenched inside the folds of my dream. I wanted to scream. I wanted to tear the sky open. She had been taken against her will, forced to live under the shadow of Ravana's palace. She had fought each day not with weapons, but with silence, dignity, and unwavering faith. She had whispered Rama's name to the winds. She had kept herself unbroken. And now, after enduring all of it, she was being asked to prove her innocence.

Not by a stranger. Not by her enemies. But by the man she loved.



Sita did not resist. She didn't plead, argue, or collapse. She stood straighter. Her eyes were calm — not resigned, but vast, like she had already lived this moment many times before.

Without a word, she walked toward the pyre they had built.

Around her, even the soldiers fell silent. Hanuman looked away. Lakshmana stood frozen, his fingers twitching near the hilt of his blade. Vibhishana whispered something, perhaps a plea. But no one stepped forward.

Only the fire obeyed.

They lit the wood. The flames rose quickly, greedy and golden, swirling higher than her head. And then she stepped into it.

I could not breathe. The dream darkened at the edges.

Even in sleep, I could feel the heat. I expected the scream. I waited for the crack of her bones or the roar of the vanaras rushing to pull her out. But nothing came.

And then — light.

Slow, certain, sovereign.

The flames leaned away from her, bowing back as if recognising a force greater than themselves. The fire did not consume her. It circled her, like a garland of obedience, a reluctant halo. Her clothes did not blacken. Her skin did not singe. She stood in the heart of the inferno, untouched, unbent, unafraid.

She stepped out of the fire moments later, not triumphant, not glowing. Just unbearably quiet.

That was when I began to cry.

Not for her survival, but for the fact that she had to prove it at all.

What did it say of our world that even a woman who had endured so much had to face fire to be believed? What did it say of us, that her voice was not enough?

I wept in my sleep. No one in the palace saw it. I did not stir in my bed. But somewhere in the fragile corners of my being, I broke. Not loudly. Not completely. Just enough.

I want to be honest about what I felt, because I have spent the years since being graceful about it, and grace, I have learned, can be its own kind of lie. I did not only feel sorrow watching her step out of that fire. I felt rage. At Rama. At the soldiers who watched with their hands at their sides. At the gods who let the flames bow to her instead of turning on the man who asked for the test. For one moment — one moment I have never confessed to anyone — I wanted the fire to turn. I wanted it to leave her and find him. I am not proud of this. I am telling you anyway. A woman who feels only the permitted things is not a woman. She is an idol someone has carved to keep the rest of us quiet.



Somewhere in that broken dream, I saw Trijata — the demoness who had sung of hope when Sita could not. I saw her weep, hidden behind a shattered column. A prayer on her lips that would never be heard.

And in the shadows, I saw Mandodari. She stood like a woman made of glass. Watching. Trembling.

She knew — more than anyone — that Ravana had never touched Sita. Not because he was noble. But because he could not. Sita had always been fire. Even before she stepped into it.

Later, Mandodari would say it aloud: that Ravana, for all his hunger, had never crossed the line of Sita's will.

But it would not matter. Because a woman's word rarely matters.

Even when she is queen. Especially when she is queen.

After the trial, Rama accepted Sita back. He held her hand before the army. The vanaras cheered. The ministers blessed the union. It was said that flowers fell from the heavens.

But nothing could undo what had been done. Something sacred had been asked to burn. And though it did not burn — it remembered.



Vibhishana was crowned king the next day. The ceremony was sparse. The gold of the throne looked dull in the smoke-hazed light. The people of Lanka watched from balconies, rooftops, alleyways. They did not protest. But they did not cheer, either.

He had chosen dharma over blood. It was the right choice. But even righteousness, when born through betrayal, can carry a shadow. He stood on the same platform where Ravana once held court. And though the garlands were fresh, the air around him felt empty. His wife stood behind him, tearful. His children, if he had any left, were not present.

Nearly every male of Ravana's line had perished. The empire had crumbled. A kingdom once mightier than heaven now stood vulnerable, leaderless, broken.

Lanka, the city of gold, now glinted like a wound.

We left shortly after. Rama fulfilled his vow. Fourteen years completed. Ravana slain. Sita rescued. A kingdom restored to a better ruler. The gods, it was said, were pleased. Dharma had been upheld.

But in my heart, I felt no closure.

On the airship bound for Ayodhya, I felt Sita's presence, even through dream. She stood at the edge of the vessel, her eyes fixed on

the horizon. Wind in her hair, salt on her skin. And though the wind carried her home, I could feel the weight in her silence. Not fear. Not regret. But a knowing.

That her trials had only just begun. And her true exile was only just beginning.

I sat alone on the floor of my chamber that day, when the dream faded. I looked at the flickering lamp — the same flame that had encircled her and stepped back. And I asked myself the question that had haunted me from the start.

If he loved her, why did he make her walk through fire?

What are we, then, to men like him? Are we wives? Or are we tests?

In the battle between Ravana's pride and Rama's dharma, what was Sita but the ground they fought on?

What was I? What were any of us?

I closed my eyes and let the ache fill me.

The war was over.

But the fire...

The fire was just beginning.

Inner Battles and Return

*The hardest battles are not fought on fields. They are fought in the rooms
we return to, with the selves we have to find again.*



A.S

Chapter 20:

The Battle Within



They called it the end of the war. But for me, it was only the beginning of something I could not name.

The fires had quieted in Lanka. Ravana was gone. The pyres had burned themselves out. The Pushpak Vimana had lifted into the sky, carrying Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana back toward Ayodhya. The vanaras sang victory. Sages wrote verses of dharma fulfilled.

But none of that touched the place inside me that had begun to ache. Not because I had been forgotten. Because I had been erased.

I still lay in sleep, but the dreams had changed. They no longer showed me battlefields or cries or visions of Sita beneath the Ashoka tree. Now, I saw myself. Not the wife left behind or the silent strength of the palace, but something stranger. Someone searching.

Each night in my sleep, I wandered rooms I had once lived in — rooms that no longer knew me. I opened door after door and found only mirrors. I looked into them and saw not my face, but versions of it. One younger, filled with hope. One older, lined with waiting. One silent, as if she had swallowed too many years.

In one dream, I sat across from myself.

"You thought the silence would make you strong," she said.

"I thought the silence would keep everyone safe," I replied.

She smiled — not cruelly. *"And did it?"*

I looked away. I did not know the answer.



What I missed was almost nothing. The shape of an ordinary afternoon. The way light moves across a courtyard when one is not also dreaming of a forest where blood is happening. I had been gone — not in body, but in attention — for so long that I had forgotten what it was to be a person whose mind belonged only to the room she was standing in.

I had not walked into exile. I had not fought rakshasas or built a bridge of stones. I had not stood on a battlefield or faced the burden of leadership. But I had watched every moment. Felt every tremor. Breathed every sorrow. I had borne it in dreams, in silence, in the places no one thought to look.

What I had done beyond watching, no one would record. I had run a kingdom in the small hours allotted to me. I had signed grain orders and tended dying queens and arbitrated between weavers and potters in years when the crops failed. I had done the unrecorded labour of holding a household upright while its men were in a forest. None of it had asked to be remembered. It did the work of being done, and then the work of being done again the next day, and the next, and the next — and across years that work had quietly accumulated into the thing I had become.

I did not look like the girl who had married Lakshmana. I did not even quite remember her.

And now that it was over — now that the war was won — I was expected to wake. To smile. To prepare garlands and lamps and welcome the heroes home.

But I had changed. The body that was about to wake was not the body that had gone to sleep. Something in me had been stretched too far in those years — the way a piece of cloth stretches around an object it must keep wrapped for too long. The cloth does not return

to its old shape. It learns the shape of what it has held.

In one dream, I saw Lakshmana again. Not the man I had last touched in the doorway of Ayodhya, not the warrior with fire in his step. This time, he was tired. He sat alone in the forest, his bow beside him, his hands covered in dried blood. He didn't speak. He only breathed, slowly, as if learning how to be human again.

I wanted to call out to him. But when I opened my mouth, no sound came. Only ash.

I woke in the palace, my hands clenched around the edge of my cot.

My chamber looked untouched. The incense burner still bore the same half-used stick of sandalwood. My writing cloth, frayed at the edges, sat folded on the window sill. But the light had changed. The air felt older. As if the palace itself had aged without me.

I stood. My legs trembled beneath me. I did not know if it was the fatigue of dreams or the weight of being forgotten.

I walked to the mirror. And this time, I did not look at my face. I looked into my eyes. And what I saw there was not loss. It was recognition.



Some wounds are too old for words. Some take the shape of silence. Some survive only by not being spoken of — which is perhaps why so many women's wounds are so old.

I thought of Sita. How she had endured more than any woman should. How even after being saved, she had been asked to burn. How the world had watched her trial like it was spectacle. How she had walked through the fire, not for freedom, but to prove she had never needed saving in the first place.

And I thought of myself. Who had never even been asked.

Not to prove. Not to speak. Not to rise. Only to endure.

Later that day, in my half-waking hours, I sat in the temple courtyard. The lamps had been lit. The priests were busy arranging garlands for the homecoming. The air was thick with turmeric, sandalwood, and anticipation. But around the edge of all the joy, there was a quiet hum of hesitation.

Ayodhya was waiting. But not without fear.

Fourteen years had passed. Children who once played in courtyards were now men and women. Mothers who had waited were older, slower. The city had shifted in silence, adjusting to the absence of its sons. Now, as the moment of return neared, there was joy — yes — but also uncertainty.

Who were these people who had lived through war? What did they carry now? Would Ayodhya still feel like home to them? Would it still feel like home to me?



That night, in sleep, I returned to the mirror.

This time, it did not speak. I did.

"*I am Urmila*," I said softly.

The reflection nodded.

"I carried the exile, though I never left the city. I bore the silence, though I was never mute. I held the weight, though I was never asked to lift it. I did not fight. But I endured."

And then, finally, I said what I had never said before.

"*I want to be seen.*"

Somewhere beyond the palace walls, a conch blew. It was not yet morning. But something had changed.

The dreams no longer blurred at the edges. My body no longer felt like a shadow of someone else's story. I was still sleeping. But now I was awake inside it.

Not the woman left behind. Not the consort of sacrifice. But the survivor.

And I knew — when I opened my eyes, it would not be to return to the world I had left. It would be to step into the one I had shaped in silence.



Chapter 21:

When She Woke



It was not the sun that woke me. It was a name. Spoken softly, almost brokenly — like it had waited on the tip of time itself.

"Urmila."

My eyes opened slowly, not to a blaze of light, but to the gentle murmur of wind. My breath caught, as if I were learning the rhythm of life again. For a moment, I didn't move. The chamber around me was dim, brushed with the colours of late dusk. The scent of tulsi leaves lingered near the doorway. The curtains swayed with a breeze that felt both familiar and foreign.

And then I realised — I was awake.

Not in the way one stirs from a dream, stretching and blinking into the day. This was different.

I had been asleep for years. Fourteen. Not the sleep of forgetting, but of bearing. Not stillness, but a secret burden carved into the body of time.

And now, it had released me.

I turned slowly, feeling the stiffness in my limbs. My skin had aged only slightly, but something inside me had been transformed. The silence no longer wrapped around me like a cloak. It had fallen away. I was here. Alive. Present. Breathing.

And then — I saw him.

Lakshmana.

He stood at the edge of the chamber, just beyond the curtain's glow. His hair had grown longer, touched by a few silver threads. His eyes were deeper — shadowed, not by age, but by memory. His hands trembled slightly at his sides, not with fear, but with something more fragile. Hope.

He took a step forward. Then stopped.

I sat upright, the weight of my body pressing into the cot, the feel of the earth suddenly too real, too new.

He knelt. His forehead touched the stone floor. Not like a warrior bowing to a king. Like a man kneeling before the home he had forgotten how to enter.

"I do not deserve to be forgiven," he said. His voice cracked around the words.

I didn't answer immediately. I watched him, memorising the lines of his shoulders, the way his body curled inward — not with shame, but with reverence. This was not the Lakshmana who had once stood tall beside Rama, bow in hand, face unreadable. This was the Lakshmana who had survived exile. Who had bled for dharma. Who had nearly died beneath Indrajit's arrows.

And here he was, kneeling not before a princess, but before a woman who had held his absence like a prayer.

I reached forward and touched his face. He looked up. And for the first time, he cried.

No words. No declarations. Just a man, and the woman who had waited — not in bitterness, but in unseen strength.

We did not embrace like lovers. We did not collapse into one another's arms. We simply sat — side by side. Two people who had

endured what love sometimes demands.

Distance. Silence. And return.



The palace buzzed with celebrations.

Rama had returned. So had Sita. And Lakshmana. The air outside my chamber throbbed with bells, voices, the rustle of fresh silks, the scattering of flower petals across marbled floors. Servants moved like swift rivers through corridors. Musicians rehearsed. Courtiers prepared speeches.

But I stayed where I was. Watching.

I moved to the balcony slowly, each step like a verse returning to rhythm. From there, I saw the city.

Ayodhya draped in flame and fragrance. Every house was lit. Rows of lamps lined the streets, windowsills, courtyard walls, even the riverbanks. Marigold garlands hung like golden rivers from rooftops. Women drew rangolis on thresholds in intricate designs – lotuses, suns, wheels of fire. Children ran through the lanes with sparklers. Elders recited verses of welcome.

Pushpak Vimaan shimmered like a celestial chariot. The golden hull caught the moonlight, scattering it in fragments over the palace domes. From afar, it looked like the sky itself had opened to deliver them.

The people gathered in the streets below, faces lifted in awe. Some clapped. Some wept. Some whispered prayers.

But there was something else too. A quiet shadow. A knowing. Because the ones who had returned were not the same as the ones who had left.

Rama, the king of dharma, wore victory like a burden. Sita stood beside him, beautiful and still, wrapped in a silence deeper than any crown. Lakshmana, ever the shadow, followed — his head bowed, eyes distant.

They had returned. But not untouched.



Later, in the garden where I once sat with my sisters, I met Sita again.

She was walking barefoot on the stone path, her sari brushing the petals of fallen jasmine. The breeze caught strands of her hair. She did not speak when she saw me.

She only reached forward and took my hand.

We stood there — two women who had watched the world move through them. Not princess. Not sisters. Not saints. Just women. Who had been asked to burn. One by fire. The other by silence. And we had both survived.

Her eyes held no tears, only the depth of someone who had seen too much and endured anyway.

I nodded once. She squeezed my hand. And then — we let go.

The next evening, the celebrations filled the palace. Conches blew. Courtiers recited poetry. Ministers praised Rama's return. Musicians filled the halls with melody. And above it all, the air trembled with something that felt like joy.

But I did not join them.

I stood in the terrace of our old chamber. The same room where I had once folded Lakshmana's robes. Where I had lit lamps in waiting. Where I had stared into the moonlight and whispered prayers no one heard.

I stood there, and I whispered to the stars.

"I was not asleep. I was becoming."

And for the first time, I felt no sorrow in saying it.

I closed my eyes — not to dream, not to forget, but to remember everything I had carried so the world could move forward.

I was not just the one who waited. I was the one who endured.

And now — I was awake.



Chapter 22:

A Kingdom Without Her



Peace is not gentle.

It arrives clumsily, awkward in its stillness — like a guest who does not know where to sit after the mourning ends.

Ayodhya wore it uneasily. Its people celebrated, yes. But there was a tightness in the air, like something had been lost that no one knew how to name.

The palace was lit for days. The Pushpak Vimana had returned, and with it came the sons of the soil. Lamps were lit in doorways. Silk draped the gates. Songs swirled in the air like incense. The scent of sandalwood and ghee lingered like a memory that didn't know how to fade. People knelt with folded hands wherever Rama walked. Women cried openly. Children clapped.

The kingdom exhaled — but not fully.

In the soft shadows behind the lamps, I walked like a stranger.

Fourteen years gone, and now they had returned. Rama, crowned. Sita, radiant but unreadable. Lakshmana, watchful, weighed down by invisible chains. The silence between them was not absence — it was gravity.

I walked through the palace like a shadow touching its own skin for the first time. Servants bowed low, unsure whether to treat me as myth or memory. Some whispered that I was a saint. Others avoided my gaze altogether, as if afraid they would catch whatever wound I

carried.

But I was not divine. I was just... tired.

How do you return to a world you never left, yet weren't truly part of? How do you walk again with feet that forgot how to touch the ground?

Lakshmana stayed close, but never too close. He hovered at thresholds, speaking only when I asked, watching me as if afraid I might vanish again if he blinked.

One morning, I turned to him and asked softly, "*Do you feel like a stranger to your own joy?*"

He didn't answer right away. Then he said, "*Sometimes I wake at night and reach for my bow.*"

I nodded. We understood each other now in ways that had no names.



Sita visited me quietly. No ceremony. No announcement. She just arrived.

She sat beside me on the terrace. We said nothing for a long time. Her hands rested gently on her lap. Mine trembled just slightly, from the weight of everything I hadn't yet spoken.

"*You saw, didn't you?*" she asked, finally, her voice a wisp in the wind.

"*I did,*" I whispered. "*All of it.*"

She turned her face toward me. Her eyes shone, not with unshed tears, but with the kind of knowing that cannot be softened.

"*I wanted you to forget,*" she said.

"I never will."

And we wept — not for what was lost, but for what was endured.

And in that moment, I realised something important. Pain does not end in silence. It softens in sharing. There are burdens too vast for one life to carry. But when two women share them, they are no longer curses. They become history.



Time passed, sluggish as heavy rain.

The palace filled again with music, though the instruments sounded older now. Children ran through the halls. Sita, glowing once more, spoke of rebuilding. Lakshmana trained the young soldiers, his voice steadier now.

And I... I found my hands reaching again for ink.

I began to write. Verses, memories, fragments of the dream. I did not write for history. I wrote so that the silence would not harden.

Because even healing needs witnesses.

Let there be record of the unseen. Let there be verses for those who wait. Let the forgotten be remembered — not in fire, but in the gentleness of returning.

But peace — true peace — never came.

Because the whispers began.

Quiet, at first. Like mould growing in unseen corners. Between the shadows of temple courtyards. In market stalls. In hushed circles.

"She was in Lanka for too long..." "Did Ravana touch her?" "I heard he kept her in his garden, day and night." "How can a queen remain pure after

such shame?"

Each word landed like a drop of acid. And soon, the whispers grew louder. Bolder. Dressed as questions, sharpened as judgments. And the wounds reopened.

I waited. I waited for Rama to rise and silence them. I waited for him to walk into the court and thunder that his wife had passed through fire itself. That her purity had been proven before the gods.

But he said nothing.

He sat in court, golden and composed, the perfect image of dharma.

And then, one morning, the silence broke. He had asked Lakshmana to take Sita into the forest. To leave her there. Alone.

I couldn't breathe.

I waited for someone to say it was a mistake. That I had heard wrong. That it was some cruel tale born of mischief.

But it was true. Sita was pregnant. And he sent her away.

Not for justice. Not for protection. For perception.

The people must not doubt him. So, he gave them her exile. He sacrificed her. Not to demons — but to public opinion.



Mandavi stood pale, fists clenched. Shrutakirti wept into her shawl. Mother Kaushalya withdrew into a silence more devastating than speech. Mother Sumitra walked the palace like a hollow drum. And Mother Kaikeyi — wept in solitude.

"I destroyed one son with ambition," she whispered. "And now we have destroyed a daughter with cowardice."

We had watched Sita walk through fire once. Now she was abandoned again. Not by rakshasas — but by those who claimed to love her.

And Lakshmana... he did not meet my eyes.

The brother who had fought death itself for righteousness, the brother who had crossed oceans, now carried Sita to the forest, and left her. He did what was asked.

The same Lakshmana who burned Lanka for her honour... now escorted her to the forest and turned away.

That day, I stopped calling it devotion. I saw it for what it was — obedience dressed as virtue.

I tried to speak to him. To ask.

"*Why?*" I whispered.

He looked at me, and his voice broke. "*Because I must.*"

"*But what about love? About truth?*"

He looked away. "*What is love, when it comes between duty and brotherhood?*"

Something inside me broke. It wasn't only Sita who was abandoned that day. A part of me was too. A part of me stopped believing.

In dharma. In protection. In men who claimed to worship women but sacrificed them at the altar of public opinion.

That night, Mandavi came to me. Shrutakirti followed, the way she always followed — half a step behind her sister, eyes already wet, waiting to be allowed to weep.

We had not been three together, alone in a single room, since the

night before Rama left for the forest, when we had sat by a dying fire and pretended we were girls again. The fourth chair was still empty between us. Sita.

"He sits in the dust at the edge of the kingdom," Mandavi said, pacing the length of my chamber. Her amber drape caught the lamplight in sharp, restless flashes. *"Bharata. My husband. He worships a pair of wooden sandals and calls it loyalty. And while he prays to his sandals, his brother sends a pregnant woman into a forest because washermen have begun gossiping in the market. And Bharata says nothing. Lakshmana says nothing. Shatrughna says nothing. Three brothers, each one obedient as a temple bell."*

She stopped and turned to me. *"Father told me, on the day I was married, that Bharata's fire matched mine. There is no fire in obedience, Urmila. There is only the ash of it."*

Shrutakirti sat at the edge of my mat. Her hands were folded in her lap — neither moving nor still, the way she used to sit in childhood when she had something to say and was waiting to be allowed to say it.

"They love each other more than they love us," she said finally. She did not look at us; she looked at the single lamp. *"I have known this for a long time, and I told myself it was beautiful. The four brothers. The unbreakable bond. We sang about it. We were proud of it. But love between them was never a thing we were inside. It was something we stood beside, and brought tea to, and tried not to interrupt."*

She lifted her eyes. *"I am not a river anymore, Urmila. A river moves. I have been sitting still for years."*

I looked at them — Mandavi who had once asked the court scholar why dharma had to be obeyed when it broke hearts, Shrutakirti who had once written that even trees listen — and I understood that the exile had not only taken Sita. It had reached into Mithila, where four girls had once braided each other's hair beneath the neem trees, and pulled the thread out of all of us.

We sat together for a long time. We did not braid each other's hair. We did not pray. We sat the way three sisters sit when the fourth has been sent away, and there is no longer any pretending.

When they left, near dawn, Mandavi paused at the door.

"If they ever call her back," she said, without turning, "I will not stand for the ceremony. I will not light a lamp in welcome. I will not wear silk that day. Let them ask why. Let one of them be brave enough to ask why."

Then she left. Shrutakirti followed her, half a step behind, the way she always did.

The next morning, I walked to the temple steps. I knelt where I once prayed for their return. And I whispered.

"They rescued her from Lanka not for her — but for pride. For glory. This... was never about love."

And in that silence, the fire returned to my voice.

Ravana had taken her by force. But he could never break her. Rama had claimed to love her. And still — he let her go.

Both had betrayed her. One with desire. The other with fear.

In the days that followed, people praised Rama. *"A true king,"* they said. *"Who sacrificed even his heart for the people."*

I wanted to scream.

No.

A true king would have made them see her worth. A true king would have fought for her dignity. A true king would not have asked a woman to prove herself twice for a crime she never committed.

The fire had already told the truth. Why must her blood be the price

for belief?

Lakshmana passed me once in the corridor. I did not bow. I did not speak. I looked away. And he... did not try to stop me.

Because even he knew, the thread between us had frayed.

I loved him. I still did. But I could no longer respect the silence he had chosen.

His love for his brother had outshined the truth. And in doing so — he let a sister fall.

Sita was not buried in flames. She was buried in trust. And trust does not scream when it dies. It just... stops.



Now, at night, I sit by my window. The lamps still flicker. The city still sings. But I do not join them.

I write.

For Sita. For the fire that did not burn her. For the forests that cradle her unborn child. For the silence she left behind. And for every woman ever asked to prove her worth after surviving what no one should ever endure.

This kingdom celebrates its king.

But I? I remember the queen.

And in these pages, she will not be forgotten.

Healing the Future

*The future is not something one inherits. It is something one tends,
the way a garden is tended, by hands that do not ask to be remembered.*



Chapter 23:

The Children of the Fire



They said Ayodhya had never shone brighter. They called it peace.

But peace is not gentle.

Ayodhya wore its peace like borrowed silk — resplendent, but stiff at the seams.

The palace shimmered with fresh limewash. Markets bustled with urgent purpose. Courtyards rang with chants and flute songs once again. Garlands bloomed across doorways. People bowed before the king with awe, not just love. Rama had returned from exile, from war, from the ashes of Lanka, crowned by dharma itself.

They said he had fulfilled every vow. They said he had sacrificed more than any ruler in memory. And they believed him blameless — because he had chosen duty over desire.

But I knew what was missing. And so did the silence behind every praise.

They celebrated that he had not taken another wife. But they forgot that he had let go of the one who stood alone in the fire. The one who had been stolen, scorched, and doubted — and yet remained unbroken.

The Ashvamedha Yagna was announced. A grand ritual to establish sovereign power. A horse was released — white, sacred, draped in gold silks and bearing Ayodhya's crest. It was to wander freely through kingdoms. Any king who caught it had to either surrender

or prepare for war.

But it could not be done without a queen. Without Sita. And so, in her place, he placed a statue beside him. A likeness carved in stone, draped in the silk of memory, adorned with the silence of a woman who would not return.

I watched the horse's departure from the palace terrace. The conches blew. The priests blessed it. The citizens threw rice and turmeric as it walked past.

Some said Rama had chosen peace. Some whispered he had no choice. But no one spoke of her.

No one asked what had become of Sita.

Was she buried in the forest? Had she been devoured by wild beasts? Or was she still out there — somewhere?

No answer came. And silence became a kind of permission.



Weeks passed. The horse wandered. Kingdoms bowed.

Until one morning, a messenger rode in, dust-covered and pale.

"*The horse has been captured,*" he said, breathless. "*Two boys.*"

A ripple of disbelief passed through the court. *Children?*

Another messenger came. Then another. Reports of Ayodhya's armies being defeated. Warriors asleep on the battlefield. Generals silent. Conches fallen from nerveless hands.

When Shatrughna was sent, I watched him leave with steel in his spine. But when he did not return, I knew something was wrong. Days passed. Then Bharata and Lakshmana followed.

None of them came back.

Not a body. Not a message. Only... stillness.

Ayodhya grew quiet. Not in panic. In dread.

My father's army was next. King Janaka, once so proud of Ayodhya's might, sent his own warriors. And they too fell asleep.

Across the battlefield, warriors stood like statues, heads bowed in enchanted slumber. Not a drop of blood spilled. But the defeat echoed deeper.

And that's when Rama stood.

No council. No announcement. Just a glance at his bow, waiting in the corner. And we knew. He was going.

Ayodhya itself held its breath.

The last time he had drawn an arrow, it had set Lanka ablaze. This time, it would test his own house.

Everyone followed him. Not just the ministers. Not just soldiers. We followed him. We walked behind his chariot as dusk painted the earth. None of us spoke.

The three queen mothers. My sisters. The old priests and teachers. The people who once sang and cheered now walked with bare, heavy feet.

And as we crossed into the battlefield, I saw them.

The army. Still. A sleeping sea of warriors. My husband among them, unmoving. Bharata's hand still clutched his sword. Shatrughna's eyelids fluttered as if caught mid-thought. Even the vanaras lay curled on the ground like tired children.

No one moved.

Except two figures, standing beside the captured horse.

Two young boys.

They stood barefoot, with no armour, no crest — only bows in hand, their backs straight, their faces calm.

One boy stood tall and fierce, his skin the colour of morning earth, his eyes burning with an ancient fire. The other stood still and deep, darker, steadier — like a river carrying storms beneath its surface.

They were beautiful. Not in the fragile way of children. But in the raw, ancient way of fate disguised in youth.

The horse stood calmly between them, as if recognising its true masters.

I do not know how to describe what I felt then. The army around me saw two strange boys at the edge of a captured horse. I saw something else, though I could not yet name it. Something in the elder's stance — the angle of his shoulders, the calm set of his jaw — was a stance I knew. Not from my own husband. Not from any of the brothers. From a face I had not seen in many years, but had loved without interruption, the way a woman loves a sister she has been forbidden to mention out loud. I told myself it was the long ride, the dust, the heat. I told myself I was imagining things, the way the very tired imagine the dead they miss into the bodies of strangers. But something in me had begun to wake that did not yet have a name. I held my breath without knowing why. And the field, for a long moment, held its breath with me.



Rama stepped forward. The boys raised their bows without flinching.

"*Let the horse pass,*" Rama called.

"No," the younger said. "*It belongs to Ayodhya.*"

"*And Ayodhya is not above being challenged,*" added the elder. "*We fight for dharma, not for thrones.*"

Their voices were clear. Neither trembling nor mocking.

A murmur spread behind me. People recognised something. Not their faces. But their stance. Their truth.

And then, just as the arrows were drawn — her voice rang out.

"*Stop.*"

I knew it before I saw her.

Sita.

She emerged from the tree line, walking steadily, not hiding. Not broken.

She wore simple robes — pale linen, wrapped in forest dust and wind. Her hair loose, her posture tall. And yet, in her gaze, there was no bitterness. Only stillness.

The boys turned first. They looked at her. Recognition flickered across their faces — a recognition too deep for memory. Something in the blood. In the breath.

Sita walked between them and Rama. She did not look at him. She touched the boys' shoulders.

"*It's done,*" she said softly.

"*But we could have* — " the elder began.

"No," she said. *"You've shown enough. Let them wake."*

The boys looked confused but obeyed. They placed their bows on the earth. Spoke something in a tongue I didn't understand.

And across the battlefield, like a ripple across silk, the warriors stirred. One by one.

First the vanaras. Then the generals. Then Lakshmana — eyes flying open as if waking from drowning.

He gasped. He saw her. Everyone did.

The silence cracked. Gasps. Cries.

Someone whispered, *"Sita."*

Another, *"She's alive."*

And then — *"Those are her sons."*

Not loudly. Not immediately. But like the first tremor before a quake.

I looked at Lakshmana. He did not move. His eyes were locked on Rama.

Rama, who stood frozen. His lips parted. But no words came.

And then, slowly, he knelt.

A king brought to his knees not by defeat — but by the weight of what he had lost.



Sita did not move toward him.

She held the bows of her sons. Symbols of a lineage he had

abandoned. Proof of a truth he had never truly grasped.

She looked across the field. And the full army now stood. All of them. Awake. And watching.

Even the citizens who had followed — my sisters, the mothers, the ministers — stood in stunned silence.

Everyone who had seen her burn in the fire and rise untouched. Everyone who had seen her disappear without defence.

And now — here she was. With sons born in exile. Raised without father or kingdom.

And still, radiant.

Still... Sita.

I felt a tremble in my chest. Not pain. But the ache of truth finally walking in daylight.

I turned to look at Rama. He wept. Openly.

And still, she did not approach.

And I knew something had shifted. Not in the war. Not in the kingdom. But in us. The women. The watchers. The ones who were always expected to endure.

Around me, I saw women weeping. I saw queen mothers pressing hands to their lips. I saw soldiers lowering their swords.

The kingdom had celebrated its king. But here stood its truest queen.

Unbroken. Unbent. Unforgotten.

I turned to Lakshmana. His head was bowed. Not to Rama. Not to the boys. But to her.

Because now, even he could see.

Sita had not been rescued by Ayodhya. Ayodhya had been saved by Sita.



Sita turned to her sons.

"*It is time,*" she said again.

"*Time for what, Mother?*" the younger asked.

She smiled, sorrow and strength entwined in her gaze.

"*Time,*" she said, "*to begin the world again. But not by war. By truth.*"

And in that moment, as the last sun of exile slipped behind the mountains, I felt it.

The future breathed.

And for the first time, it was a future carried not by kings, but by children born of fire and forest. Born of loss and love. Born of a mother who would not let her dignity be swallowed by the silence of history.

The children of the fire had come.

And the world — was about to change.



Chapter 24:

The Last Witness



The air after war is not still. It quivers.

There were birds in the trees that day, I remember. There were always birds afterwards, the moment the killing had stopped. The birds had been waiting.

Sita. Not broken, not diminished — but radiant, crowned not in gold, but in truth.

Her sons stood beside her, bewildered. They looked not at Rama, nor the kings gathered, but at her — with the confusion of boys told to sheathe weapons they had only just begun to understand. Their brows were furrowed with the questions of children who had grown up strong, but not yet known betrayal.

And she? She was calm. Not the calm of surrender, but the calm of clarity.

Rama remained on his knees. Frozen. Ashamed. He had marched to war expecting conquest. Instead, he knelt before judgment.

The soldiers of Ayodhya, the citizens who had followed him to the battlefield, all looked on. Some bowed. Some wept. No one moved.

I had carried all of it. I would carry it for the rest of my life. Nothing about that day would ever quite leave me.

I had watched her vanish into the forest, alone and pregnant. I had screamed silently when Lakshmana walked away from her, carrying

the order that should never have been spoken. I had listened to the whispers in Ayodhya that called it dharma.

And now — dharma stood speechless in front of her.



Rishi Valmiki arrived without thunder.

He walked into the field with the humility of one who had nothing left to prove. His robes were simple, but his eyes held galaxies. His steps were soft, but each one struck deeper than any arrow fired in war.

The children turned at once and ran to him.

"*Acharya...*" they said, together. "*Is this true?*"

He placed a hand on each of their heads. "*You were born of fire, and raised by silence,*" he said. "*Yes, it is true. That is your father. And this — this is the world you must choose whether to forgive.*"

Their faces trembled. Their hands curled slightly, still caught in the energy of battle.

"*Why didn't she tell us?*" one asked. "*Why did she stop us from fighting him?*"

Sita spoke then, finally turning to them. Her voice was quiet. But the battlefield obeyed her still.

"*Because you were not meant to fight your father. Not in blood. Not in anger.*"

They stared at her. Their eyes were oceans that had never known salt.

Valmiki's voice followed hers. "*I was there the night they were born,*" he said, his eyes on Rama now. "*It was I who named them — Lava and*

Kusha. They were never hidden. They were never ashamed. They were raised with stories – not of kings and palaces, but of right and wrong. They learned to speak truth, even when it hurt."

There was no accusation in his voice. But there didn't need to be. Truth carries its own gravity.

Hanuman came forward, head bowed.

"I knew," he whispered. "From the moment she left the palace, I followed her – not with words, but with service. I watched her from the trees, from the wind, from silence. I brought herbs when she bled. I guarded them when beasts crept nearby. I swore an oath to her that I would not betray her wishes – not even to you, my Lord."

He turned to Rama, his voice breaking. *"She made me promise... not to speak. And so I obeyed."*

He paused. The court was so still it might have been carved.

"I have kept many promises in my life. None has weighed what this one weighed. I served you, my Lord, while knowing what I knew. I sat in your councils while she lived in a hut. I bowed when you spoke of dharma. There were nights, in those years, when I did not sleep – because to sleep, sometimes, is to risk speaking in dream."

Rama did not raise his head.

I stood among the princesses. Mandavi's lips were pale with fury. Shrutakirti wept softly, a hollow sound against the vastness of the field. All mothers – once so proud – bowed their heads.

But I, Urmila, stood still. Because I remembered it all. Every silence. Every wrong wrapped in holy words. Every time the world chose to doubt her instead of defend her. Every time we, the women, had been told to keep our questions to ourselves until the men had finished deciding what truth was.



Ayodhya stood at its knees.

An entire empire brought low by two boys, born in exile, raised in simplicity, armed only with love and pain. The people who once celebrated the exile of their queen now stood facing her truth. No one could meet her eyes for long. No priest offered a verse. No man dared interrupt.

Lava and Kusha looked at Rama — not with reverence, not with hate, but with the complicated ache of children who had grown up without answers.

Sita gestured toward them.

"Go to him," she said. "He is your father."

They hesitated. Then they walked — slowly. Not because they feared him, but because they did not yet know him. They stood before Rama.

He opened his arms.

But they did not run to him. They bowed. Not in surrender. In acknowledgment.

And that was enough.

Rama rose. Tears streaked his face. He took a step toward her.

"Sita..."

She raised her hand. He froze.

"You may love me, Rama," she said. "But you did not protect me."

Her voice did not tremble. It was the same voice that had once soothed me as a child, that had sung hymns into the walls of Mithila, that had carried exile like a crown.

"You asked me to prove my purity once," she said. "I did. You asked me to be silent, I was. You asked me to vanish, and I obeyed. But not today."

Today, her eyes spoke louder than fire.

"I do not owe you, or your kingdom, or your court — another trial."

Rama opened his mouth. But no words came. A hush fell so deep that even the earth seemed to listen.

I watched his hand — so steady in war — now shake like a leaf caught in wind.

"I do not doubt your love," she said. "But I doubt the world that makes love a condition, and suspicion a virtue."

And then — she turned away. Toward the earth.



She knelt. And placed her palm on the soil.

"Mother," she said. "You birthed me in silence. Now, return me in truth. Let this be the last time any daughter of yours is asked to prove her soul. Let my story end here — before they ask me again to burn."

The ground shivered beneath her fingers.

A hush fell. Cracks appeared — not from violence, but like petals unfolding.

The earth itself trembled gently, not in pain — but in welcome.

And then — she was gone.

Not torn. Not broken. Returned. Held.

There were no screams. Only gasps. Sobs. And a silence that would

take centuries to forget.

Even the wind wept, and the stars seemed to lower their heads.



After she vanished, no one moved.

Rama crumpled where he stood, his sobs raw against the silence. The citizens of Ayodhya fell to their knees. Ministers wept openly. Mothers clutched their children tighter.

And I — turned away, finally letting my tears fall.

Lava and Kusha stood at the edge of the crack, staring into a void they did not understand. Valmiki moved to them, placed his arms around their shoulders.

"She was never yours to keep," he said softly. "But she will always live in what you become."

I wept.

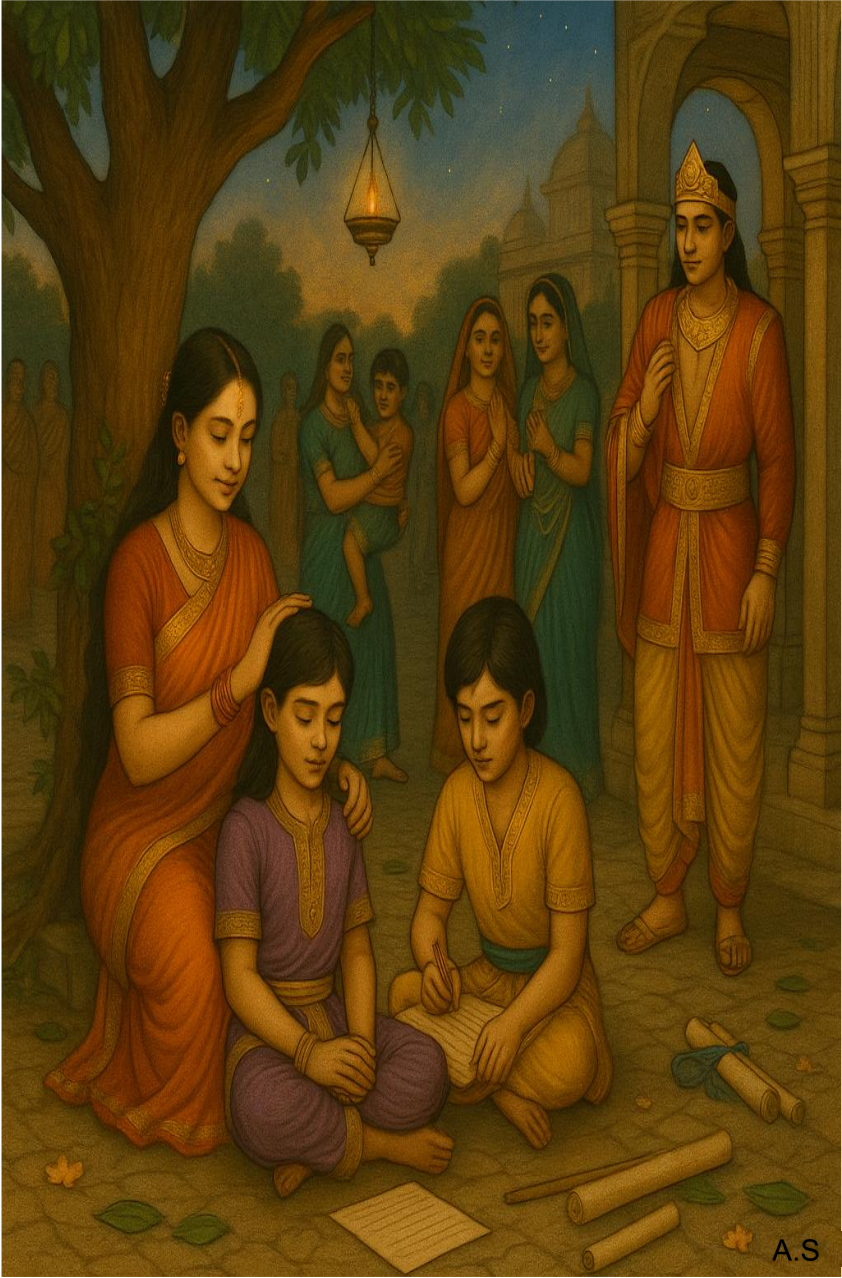
Not in front of the world. Later. Alone.

For Sita. For what we did to her. For what we called dharma. For every silence we mistook for strength.

In my dreams, I would see her again — standing at the edge of the world, unbroken, holding fire in her hands.

And I knew I would carry her story for the rest of my life. Not because she needed a monument. But because the world needed a memory.

Of the woman it betrayed. Of the mother who rose. Of the goddess who was never believed — until she left.



Chapter 25:

Bonds Rewoven



After Sita was gone, the air in Ayodhya changed again.

Not like it had after victory. Not like it had after war. This change was deeper. Slower. Quieter. Like a tide pulling back into itself, leaving everything behind reshaped.

The kingdom mourned. But it also began to breathe again — gently, slowly, as if remembering how.

Some days, I could not bear to walk through the palace gardens. The petals reminded me of how she used to gather them for the temple lamps. Other days, I could not bear to stay indoors — the silence pressed too closely against the walls, as though it carried the imprint of her voice.

Even Mother Kaushalya had grown softer. Mother Sumitra had begun reading scriptures aloud again, but only when she thought no one could hear her. Mother Kaikeyi rarely emerged from her chamber, but when she did, her eyes carried not guilt — but a strange clarity. As though she had finally accepted what could not be undone.



Lava and Kusha stayed.

No grand ceremony welcomed them. No announcement was made. They simply arrived — two boys with the sky in their stride, with fire braided into their blood. They walked the same halls their father

once had, but with different eyes. Eyes that questioned, not worshipped.

"*Why do people bow so much?*" Kusha asked me once.

"*To remind themselves that they still can,*" I said.

I became their anchor. Their evening voice. Their morning routine. They would run into my chamber with scrolls in their hands and stories tumbling from their lips. They asked about stars, about dharma, about why no one talked about their mother anymore.

I told them the truth, in fragments gentle enough to bear.

They called me *Maasi*. But in my heart, they became something more. The children I had not borne, but had waited for. The sons of Sita. The echoes of a love we had all failed to protect.

I watched them laugh with Mandavi, braid Shrutakirti's silks into bows and ropes. In their joy, I saw the healing begin.



The palace found rhythm again. It was no longer the palace I had married into.

Not the rhythm it once knew — of royal proclamations and embroidered feasts — but a slower, more human beat. The kind that rises in homes where people have learned to live through grief.

Eight boys lived in it now. Six of them born in the palace: Mandavi's sons Taksha and Pushkala, sturdy as oaks and mischievous as rivers; Shrutakirti's sons Subahu and Shurasena, clever and quick as sparrows; and our own Angada and Chandraketu, racing through the corridors like young monsoons, weapons in one hand, laughter in the other. The other two had been brought to us by the field where the earth had opened — Sita's sons, Lava and Kusha, raised by a sage and a banished mother, slightly older than the others by a season or

two, and walking through the palace courtyards now as though they had always meant to arrive here, just not on these terms.

The boys had not yet learned to ask why the household held two of them differently from the other six. They would ask, eventually. For now, they were children together, and that was enough.

I loved my own with a sharp, frightened love.

They could not understand why their mother sometimes wept while looking perfectly happy. They were too young for the question, and I was too old to give it an answer that would have helped them. I had folded my sorrows into the small daily acts of feeding them, braiding their hair, bandaging their knees, choosing not to say the names that lived underneath the ones I called them by. Mothering, after all that had happened, was the slow art of keeping certain words out of certain rooms.



In the afternoons, Mandavi taught them how to wrestle, and Shrutakirti taught them how to count using lotus petals, and I taught them poems and riddles. Lessons that weren't always logical — but stayed.

One day, Angada sat beside me, watching dust drift in the late golden light.

"Mother," he said, *"why does Father laugh so quietly?"*

I paused. He noticed. Of course he did.

"Some people," I said, *"learned to laugh in places where being loud would have been dangerous."*

He thought about it. Then nodded. *"Then I will laugh louder for him."*

I kissed his forehead. He ran back to his brother.



One afternoon, the two of them were chasing each other in the south courtyard, the way boys do — without aim, without strategy, just the sheer flight of it. Angada caught Chandraketu near the neem tree and the two of them rolled together in the dust, laughing. They came up brown and breathless, and they ran first to where I was sitting near the verandah, calling for me to look. I looked. Then they went on to find their father.

I watched from the verandah as they reached him. He had been polishing the same blade he had been polishing for nearly an hour. They stood in front of him — proud, dusty, trying to draw his attention with the absoluteness only small boys can muster. He looked up. He smiled at them. He nodded. He said something I could not hear, and they nodded back, and they ran back to me a moment later — not crestfallen, exactly, but quieter, the way children get when they have offered something and received only the form of the response they wanted, not the substance.

I do not know what he said. I never asked. I think it was something kind. I think it was just not the thing they had needed. There is a particular shape of love a man learns when he has spent fourteen years being silent in a forest with his brother, and it does not unlearn itself when the war ends and the children arrive. He loved them. I never doubted that. He simply did not know how to put down what he had been carrying long enough to hold them too.



Lakshmana kept his distance.

He moved like someone carrying something he could not put down. The war had ended. The arrows were set aside. But there was still something rigid in his shoulders.

He held me with care. But not closeness. He sat beside me. But always at the edge of the room. He smiled. But it never reached his

eyes the way it had before he left.

In the early days, I tried to ask. To pull him out of whatever weight he carried. But Lakshmana had carried fourteen years of duty, blood, fire, and silence — and not all of it could be undone with embraces.

So I waited.

One night, I found him by the courtyard pond, looking into the water as if it could give him back what he had lost.

"*Are you here?*" I asked softly.

He turned. "*I'm trying to be.*"

I stepped closer. "*You don't have to carry it all alone, Lakshmana. Not anymore.*"

He didn't answer. He took my hand. Held it long. And said,

"*I left a part of myself in the forest. I don't know how to bring it back.*"

I leaned against him. "*Then let me sit with the part of you that returned.*"

It was not healing. But it was beginning.



That night, Mandavi came to me again. Shrutakirti followed, the way she always followed — half a step behind her sister, eyes already wet, waiting to be allowed to weep.

We had not been three together, alone in a single room, since the night after Sita was banished — when Mandavi had stood at the door of this same chamber and vowed she would not stand for any ceremony of return. There had been no ceremony. There would be none. Sita had been called by the earth, and the fourth chair between us — empty for years — was empty in a different way now.

For a long time, none of us spoke. Mandavi sat with her hands wrapped around a cup of cooling water. Shrutakirti rested her forehead against the wooden frame of my doorway, the way she used to as a child when she was about to say something she was unsure she ought to say.

"I have been thinking," Mandavi said finally, *"about all the things our husbands did not do."*

She said it without anger. She said it the way one might catalogue a long illness, naming each symptom only to make sure none had been forgotten.

"They could have spoken. Any of them. There was nothing in dharma that required their silence. Bharata could have said: I have seen what comes of obedience that is not questioned. Lakshmana could have said: I have walked her into a forest once, and I will not walk her into a second one. Shatrughna could have said anything at all. None of them did."

She lifted her cup, looked at the water, did not drink.

"They love each other," she said. *"They have always loved each other. I used to find that beautiful."*

Shrutakirti lifted her head from the doorframe. *"They love each other more than they have loved us,"* she said. *"I have known this for a long time, and I told myself it was something to be proud of. The four brothers. The unbreakable bond. We sang about it. But love between them was never something we were inside. It was something we stood beside, and brought tea to, and tried not to interrupt."*

She looked at me. *"I do not know what to do with this knowing now. I thought, when she came back, that we would all become ourselves again. We have not. Something between us is missing, and I cannot tell whether it is her or whether it is the part of us that used to believe in what they were doing."*

I looked at them — Mandavi who had once asked the court scholar why dharma had to be obeyed when it broke hearts, Shrutakirti who

had once written that even trees listen — and I understood that the exile had not only taken Sita. It had reached into Mithila, where four girls had once braided each other's hair beneath the neem trees, and pulled the thread out of all of us.

We sat together for a long time. We did not braid each other's hair. We did not pray. We sat the way three sisters sit when the fourth has been sent away, and there is no longer any pretending.

When they left, near dawn, Mandavi paused at the door.

"If the world ever asks why we did not speak," she said, without turning, "let one of you tell them. Let them know we sat in a room one night, and we named it. Let one of you tell them, when I no longer can."

Then she left. Shrutakirti followed her, half a step behind, the way she always did.



It was some weeks after that night that I saw something in the eastern courtyard that stopped me where I stood.

Lava had a bow in his hands. He was showing the others how to string it.

He had been raised in a hermitage. He knew the work the way a boy knows it who has had to do it for his own arrows, his own food, his own survival — not the way princes learn, with masters-at-arms and ceremonial wood and the small luxury of being corrected by men paid to correct them. He stood with the bow in front of him, talking quietly. Kusha was beside him, watching. And the six cousins were arranged around them — not in any order anyone had given them, simply in the arrangement that boys fall into when one of them knows something the others want to learn.

Taksha and Pushkala were closest. The rest followed in their loose half-circle. My own two were at the back, the smallest of the group,

leaning forward to see past the older shoulders.

I stood in the shadow of the colonnade and watched.

Lava was teaching them the angle of the string. Kusha said something that made Taksha laugh — a small thing, an aside, the kind of remark a boy makes to another boy to keep him from being shy. The others leaned in further. Subahu asked a question; Lava answered it; Shurasena nodded as if he had been about to ask the same thing and was relieved someone else had spoken first. My Chandraketu reached up and touched the bow Lava was holding. Lava let him hold it for a moment. Chandraketu's hands were too small to draw it. Lava smiled and adjusted his grip without saying anything.

And I saw, then, what was happening.

Their fathers had spent their lives arranging themselves around Rama. Bharata in worship, Shatrughna at Bharata's side, Lakshmana in the innermost orbit. Three brothers organised around a fourth, who was the centre of their love because he was the centre of dharma, and who had never quite seen them as separate from his own light.

Now the sons were doing the same thing. But the centre had moved.

Their fathers had built their lives around the man dharma had chosen. The boys were building theirs around the children dharma had failed. They had chosen Lava and Kusha. Not because anyone had told them to. Not because tradition arranged it. They had simply, on their own, recognised who the centre of love ought to be in a household that had buried what it had not been brave enough to ask forgiveness for.

It was the closest thing to justice the next generation could provide. They could not undo what had been done to Sita. They could not give her back her years. But they could, in their small daily choices, place her sons at the centre of the household their fathers had refused to keep her in. And that — that was something. That was not nothing.

I watched them for a long time. Lava adjusting the string. Kusha laughing. The six arranged in their loose half-circle, leaning forward, the way the four brothers had once arranged themselves around the boy who would be king.

I never told them I had seen it. The young do not need their kindnesses pointed out to them; it only makes the kindness self-conscious. I let them go on, in their small daily revolutions. I returned through the colonnade to the inner courtyard. And I cried a little, very quietly, in the corridor, before I went on with whatever I had been doing.



The palace, slowly, began to feel like a home again. Not the old home, but a new one — quieter, deeper, more aware of what it had survived.

And I — I had begun to write again.

Not poems of waiting, this time. Not laments of absence. But verses of return. Of healing. Of stitching together what had once been torn.

Because the bonds between us — between sisters, between lovers, between mothers and sons, between kingdoms and their wounds — had not vanished.

They had only needed to be re-woven.

Final Departures

*Some farewells are not endings. They are the slow turning of a tide
that has been moving toward shore all along.*



Chapter 26:

The Quiet That Holds



For some of us, peace is a slow breath after years of holding it in.

I no longer woke to the cries of war in my dreams. But silence had a way of speaking, especially at dusk, when the shadows of memory stretch long across the courtyards. That's when I'd feel it most — that ache behind the calm. The knowing that something had ended... and something else was quietly slipping away.

It began with Mother Kaushalya.

She had grown quieter in the years since Rama's return. Her love for him remained steady, but her gaze had begun to drift elsewhere — to the river, to the sky, to something that called beyond the stone walls of Ayodhya.

One morning, I found her folding her silks in a way I hadn't seen before — neatly, ceremonially.

"I dreamed of your father," she told Rama that evening. "He was standing at the edge of Sarayu, smiling. He said I've waited long enough."

Rama did not stop her. He only bowed, and placed his hand on her head.

The next day, Mother Kaushalya walked barefoot to the river. No procession. No fanfare. Just Mother Sumitra beside her, and Mother Kaikeyi behind, carrying a single diya in her palm.

Mother Sumitra had said nothing of leaving. But her silence had

deepened over the months. She had taken to sitting in the temple gardens long after the lamps were snuffed. I would sometimes find her there, humming lullabies to herself, as if singing to ghosts.

Mother Kaikeyi, too, had changed. Time had not forgiven her entirely, but it had softened her. She never entered the main hall without touching the floor. She spent hours at the shrine of Sita, lighting wicks, whispering verses. Perhaps trying to speak what she could never say aloud.

I saw it once, the thing between them, on the morning before they walked.

I had come to Mother Kaushalya's chamber with the day's accounts — there were still accounts, even at the end of an age, even on the morning a queen was preparing to dissolve — and I found Mother Kaikeyi there before me. She was sitting on the floor at the foot of Mother Kaushalya's bed. Not weeping. Past weeping. They had been talking, I think, for some time before I came in.

I bowed and turned to leave. Mother Kaushalya stopped me with a gesture of her hand that I had only ever seen the dying make: *stay, since you are already here.*

She looked at Mother Kaikeyi for a long moment. Then she said, to no one in particular, with the unsurprising clarity of women who have outlived their grievances:

"We were given to the same man, you and I. We agreed to that. No one asked us if we wanted to be each other's sisters as well."

Mother Kaikeyi did not look up. *"I was the youngest. I thought love was a thing one had to win."*

"You did win it," Mother Kaushalya said. *"I knew."*

That was all.

Mother Kaikeyi began to cry without sound. Mother Kaushalya did not reach for her. I have thought, in the years since, that her not-reaching was an act of greater respect than any embrace would have been. Mother Kaikeyi had not come for absolution; absolution was not on offer, and she knew it. She had come because she could not face the river without sitting once, in silence, with the woman whose son she had exiled.

I do not know what passed between them after I left. I know only that they walked to the Sarayu together the next afternoon, in the long golden light that the river takes on at the end of a year — and that Mother Kaikeyi, who had walked behind for so many years, walked behind once more, carrying the diya. But for the first time in a very long time, she did not walk alone.

I was there when the three queens reached the riverbank. I did not speak. I simply watched.

Mother Kaushalya knelt first. She placed her diya on the water and watched it drift. "*I have seen too much,*" she whispered, "*but I leave with love.*"

Mother Sumitra pressed her hands to the soil. "*This earth held my sons. That is enough.*"

Mother Kaikeyi looked to the sky and said nothing. But a tear rolled down her cheek, and it spoke more than all the words she had lost.

And then — they stepped into the Sarayu.

The water shimmered around them. Not as death, but as return. Not a goodbye, but a dissolving into something larger. Mothers of princes, queens of a kingdom, women who had borne the weight of history — now carried gently by the river, as if the land itself bowed in farewell.

I walked back alone that evening. And for the first time, the palace felt older than me.



Lakshmana found me near the neem tree that night. He had not seen his mothers go, but he felt it in the wind.

"*They're gone, aren't they?*" he asked.

I nodded.

He did not cry. He only looked at the moon for a long time, then reached for my hand. "*They always loved you.*"

"*They loved all of us,*" I replied. "*They just didn't always know how to show it.*"



In the following days, the halls grew quieter. The echoes of the queens still lingered — in the fragrance of their favourite oils, the worn edge of their prayer cloths, the rhythm of footsteps no longer heard. I began tending to their rooms myself. Dusting their mirrors. Folding their last garments. Watering their plants.

It was not duty. It was memory made sacred.



Ayodhya moved on.

Children grew. Laws were written. The future planted itself like seeds in soil we had wept upon.

Bharata's sons carried themselves with steady grace, heirs to a wisdom that came not from books, but from watching grief turn men humble. Shatrughna's sons learned to ride before they could write, their laughter ringing through the courtyards like small bells. Our two sons ran through the gardens, bowstrings slung across their backs, learning to fight not for conquest, but for honour. And Lava

and Kusha — they walked through the old stone courtyards with questions on their lips, and fire braided into their laughter.

The kingdom endured. But so did we. The women who remembered. The women who held. The women who refused to let the past slip into silence.



And me? I became the stillness at the centre of it all.

Lakshmana said once, *"You're the only thing in this palace that never changed."*

I smiled. Not with pride — but with a quiet, unshakable truth.

Because someone must hold the roots, when the branches stretch for the sky. Someone must remember the songs, when the halls are emptied of singers. Because even queens, even mothers, must rest one day. And someone must be there — to whisper their names into the new dawn.



Chapter 27:

The Farewell Without Sound



The neem tree bloomed late that year.

I remember standing beneath it at dawn, watching the wind curl through its branches, petals dropping like whispers. There was a hush in the air — not silence, but a quiet that felt... expectant. Like the world itself was waiting for something to end.

Lakshmana walked beside me, barefoot. The edges of his dhoti damp with dew. His hand brushed mine, not in affection, but in stillness. In the kind of presence that doesn't need words.

He said, "*Rama called for me.*"

And I knew.

I had always known this day would come. Ever since we returned from Lanka, ever since peace began dressing itself in garlands and rituals, I had known. There would be a day when Lakshmana would not return from that walk. A day when duty would ask one final thing of him.

"*What has he asked?*" I asked quietly.

He did not answer right away. He turned his gaze toward the Sarayu, just visible beyond the palace walls.

"*To leave,*" he said finally. "*Before him.*"



Rama's time on earth was ending. The sages had spoken it. The stars had whispered it. Even the river had begun to slow, as if waiting for her king.

But dharma, in its strange and merciless way, had other conditions. A promise had been broken — one Lakshmana took upon himself. To honour it, he had chosen to go first. Not with resentment. Not with hesitation. Just a calm, obedient acceptance that broke something inside me.

"You do not need to prove anything anymore," I said.

He looked at me — not as my husband, not as a warrior, but as a man laid bare.

"This is not about proof," he said. "It is about ending what I began."

That night, we did not speak of exile, or war, or oaths. We sat together on the floor of our chamber, eating from the same bowl, laughing softly at the burnt rotis I had forgotten to watch. He tied my anklet when it came loose. I mended the corner of his shawl where the thread had frayed.

We became, again, two people in love — not by declaration, but by shared stillness.

And then, when the lamps had burned low and the night had grown soft around us, he said the thing he had never said.

"You carried it for me, Urmila."

I looked at him. He did not look back. He was looking at the lamp.

"All of it. The kingdom, while I was in the forest. The sleep, which I could not take. The years that no one will name when they tell this story. You carried them. I came back. I never said it. I do not know why. Perhaps because if I had said it, I would have had to look at what I had asked of you, and I could not bear, in those years, to look at one more thing I had asked of

someone. So I did not say it. I let you carry it, and I let myself not name it."

He turned the lamp slightly. The wick guttered, then steadied.

"I am saying it now. Because I do not get another chance to. I know what you did. I know what it cost. I have known the whole time. I let myself behave as though I did not know, because knowing would have required me to thank you in a way that thanks could not have covered. So I performed the smaller man who had taken your sacrifice for granted, and I let that man be the husband you got. I am sorry for him. I am sorry I could not be larger than him while there was still time."

He looked at me at last.

"You were the kingdom, Urmila. While I was in the forest, you were the kingdom. I should have said so at the gates the day I returned. I am saying it tonight, in our chamber, because it is the only saying left to me."

I did not answer. There was no answer to give that would have helped. I only reached for his hand. He let me hold it. We sat that way until the lamp burned out.



At dawn, he bathed in silence. Wore simple white. No armour. No ornaments.

I followed him to the threshold.

He paused, then turned. There was no trembling in his hands, only a softness I had seen once — long ago, on the day he left for exile.

"I am not afraid," he said.

"I am," I replied.

He smiled. *"But you're stronger."*

And then he did something he hadn't done in years. He bowed to me. Fully. Like a student. Like a devotee. Like a man honouring the one who had stayed behind so he could walk ahead.

I pressed my hand to his heart. *"Come back to me. If not in body, then in sky, in river, in breath."*

He did not promise. He only turned. And walked.



I stood at the edge of the Sarayu as he stepped into its waters.

The sun had risen fully now. The birds had begun to sing. The river welcomed him not as a stranger — but as a guardian returned.

The ripples grew. Then faded.

And he was gone.

Not a splash. Not a struggle. Just a breath released back to the world.



I did not cry.

I sat beneath the neem tree. I listened to the wind. And when the first petal touched my shoulder, I looked up and smiled.

He was still here.

Not in form. But in every quiet place that still remembered how to wait. In the hush of river mist at dawn. In the way the neem tree bent gently without breaking. In the pulse of a kingdom that had forgotten how to name its own sadness.

He was everywhere.

And I — I remained. The quiet that holds. The memory that breathes.
The love that endures without needing to be seen.



The next morning, Rama walked into the same river.

He had not slept. Sage Vashistha was the only one allowed to enter his chamber in the hours between, and what passed between them no one would ever quite tell. At dawn, Rama emerged. He led Lava and Kusha to the inner hall and crowned them himself. There was no court ceremony, no priests in formation, no songs prepared in advance. There was only a father placing what remained of his kingdom into the hands of the sons he had once asked his brother to take into a forest. The household watched, the queen mothers watched, the brothers watched, and no one spoke. There were no words for what was being done. A man was giving his sons what he had refused their mother. It was the only inheritance he had left to offer.

Then he walked to the river.

The kingdom followed him. Not in rows. Not in formation. Just walked behind him in a long uneven procession of people who could not believe what they were watching and could not bring themselves to stop watching. The Sarayu was full of dawn light. Rama stepped into it without ceremony, the way Lakshmana had stepped in the morning before. The river received him as it had received his brother.

Moments later, Bharata stepped in.

Then Shatrughna.

No one had told them to. They had simply followed.

Four brothers. One river. A single sunrise and the one that had preceded it.

The kingdom watched.

For days afterward, no one spoke of what they had seen. The grief was too large for words, and the geometry of it was even larger — four brothers, four exits, one river, less than two days. Even the priests, who usually had a verse for everything, kept their verses to themselves.

But then, slowly, in the markets and the temple courtyards and the long quiet evenings when old men gather to remember together, people began to say things.

Someone said that Rama had walked the Sarayu the way the river had been walked once before, in a story they half-remembered, by a being whose name they were not sure of. Someone else said that Lakshmana, in his final years, had moved through the palace the way a great coil of water might move beneath the surface of a lake — visible only as a slight disturbance, but always *there*, holding what was above it. Someone else said that Bharata had circled Rama his whole life like a wheel circles its centre, and Shatrughna had been the sound that goes ahead of an arriving thing, the call that announces a presence about to enter.

Wheel. Coil. Conch. King.

They were not making divine claims. They were not declaring that the gods had been living among them. They were ordinary people groping for words for what they had witnessed, and the words they had inherited from their mothers and grandmothers — *Vishnu*, *Sheshmag*, *the chakra*, *the shankha* — were the largest words their vocabulary contained. They reached for those words because no smaller ones had fit. It was the language of gods because no other language had ever been built for human acts of that size.

I listened to all of it. Sitting on the verandah of my chamber. Listening to the city talk to itself the way a city talks after a great loss it does not yet have the means to name.

And I will tell you what I, who had loved one of those men for the length of my life, came to believe.

They were not gods. They were brothers. They were men who had been given a story too heavy for the bones they had been given to carry it with. They had carried it anyway. They had done things that their own bodies should not have been able to do, and they had paid the cost of that doing with the years they would not have. The kingdom called them gods because the kingdom could not bear to admit that human beings had performed what they had performed, because if human beings could perform such things, then the kingdom would have to answer for every smaller thing it had failed to perform itself. It was easier to make them gods. It is always easier.

And Sita — who in the months that followed would be spoken of in those same vocabularies, called Lakshmi, called the goddess of fortune who had walked among them and chosen to leave — Sita was not a goddess either. Sita was my sister. I had braided her hair as a child. I had watched her struggle to lift a bow she would later lift without effort. I had seen her tired. I had seen her wrong, sometimes, in the small ways everyone is sometimes wrong. She had been a person. She had endured what no person should have endured. She had walked through what she walked through with the dignity she was given by no god, but by her own self, daily, in the small choosings.

If the kingdom wanted to call her Lakshmi, the kingdom could call her Lakshmi. The kingdom would do what kingdoms do; it would find the words it had to find. I would not argue. I had spent too many years carrying what could not be named to begin arguing now with people who were doing their best to name it.

But I will tell you, who is reading this — whoever you are, in whatever century — what they really were.

They were people. They were people who lived, and who loved imperfectly, and who failed each other, and who tried, and who did some great things and some small cruel things, and who walked into

a river on two consecutive mornings because they had agreed, somewhere in themselves, that their part was over. The river received them because the river receives everyone. The kingdom called them gods because that was the only way the kingdom knew how to mourn.

I called them by their names. Lakshmana. Rama. Bharata. Shatrughna. Sita.

It was enough. It was the most accurate naming I had.



A.S

Chapter 28:

The River That Remembered



The neem tree bloomed again. New leaves. Pale green. Delicate. Reaching toward a sky that no longer frightened me.

I had lived long enough to watch children grow into kings, and kings grow tired of their crowns. The war had ended. The songs had changed. Even grief had softened at its edges. And I was still here.

I was very old by then. Old enough that the physicians had stopped prescribing and begun simply sitting with me in the evenings — which is how physicians tell you the truth without saying it. My hands surprised me each morning: spotted now, and thin, the same hands that had once braided three sisters' hair before dawn. I did not mind them. They had done their work.

Ayodhya no longer needed me. Not in the way it once had. Lava and Kusha had taken up the rhythm of rule — wise, fierce, and full of mercy. Our sons, grown now, came and went through the courtyards with their own concerns. The three of us — Mandavi, Shrutakirti and I — gathered often beneath the jasmine arch, talking not of exile or sorrow, but of recipes, grandchildren, new poems, foolish dreams. The palace had become lighter without being louder.

But I had grown quieter. I moved slower. Ate less. Slept deeper. I spent hours walking the garden barefoot, touching every leaf as if to say farewell. The anklets that once chimed with purpose now fell silent as I moved. No one noticed. That was the beauty of aging — to fade not with tragedy, but with peace.

One morning, I told no one. I simply walked.

It took me most of the morning to reach the river. Once, that walk had been the length of a song.

As I walked, I saw something on the path. A single black feather. I bent — slowly now, the way one bends in old age — and picked it up. A crow's. I had not held one in many years. The last time had been a morning when I was very young, when I had found three of them on the floor near my cot after a dream I have never told anyone about. I had not known then what they meant. I knew now. The forms anger takes when no one will give it a hearing scatter into the world and become birds. They had not forgotten me. They had come, in their quiet way, to see me leave. I placed the feather back on the path, where it had wanted to be, and went on.



The Sarayu was gentler than I remembered. Wider. Slower. More certain of her path. I sat by her edge and watched the water curve around stones with the patience of someone who no longer feared obstacles.

She had seen kings rise and crumble. She had seen fire and coronations, widows and lovers. She had carried secrets in her flow, and still — she had never stopped.

A part of me had always belonged to this river. She had held my reflections when I questioned who I was. She had listened when I had no one else to speak to. She had stayed — when everything else left.

I pressed my palm to the wet earth. It felt like memory itself.



I thought of Lakshmana.

Not in the sharp pang of loss, but in the slow warmth of memory. I remembered the way he smiled only with his eyes. The way his fingers trembled when he brushed my braid. The way he had once told me, "*You don't carry weapons, Urmila. You carry the weight of those who do.*" And the neem tree in the south courtyard, where I had first found him polishing his blade in the dusk, before we had quite become the people who would do what we did together. He had said something that evening I have never forgotten — that he had been thinking about Rama. He had been thinking about Rama for nearly the entirety of the time I had known him. And yet, somehow, he had also been thinking about me. I had not understood it at the time. I had spent the rest of my life understanding it.

I whispered his name into the wind. Not to summon him. Just to let the world remember that I had loved him. And that he had been real.

A single petal from the neem tree floated downriver, spinning. I smiled.



I thought of Mandavi, then. She had said to me once, on a long night when the four of us were three: "*Let one of you tell them, when I no longer can.*" I had not known then that the telling would fall to me. I had not known that one of the things a witness must do is also outlive everyone else who could have told the story. I had outlived them. Mandavi had gone, quietly, in her sleep. Shrutakirti had followed a season later, having waited for her sister the way she had always waited for her sister. I had been the last of the four. I had been the one who told. I had told by living. I had told by remembering. I would tell, now, by going where they had gone.



I walked into the river slowly. Not to disappear. Not to dissolve. But to return.

The water rose around my knees, then my waist. I let it hold me, like

the way a mother holds a sleeping child — without urgency, without fear.

I thought of Sita — how she had commanded the earth to take her back. I did not command. I only asked.

"If you still remember me," I said, "let me come home."

There was no thunder. No gods. No flame. Just a single bird circling overhead. And the cool hush of water welcoming me like breath.



I did not drown. I did not fall. I let go.

And the river carried me forward, gently, silently, into the horizon.

No final cry. No great lament. Only the sound of the Sarayu remembering.



They say nothing remarkable happened that day.

But the neem tree shed one petal more than usual. The wind shifted west. And the Sarayu, for a moment, glowed gold at dusk.

They say Urmila walked into the river. But I know the truth.

She walked into story. And became the part no one forgets — Even if no one speaks her name.



Epilogue:

The Verse Remembered



The neem tree still stands in the courtyard. Its branches curve like arms in prayer, holding both shadow and sun.

The children who run beneath it do not know the name of the woman who planted it.

But when they fall, the earth catches them softly. When they cry, the breeze hushes them gently. And when they ask the wind for stories, it sometimes tells them one without kings, without crowns, without war —

A story of a woman who waited. Who watched. Who wove the silence between verses so the world would not fall apart.

They may not speak her name. But she is there — in every pause, in every breath of peace, in every lullaby whispered to the next generation.

She was never missing. She was the space where everything held together.

Author's Note



I did not set out to rewrite the Ramayana.

I only wanted to listen — to the silence between its verses.

And there, in that silence, I heard her. Urmila.

I came to her by accident. I was reading the closing pages of Amish Tripathi's *Scion of Ikshvaku* — a scene of Lakshmana leaving Ayodhya for the forest with Rama and Sita — when I realised I felt nothing for the woman he was leaving behind. Not because she was unnamed. She was named. I had known her name my whole life. But across every retelling I had read, every television serial I had watched, every prayer recited in my home, Urmila had been reduced to a single fact, the wife who slept for fourteen years. Her sacrifice, a nap. Her endurance, a missing scene. A footnote of slumber inside an epic of waking sons.

And yet — when I let myself sit with her — I felt the full weight of her. The waiting. The silence. The choice to stay. She belonged beside Sita, beside Kaikeyi, beside Mandodari. Not as a wife referenced through a husband, but as a woman whose sacrifice deserved the same gravity we had always given to Rama's exile, to Sita's fire, to Lakshmana's loyalty. And in her wait, in her sacrifice, I found something I had not known I was looking for. I could not move past her.

Too easily forgotten. Left behind while the world marched into glory and grief. But when I leaned in, I found her not missing — only unheard. Not passive — only powerful in a different way.

She was the guardian of stories no one thought to ask, the keeper of pain that had no language, the wick that held the flame steady.

Like many of us, I had known her only as Lakshmana's wife. The one who slept while the epic unfolded. But when I began to trace the silence around her, I found not absence, but presence. Purpose. Power.

She dreamed the war while awake. She endured exile without ever stepping into the forest. She stitched the epic together — not with arrows, but with waiting. She carried the burden of grace in a world that rarely rewards it.

I am not Urmila. But I have been her, and so has every woman I have grown up beside. The mother who held a household together while another name was the one people remembered. The grandmother who fed three generations and was never asked what she had wanted to become. The aunt who stayed back so the others could leave. We are a country of Urmilas. We have been told it is our virtue. I am no longer certain that is true.

Writing this story changed me. It taught me that quiet strength is not weakness. That sacrifice is not submission. That those who stay behind sometimes carry the heaviest burdens of all.

This book was my act of listening. To every person who was told that love means waiting. To every soul who watched, endured, and held the world together from the margins.

Urmila's voice is not loud. But it lingers. She does not demand space. She fills it.

She has been sleeping in our pages for centuries. This book is my attempt to wake her.

Now she is yours.

Do not let her sleep again.