

## THE NETHER REGION

**R**ama embraced Vibhishana, Hanuman, Nala, Nila and others and thrilled them all with the Divine Touch. At this, the pain that tortured them disappeared in an instant. The wounds on their bodies were healed. The Vanaras were delighted at the sight of Rama's happy face. The compassionate look of Rama fell upon the Vanaras.

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

He said, "Respected Consort, give up your grief. Do not think that I am a hero of that type. I shall bring you solace, within an hour or so. You can witness on the battlefield, my terrific might. I shall pluck the heads of those who caused the death of your husband, and bring them with me. This shall be done, without doubt." Thus Ravana boasted and raved in the presence of Sulochana. His anger burnt his frame and he was beside himself with rage.

Hearing his words, the wise and virtuous Sulochana said, "Oh Ten-headed One! Is there in your heart any trace of hope that you can win victory? You are sunk in the deep darkness of delusion. I had swallowed my resentment and my disappointment so long, for I felt that opposing one's father-in-law was improper; and in this case, it is also useless to try to convince you. Your rage is the prime cause for the destruction of the Rakshasa population of this island. Let me tell you this—it is impossible for you to win this war. This is the truth, the indisputable truth." Sulochana rose suddenly, and wailing alone, she moved towards the apartments of Mandodari, the Queen, the mother of Meghanada. Reaching there, she fell at the feet of her mother-in-law and said, "This calamity has been brought about by your husband and not by anyone else. You too cannot escape such a calamity, which is sure to befall this day or the next." Her torn heart poured out words that were harsh and cruel. Mandodari too was pained when she contemplated the evil desires of Ravana and his pride at his own wickedness. She wept at the realisation that the

words of Sulochana were awfully true. The two women sat silent for long, and later they described to each other the virtues and excellence of Rama and the patience and chastity of Sita and told themselves that if only they could get a glimpse of that divine person their lives would be rendered worthwhile.

Ravana could not bear to witness the agony of his daughter-in-law, the bereaved Sulochana. Her words thrust his heart like sharp spikes. His grief was so heavy at the loss of such a bright and loving son that he fell on the floor and in despair beat his head on the ground. Rising up, he poured out his anguish before the Siva idol of his favourite temple. Meanwhile, the ministers of his court approached him there. They said, "Oh King, why are you grieving in vain? Sons, wives and all the rest on whom we lavish our love are all like the lightning flash that illumines the dark cloud for an instant. They come and go. Life is a flash, it does not last. Knowing this in full measure, it is not proper for you to sink in ignorance and bewail their loss. Now is the time to plan the future. Plan out the strategy by which we can destroy the enemy at our doors." They tried to bring consolation and remind him of the immediate task, through various arguments. At last, Ravana folded his twenty palms and praying to Siva, he fell on the floor of the temple in reverent homage.

When this happened on the earth above, Ahi-ravana, living in the nether regions became aware that Ravana was suffering a great burden of sorrow. He thought within

himself, "How could this be? He has all the world under his control and within his grasp! No one can defeat him." Ahi-ravana worshipped no other god but the Devi Kamada. Immediately, he meditated on Her and She revealed to Her votary the place where Ravana was, at that time. So, he could appear before Ravana, in the Siva Temple itself. He fell at Ravana's feet, announcing his name while doing so. Ahi-ravana was no other than another son of Ravana. He enquired the reason why the father was so disheartened. Ravana related to him all that had happened since the nose and ears of Surpanakha were sliced off by the brothers. This account made Ahi-ravana very sad. He said, "The path of morality is adored by everyone in the world. By straying away from that path and preferring the path of immorality, fear enters the heart. Instead of paying attention to the past and future, and the likely course of events, you have plunged into this foolish fatal war. As a consequence, you have destroyed your clan and your dynasty. You do not know the heroism and the power that lies dormant in 'man.' You have counted the greatest among them as the least and the lowest. Yet I wish to tell you one thing now. I shall capture Rama and Lakshmana and take them with me to the nether regions. I shall sacrifice them as offerings to my Kamada Devi. I shall thereby bring immense fame to the Rakshasa name." With these words, he prostrated before Ravana, and made obeisance to Kamada Devi. Then he entered the camp of Rama. With his supernatural power, he invoked the spirit of darkness and enveloped the Vanaras in thick blackness. No one could see his own palm, held before him! Such was

the thickness of the pitch darkness around all. The Vanaras were extremely vigilant in camp. Even Death dare not enter the place. Hanuman, the Vanara guard, elongated his tail to such an extent that he could encircle the camp with it many times over, until the coils one over the other became a high wall, of the size and strength of a mountain barrier. Hanuman himself sat alert at the only gate through which entrance into this impregnable fort was possible.

Ahi-ravana saw the caudal fort and was stricken with great fear. He could not conceive of any strategy to outmanoeuvre this defence. Suddenly getting a brain wave he changed himself into the likeness of Vibhishana and accosted Hanuman at the gate. He told him, “Friend, I must go into the Presence of Rama. With his approval I had gone outside the camp to perform my evening prayers and rites. I have finished them now. If I do not go without delay, I would incur the sin of disobeying His command. So, allow me to enter the camp.” Hanuman was taken in by those words and that form, which were to his ears and eyes the same as Vibhishana’s. He allowed him into the camp. He found Nala and Sugriva fast asleep, since they were exhausted by the day’s fighting. Rama too was sleeping, with his hand clasping the hand of his brother Lakshmana. The pseudo-Vibhishana who was approaching him was not unnoticed by Rama. He had incarnated, adopting, in sport, the human frame and his purpose in so doing was to destroy the entire Rakshasa species and wipe them out. His task will remain unfinished if the descendants of Ravana

survived in the nether regions. So, he played the role, as if he did not know the trick that Ahi-ravana was about to indulge in. Others cannot understand his ways. He knows where, when and by which means, one has to be exterminated. He plays his drama in his own way.

The Rakshasa recited the Mohana Manthra, which would make whomsoever he wants swoon and become unconscious. That made the Vanara heroes sleep even more soundly. Then, he bound Rama and Lakshmana and carried them off to his region in the bowels of the earth, the region called Patala.

After some time, the Vanaras woke up and were plunged in dismay when they found that Rama and Lakshmana were not beside them. The place where they had slept had become a deep pit. The entire camp was soon filled with cries and groans. The Vanaras were rendered as miserable as the sky without the moon, or lotus blooms without water. The Vanaras started moving in all directions to seek out the brothers and recover them. Many ran towards the shore of the sea. Many searched the borders of the campus. No one could discover any clue. The Vanaras lost hope and courage. They were overcome by sorrow and despair. “All the Rakshasa warriors have been destroyed. Ravana alone has survived. His days too were nearing the end. At this juncture, this misfortune has overtaken us.” The Vanaras lamented their fate in this manner. Sugriva, the King of the Vanaras, himself fell unconscious on the ground. Vibhishana had not heard about this incident. He

was returning with wet clothes on, from a sea bath, after performing his morning rites. The Vanaras ran towards him and revealed to him that Rama and Lakshmana could not be seen in camp. Vibhishana was struck with sorrow for one instant; but, since he was conversant with the tricks that the Rakshasas could play, using their supernatural powers, he guessed the plot correctly. “Come. Let us go into the camp,” he told them. This gave them some little consolation. When he talked with Hanuman at the gate, he was surprised and shocked. Hanuman asked, “Why? You passed through this gate into the camp a while ago. You asked me permission to do so.”

It was now clear to Vibhishana. He could picture in his mind what had happened. So he addressed the Vanaras thus: “Vanaras! There is no need to be anxious. Ahi-ravana, the son of Ravana, is a master in such tricks. He is living in Patala—the nether regions. Judging from the depth of this pit, I am sure it is he who has carried Rama and Lakshmana to his own place underground. I have no doubt on this point. For, no one else can assume my form. Do not be disheartened. It is best that someone from among us, who is mighty, proceeds thither.” Vibhishana looked around and sighting Hanuman, he said, “Hanuman! Your physical and mental strength are known all over the world. Go immediately to Patala and bring back these Oceans of Mercy, Rama and Lakshmana. Vibhishana described also the route that Hanuman had to take to reach Patala, where Ahi-ravana stayed. Sugriva, Angada and Jambavantha

clasped Hanuman to their breast and shed tears of joy. Hanuman solicited permission from his Royal Master, Sugriva and, while starting on his mission, told the Vanaras, “Do not fear. Do not be anxious in the least. Whoever he is, I shall destroy him, even if I have to sacrifice my life. I shall stand before you with Rama and Lakshmana pretty soon. Be assured.” With these words and with the acclamation, Jai Rama, Jai Rama (Victory to Rama, Victory to Rama) emanating from his tongue, Hanuman started off. Reaching the Patala region, he rested awhile under a tree. He heard two birds sitting above him, conversing aloud. Hanuman knew the language of birds. So he sat listening to their talk. “Dear One,” spoke the bird, “Ahi-ravana has brought two brothers Rama and Lakshmana, and he has made all preparations to sacrifice both of them to Goddess Kamada just now. He will cast these holy bodies away, after the sacrifice. We can feast on those sacred bodies to our full content. This day is a festival day for us.” Hanuman rose suddenly from under the tree; like a cobra whose tail has been trodden upon, he hissed with rage, and leaped forward like a giant flame. “Alas! I fear what has happened already to my Lord,” he wailed.

He entered the City of Ahi-ravana. At the very entrance, he had to fight and overcome Makaradhwaja, the guard in monkey form. But seeing that he was a monkey, he explored his genealogy and history. Hanuman was able to win his confidence and get from him inside information about Rama and Lakshmana and their fate. He also came to

know from him that the brothers were to be taken at dawn to the temple of Goddess Kamada, for being offered as human sacrifice to Her.

Hanuman asked Makaradhwaja, the Monkey Guardian of Patala, where the two brothers were kept by the cruel Overlord of the Nether Regions. He gave him all the details. However, he insisted that he will not allow him to enter the area, for, he had to obey his master and be loyal to him and to his interests. “Whatever the suffering I have to endure, I shall not let you in,” he said. “If I show you special consideration for the reason that you too are a monkey, I will thereby be dishonouring the entire monkey species, as unreliable and ungrateful. My lord, Ahi-ravana, is as much adorable to me as your lord, Rama, is to you. However near you may be to me, I shall not waver or deviate. I must do my duty and carry out his command. You can get in only after defeating me in combat,” he said challengingly. Hanuman appreciated his sentiments and his sense of duty. He was happy that Makaradhwaja had taken the proper attitude. He took up the challenge and entered into the fight. After some time spent in fierce combat, Hanuman decided that protraction was not desirable. So, he twisted his tail around the body of Makaradhwaja and cast him far out in the distance. Then, Hanuman boldly entered the City. He noticed a florist entering the gate with a fine big garland of fragrant flowers. Resolving that this was the best chance to reach the place he wanted to, he assumed suddenly a molecular form and occupied the garland the florist was

carrying. The garland was not rendered any heavier. It was as light as ever. The florist had no idea of what happened. Everything was as before, for him. The garland was delivered to Ahi-ravana himself. He took it in both his hands and placed it round the neck of the image of Kamada in the temple. He also offered various rich dishes as sanctified food to the idol. From his vantage point on the garland round its neck, Hanuman ate up the dishes as they were placed before the idol. The Rakshasas saw the food disappearing, and they were delighted that their Goddess had deigned to accept their devotion. Ahi-ravana too was happy at the thought that “this day my prayers have been answered. My fortune has reached its summit.”

Meanwhile, Rama and Lakshmana, the brothers, were brought in, decorated in the manner in which sacrificial animals are decorated. Gigantic Rakshasa warriors were holding them by their arms on either side. Hanuman saw them being made to stand by the side of the sacrificial altar. Hanuman bowed obeisance to Rama from where he was, and filled his mind with adorations for Him. The guards placed the brothers right in front of the Idol, and held sharp swords near their necks. Ahi-ravana said that the sacrificial offering of the lives of the two brothers must take place immediately after the waving of the Holy Flame, and that they ought to be ready to execute their task, without a moment’s delay. Rama and Lakshmana, who were really Divine Beings playing the role of humans, had discovered that it was Hanuman who had eaten the food offerings

placed by Ahi-ravana before the Deity, and that knowledge induced them to take on to the impending events with great good humour. Seeing them smiling and light-hearted, Ahi-ravana was awfully enraged. He said, "Well, if the few moments more of life that you are granted give you so much of joy, I do not grudge it. Be happy while you can. A while later, you can smile in the realm of Yama, the Ruler of the Dead." He paid no regard to the brothers, but continued to relish their fate and utter harsh words to wound them even more. At this, the priest rose and paying respects to his master, informed him that the code of political morality requires that the victims be permitted to pray, if they so desire, to their guardian for peace after death. The Rakshasa Chief rose from his seat and announced, "Princes! If you have any well-wishers, this is the time to express gratitude for them, since you have only a few moments to live." Rama and Lakshmana looked at each other's face and smiled.

That very moment, Hanuman let out a terrific roar. Hearing it, the Rakshasas imagined that their Goddess had manifested Herself and was expressing Her anger. Hanuman jumped from the garland, assuming his terror-striking Form and grasping the sword that was in the hand of the Goddess, he felled Ahi-ravana to the ground and hit him all over, hacking him to pieces. But his body was of diamond strength and he had won a mysterious boon which made the bits get together and become whole, as soon as they were separated. At last, Hanuman fixed Rama in his mind and with a shout, Jai Rama, he caught the head in one hand and with the

other sliced the neck. Before they could join, he threw the head into the blazing fire, in the sacrificial pit, before the Idol.

Just then, Makaradhwaja managed to reach the temple and the presence of the Goddess. On seeing him, Hanuman recovered the golden crown from the head of Ahi-ravana, and placed it on his head, he proclaimed him ruler of Patala and advised him to be ever grateful to the Brothers and to be always loyal and devoted to them. He had Rama and Lakshmana seated on his shoulders and, at one jump, he rose from Patala and landed safe in the midst of the Vanara hordes eagerly looking for them with their million eyes. Vibhishana and others could not contain the joy that overwhelmed them when they saw the Brothers safe and sound before them. They fell at the feet of Rama and Lakshmana. They clasped Hanuman in their arms and shed tears of gratitude. The Vanaras praised Hanuman in a thousand different paeans. They lifted him on their shoulders. They fed him and fondled him. They embraced him, poured their love on him. Vibhishana stood before Rama and said, "Lord! What shall I say of your *Leela*, your Sport? You alone can reveal to us the meaning of your acts and activities. You have come with the resolution to wipe off the Rakshasa denizens even in the Nether Regions. All this stage-acting, is, I know, to fulfil that resolution."

Ravana came to know that Rama and Lakshmana had been brought back by Hanuman from the kingdom of Ahi-ravana. He heard the tragic news of the death of his son,

Ahi-ravana. He collapsed and fell on the ground. He lamented his loss, long and loud. Tears flowed in streams from his eyes. Mandodari, the Queen, came to him and tried her best to console him and reduce his grief. He did not give ear to her words. He only grew more and more enraged at her soft counsel. Ravana mustered courage and rose suddenly, to meet a Minister who presented himself at that time. His name was Sindhuranatha. He was a respected elder, far gone in years. He was a very wise man, who was in close proximity to Vibhishana, when he was formerly in Lanka. He advised him on various moral virtues and on the mortality of men and things. Ravana did not listen to his words. He even treated them with patent disgust. The Minister was sad when he saw his reaction. He felt, "In times of misfortune, intelligence too gets warped. Poor fellow! He is heading towards disaster and so, even sweet counsel tastes bitter to him." Still, out of compassion, he continued with his words of sympathetic advice.

Ravana said to himself: "Now my kith and kin have been decimated. There is no one left alive." Just then, an aged Minister said, "Why do you say so? You have another surviving son, Narantaka, who has with him 72 *crores* [a crore is ten million] of Rakshasas. Call him for support. Send a messenger immediately. He can destroy the enemy. You need have no doubt." Ravana was delighted at these words. He sent the messenger, named Dhoomakethu, with instructions to bring with him the clever Narantaka. The messenger described the tragedies that had overtaken Lanka

and communicated the urgent appeal Ravana had made for his help. He proceeded, on the spot, with his hordes and as soon as he reached the field he fell upon the Vanara forces. Hanuman spied him from far. He went forward to confront him. On seeing him and his terror-striking form, Narantaka was struck with fear. He asked Dhoomakethu who he was and was told that he was Hanuman, the invincible hero who had killed all his brothers. Hearing this, Narantaka became even more ferocious. He placed arrows on his bow and let them off against Hanuman; but, he caught them all by the hand and broke them to pieces. He came very close to Narantaka and pounded his breast heavily with his clenched fist. He lifted him aloft and turning him around fast, threw him deep into a Nether Region named Rasatala. Millions of his Rakshasa followers were thrown into the sea. He broke into smithereens the chariots in the army of Narantaka. The charioteers were also decimated.