

Chapter 8. Another Challenge to Rama's Prowess

Meanwhile, Dasaratha proceeded toward Ayodhya with his sons and daughters-in-law, the sages and scholars, army units of infantry, elephantry, cavalry, and chariotry, and citizens of his empire. Suddenly, they observed certain bad omens, and they had a premonition that something serious was about to happen. Dasaratha approached Vasishtha. "Master! What a surprise this is! Dark clouds are thickening and howling; the beasts on earth are tramping around us full circle. They shouldn't behave so, should they? What can be the reason? What does it indicate? I am apprehensive about these omens."

Vasishtha could see the meaning of these portents by means of his divine insight. "O King! These are signs of some terrible event nearing us. The clouds are roaring frightfully. But, since the beasts on earth are circumambulating our chariots, this much can be inferred; the disaster that threatens us will be averted. Therefore, you need have no anxiety." Vasishtha instilled faith and confidence in Dasaratha, and they awaited events.

Suddenly, the wind grew into a fierce cyclonic storm! Even as they were looking on, giant trees were pulled by their roots and fell with alarming noise. Even the mountain peaks rolled one over the other. Thunderous explosions rent the air, as if the earth itself was breaking into pieces. Those in one chariot could not see the vehicle before or behind them; so thick was the dust that rose all around! Horses and elephants started running wildly in panic. Foot soldiers dropped unconscious; others stood petrified by a weird fear.

Vasishtha, Dasaratha, and the four sons were the only ones who were unafraid in all that huge concourse! All the rest were drained of vigour and vitality. For good reason, too. For the ground and air were enveloped in darkness. The darkness was heightened by blinding flashes of light! And, a dreadful figure, with terror-striking eyes, stood before them.

His head had a crown of thickly matted hair. He had a giant double-edged axe on his shoulder. He had on another shoulder a bag of arrows that shone like lightning streaks. He appeared to them like the forehead-eyed Siva on His way to destroy the mighty demon rulers of the Triple Fortress (Thripura)!

Vasishtha recognised him immediately as Parasurama. But he wondered why he was so fierce with anger that day, even though all his rage against the warrior (*kshatriya*) clans had long ago subsided as a result of the campaigns in which he had destroyed them. He tried to discover what could have kindled the flame again from the cooled embers.

Vasishtha moved toward Parasurama with the traditional signs of welcome, like inviting him to wash his hands and asking permission to wash his feet. Though he accepted these marks of good will and heartfelt reception, Parasurama stared at Rama with eyes like glowing cinders! Rama, however, reacted with a charming smile, a smile that only fed the fumes of his anger! He raved loudly, "O son of Dasaratha! I listened to your exploits being praised by a thousand tongues. I also heard how you broke Siva's bow, as if it was just child's play. But all that is hearsay not directly seen by me. I have come to personally examine your valour.

"I brought this divinely consecrated bow, which belonged to Jamadagni, my revered father. Show me your might—string and fix an arrow on it. Or else, fight me!" He challenged Rama, in passionate anger.

Rama was unaffected by this demonstration of anger. He smiled coolly. "O Bhargavarama! I thought that the vengeance you had nursed against the warriors (*kshatriyas*) had ended long ago. Why this relapse? Why this

downfall, this absurdity?”

Just then, Dasaratha bent low and appealed to Parasurama in plaintive tones, “*Bhagavan!* You are a *brahmin*. You have won great renown. My sons are tender teenagers. Why develop vengeful hatred against them for no reason whatever? This ill becomes the high status of your lineage. Your forefathers studied the *Vedas* without intermission and performed rites and ceremonies with elaborate care. You yourself declared that day, when you entered on the ritual of penance, that you would not handle any weapon thereafter; you said that your desires had been fulfilled. You did this before no less a God than Indra, gifting all the territories conquered by you to Kasyapa, yourselves resolving to spend the rest of your days in the performance of righteous deeds and the gaining of equanimity.

“You were all along engaged in austerities on the Mahendra Peak! Now, quite contrary to your declared intentions, your mind is set upon destroying my dynasty and family. Isn’t it a terrible sin to act against one’s given word? At this breach of promise, of what use is austerity? There is no god higher than truth, is there?”

You challenge only Rama, and you say you will fight only with him! If anything injurious happens to him, my entire family will be plunged into dire calamity. Our lives will end the moment danger harms him. A *brahmin* like you should not become responsible for the loss of so many lives! It is not only a sacrilege on *brahminhood*; it is a heinous sin.”

Parasurama paid no heed to Dasaratha’s words. He looked only at Rama. “The bow you broke and this one have both come from heaven; Viswakarma, the divine artificer, made them both. One was offered to Siva for use against the demons of the triple fortress; the other was entrusted to Vishnu. Once the demons were destroyed, Siva sent the bow to Emperor Devaratha, with the arrows that were used for the fight. Perhaps the bow had become frail and feeble, since the purpose for which it was offered had been accomplished. It is no proof of might and heroism if such a bow is broken. This bow has work yet to do, so it still retains its vigour and vitality.

This bow is surcharged with efficacy and power. Take this, string it, and break it as you did the other. That is the way to prove your strength and heroism. Do not strut about in pride that you broke the bow of Siva! Break this and write your name in the annals of the brave.”

“You may doubt my words that this is the bow of Vishnu,” he continued. “Vishnu Himself kept it in the custody of Hrishika, a great sage. He handed it over to his son, Jamadagni. Jamadagni is my father. He was the repository of tremendous merit acquired by austerity; he was so pure hearted that he had no trace of hatred or vengeance in him.

My father had renounced the use of weapons; yet, Karthaviryarjuna, the wicked, killed him. It was a crime of unprecedented cruelty; no one had killed another so atrociously. I decided that I should not show mercy; I had to teach him a lesson; I vowed that I would destroy not only that monster but all unrighteous kings. From that day, I have been cutting them to pieces and playing ball games with their heads.

“This bow was with me in all those campaigns. I killed many wicked monarchs. I brought the entire world under subjugation. My anger at those who had killed my father cooled a little with this. I gave up the vendetta and started a *Vedic* sacrifice. I invited Kasyapa for that rite (*yajna*), since he was a great saint immersed in meritorious activity. I gave him the Earth, which I had conquered, as ritual fees for supervising the rite. Since then, I have been spending my days on the Mahendra Peak, with my mind immersed in peace and my intellect shining in spiritual splendour.

“Your father asked me why I took up this weapon again and put on a challenging pose, in spite of having renounced the path of vengeance and hatred. I’ll answer him now, Rama! Two bows were created in heaven and came upon the earth. You broke the Siva bow. This one alone remains now, intact. If this too is broken (it does not serve any purpose being with me, for its work is over), then my renunciation will be complete. So I want you to break it and keep it. I’m waiting for this consummation. The moment has come; I’m determined to utilise it, rather than let it go by or allow it to be misused.

“Perhaps, you doubt whether fighting is the best use that time can be put to? But the significance of the fight has to be looked into. It may be for the progress and welfare of the world; it may promote the suppression of the unrighteous and the encouragement of the good. You cannot pronounce war as undesirable, judging from a superficial point of view.

“Analyse the purpose. When a knife has to be sharpened, one has to hone it on a grindstone. No one can condemn the process as injurious to the knife. If the body is to derive strength from food, the food has to be placed between rows of hard teeth and ground into paste mercilessly. No one can condemn this process as violence exercised on the material. It may become necessary in order to provide pure (*sathwic*) food for either the body or the body politic, to have recourse to struggle, conflict, and the apparent infliction of pain.

“Well, we’re in the middle of the road, halfway through a journey. It’s not proper to indulge in talk, standing here. Let’s get to action. We should start straightaway. Come on! Either string this bow and break it in the process or fight a duel with me!” This was Parasurama’s call.

Lakshmana fumed with anger while listening to Parasurama’s challenge. He was about to intervene with a hot retort when Rama quietened him. “This matter does not concern you. I myself have to answer the questions asked of me. It is against good manners for you to come between us; let me handle the situation.” His affectionate and soft counsel made Lakshmana desist.

But when Parasurama started laughing at Rama and ridiculing him for not accepting his challenge, Lakshmana couldn’t control his resentment. He shouted, “O Bhargava! This is not much of a task for Him who broke the bow of Siva! To break this little bow, why do you challenge Rama? This is a *brahmin* weapon! It is just a blade of kusha grass. I can break it myself in a trice, effortlessly, even while playing with it; for this petty task why ask Rama. I have no need to transfer the assignment.”

Lakshmana’s words inflamed Parasurama even more. However, Rama took things coolly and calmly; he smiled at Lakshmana and pacified him by his soft speech. The more enraged Parasurama became, the quieter and more restrained was Rama’s reaction.

Soon, Parasurama lost control. He gave free reign to his tongue and started pouring rank abuse, which caused some consternation in Dasaratha’s heart. The maids and servants hid themselves from the furious onslaught. The four arms of the army were shaking with fear. The pundits were terrified. But Sita was not in the least agitated and watched the scene with amusement. She was not affected by the slightest apprehension. She instilled courage and confidence in the hearts of Urmila, Mandavi, and Srutha-keerthi, telling them that he was a lame jackal before the lion Rama.

When they saw Rama reprimanding Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna had no mind to intervene. Or else, they too would have joined the fray and asked Rama for permission to fight or take up the challenge. They awaited Rama’s orders and kept away. Vasishta could know the past and future, so He realised that the incident was but a

scene in the divine drama. He was silent and unshaken.

Ramachandra spoke with profound calm. “Parasurama! You are a *brahmin*. For a *kshatriya* you are an object of worship, on the basis of caste. You are a kinsman of the revered Viswamitra. I don’t feel it proper to kill such a high caste *brahmin* or to aim this holy weapon against you. You yourself declared just now that it belongs to the realm of the gods, that it has so far destroyed every enemy, city, and fort against which it has been used, and that it can overwhelm and defeat the strength and pride of whomsoever it encounters. Isn’t it sheer waste to make it unserviceable?”

“So, choose either of these two alternatives and tell me: Shall I use it to prevent you from moving about on your feet? Or shall I prevent you from attaining the higher worlds that you have earned by means of austerities?”

These words enraged Parasurama even more. His eyes turned red with anger, and he rushed toward Rama, exclaiming, “What are you prattling?”

Rama took hold of the Vishnu bow that was slung on his shoulder, with a derisive laugh, which hurt his pride. Lo! No sooner did the weapon reach the hands of Rama than Parasurama got debilitated. He lost all energy and vitality. Rama shone in such added splendour that no one could stand that blaze. He stood there as if countless lamps were lit on one spot, radiating blinding light all around. When the authentic wielder of that bow, Narayana Himself, held it in His grasp, the bow too acquired added lustre; a triumphal aura surrounded it and lightning streamed from it. The gods gathered in the sky and showered flowers on Rama holding the bow. The auspicious sound of music filled the sky.

Meanwhile, Parasurama was full of smiles. He said, “Rama! Did you notice what happened! I have experienced the delight of the divine manifestation, your divine splendour. In days gone by, I gifted this earthly region to Kasyapa. Receiving it, the sage Kasyapa declared that I should not enter his dominion again, and even if I did, I should not spend a night therein; he pronounced a curse upon me, on these lines. Well. It is already getting dark. I can no longer be present here. I have to hurry fast to the Mahendra Mountain. Through my incomparable austerity, I have won high heavenly regions. Break the bow and, with it, break all the power I had won. All the power I have in me is yours. O Rama, watch this, I am offering to you the power earned by me.”

Thus saying, he came near and embraced Rama with both hands clasped firm around him. At that moment, three facets of Divinity that had subsisted in him so long came forth from him and merged in Rama. Parasurama addressed Rama. “Rama! The world cannot easily understand the mystery of the divine; even those like me who have earned great power through denial and detachment and ascetic practices rely more on their own spiritual achievements, ignoring the influence of the divine strategy of Vishnu.

“Therefore, I set about to make known your reality and genuine power to the world; I have given you my powers as an offering; I also proved once again that you are the mighty Vishnu, the God endowed with unique power, the God who directs the drama of the universe. There is nothing that is devoid of you, nothing that is not you. You are all. Yours is all. I had the good fortune to wield your divine bow for some time, and as a consequence, I earned some reverence from the world. That is the merit I have won. This is my offering.” With this Parasurama disappeared.

Rama gave the bow and arrows to the God Varuna, with an unperturbed smiling countenance. He prostrated before Vasishtha and Dasaratha, who were by his side.

Home at last

All the while, Dasaratha was shivering with fear, apprehending what might happen to his son from this apparition, what calamity might land on him. Now, he was free of anxiety. He drew Rama near and fondled him affectionately. He raised the son's face toward him, holding it by the chin and, finding it rather difficult to express his feelings in words, said, "Dear Son! I am indeed lucky; I was afraid I might not see you again. Your resolute courage, your heroism is beyond imagination." He praised Rama and appreciated his exploit in many ways.

Rama replied, "*dharmā* has to win: Victory is the inevitable concomitant of righteousness. In the preliminary states of the struggle, it may create some fear and obstacles, which might appear formidable. It will cause even weakness of mind. It might arouse suspicions of defeat and failure. But, instead of bowing or bending before it, one has to fix his attention on the goal itself. Then it can never fail. Failure can never affect it. People do not peer deep into the truth of *dharmā*'s might. They are carried away by superficial handicaps and worries, so they give up the path and suffer. What has happened is for the best; I ascribe this to your blessings."

Rama again fell at his father's feet, saying, "The armed forces are awaiting your orders to resume the march toward Ayodhya. Kindly give them your commands."

Dasaratha was filled with delight. "Son! Why should we delay further? Grief and joy afflict us one after the other and cause distress to the person and his body. We can go to the capital city and seek to live there happily in the best manner possible." He called the ministers to his side and told them to order the troops to march.

The soldiers cheered in joy and began to move forward. The interlude of fear had ended. Dasaratha spent the remainder of the journey describing and enjoying the description of the amazing events of the day.

As they neared the city, some regiments were sent in advance to inform the citizens of the arrival of the party, with the sons and daughters-in-law. The memory of the grandeur and glory of what they had experienced at Mithila and on the way home gave speed to the feet, and the advance party flew like arrows from bowman's hand into the city. They announced that Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrugna were entering the city with their brides and that Dasaratha had sent them to give the glad tidings.

The citizens of Ayodhya decorated the streets and houses in a variety of attractive styles. Plantain trees were tied to posts on both sides of the road. Bunches of coconuts were hung from the posts. Rosewater was sprinkled. The entire city was made charming and attractive.

Musicians took positions all along the route. Fireworks were collected and distributed all along the line, so that it could be made one continuous stream of colour and cheering noise. They awaited the party with the deepest feeling of joy, counting the minutes as they looked into the distance to catch the first glimpse. Women in veils crowded the windows and terraces of the mansions and peeped from behind curtains tied across them.

Emperor Dasaratha entered the city with his sons and their brides. Music rent the air as soon as they were sighted. People cheered enthusiastically, shouting "hurrah! hurrah!" till their throats were hoarse. Women waved lights, threw flowers on their path, and sprinkled rosewater. The young men were like bright stars. When the populace saw the ennobling scene, many forgot where they stood or who they were; their joy knew no bounds. Their thirst could not be quenched, however long they gazed, so they walked long distances backward in order to keep their eyes fixed on them! Thus, the entire route was covered and they reached the gates of the palace. There, *brahmins* had stationed themselves, so they could recite *Vedic* hymns invoking good fortune and prosperity on the newlyweds. Maids waved lights and performed rites to ward off the evil eye. They prayed for the daughters-in-

law to come in, placing the right foot first.

Meanwhile, Kausalya, Sumitra, and Kaika stood at the entrance to the zenana (woman's quarters) awaiting their approach with avid eagerness. They sprinkled sandal scent, tucked flowers in their hair and placed red dots on their foreheads. When the sons came, the queens were overwhelmed with joy; they drew them near and fondled them, patting their heads and chins and blessing them profusely. Then the four sons and daughters-in-law prostrated before the three mothers, whose eyes streamed tears of joy, for their happiness knew no bounds.

The maids brought rice boiled in milk on golden plates; the mothers placed the food in the mouths of the newlyweds and persuaded them to eat. They gave them milk to drink and then took them to the inner apartments.

In the evening, ladies from Ayodhya were invited to the palace to share in the auspicious ceremonial of welcoming the newlyweds. An imposingly beautiful dais was readied, and golden seats were placed upon it. The queens brought costly clothes and jewels with precious gems set on them in artistic patterns; they commissioned talented maids-in-waiting to help the daughters-in-law to put them on, and they themselves supervised the wearing of the costume and jewellery. They held them by the hand and led them to their seats.

By that time, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna had come and taken their seats, wearing princely robes, costly jewels, and crowns. Each sat to the right of his bride. The mothers, as well as the ladies invited from the city, feasted their eyes on the splendour of the scene, and their bliss was immeasurable. While they were going through the ceremonial, gifts were distributed outside the palace to people in profusion. Cows, cash, gold, land, grain, vehicles, and horses were given away in plenty.

Brahmins came before the dais and cast auspicious rice grains on the heads of the newlyweds, to the accompaniment of the recitation of *Vedic* hymns. Then, married women waved 108 lamps before them to ward off the evil eye. After this, the sons rose and with their wives they prostrated before the mothers, the father, and the *guru*, Vasishta. Then, they retired to their own apartments.