The Princess Without A Nose

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The Anthropology

This story of Sita and the Ramayana is told from the point of view of Surpanaka, also known in the Indonesian wayang world as Sarpakanoko.

She is the Rakshasa demon woman who inadvertently instigates the war central to the Ramayana epic. Prince Rama encounters her during his period of exile in the forest with Sita and his brother Lakshmana. Surpanaka takes a fancy to him and says she wishes to marry him. He shuns her, teases her, rejects her, disfiguring her in the process. Since she is the sister of a powerful king, however, she flees to her brother, pleads her cause and calls for revenge. Sita’s kidnapping and the war for her rescue ensue.

She conveniently disappears from the story thereafter, but I like to think of what became of her if in fact she did not dive into the sea, but continued on. In this story I have her do so, taking the role of half-willing caretaker to Sita in her exile, seeing the situation both in sympathy to her brother the King, and to Sita as fellow victim of men.

The story is also an exercise in creating fictional anthropology, after the inspiration of my favorite author Ursula Kroeber LeGuin. I have built on the three different cultures basic to the Ramayana: the Aryans of Rama’s royal court, the demon Rakshasas of Lanka (Sri Lanka today), and the mythical monkey people called Venire. Conveniently in the epic they can all understand each other’s language.

Of course all three peoples must have their own myths and exaggerations about each other, not to mention unkind stereotypes. And all have their different ideals of physical beauty, different sexual mores and behavioral expectations. These I can see as a central issue in the Ramayana.

What if the encounter between Surpanaka and Rama in the forest was a great cultural misunderstanding? What if among her people it was expected that a young woman coming of age was to ritually choose her first lover and he was to consider it a great honor to be so chosen? And what if among Rama’s people it was considered promiscuity for any woman to proposition a man, and for any married man to accept a proposition?

And so the story unfolds from Surpanaka’s eyes, as observed from behind her mask. From the judgment of another culture’s rules Ravana, Rama and Sita seem both heroes and fools. Ravana is blinded by love but true to his nobility and dies for it. Rama is heroic enough in his quest for Sita but easily swayed by political winds and thus not at all loyal to or worthy of Sita. Sita is utterly true to her own high ideal of chastity but blinded by her ideal of Rama and ultimately unable to take control of her own life in different circumstance in any way save to end it.

In this version of the Surpanaka story I have given her a life mate. In a more recent version I decided this happier ending was not particularly necessary, and I leave her to be just the Song Weaver of Lanka, sister to the King. Her song is the song of Sarpakenoko’s Revenge. The price of the revenge she now knows, is the loss of the person who she realizes was her sister.

—Barbara Benary
Chapter 1: Firstlove

I take off my mask. I salute you with my pen. Meet the Princess SP, for so you know me by my title as a Satri. But we are without masks now. Know me as my closest kin know me, by my given name Surpanaka. I have come to tell you, to sing to you in words, of how I once had, and lost, two brothers and a sister, a nose and two ears. I sing to you of how I came to be known as the Mask Princess.

I blame it all on Firstlove, that Spirit Being that so permeates the imagination of our young folk, fills our poetry and our learning and the empty, curious minds of children long before their eleventh or thirteenth primes. We are romantics, we Lankans, romantics from the lowest born Suder to the highest born Satri; even our royalty, even our princesses. Especially our princesses.

The mainland dwellers, I have heard tell, think of us as warlike people, as thoughtless destroyers and takers. Why else, they say, would we cast out our young men and young women at their seventeenth prime, cast them out to survive in the seaside forests, to roam in lawless packs disturbing the peaceful seekers of solitude and the harmless troops of nomads? I have tried to explain to those few foreigners who care to listen that our Forester youths are scarcely outcasts. Most of them cannot wait to be old enough to be allowed to go, to test their strength and wits and learn survival, to have the first and possibly greatest adventures of their lives. It is not the spirit of cruelty that drives them as they wait with eyes full of anticipation and longing, searching for the first sight of the boats that will take them westward. It is I think the romanticism that is so strong a part of Lankan character. Though there are those who might argue that romanticism carries within it the very seeds of cruelty and treachery.

In my seventeenth prime I too became one of those wanderers, joining my age mates in their journey to the mainland. As I am a princess, no one expected that I would suffer the deliberate deprivations or have much need to learn the skills of fighting and defending that would be crucial to the other youths. My companions would be returning home at their nineteenth prime to serve as Guardians, the armor and strength of Lanka. Queens and princesses, on the other hand, rarely have need to do battle, though we and all Satri women carry the personal dagger of self-defense bestowed upon us by our mothers at our eleventh prime.

No, I joined my age mates in the forests that year for adventure. And I did not go entirely alone. Two sturdy and trusted warriors accompanied me as my guards, keeping their distance but not too far, so that I might if I wished have at least the illusion of independence. They were familiar with my sharp tongue and kept respectfully away when I asked. But it would not do to leave the king’s only sister entirely to her own devices. They were older fellows, and I rather liked them even as I bossed them around. But as youth will, I spent much of my time in the chosen company of one or another group of mostly male young folk, exploring and wandering and largely ignoring my discrete royal escort.

This of course was as my older brothers wished it. Firstlove had not yet come to me, and
was less likely to in the protected surroundings of the Lankan court. The Forest Years are often the time for seeking one’s Firstlove, and although no one explicitly said so, my brothers rather assumed that I would find someone or other among the spirited Lankan youths, and would return feeling the more worldly wise for the experience.

Ah, Firstlove! I knew enough about that Spirit Being to know that he hides all the more if one seeks him too ardently. And so through many months of adventure I did my best to keep him from my conscious mind. I opened my eyes instead to all that was new: the forests, the creatures, the sea and the crossing to the mainland, learning to find one’s own food in the wilds, learning to hunt and stalk both game animals and humans, who might one day be potential foes.

I was fortunate to have among my companions one of my closest childhood friends, my cousin IJ. Even though he was a year older than me and a boy, our friendship had survived the change into our halfway years. Having already weathered his first Forest Year, IJ rightfully could, and did, lord it over me in matters of newly acquired skills. He was master and guide as well as old friend. But now that he was at ease with himself in the wilderness, adventure and mischief seemed foremost on my cousin’s mind.

IJ favorite sport at the time I joined him was hunting for signs of the mainland peoples. He would take me to where he had found a huge rock covered with strange inscriptions: a Vanara book-stone, so he told me. And he also took me to numerous sites of Arnaya hermitages. They all seemed vine-choked and abandoned when we got to them. IJ explained that this was because we young Lankans had a fearful reputation among the Arnaya hermits, and they usually decamped as soon as they learned any of us were in the area. Thus I never saw a one of them when I was with IJ. More often we would see the face of a wild Vanara, which would melt away into the jungle seconds after we spotted it. IJ talked often of trapping one of them; he and his friends had done so a number of times. But I could not see the point of his silly sport, of overpowering and teasing the poor creature and letting it go again. I reminded him that there were a scattering of tame Vanaras living perfectly civilized lives in our very own court, respected servants of my brother the king. One of them was even the king’s physician. We had all seen them before, so why bother them?

I did not always wander with IJ or even with the group. Now and then I would take and afternoon to explore all on my own. This was great fun for me, even though I knew my knights lurked somewhere in the bushes behind me. I even delighted in making difficult climbs up rock walls and hopping across slippery rocks in streams, knowing the older and larger men would have to struggle to keep up with me. Later in camp they would complain of their big sore feet and I would tease them, all in good nature.

It was on one of these solitary adventures that I came upon my first Arnaya hermitage that was inhabited. Like any good hunter I at once crouched down behind some cover and watched them in silence. I was a good distance away and could not see their features too closely. There seemed to be two of them, a man and a woman. The man was bare-chested, and appeared to spend most of his time squatting on the ground chipping flint for arrowheads with his knife. He was built rather tall and lean, it seemed, and was
fairer of skin than most Lankans. I couldn’t see his eyes clearly, but I assumed they would be narrow and slanted. “Slanties” is what my friends tended to call these people. They were all like that, they said. I had never seen one before.

The woman wore a veil that concealed her hair and her face, as well as that long twisted cloth with which Arnaya women manage to conceal most of their body save their arms when they are working. This woman worked a lot, doing nearly all the labor involved in making what I assumed was their dinner. She must be a servant or a slave of the man, I figured. There was no sign of intimacy between them. I wondered that her veil did not get in her way or catch fire as she worked. I couldn’t imagine the purpose of her wearing it. If she lived with that man he must know perfectly well what she looked like anyway. And who else was there in this wilderness to look upon her? Surely she did not know I was there.

It would be fun, I thought, to sneak up on them and steal something—a pot maybe, or an arrow—to bring back and show IJ. But it would be risky with the slanty man around grinding his arrows. And besides, my two guards had caught up with me now and were waiting in silence behind me. I knew they wouldn’t let me go. Not this time.

I kept my find a secret from IJ and the others. But how the slanties intrigued me. I returned day after day to observe them. There were three of them, I discovered on the second visit. There was another male, about the same size and age as the first one. I could tell them apart from a distance because the newer man was even paler than his brother and his hair, tied back with string, was lighter colored. Brown, it seemed to me, like Vanara hair. The men, one or both of them, seemed to spend a good deal of their time away from the hut hunting. The servant woman rarely seemed to go anywhere but inside and out as far as the fire. Once in a while the men must have taken her somewhere for exercise because one day when I knew the men to be away I sneaked a look inside and she was gone.

Arnay language, I had been told, is fairly much like our own. I was terribly curious to talk to one of them, and I rather hoped I would find the woman home. But as fate was to have it, it was one of the men I first saw alone. The fairer one. I had been waiting on the far bank of the stream that ran near their hut, hunting for the hunter. I had figured out that this was the path they often took. The arrow-maker was back there with the cook that day. I supposed they were just waiting for the hunter to come back with dinner on his back. And he did. That was when I first saw him up close. Not a dozen yards from me he paused by the stream crossing, lay down the slain monkey he had carried, and drank water from his cupped hands.

And he was Firstlove.

Truly Firstlove transfigures men and women. The pale skin in the evening sun seemed to me golden; the brown hair shone with warm glints of fire. I could not see his eyes for more than a second when he turned his head to the side, but they were gray it seemed, and glowing. They slanted, yes, but it matched the bold lines of his nose and brow to perfection. His beard was cut short and trim, accenting the line of his jaw. All was narrow, pointed, utterly unlike Lankan features, and yet strong and manly. His grace as
he arose and shouldered his catch was that of a deer. Returning home he thought himself no doubt a hunter. But he was being hunted in turn, from that moment on.

I had to explain to my two shadows. A princess must be safeguarded, but a woman’s right to privacy in love is inviolate. I meant to have him, and my two loyal ones must keep properly out of the way. So I informed them. And so, after some fond protective arguing, did my two knights agree. I would seek him again by the river the next evening, and they would situate themselves at an appropriate distance until I returned.

He was not to be an easy catch. The following evening he returned with the second man beside him. I had no interest in the second man and did not wish him to see me, so I stayed out of sight and did nothing. And the next day it rained. And the next day. It was four evenings later before I was able to confront my Firstlove alone.

I remember the first word I spoke to him as I stepped out of the shadow of a great jackwood tree, making him startle and leap like a deer. “Hunter” I spoke. And the man leapt so violently that he tripped over the leg of a real deer, the slain deer he had put down on the path beside him when he knelt to drink. The moment of gracelessness was less than a half second, then he again caught his balance and stood there, frozen and poised, not a dozen paces from me. His wary, slanty eyes quickly scanned the underbrush around me. Then seeing I was alone and smiling at him he relaxed just a little bit, just enough for a bit of a smile to creep around the edge of his own mouth, as if to acknowledge that one misstep.

“Don’t be frightened of me, hunter,” I said.

“Who are you?” His voice rang, warm and pleasantly resonant. I had not heard him speak before, and at the sound I loved him all the more.

“I am SP, Princess of Lanka,” I replied. “Tell me your name. You don’t look like a hermit to me. I had always thought hermits were old and helpless.”

“I am Rama,” my love replied, again smiling pleasantly. “A prince in title, but without a kingdom, I am afraid. My little house and these forests are all I have. But they are more than enough.” His accent was not that difficult, it seemed. I could understand his speech quite clearly, and I assumed he understand me just as well.

“Rama,” I repeated. “Prince with a forest for his kingdom and only two subjects. I have been watching you for some days, Rama. Did you know that?”

“You must have been silent as a panther then, my lady. I never caught sight of you, nor did my brother. Why do you follow us, and seek us out? What service may we do for you?”

I liked the way he spoke too. Certainly his speech had the graciousness of a prince, if indeed he was not one. And now that he had asked, it was time for me to speak the words, the ritual words of welcoming Firstlove, words that one may speak only once in one’s life.
“The Spirit Being is in you,
turning you to gold.
I seek you with my heart, Firstlove.”

And he should have then replied:

“Am I so honored to be vessel for that Spirit
To be joined with the joining of our hands?”

But Rama never said those words. He stared at me, silent and puzzled. It occurred to me
that he didn’t understand. Why would he understand. He was not a Lankan; perhaps
among his people there was no Song of Firstlove and he had no way of recognizing the
words. “Do you not know Firstlove?” I asked gently.

“Love?” he echoed. That word at least was in his vocabulary. He smiled then and shook
his head as if astonished, or perhaps embarrassed. “I—I have a wife, you know.”

“You do?”

“If you have seen my house, then you have seen her.” That servant woman! I was
astonished in turn. And then I laughed abruptly to think that the mummified slave in
the little clearing might be his wife, might be a princess!

“That doesn’t matter,” I explained. “It is not your Firstlove I speak of, but mine.”

“I don’t understand you,” he replied frankly.

“In Lanka, Firstlove is a special thing. And to be a firstlover is an honor. You don’t have
to be virgin to be a firstlover. And it doesn’t matter if you are married; it is no shame to
your wife.” I spoke as simply and plainly as I could. How could he not understand me?
In fact I think he did understand me, for he fell silent and simply stared at me.

Well, I could not wait for him to say the ritual words. He did not know them. And
besides, the words are just the beginning. Action speaks for itself, and Firstlove speaks
in actions that all born human may understand. Action speaks for itself, and Firstlove speaks
in actions that all born human may understand. I came close, reached up to my shoulder
and unfastened my tunic, pulling it slowly down and to the side, so that he might see
that Lankan women are as desirable as
any of his own kind. I reached out my two hands
to his, the first gesture of the ritual. And what man alive does not know that gesture?

Slowly, cautious as a wild thing, he took one step toward me. Glancing down at his
lower garments I could see the evidence of his desire, as human as any man’s. Yes,
Firstlove is indeed a Being transcending all languages.

“Princess...” he began in a low voice—and one hand reached out toward mine.
—And then the call, clear and bold, came from just across the stream. “Rama!”

We whirled, the two of us this time. And in a second the voice materialized itself on the
far bank of the stream. It was the black-haired brother, the arrow-maker.

“So there you are!” exclaimed the intruder, standing there staring frankly at us, his arms
crossed around his chest, a broad grin on his face. “Even here in the wilderness the
women come searching for you to get their hands on you!”

“Lakshmana. This is a woman of the Rakshasas. Her name is—” he faltered a second. “Espay,” he then hazarded, glancing nervously in my direction.

I had been startled, but now I became aware of the brother’s dark eyes staring at me. At once I pulled my tunic up, fought with the tie angrily. What right had he to intrude at such a time? Any Lankan over the age of three who walked in upon such a scene would have the common sense and courtesy to apologize and back away at once.

Ah, but he was an Arnaya, a barbarian. What did he know. “She was looking for—for a husband,” explained Rama. “I told her that I am married, of course. I was trying to make her understand.”

“Oh yes, lady, he is certainly married,” said the arrow-maker.

“But of course my brother Lakshmana here is a single man,” added my would-be Firstlove as he knelt and lifted the deer carcass to his shoulder. “You can ask him. It might do him good to make your acquaintance.”

I saw at once that Rama was retreating, hoping to disengage himself in every way from our brief intimacy. At his word, the smug Lakshmana replied, “Well now, let’s see.” And he stepped the two short steps across that little stream and stood by his brother’s side, staring down at me critically.

“Her face is round as a chipmunk. Don’t care for that. But the tits looked pretty nice. Wouldn’t mind another look at them.”

I took a few quick steps back. “Rama, tell your brother I have no interest in him.”

“No, it’s you she’s after!” Lakshmana laughed. “And those manly shoulders of yours. Just wait until Sita hears about this!”

Rama at once whirled on his brother. “Sita will never hear of this!” It was a voice of command. “Come now. We’re leaving.”

“But what about her?” Rama was already across the stream and striding away toward home. “She might follow us,” called out Lakshmana, one foot in the stream.

“Then get rid of her,” he cried, already out of sight.

Lakshmana turned then in midstream. He spoke but a single word to me. It is not a common Lankan word, but a foreign word that had somehow migrated from the mainland to our island in recent years. All the halfway years boys and girls know its meaning full well. “Whore,” was what he said.

So appalled was I by the both of them that I wasted the precious second that followed groping in my mind for a proper retort, never thinking to fear or to defend myself. And so fast did the warrior move that I never saw the sword coming.
Chapter 2: The Garden

That is how I came to be the Mask Princess, and how I came to make my home in a
garden. It is a large garden, a park in fact, full of lush tropical trees, the underbrush all
cleared, the walkways planted all with flowers, yet the trees alive with the calling of
birds, insects and monkeys. Like the Little Palace which it adjoins, the garden is divided
into a number of rooms by walls, the smallest of which is right outside the suite of
rooms which are my private domain. The next walled room leads to the public entrance
on the street, and the one beyond that opens into a vast space where men might ride and
race their horses amidst the pleasant foliage, yet still within the confines and privacy of
the royal grounds.

I had known this garden since childhood, for though my mother raised me and my
brother VB in the main palace on the hill above, with its grand view of the sea, we often
came here to spend time away from the bustle of the court with other royal women of
the family. It was always a special place to me, and I was thankful when my brother RV,
who was then king, suggested that I take up quarters there during my recovery.

The recovery was remarkable, according to the court surgeons. In fact it was remarkable
that I had survived the passage to Lanka at all. I had lost a great deal of blood and it was
two days before my cousin IJ and his companions had come across us, another two
before a they could get me to the shore, commandeer a boat and make the passage. Of
the two loyal big footed knights that had run to my rescue upon hearing my screams,
only one was found, and the poor fellow was so weak from his wounds that he died
before setting foot on the boat. Nor was his partner to ever see Lanka again. Either
Lakshmana or Rama had dispatched that man by the side of the stream, and left my
rescuer for dead by his side. I had staggered off blindly into the brush and apparently
lost consciousness. The one man revived hours later and began the heroic task of
dragging me back in the direction of our camp, an effort that would cost him his life.

Throughout those half-conscious days of pain and terror I never saw a thing; the sword
cuts had so swollen my face and so much blood had run into my eyes that I thought I
would be blind forever. My cousin, who was the only one to see me in at condition—and
he quickly hid my face from all other eyes—though me blinded too. But as it turned out,
the X that had been slashed across my face fell short of putting out my eyes. One side of
my brow and one cheek were deeply gouged and needed extensive stitching; one lid
had been badly scratched, though not cut through. The eyes themselves would see. I
remember the soft, deep voice through my semiconscious haze telling me that. It was
not until the poultices
and bandages were removed that light seared into me, probably
many days later, as the practiced hands carefully parted my lids. It hurt much the first
time, but soon after I could do it myself for a brief second, and came to know the dark,
dark face with its startling shock of white hair that went along with the Vanara
surgeon's familiar, comforting voice. I think he must have given me some fairly strong
drugs to see me through my pain. They made me see things with my eyes closed. And
worse, there was a moment when I thought my eyes open and I saw a second dark face,
this one black-haired, hovering behind the first. I can remember still that terror of being
unable to tell if the vision was within me or without.

When the pain and hallucinations receded and light and clarity of mind returned to me once more, I was given a frank inventory of my losses. Despite infection, the wounds were beginning to heal. There would be scars, but they would most likely be minimal if not invisible after some years. My ears were gone, the outer part of them which aids the gathering of sound but is not essential to hearing. I would hear, as I already heard. Large chunks of hair had gone with the ears, but would re-grow save in a few patches where the scalp had been shorn as well. A hair piece or head cloth would make those injuries invisible to the world for as long as necessary. Perhaps most painful of the injuries was the loss of the last joint of two fingers on my left hand. I must have instinctively lifted my hands to shield my face from my attacker. I liked to think that perhaps those fingers had borne the force of the cut and saved my eyes.

But the one thing that could not be cosmetically shielded or repaired was the tip of my nose—only the fleshy part, for the butcher had not clipped the nasal ridge at all. But noses do not regenerate. The flesh can be closed, and it had been. But the shape would never be the same. The surgeon did not say so plainly, but it was obvious: I would never have a normal human visage, only a grim, distorted caricature of a face.

It was the king himself who brought me my first mask, sewn on his instruction by the finest seamstress who served the royal women. It was of soft gray fabric, embroidered in red around the edges and eye-holes. He did not say a word but put it into my hands, tactfully. I wept quietly and kissed his hand. Later, after seeing me wear it, other members of the court brought me gift masks, one more exotic than the next as they outdid each other in the extravagance of their condolence gifts. I accepted them all, just as a girl at the celebration of her eleventh prime accepts the gifts of clothing that mark her as no longer a child but a woman. The gifts acknowledged my new status as a freak, but they were also affirmations of affection and support, lovingly presented.

I did not see the ladies of the royal household and the court until after the bandages came off and the first gift mask had modestly replaced them. In fact I saw no one at all during those first weeks except my brothers. RV came as often as he could, which was not as often as he would have liked, but he was king and frequently occupied. KK was also there a lot, for his princely assignment of training the young Guardian troops left him with leisure hours in this time of peace. KK was a great fighter, not because he had a fighter’s soul, but because he did not get along with people very well. He preferred to be left to himself, to spend long periods of time in meditation or simply sleeping. Most folks were thankful for that, for with his querulous disposition and huge size, he was capable of wrecking as much havoc among civilians as among an enemy. But KK never had quarreled with me, and rarely with his brother the king. I was thankful for his visits. He liked to read me poetry when he came, poetry that he wrote himself after his meditations, wrote and then hid away. I don’t think even RV knew that our fearsome warrior brother played so gently with words.

As for my third brother VB, I have no memory of him visiting me at all, unless he did so when I was unconscious or asleep.
I don’t know how much I told RV during those bedside visits, those many times he sat by my side with my bandaged hand in his lap. I must have told him all that had happened that I could remember, and he in turn must have thoroughly quizzed IJ and the other youths with whom I had last shared a camp. I learned that they had all been ordered home to Lanka following the furor of my own homecoming. They had been questioned, then sent back in the company of a sizeable group of more experienced Guardians to seek out the Arnaya enemy. They would not have an easy time of it. I had kept the location of the hermitage secret from all of them, and now I could barely remember how to get there myself. By the time the searchers made sense of my directions it was likely that the Arnay would have moved on. They did as a rule disappear when they knew Lankan youths were in the vicinity. And after slaying my own guards they would have been wise to find another, safer corner of the forest.

I don’t think I ever discussed with RV what I hoped he would do when he found them. Lankan honor is an understood thing. So is Lankan justice. They had slain two of our warriors, had dishonored and nearly killed the king’s only sister, future mother of the heirs to the throne. They must, of course, die.

From time to time when I saw RV I would ask him if he had any news from the mainland. And at last one day, not long after I had begun seeing people again, receiving those gaudy but sad little gift masks, he told me: “The news is good. I’ll be going across to take care of the business myself tomorrow.”

Remembering the bloody deaths of my two knights whom I had never seen in combat but assumed to be more than competent, I couldn’t help throwing out a word of warning. “Take KK with you. Wake him up and drag him if you have to. There are two of them.”

RV grinned and laughed. “Never fear, little sister. The throne of Lanka will not be in danger.”

And the throne was apparently not in danger at all, at least not then, because six days later I received news of the king’s victorious return. Along with the message came his personal note to me, which was short and to the point: “The crime has been avenged,” it read. A feeling of relief filled me. Mostly I was glad that my brother had accomplished his deed without suffering injury. And in my Lankan heart I was glad to know that the ones who did me such outrage no longer walked the earth. I searched that heart for any trace of regret, trying once more to conjure up the image of the tall, slim man with golden skin. I could still picture him, but by no stretch of imagination could I recall the light of Firstlove glowing from the picture. The Spirit Being had left my memory entirely, and I was glad of that. Instead I remembered the slain deer at the hunter’s feet, and imagined the man lying where the deer lay, limp but unflawed with only a single patch of red where the arrow shaft protruded. There was no feeling of regret in that. My only regret was my great error in imagining the Spirit Being had been inside that body in the first place. If only I had not seen Firstlove but only a stranger; if only I had stayed behind the jackwood tree in the shelter of the brush and then returned to tell my adventure to my cousin and his friends.
And that is why I ever after have borne such a grudge against Firstlove.

It was two days later that the king came down to the Little Palace to see me in person. I looked forward to hearing the details of his deed. “They are dead, aren’t they?” I asked him at once just to reassure myself.

“No one’s dead. in fact I trust that they alive and well, wherever they are. They’ll live and suffer.”

“What? You didn’t slay them?” I cried out incredulously.

“Death only comes once. Those were princes you know, and death in combat would be an honor to them; I see no point in granting them that honor after their dishonorable treatment of my sister.”

“Then what on earth did you do to them?”

The king grinned in contentment as he explained. “I decided to steal from them what I believe is the thing they value most in the world. This Prince Rama obviously doesn’t place much value on his kingdom. I have learned from my spies among the Vanara that he gave up his title to the throne of Ayodhya—that’s an Arnaya city way inland and north of here. He lost out in some sticky palace intrigue. His father sent him into exile, then died. A younger brother is now king in his place but he makes no effort to reclaim his rights. They do that, you know. It’s their religion to give up things, material things. Renunciation brings them great merit, or so they think. That’s why so many of them become hermits in the forest. But I don’t think Rama counted on renouncing his wife. After all, he dragged her out into the wilderness to keep him company and has kept her there in rags for thirteen years. So I reckoned the best way to hurt him would be to take her.”

“Take her? Did you cut up her face?”

“Oh of course not. Revenge was in order, but I’m not about to imitate barbarian habits. No, she’s untouched, physically. And perfectly well and safe. Now if Rama wants her back, he’ll have to pay us a little personal visit, which I rather doubt he’ll do. He’s an exile, after all, without any army, and I doubt his brother the king will want to give him one. He’ll spend years searching the world for her, and if indeed he figures out where she is, he’ll be helpless to do anything about it. Princes don’t like to be helpless.”

For a moment I took this in, searched the logic of his unlikely plan for flaws. “But suppose she doesn’t mean all that much to him? Suppose he just gives up after a while and takes another wife?” I couldn’t help but consider that, thinking how he had forced her to live the life of a slave, and remembering how he had looked upon me for that brief second before Lakshmana had intruded.

“The Arnay don’t do that,” countered my brother, who had always seemed to know more about the world than anyone else I knew. “They’re strictly monogamous. If they’re widowed they go to their graves widowers. Even the royalty don’t keep mistresses—especially the royalty; they have to be ethical models for their subjects. Their penalties for violating chastity are barbaric, so I’m told.”
I wished he had told me that sooner.

I tried to console myself with the idea that Rama must now go to his grave without ever touching another woman. No, it would have been much better if RV had simply sent him to his grave. Now. Oh well, there was little point in chastising the king, nor pointing out to this brother who had always been very clever but not always practical, that he had been clever but impractical once more.

“Where is she?” I asked

“Here. A guest of the Royal House of Lanka.”

“Not a happy guest, I imagine. Is she in prison?”

“Heavens no. It is not my intent to punish her. After all, it’s scarcely her fault that she comes of a barbaric people. She probably never had any choice about who she married anyway. And since she’s never laid eyes on you, I’m sure she couldn’t be held responsible for ordering the men to attack you. You wouldn’t wish her punished, would you?”

“Of course not. No Lankan takes revenge upon the innocent.”

“I’m happy to hear you say that. I was hoping you would feel merciful and take pity on her. I’m a bit worried that she hasn’t eaten anything since she came here. Maybe our food is too strange for her, but I think it’s purposeful. She probably thinks we’ll do hideous things to her and is too frightened to eat, or wishes herself dead. If you could take her under your wing, so to speak, comfort her fears, that would help a great deal. I was thinking of bringing her here to the Little Palace, if you don’t mind.”

I hesitated, but couldn’t think of a good reason to object. After all, I was more or less in exile, and not ready to face the world beyond my intimate acquaintances. In fact I was not sure what to do with my time.

“What about my mask?” I asked finally.

“Sita will probably imagine that all Lankan princesses wear masks, until you tell her otherwise. I’m sure she’ll never connect you to whatever her men folk told her about their encounter with us.”

That much did seem probable. I gave my assent to my brother’s plan. Sita would be brought to the Little Palace and to my quarters the next morning. And I would be her hostess and try to keep her from starving herself.

“And what then?” I asked my brother, bothered a bit by the strange concern he seemed to have for his captive. “What do you intend to do with her?”

And then the King of Lanka gave me the most unlikely answer. “Marry her,” he said.

Chapter 3: The Ward

The day I met Sita I was wearing my green and silver mask. It was given to be by my former sister-in-law MD. The king had recently divorced her, but still she and I had
remained friends. I thought her taste a bit crude: the mask was like a fortress, all the ornate metal at the edges, the spirals and curls reaching out from the corners of the eyes halfway around the sides of my head. It had looked formidable in her mirror when she showed me. (I had removed all the mirrors from my own quarters.) It was the kind of mask that might frighten one if one came upon it unexpectedly in the dark. But perhaps somewhere underneath I did mean to frighten Sita a little, for I was wary and uncertain of her myself.

They had brought her to the Little Palace the day before, but she had refused to go indoors and had spent the night sleeping on the ground under a tamarind tree. Apparently she had been sleeping under various trees for the entire time she had been captive, for though she seemed weak, no one had been able to convince her to go indoors and be comfortable. And RV had forbidden the use of force. I learned all of this from the Triji, the servant maid who had been assigned to Sita and had accompanied her to her new quarters.

Triji cannot speak; no one knows why. The palace doctors have all examined her and agreed that there is nothing physically wrong with either her vocal cords or her hearing. She appeared out of nowhere at the palace steps as an eight year old child. My mother took the child under her wing, and together they invented the sign language with which she communicates. No one could determine her background, nor, once she had learned to make herself known to us, was she willing to divulge a thing. It was as if her entire history and whatever calamity had torn her from it had been neatly erased. She might or might not have been born to servitude, but nevertheless she eventually was given a position in my mother’s service and remained there, seemingly content, until the day of my mother’s death, after which she attached herself to me. Triji is several years my elder, and was my playmate through many years of childhood. Thus I am more familiar than anyone with her sign language and we can converse silently but fluently.

Triji seemed both frightened and frustrated by her new charge. The Aryan woman made no attempt to talk to her and had rejected her every attempt at friendship, her offerings of food, of blankets, of shelter. How was she to serve a princess who would accept nothing but water? And if she should die, the king would certainly blame her for negligence.

I assured Triji that our guest would now be my responsibility, and any ill that befell her was certainly the king’s own fault for bringing her here, not her own, and I would most certainly tell him so myself if need be. Reassured somewhat, Triji directed me out to the garden, the second walled garden beyond the entrance to my rooms where the tree grew under which Sita had decided to live. She trailed a dozen steps behind me as I approached the tree and the shapeless lump of rags lying beneath it. The woman either slept or pretended to sleep.

“Sita?” I addressed her quietly but formally. “Welcome to my home. We call it the Little Palace, and you are now my guest.”

At first there was no response. Then the pile of rags stirred, a veiled head emerged, saw me, then she startled up to a crouching position. I was glad I had worn MD’s frightful
mask. At least it had forced a reaction from her.

“I don’t know what people have told you about Lankans, but be assured that we of the royal family of Lanka are not in the habit of devouring our visitors,” I continued since she made no sound. “In fact we try to feed them and make them comfortable, if they will allow it. But if you prefer you may starve yourself; I shan’t force you. It’s a pity, though. I don’t expect you enjoy captivity, but you are passing up one of the better things about it. My cook is excellent, and I do like company at dinner. Triji, would you mind making a little visit to the kitchen and seeing what’s on the menu?”

At the cue, and with some visible relief, my old friend fled back to the palace, leaving me alone with my charge. Quite deliberately I sat down a few steps away from her, arranged my skirts over my knees. I was wearing the formal, long tunic that is the official royal dress. It was of green silk, matching the mask, and it had plenty of flashy silver thread in it. I wanted Sita to know that she was in royal company. And sure enough, as soon as Triji was out of sight the silent Sita spoke—a thick accent but quite intelligible.

“Who are you?”

And so I told her. “Princess Espey,” she repeated, thinking as Rama had thought that it was a single name. “Are you the daughter of—or the sister of—” She faltered as if not wanting to put a name to my august brother, her kidnapper, whom she must surely hate as deeply as I hated her husband. I decided to avoid saying either of their names.

“His sister,” I answered. “And I am here to help you.”

“I thank you. But I do not need help. I will be rescued, if I live.”

I was impressed by the arrogance of those words, coming from one so helpless and abject. Arrogance or courage; it could be either. But I was determined to get the upper hand. I replied: “Then I strongly suggest that you make every effort to live. Your.. rescuer should be most disappointed if he went to great lengths to save you and found you had meanwhile died by your own hand or starved yourself needlessly.”

She stared at me distrustfully.

“Why?” she challenged. “Why should you care?”

“I don’t know you well enough yet to say if I do care. But you are a princess, even though you are of another race.”

I left that dangling, to see what she would make of it. After a long moment she spoke. “Who prepares your food?”

“A cook who has served our family for years.”

“Is he Kshatriya? Or Brahmin, maybe?”

Now it was my turn to be puzzled. It hadn’t occurred to me to visit the library to find out what information there might be on Arnaya ways. Nor, in the surprise of my brother’s announced intention, had I thought to ask him for details. I knew so little
about my enemies, and was so ill equipped to deal with my prisoner. I did not recognize the words she spoke. But in context it seemed as though she were asking about social rank, so I hazard a reply. “The cook and his family are Satri. Of the same class as ourselves.” In fact I didn’t know if this was true, for the class of one’s cook is not of any importance to Lankans, so long as the food tastes good.

“Then if you wish…”

“I should be happy if you would dine in my company,” I replied graciously.

Later when the food was brought to us there under the tree, I was able to get a bit of a look at her. I could eat quite well without removing my mask, but Sita could scarcely consume nourishment through the veil, and once Triji had retreated from sight she pulled it aside. As RV had foreseen, she did not say a thing about my own facial disguise. Seeing that I kept it on she apparently accepted it as some bit of formal gear that Lankan princesses wore. With understandable suspicion she restrained herself from tasting of each and every dish until I had eaten some myself. Then, seeing I did not succumb to poison, she fell to her task. For a starving woman I thought she ate with considerable delicacy, yet she was methodical and thorough, and managed to put away a goodly quantity. The hearty Lankan fare would keep her from the grave for a while more. As to whether it would fill out the sharp-featured face, the angular, gaunt arms and shoulders I could not say. Perhaps they were her racial inheritance and incurable.

Without appearing to stare I did my best to assess her physical attributes. The mask aided me in this. I was trying to see her with the eyes of love, to see what my brother had seen. But so thoroughly had the feeling of love left me that I could not imagine very much. The image of Rama stood in the way, and everything that was visibly Aryan about either of them repelled me. I tried to imagine seeing her from the purely male viewpoint, but even then it was difficult to find beauty even in those universal feminine points, for hers were so distinctly unlike the Lankan ideal. Her hair was a soft, light brown: the sands of a riverbank rather than the strong black of night. Her eyes were dark enough, but narrow and slanted, of course. Her nose—ah, even I who had none at all did not envy such a nose!—was all thin and pointy, matching the pointy but somewhat receding chin below her thin lips. Her breasts and hips were hidden enough in her wraparound that they had to be imagined, and her skin—the tiny amount of it that she ever showed—was rather pale, a bit unhealthy looking I thought, but probably the natural result of keeping most of her body under wraps most of the time. The only attractive thing I could see about her was that she did have a graceful way of moving, though in the course of just sitting and eating she didn’t move very much.

I decided I could not blame this odd choice of my brother’s on Firstlove; his was long past. Nor in fact was this one of his Changing Prime years, those times in mid life when it is said a man is most vulnerable to his fate. It came to me that this must be the work of Madlove. Madlove is known as a Spirit Being who attacks the young far more often than the mature, most of whom survive his ravages. But when he finds a weakness or marks a victim among grown men and women, he is known to be quite deadly. I would
have to speak to RV about his intentions with her, and the sooner the better.

Later that day I set about providing Sita with basic comforts to enhance her chosen camp. A screened area was provided, and a sanitation jug and a goodly sized water jug for bathing. (I hoped Arnaya knew what those two very different vessels were for.) Then I had a small, open tent erected a few paces from the tree trunk, and stocked it with several pillows and light-weight blankets so that if the tree failed to protect her sufficiently from sun or showers she could remove herself to that shelter, though I reminded her that a private place was always available to her in the palace itself. Meanwhile the servants would come with food and water and to attend to the facilities twice daily, but other than that she would be left under her tree in peace. She could ask what she wished of them, and she could send for me when she wanted me, or better yet come to my rooms, which I pointed out. When I finally made to leave, my unwilling guest suddenly seemed reluctant to see me go.

“And you will come back too, won’t you? I much prefer your company to being with that strange servant woman. She won’t talk to me; she just waves her hands like a monkey. And the women in that other place—” (She gestured vaguely; I supposed she meant the Great Palace or wherever she had first been sequestered)—“They stared at me as if, as if I were in a zoo! And they talked about me, not to me, just as if I wasn’t there.”

I assured her I would be back the next morning, and to my knowledge she was to reside here free from the insults of those women, whoever they were. I had taken only two steps back toward the palace when I was recalled again in a sharp whisper. “Espey!” I turned. Sita hesitated as though not liking to acknowledge the fear that showed plainly on her narrow face. “He will come again, won’t he?”

I was caught, not knowing whether she meant her husband or the king, and not wishing to have to speak the name of either. “I expect my brother will want to know how you are doing,” I hazarded.

“He will come. I know it. He said so himself. Please, if you are a princess—you understand then—”

I didn’t, and told her so.

“I can’t be alone with him. It would be... unspeakable. Please, you must promise to be with me when he comes. Make him promise to allow that, I ask of you as—as a sister.”

I thought about that. Aside from our royal status I could think of nothing sisterly between us at all. But I could empathize with her fear, the fear of a lone, unarmed woman before a man of power who desired her against her will. Lankan men don’t do such things, mind you, but how was she to know that, given the proven ferocity of her own men? And although I believed my brother honorable unto death, I was nevertheless concerned because of that lurking presence of the spirit of Madlove. I decided she was quite right; my presence was needed: to protect him as much as her. I promised.

As I later learned by talking with each of them privately, Sita’s kidnapping had been
very frightening for her, though when it came right down to it, no harm had been done
her at all. RV’s hunters had stalked her, then he too had observed her much as I had
from a distance. For the life of me I could not understand why he took her so secretly,
but be that as it may he did. He decided to take possession of her personally rather than
subjecting her to the handling of his able warriors. He had dissembled, throwing a cloak
about himself and coming empty handed to her door and asking in a dry voice for
water. She had given him water, he had thanked her put down the bowl, picked her up
and simply walked away with her—taking care to pinion her arms in case she carried a
personal dagger as Lankan Satri women do. Once in the protection of the bushes, he
had had the warriors truss her up like a deer and had conveyed her thus through the
miles of jungle to the camps, then to the shore and the ship. In all that time no one had
harmed her or even laid hand to her, save for those few brief seconds when RV himself
searched her body for the absent dagger. Sita herself took this simple military
precaution as a prelude to rape, and although no man had touched her since save to tie
or untie, blindfold or unblindfold her, it was clear that she would never forgive that
indignity till the day she died. The horrors of that trip must have loomed in her mind as
greatly as my own assault and near death did in mine. I wanted to laugh when she
spoke of it, to rip off my mask and show her, tell her how little she knew of suffering
indeed! But I refrained. I felt that my secret was essential to whatever power I had over
her.

As for my brother, he seemed to think that the kidnapping had been a rather simple
thing and that the few physical discomforts of travel that Sita had undergone were
nothing that a Lankan boy or girl in their Forest Years would not write off as a simple
day’s adventure. He had not abused her, nor meant to. Nor did he plan to in the future.
He wished to have her treated royally. Ah, how the knife would twist in Rama’s heart if
and when he came to know that his wife now preferred the comforts of the Palace of
Lanka, or better yet, had accepted a new king and husband!

Of course it didn’t appear that Sita was of a mind to accept any such things, and I told
him so quite plainly. “Don’t underestimate a woman’s determination,” I reminded him.

“As I well know from my recent divorce, sister, a Lankan woman’s determination can be
a fearsome thing. But these Arnaya raise their women to be slaves. This one will
change; I’m sure she will, given time.”

As to why he desired her I could not get him to say—at least not to me. But a man will
speak more freely of these things to other men, I suppose. From my brother KK I
learned that RV found her “well-built,” her features “exotic” and her strange hair color
“like a lioness.” The fact that she hated him did not daunt him; he didn’t credit her with
the character to resist the situation for long.

As I say, Madlove had gotten to him indeed.

This was quite evident when he began to pay Sita the promised—or threatened—visits.
He would come in the evening. True to his word he made no objection to my presence
at the interview; he said he would comply with anything Sita requested of him—anything but return her, that is.

Her first request was for distance. She would not let him come closer than five paces. There was, as she pointed out, always the width of an elephant between them, and I’m sure she would have preferred the actual elephant to the empty width. Despite the madness of the entire situation I thought RV handled himself with a good bit of dignity. He asked after her comfort; her answers were short and cold, barely polite, and in fact totally insolent if one considered that she was addressing a king. Without taking the least offence he told her quite plainly that he wished her hand in marriage, and that no other woman encumbered his feelings or his life at this time. She would never be forced to marry, nor to give her assent unless it was completely of her own free will.

Sita assured him she would die before giving such assent. And that furthermore she would somehow manage to take her own life if he so much as touched her again for any reason at all.

Patiently RV replied that he had every intention of honoring that request. (It had scarcely been so polite a thing as a request.) And that so long as she posed no physical threat to her own or any one else’s safety, no one man or woman would ever need to lay a finger on her. He wished her to be his wife, to learn to return his love if only in the littlest way. He pointed out that he had divorced precisely because he could not bear to live with one vengeful, unhappy woman and so he would be pleased to wait and win a loving, willing one instead. Sita told him that he was in for a long wait, and he should not expect it to happen in this their mutual lifetime.

RV did not stay long to provoke her. He bowed formally and spoke his parting words: “I thank you for hearing me out. Rest assured that my offer of love will continue tomorrow and forever. Think upon it. I will be back again tomorrow.”

This scenario was to replay itself night after night. Sometimes he spoke at length of his love, other times of his own life, his adventures and conquests. He never failed to ask after her, politely though not in much detail. Her reply was always prompt, always a firm return of hatred for love. Some evenings she reviled him thoroughly, others she was more passive, seemingly more bored or angry than fearful and indignant. But always she was moved by the encounter, and afterwards she often wept for a while.

And through this I stood aside, the chaperone, the spectator, witness to his hopeless suit, her tormented rejection and fears of its consequences. I felt my soul split in half, part of it championing my brother, part my unfortunate ward. Look, I longed to shout to her: can’t you see the honor, the dignity, the way he withstands your verbal assaults when with a sneeze he could blow you across the earth? How could you not notice the beauty of his tall, strong form?—for my brother was indeed beautiful in Lankan eyes, twice the man that Rama was. Ah, Sita, could you not at least credit him for this, thank him for his concern for your safekeeping instead of slapping him with insults like the barks of an untrained puppy?
And then a second later she would speak and I would be moved in turn by her fear. You’re mad, brother! I would think. How could you expect her to give herself to her kidnapper, to be touched by one who she did not love, who in her own eyes was repellent? See how brave she is to stand you off with words, with that invisible elephant of hers, when she knows not the depths of your passion, the impulsiveness of your decisions, or whether your royal patience will at any moment break, leaving her ravished, maimed or dead?

Thus they sucked me into their anguish, and I could help neither of them. I pitied them both.

Since the king seemed impervious to reason it was not long before I decided I must speak with the rest of the family about him. Our parents being both deceased, the closest of kin were my two other brothers KK and VB, both older than me but younger than the king. I also decided to invite MD to the meeting, for though she was out of favor she knew the king as well or better than the rest of us.

We met in library of the Little Palace, as privately as is possible in the public lives of the ruling. And we were all agreed upon one thing from the very start: that the king’s pursuit of Sita was ridiculous, or perhaps even dangerous. KK put it crudely, if concisely: “If RV wanted to have her, why didn’t he simply have her, consider her the spoils of war, do to her what was done to our sister SP and leave her there on the mainland shore? Why must he burden the court of Lanka with her?”

I rushed in to defend RV’s honor. “Well he didn’t, and I’m glad he didn’t. He’s too much of a gentleman, foolish sometimes, but too pure of mind and motive to treat any woman that way, even an enemy. What was foolish was taking her here and keeping her against her will. He should have gone right after Rama instead; Rama and his brother are the guilty ones, not Sita! Men should fight their own fights, not use women as pawns.”

“What he should have done scarcely matters,” broke in VB. “He’s done it and I haven’t had any more luck talking him out of it than you have. Frankly I don’t much care if he drives himself mad over her, but I do worry for Lanka. It’s his duty—and ours if he won’t do it—to protect Lanka. That wasn’t some stray women he took; it was a prince’s wife. True it may take the prince a long time to locate her and do something about it, but so long as he lives I think he will try to do something. We could be facing a war, maybe even an attempt at invasion. We have no history of full scale war with those people. There’s no knowing what could happen.”

My sister-in-law’s objection was of a different nature. She quite agreed with me about Madlove. “If any over-proud male is vulnerable, he is. Doesn’t he care for the reputation of the Royal House of Lanka? If SP doesn’t marry and have sons, his by that woman would be next in line to be king. I agree with KK: let him have her if he wants her. But not marriage! Imagine Lanka ruled by a half-breed, a pale skinned, slanty eyed, bony skeleton with bleached hair! How are the people to respect and follow a king like that?”
Jealousy dripped from her every word, of course, as well as xenophobia. Female children are certainly welcomed in the royal family, but it is a male who must wear the crown, preferably the sister’s son. And she, MD, whose heirs would have had second claim to the throne, had been unfortunate to have produced only three princesses and no princes up to the time of her divorce. I supposed that if I in time bore a male heir with primary claim to the succession she would probably be jealous of me as well, but in my current situation that was quite unlikely to come to pass. She looked upon me as a solid friend, no doubt loved my face for its unsightliness, considered me her ally in all things female.

Watching her queenly blustering I considered once more how unfortunate it was that RV had put her aside. She was surely a match for him, full of vitality, ready and able to assist and advise as a king’s wife should. And she was still a beauty, a Lankan beauty. I suppose it was jealousy that parted them. A happy marriage is supposed to be able to survive a love affair now and then on the side; maybe RV had too many, or maybe he had made unkind comparisons. For whatever reasons, he had eventually earned her undying anger, as strong as any undying devotion. Whatever her motives, I was quite in accord with her that RV had strange sexual taste if he found Sita’s odd physique more appealing than MD’s fully developed, lush womanhood. I also thought it odd that he found Sita’s chaste and sometimes nasty denials any more alluring than MD’s scathing and shrewish tongue, which she had sharpened to perfection upon him.

But for all our analysis of the king’s behavior and despite our agreed objection, the four of us failed to come up with any plan to dissuade RV, right his wrong, or undo his madness.

“Myself I wouldn’t mind a little war with the Arnay,” put in KK. “Never fought them before, but it’s bound to happen some time or other. Might as well put them in their place if they get out of it. As for invasion, I don’t know how they possibly could. They don’t sail boats and I’ve heard tell they can’t even swim. But we can fight them perfectly well on the mainland; we’ve had plenty of skirmishes with them over there, and no problem at all.”

“Only we’ve got to get her out of Lanka,” insisted VB. “Keeping her is an invitation for them to bring their war here. Better if we bring it to them.”

“But how?” asked MD. “How do we get her out?”

And none of them could think of a way to kidnap her back from the heavily guarded Little Palace without openly defying the king. I could think of several ways, actually, but no matter how wrong his actions were, I could not bring myself to think of defying RV, even in secret.

He was my brother; I loved him.
Chapter 4: The Spy

Some time later Sita nearly was rescued.

It happened many months later. I am quite certain that Sita herself had no part in the planning of it. In fact she bungled it quite thoroughly when the opportunity was at hand. But then again she had not been expecting it, at least not this way.

The way she had dreamed of it, Rama himself would come, preceded by the sounds of war, the clanging of bells in our conquered city, the sounding of trumpets. He himself would rip the gates from the palace grounds and slaughter the guards single handedly, then take her in his victorious arms and lead her home, wherever home was. She had told me in great detail of this. It was her dream, the dream that had sustained her for nearly eight months now. She daydreamed of it, and no doubt replayed the scenes in her nightly dreams as well. She assured me that I would certainly be spared, that she would tell Rama of how kindly I had been, how sympathetic to her plight.

I suppose I had been kindly. It had not been my intention, but she forced me to it. She simply decided that I was her champion and treated me with a total trust that always embarrassed me, for I had done little to earn it. And I was her only companion, by her choice. And she was my responsibility. Thus I ended up spending a great deal of my own time with her, and not just when I was acting chaperone. The truth was that although I visited the ladies of the Great Palace quite frequently, I no longer felt comfortable in their midst. They were respectful as always, but I always got the feeling, much as Sita had in her brief contact, that they regarded me as something of a spectacle and said much behind my back that would never said to my face. I too had become, though by my own choice, a kind of prisoner in the garden.

Sita also loved me because she knew that I routinely petitioned my brother on her behalf, though without any success. What she did not know was that the petitions were not what she assumed them to be. I argued my own arguments, and those of my brothers and my ex-sister-in-law. And I beseeched him to return her for his own sake, for the sake of his honor and his sanity. I never suggested that he return her for her own sake. For her return and her happiness would mean Rama’s happiness. I had no desire to forgive and forget or to let Rama enjoy a blissful reunion in the future, no, not even if it required that Sita stay here and suffer permanent separation from him. Besides I thought her suffering quite overdone, a self pity that seemed foolish considering the potential comforts of her present domicile. And if she chose to isolate and deprive herself she had little right to complain thereafter of loneliness and deprivation—no more right to complain than I myself had.

In any case it seemed not to matter what I said. RV patted me fondly and ignored me; Sita told me everything with an open heart. And if she raved on about the great deeds of Rama, I would make her suffer in turn through my tales of RV’s heroic exploits. She knew I believed her kidnapping was wrong and that she should be released, but I wanted her to be sure to understand that though I might criticize him, my love and loyalty lay always with my brother, just as hers must lie with her murderous husband.
When her rescuer came, it was not with the sound of trumpets and the roar of elephants. It was not even Rama. He came by night, and stealthily, as if to sneak her away in the same manner as she had been taken from the forest. I was there when he appeared, for it was after our evening meal and we had just come back from a walk around the Great Garden where by day the princes exercise their horses. We were alone, approaching her tent beneath the tree when we heard a rustling and a distinct thump as the body that had vaulted over the wall hit the bushes below. Sita grabbed my arm and I drew my dagger, the both of us frozen and staring in the direction of the sound, waiting for the intruder to reveal himself.

“Sita! Princess Sita!” came the hoarse whisper. And then he came out of the shadows: the ugliest human face on which I have ever laid eyes.

There was just enough light left from the dying sun and rising moon to reflect in an eerie fashion from his face, hands, arms and bare chest. The man—if it was a man—was white, not just pale of skin like Sita, but paler than death. I realized that whatever he was, he must be an albino.

He did not come close. Perhaps he caught the glint of moonlight from my dagger blade. Crouching there by the cover of the bushes he spoke to us, still in that harsh whisper. “Sita! I must speak to you alone. Is that woman your friend or your jailor?”

“She is my defender,” Sita answered promptly. “Keep your distance stranger or I shall call for the guards.”

“If you do you will never hear my message from Rama.”

I heard her quiet gasp, the quick intake of breath. But she was every inch royalty that moment. With scarcely any hesitation she challenged him. “Then say who you are. And prove that Rama sent you. And no, don’t come a step closer.” For the ghoulish intruder had started in our direction. He stopped dead, reached into a pouch at his belt, withdrew a small object and tossed it, slowly and deliberately, in our direction. Sita knelt to retrieve it. As near as I could tell before her hands enfolded it, it was a ring, probably a gold one, large and heavy.

As she knelt there, staring at the thing, the spy spoke again. “I am Hanuman, Princess Sita, war leader to the great Vanara chief Sugriva. And yes, Rama himself has sent me. You see it is his ring, the one given him by his father years ago.”

“It may mean you killed him,” I interjected.

“That is not true. But Sita must decide. I have delivered the ring. I cannot deliver the message that goes with it unless I may speak to her alone.”

I put a hand on Sita’s shoulder; it seemed to bring her out of the trance that had held her kneeling to the earth. She arose. “I will hear your message,” she replied.

“Your lady companion must go then.”

“No. She will stay in full sight of us. But we will talk quietly and at a distance from her. If she sees that help is required, be sure she will send for it, and it will come quickly.” I
could feel her shoulder tremble as she spoke, but her voice was iron calm. Perhaps my brother and I had both been wrong about her character. Surely here was the stuff queens are made of.

I nodded to her and withdrew two dozen paces in the direction of the garden gate, beyond which two guards had been waiting on duty when we stepped within only a few minutes earlier.

Vanara, I mused to myself. An albino Vanara. No wonder his features had looked so strange; I had never seen them on other than a dark face before. But yes, he had that slight, stooped posture, the strongly muscled arms, the spiky hair which I imagined in full sunlight might be somewhere between yellowish and white. And the dress: bare from the waist up, as was the custom of the forest Vanaras. Those who lived in Lanka City of course dressed like ourselves and followed our customs. I watched them carefully. If he was a trusted emissary I suppose Sita was safe enough. But Vanaras are strange in their sexual relations. Within their own society they are oddly public about it. Almost casually, consenting couples would go about the act just about anywhere, by a roadside, in a busy clearing by a stream, in any place at all. IJ and his friends considered a great sport to sneak up on Vanara couples in the act, justifying their adolescent encroachment by the knowledge that to them it was not a private matter at all. RV, who for some time in his youth actually lived among Vanaras, had told me that this did not mean that people of that race thought incessantly of sex, nor that they practiced indiscriminate rape; it was simply a different way of looking at things. But still I kept an extra cautious eye on Sita. Sita must fear them even more than I, for she had told me that from the Aryan point of view these people were simply talking monkeys.

Meanwhile she talked with the talking monkey for nearly ten minutes. If he did not truly have news of Rama then he must indeed have an interesting story. I could see him gesticulating—from a somewhat closer distance than the width of an elephant. And I could see her shaking her head. I could not hear them. No doubt their voices were low, but more likely the absence of the natural sound gathering part of my ears and the additional covering of mask and hair impeded my perceptions as well.

Now quite abruptly the ugly white creature stepped back, bowed profusely, and turned toward the bushes again. With a leap he was up on the wall and over, and Sita had turned running to me.

“Espay! Espay! It was truly a message from him!”

“Has he come for you? Is he here?”

“No, no, but he will. I am sure of it now.”

She dragged me at once to the bench near my own door—mine not hers this time—and in rapid excitement recounted all that had been said between them. Rama had searched the forests for months. Rama had found and befriended that Vanara leader Sugriva, who like himself was in exile. Rama had aided Sugriva in regaining his leadership of a large Vanara community by killing the ex-chief’s brother dead with an arrow in his back. In gratitude Sugriva had given him Hanoman, his best fighter and ally, to aid him in his
search. The Vanaras had searched land and were now searching the sea as well, on Rama’s behalf. And now that Hanoman had ascertained her exact whereabouts, why Rama would come for her himself in no time at all!

I realized Sita was smiling. I had rarely if ever seen her smile. It did something for that lean and narrow face; it gave her a kind of odd beauty. My brother could never have seen that smile. He must have only imagined it, too bad for him. Good will so overflowed her that she held my hand as she spoke, sharing her joy with her dearest friend. How poor RV would have loved her to hold his hand so!

There was something odd about her story. I had thought the Vanara was a paid informant, eager to go off for his reward. Now it struck me as rather odd that he had not tried for an even greater reward by stealing Sita back himself. I mentioned this to her.

“But Espay, I couldn’t. You know that.”

“Ah, of course. I was right there. I might have called for help.”

“No, not that. I know you wouldn’t betray me, Espay. Don’t ever think that I doubt your loyalty. You are my sister, and I couldn’t have lived but for you.”

“Why then?” I asked. So often it was like that: at one minute she seemed the simplest woman on earth to understand, then in the next I would be taken by surprise by some unsuspected great gap that would arise between us.

“Oh he offered, of course. But I said no. I’d have to get over the wall. He would have had to carry me. I couldn’t let him touch me.”

“Because he’s Vanara?”

Sita stared at me incredulously. “Because he’s not my husband. I cannot allow any man but my husband to touch me.”

I was struck dumb. The thought that she had refused rescue because the rescuer was a stranger—this I could understand. Even if he did come from Rama, the fellow was so hideous that even I would be reluctant to go with him. He was far more in need of a mask than me! But if my life and freedom depended upon it, I suppose I would have taken the hand and the risk. Was Sita any less courageous? Perhaps; after all she had been kidnapped once before. But as she put it, her main reservation had been about accepting a boost over the wall, a helping hand from the shore to the ship. She would endure captivity forever rather than the shame of that pragmatic and casual touch. That spy had risked his life to get to her and she had sent him away because he was not her husband. No, she had to have it the way of her dream: armies and slaughter and head-on assault, trumpets and war drums and the gates torn down. Any lesser rescue was not worth her while.

There were many things I could have said to her, but I realized they were all as useless as my entreaties to RV for her release. Finally I shook my head and answered. “I’m glad you stayed.”

She squeezed my arm again. “He’ll come now. I’m sure of it.”
I smiled at her in false empathy. It would be a sad thing to begrudge her this meager joy. Then I made as if to leave. “Do you think it’s safe for you to be here alone tonight?” I asked.

“I don’t think he’ll be back,” she answered, turning a slightly worried gaze to me. She hadn’t thought ahead of the moment.

“He is a Vanara,” I suggested, playing upon her suspicions. “And a stranger even if he is your husband’s friend. I’m a bit concerned he might have a change of heart and decide that he must take you after all, whether or not you agree. I’d feel much more comfortable if you would spend the night indoors and take a room next to mine.”

For the first time in eight months Sita did not object. She let me guide her into my quarters where I at once summoned a maid to make up a chamber for her next to the one where I slept. Then while the young girl bustled around stealing sly glances at the exotic visitor, I excused myself to get something to make Sita comfortable and disappeared into the inner rooms. I wrote quickly and sent the message off with Triji, who ran like the wind to the guards outside.

Sita was dead wrong. I would have betrayed her in a second had she set off with the Vanara. As it was I was probably too late already. Yes, I cared for her. I probably liked her too, though she often baffled me. But my first loyalty would always be to Lanka. No message must get to Rama; no trail must lead him to our door.

A while later I heard the distant sound of the alarms that summon the city’s Guards. I didn’t tell Sita what it was, though she ought to have recognized an unfamiliar night sound after her months in this place. Perhaps an hour later there were other alarms from the distant city. Triji came and told me in signs that there was fire, or perhaps several fires in the city. I slipped out with her and we could see the light on the night horizon, coming from several places beyond and below the Great Palace. I slept only sporadically that night, and Triji even less as I sent her back and forth to keep me posted. Sita, despite the excitement, seemed to enjoy the luxury of a proper bed and the attention of servants. They told me she went to sleep quite quickly.

Lucky for the spy, I thought. The distraction of the fires would insure his easy escape. It was only near dawn that the news came down to me that it had not been all that easy. Late though my warning had been they had caught him before he made it back to the sanctuary of whatever boat had brought him here. They had held him for unsuccessful questioning up at the Guards Encampment which adjoins the main prison. I did not learn this until KK told me later, but they had tried some of those less subtle methods of inquiry, “burned him a wee bit,” as KK put it. But they had not learned much more than I had already learned from Sita herself. Then some how or other the fellow had gotten away from them. “Agile as a monkey” as the soldiers later said. He vaulted another poorly guarded wall and got out into the city and took his revenge, fire with fire, creating such a great distraction that he was easily lost to his pursuers. They searched the island for a week and never found trace of him.

RV also ordered inquiries about how he could have slipped ashore and into the well
guarded royal grounds unnoticed in the first place. Recalling our long ago conference on
the Sita problem I myself wondered if some one among my family might have aided
him. But no evidence or explanation was ever found.

I told Sita about what had happened the next morning, all that is but my part in
initiating the pursuit. There was no point in denying her her joy at the successful escape;
after all it was already done. She looked more rested and contented than I had ever seen
her, and in no hurry to resume her vigil at her primitive outpost beneath the tamarind
tree.

She had been studying my personal items, and seemed fixed upon the shelf of masks. I
didn’t say a word to stop her from exploring. She touched them, took them down from
the shelf and held them one by one, considering them as works of art it seemed rather
than as garments. She did not try to put them on herself. I realized she must have
noticed that I do not keep any mirrors in my chambers either. And she must certainly
have observed that the women of the Great Palace whom she saw so briefly did not
wear masks. I realized she could easily have spoken to one of her chambermaids. She’d
had plenty of opportunity. I could feel my back tensing as I awaited her inevitable
question.

But it did not come. And suddenly the words burst out of me. “You’d wear them too if
you were born with a face more hideous than that Vanara’s.”

She put down the mask, her eyes filled with compassion, and she came and put her arms
around me. In her was all the love and loyalty and caring that she in her innocence had
always credited to me.

You don’t know, Sita, I shouted silently from within. You don’t know half the story at
all.
Chapter 5: Brothers and Bridges

For as long as I could remember, my brother RV was the person I loved and respected most in my life. The fact that he was king had little to do with it, though in truth I could not and still cannot think of a man born more suited to kingship. No, my love was very much based on the fact that RV more than anyone else had been parent as well as brother to me as a child. I suppose I was fond of my mother, who died shortly before I entered my Halfway Years. But fathers and men in general had made little impact on me, other than my brother.

RV's own father, our mother's first husband, had perished long before my birth in a battle during some campaign on the mainland, for it was in the mainland forests to the north that our branch of the Lankan Satri lived at that time. He was the king's brother-in-law and so it was both an honor and a duty that he should have had been in the thick of the fray, his two young sons RV and KK at this side. He was killed, and his sons promptly and thoroughly avenged him. Tales of my brothers' prowess were told and retold even before I was born. My mother remarried soon after she was widowed—rumor had it that VB had already been conceived while the others were away at battle. At any rate a third male heir appeared, and my mother, to insure the proper continuation of the line, soon produced me. No doubt she would have been happier with a second female heir as well, but my own father made her again a widow soon after, succumbing not to war, sad to say, but of a fever that came to plague our mainland city the first summer of my infancy. It was in fact because of that fever, and not because of defeat at the hands of any enemy, that we Lankan people, with my brother the king-to-be in the lead, migrated to this empty island in my infancy, giving it our name and building the great city that stands here today. Soon after, the old king gave over the crown to RV. The city grew as I grew, and so did my brother's renown. Small wonder that it was he who throughout my childhood fired my imagination with ideals of heroism.

RV was a great explorer and adventurer in his younger years. It was said he ventured to the peaks of the snow-covered Himalayas, and miles beyond counting into the uncharted oceans. Not long after Lanka City was established he took a year's journey, spending most of that time among the nomadic Vanara people of the mainland and the seas. He became, so it was said, the only man among kings who learned the difficult Vanara tongue, with its endless guttural sounds. And he became the only Lankan trusted by the Vanara with the knowledge encoded on their many Bookstones, those carved boulders scattered throughout the forest and previously believed to be nothing more than abstract design. During that time RV learned that the Vanaras, though without cities or permanent homes or books or any sort of unified leadership, were nevertheless a learned people, adept in certain kinds of engineering, boat building, seamanship and medicine. In the years since that venture Lanka had been visited frequently by Vanara fishing boats who would put ashore some dark, half-clothed wild man who would turn out to be a scholar or otherwise learned man who would spend much time in my brother's company and then depart. A few of them stayed, adopted
Lankan clothing and customs, even married among us.

I believe it was from these contacts that RV developed his preoccupation with literacy. Through the years of his kingship he had amassed what I believe is the largest collection of writings known to man, and what is more, instead of keeping it the private property of kings, he made it available to all literate men, encouraged literacy among all of the Satri class. And no small number of the manuscripts were in his own hand, recounting his adventures in far away places.

What few knew, what I myself did not discover until after great disaster had laid my family low, was that some of those manuscripts were not RV’s, but written by KK.

I had always held my second brother in awe. He was, for one thing, huge, a head taller than RV and far taller than me as a child and even as an adult. His reputation was fearsome too. It was rumored that in those early battles where he lost and avenged his father, KK had taken a blow to the head that changed his personality, though as I was born later I had no memory of him ever being any other way. KK loved war, loved to lead the troops. Inactivity was difficult for him; when politics became too quiet, when there were too few home guard to train or exercise, he brooded. Either he would go off by himself for long stretches of time telling no one, not even the king, of his whereabouts, or else he would go through the motions of his daily routine at the palace in an increasingly murderous mood. It was said among the soldiers that there was no need for capital punishment on Lanka; a condemned man had only to be offered his freedom in exchange for being the one to have to wake Prince KK in the morning.

And KK remained a bachelor all his life; although many women shared his bed, seemingly not one of them wanted to be the one to wake him in the morning either. As for myself, I know he cared for me but I too held him in a kind of awe as though he were a Spirit Being, some force of nature beyond control.

Then one day in the king’s library I chanced upon a book and opened it, and read:

We are born in blood
We die in blood
And all the days between
We eat and drink it.
A red haze, the blood of my eyelids
colors all the world I see,
A world defined in red.
But certain days are given
To cleanness.
I blink and the sky empties.
It is then I take my pen in hand.

Years later that was the first of his poems I set to song. I scoured the king’s library and found many loose sheets, and three or four such booklets. KK had by then gone off to his eternal meditation, yet I met him here again, and for the first time. I never knew this brother until he was dead. The singing took many years.
But as for my third brother, the one so close to me in age, I knew him all too well. We fought incessantly as children, each resentful of the other. I realize now it must have been hard for him, being so small and insignificant beside his adult and accomplished brothers. And there was no special future in store for him. The king’s sister must produce a male heir to be king, and a female heir to bear the next king in turn. A second son or daughter was advisable insurance. But a third of either sex was for all political purposes extraneous. Even at a very young age VB seemed to know this, and I was the only handy object upon which he could vent his frustrations.

This is not to say that my closest sibling was neglected. King RV saw to it that his small brother was educated, and spent some time with him no doubt. It seemed that VB could hold his own favorably in the realm of learning; RV always held that he was no fool. But when it came to real affection, the bond between RV and myself was always much stronger.

As for KK, he had little use for his baby brother; VB was not an athletic child, being somewhat slow and stout, nor inclined to learn the manly art of warfare, which seemed to be all that KK knew how to share. I remember VB as a discontent child, competitive, often bitter and vindictive toward me in youth. In his Halfway Years he lost interest in annoying me and turned to challenge his older brothers instead. He spoke words of open criticism, both to them and to others. RV chose to pay no more attention to him than if he were a flea. I suppose this was the wise and dignified thing to do, though it certainly fed VB’s adolescent conviction that he was the most unappreciated person in the family. Later VB survived his Forest years and returned from the mainland seemingly changed. He was a patriot now, devoted to Lanka. And RV treated him at last like a man, listening to his flea-bites of criticism, occasionally taking his advise. I supposed he would always be hungry, critical, dissatisfied. That was the kind of man he was. But now at least he was bearable.

Now, over the Sita problem I found myself for the first time in alliance with VB at last. In fact it seemed he showed a great deal of good sense, something our brother the king had so clearly lost. VB wished to save Lanka; I wished to save that and my brother’s mind as well, if I could. And poor RV had not the slightest idea that either was in jeopardy.

Long before it happened we knew where the war would come from and who our enemies were. Both from the Forester Lankans and our Vanara spies we were warned well in advance that Rama had learned where his wife was held captive, that he had amassed an army, that he planned a war. We were all incredulous about the army story, for there were scarcely more than a few dozen Aryans in the mainland forests at all, and those were all hermits. But the army, it appears, were all Vanara.

In family council we quizzed RV about this phenomenon. It went against everything he had ever said about Vanara ways. Although they had bitter and deadly warfares among themselves, they had never been known to take on another race, nor ever to unit in numbers large enough to form what we think of as an army. And since its founding the City of Lanka was thought to be invulnerable from any enemy. Aryans lived inland and had no knowledge of sea-craft. They couldn’t even swim.

But Vanaras could swim. They could sail. VB was quick to point out there was no
knowing what they could do, if they had a reason to do it. Together with IJ he sequestered himself in the library, where the two unearthed all they could of writings on the Vanara, those by our own scholars and those written by RV himself in his youth. They then took council for a strategy.

“They’ll bring a flotilla of boats, I imagine,” predicted IJ. “If we keep the shore well guarded they won’t be able to land, and if some do slip through there won’t be enough of them. We’ll make mincemeat of them.”

“That’s just why they won’t do any such thing,” responded VB, ready as usual with an argument.

“Do you think they’ll just stay home?”

“They have the means. It’s written right there, in the king’s own hand. They build bridges. They can’t build a city or even a tree house, but there’s records in their own wars of how they build bridges when they have to. The bridge is in pieces; it rests on boats. The army marches from boat to boat, picking up the pieces behind them.”

“Good,” growled KK. “Let them make a bridge. Then we’ll knock those piddling Aryan brothers off it with a catapult, and they’ll drown and the monkeys will go home.”

RV simply let them all talk, and took his time in replying. At length he said to VB, “If a bridge can be built over an ocean, which I’ve heard tell of in tales but have yet to see, then a clever man such as yourself ought to be able to come up with the means to sabotage it, don’t you think?” It was meant as a challenge, and after meeting his brother’s stare for moment, the critic nodded solemnly.

“If the king so commands, then the means shall be found.”

“Good. Research it. Not that the king wouldn’t be perfectly happy to meet the invader head on, of course,” added the king.

I shared the developments with Sita eventually. There seemed no point to secrecy now that rumors had become quite public. She was terribly excited and just as eager for a confrontation as RV. I think it was the first and only thing they ever agreed on. “Don’t let VB sabotage the bridge!” she exclaimed. “Find out how he’s going to do it and don’t let him do it, please.”

“Sita,” I reminded her, “you know I want to see you rescued, and I’m sure it will happen some day. But you must not ask me to betray my own brother. You must understand surely why I cannot.”

“I’m not asking you to betray the king, only VB. You yourself have told me many times what an underhanded fellow he is. The king would be perfectly happy to meet Rama in honest combat. Let him do it.”

I told her that I doubted that there was much that I could do, things being in the hands of the men now, but I would try if I could. That was the kind of talk Sita would understand. Actually there is a great deal a Lankan princess can do if she cares to try. I did not, though often I look back now and wonder if things might have gone differently
had I meddled. No, I doubt it; for VB had another strategy in mind, one that none of us in the least anticipated.

Sure enough, a few days later all Lanka was afire with the news of the bridge and the army and the boats. The chain of boats stretched forever, so they said, and swarmed with Vanara and all manners of wild beasts, seething and frenzied as a pack of animals driven from the jungle by fire. They worked at an amazing rate, moving that floating, moveable bridge across the waters to us. One day it was sighted, the next it was halfway to our shores, the third it was within plain sight, the fourth it was nearly within arrow distance of the piers of Lanka City. All our soldiers and Servers were armed now, and boatloads of them went out to combat the invasion. But for every arrow fired at the mass of invaders, a dozen was returned. Many were felled on both sides, some to sink, some to swim. And yet the mass came on.

Sita could not leave the garden, of course, being a prisoner. And even had the gate been open I think she would have waited there for the glorious rescue of her dreams. But the worst cruelty for her was lack of news. I must be her eyes and ears. A dozen times a day I went to the Great Palace to see for myself, or else sent Triji when it grew too tiresome, to tell her of each and every development.

That first day of fighting not a single Vanara set foot ashore, and the bridge could not get within the final yards of land. But they tried repeatedly and the waves that lapped the sand grew red.

The royal women were good observers. MD shared the news freely whenever I came, and even pointed out for me their leaders. The ugly white Vanara whom I had met in the garden seemed to be one of the chief of them. It wasn’t until the second day that I caught sight of the two Aryan princes, my enemies. Yes, it was I who named and identified them so that the word might go out among the warriors.

And it was I who had to say those words to the Princess Sita: “I have seen your Rama.”

Never have I seen a human face so lit with joy. So overwhelmed was she that she failed utterly to perceive my own lack of enthusiasm. I had seen my life’s worst enemy, the one who had cast me down from beauty and wholeness and a woman’s future. He had killed Firstlove; my only relief was to find that aside from a quick sickening in my stomach upon sight of him I had felt nothing more.

When she was done embracing me she barraged me with questions. Yes, he appeared unwounded and fighting like a tiger. I had to admit that it had been quite a feat to have united such vast numbers of nomads and bent them to his cause. It was an impressive army, even though it be composed of such strange men.

“They are good beasts at heart,” proclaimed Sita. “Half men thought they be, they understand righteousness and justice. And our cause is just.”

That night the invaders made a desperate attempt to storm the shore under the cover of darkness. But the entire beach had been lit up by torches. Fire arrows were shot incessantly into the boats and Vanara hordes. There was much killing, but the final
bridge section could not be put in place. Nor did the invaders retreat.

Triji came before dawn to wake me and hold me silently in her arms. The first of family had fallen. My cousin IJ was no more.

The next morning the tide did what the great army had not been able to do. The entire construction of boats, bridges and army was gently pushed ashore by the hand of the sea under the push of the moon. The noise of the ensuing confrontation could be heard even here, a mile away, as men died and scrambled over each other’s bodies to attack yet again. The army came ashore, most of them, though our troops held them with their backs to the ocean. The very bridge itself dispersed as if by magic, the connecting planks taken up onto the boats and the boats spread out a little beyond reach of our arrows, waiting.

Later that day the news was good. The Aryan Lakshmana had been hit by one of our marksmen—credit was given to KK. He seemed not to have been killed outright, but he was dragged away from the battle. The general Hanuman had a stiff battle of it covering the little retreat with the wounded man to one of their boats.

When I told Sita, she wept. The tears in her eyes kept her, I believe from perceiving the gleam of triumph in my own as I held and comforted her. Let him die, I though, Die and die again. Or perhaps let him be long in dying, crippled and in pain for years. Yes, now I though at RV had though; long pain would be a far finer vengeance than death.

The invaders camped on the beach that night, and the Lankan warriors up on the rise above them. All were too exhausted to carry the warfare beyond daylight. When I went to the Great Palace I found that both RV and KK were out there in the night with their men and women warriors. I inquired after VB, thinking that he more than anyone else would have a grasp of how the battle was progressing, what our chances were of driving the invaders out. I could not find him in the Great Palace however, and as I searched it suddenly occurred to me that I had not seen him for some time, not since the fighting began. Whatever bridge sabotage he had planned must have gone wrong. I began to worry for him, for though he had not been much of a friend, he was after all my brother. But no one else had seen him either.

I came face to face with the king just after dawn of that third day, when he came up to the high tower to have a look over the battlefields. He had a strange piece of glass in hand and looked through it out into the rising mists of dawn.

“No one has seen VB,” I spoke softly behind him.

“He is there,” came the reply.

“You have seen him? Is he with our army?”

“Look through the glass. Have I ever shown you this before? It’s a Vanara glass, given me by one of their chieftains I used to know. I don’t suppose he’s out there with them; he was not a fighter but a teacher. He shared the wonders of Vanara knowledge with me... long ago.”

His voice sounded tired as he handed me the strange object. I mimicked his action and
looked through the glass. I had seen how thick glass in a window pane can distort what the eye sees, but never had I dreamed that the glass could seem to transport the very eye half the distance to an object at sea.

“Have a look at their encampment,” said RV. “Who do you recognize of our enemies?”

I scanned quickly from fire to fire, getting used to the strange glass. It was not hard to pick out the light skinned ones among the dark skinned. There, there was Hanuman. Surely where Hanuman camped Rama would be somewhere near. Yes, there he was, the black hair and white skin and long, thin arms. I spoke their names quietly.

“Prince Rama is surely talking with someone this morning, planning his attack, wouldn’t you think?”

I made myself search again for my true enemy. With the slightest flinch of my hand he would leap away, but at length I found him and held him steady. He seemed small and helpless, a toy captured in the glass.

“Yes. He’s talking. To, it looks like—” I stopped with a gasp.

RV answered for me. “My little brother has crossed the bridge.”
Chapter 6: Traitors

There is no uglier word in the Lankan language than traitor, unless it be kin-murderer. And VB had well earned both titles by the time the Vanara war was over. Yet he is a clever man, and even as the battle raged he had sown seeds of discontent among the people, sent out spies and secret sympathizers no doubt, so that whispers were already heard in the streets that it was the king himself who had betrayed Lanka by inviting the enemy to our door. The treason of our king was that he valued the slanty princess above his own people and refused to give her up even as the young Guardians died by the hundreds on the shore, sacrificing themselves so unnecessarily.

Of course it is always so when a war is costly and too many of the young have given their lives. The people, frustrated and grieved by the great loss, are always ready to turn against their leaders. The heroism that had built RV’s fame long ago: forgotten; his knowledge and strength and vision that had built Lanka City from bare rock and made our island invulnerable: forgotten when the first Vanara invader stepped ashore and the first Lankan Guardian fell to the alien arrow.

Oddly there is no word equivalent to “traitor” in the speech of the Vanara. I am told there is a word for friend-warrior and for enemy-warrior, and even a term for new-friend-warrior and new-enemy-warrior to indicate those who switch sides. But so short-lived are Vanara alliances and so frequent the changes of loyalty that there is no apparent sense of shame attached to the words. And so it is not so surprising, looking back, to see how readily VB was accepted into the ranks of the enemy. He would never be called traitor while he hid amongst them. But should he live, should he make the mistake of returning among us, I myself would be the first to burn him with the brand and never let him forget it until his dying day.

Now in the third day of fighting all had come to know of VB’s treachery. Sentiments among the anxious civilians flared wildly in all directions. Sons and daughters fell on the beach; distraught parents searched the house for arms, for relics of their own youth, vowing to bear them against the enemy in revenge, or else against the king himself for bringing disaster upon the family.

KK was down among the troops, rallying them, calling for more volunteers. Mature men, even old men now swelled the ranks; I could see it all through the Vanara glass looking-piece my brother had left in my care. I wished I could be down among them myself, that I could have a moment alone with KK to speak with him, to ask him who, in his heart of hearts, he believed the true traitor to be. But no such conversation was ever to be mine. And it would have been unnecessary in any case. I already knew from our private family discussions that KK did not approve of Sita at all, nor did he have any sympathy for the king’s infatuation. He must also have foreseen by now that all Lanka would suffer in this war, that his beloved troops would die. Like VB he was a patriot, but he was also a man who knew but one direction: forward. No, there was no doubt where KK’s loyalty lay. He had fought at RV’s side long before either VB or myself were born. He would always fight at RV’s side. For him, the king was Lanka.
The great assault happened a little before noon. I could see the waves of young men, old men and trained warrior women amass and charge toward the beach, slipping and leaping over the bodies of the slain, with KK in the lead. My glass even picked out the foreign faces, dark faces of the Vanara loyalists, lifetime citizens of Lanka, scattered among our ranks, charging down on their own kind in defense of their chosen home. They came as fast and as surely as a great wave from the ocean, and in seconds they crashed down on the rock shore of the enemy’s ranks. The roar of massed human voices reached even to the Great Palace tower where MD, her eldest daughter, several other ladies and myself shared the window’s view, passing the little glass among ourselves. Triji slipped in among us and gestured that Sita had sent her once more, desperate for news of the battle. I told her to send word that the great wave of Lankan forces had swept down on the invaders. Surely they would be swimming for their lives back to the boats in minutes.

But it was more than minutes. It seemed like the carnage went on for an hour or more, the two races locked in hand to hand combat with, lances, arrows, even fists and teeth and rocks. Then, almost inexplicably, the combatants pulled apart. The great roar had lessened. I could see that the flag of temporary truce had been waved. A great mass of Lankans seemed to clump around one part of the beach. I could see the unmistakable Hanuman himself at the head of the Vanara forces holding back his men with a signal. Gradually the ranks broke. We could see men on both sides putting down their arms and beginning the grim work of untangling the masses of wounded, dead and dying that were strewn on that beach like the great clumps of seaweed after a storm.

Triji disappeared at once, though whether to bear the news to Sita or to get news from below we could not tell. Before she returned another servant came crying to us with the news. Lanka had fallen back; our general Prince KK had been slain.

Now the wailing of women replaced the battle cry of men.

Down on the beach the assailants now worked side by side to recover the living, separate out the dead. Boats came ashore unchallenged to bear away the fallen Vanara, for they like to bury their dead at sea. The deceased of Lanka were lain out in rows only long enough to be properly identified; then as soon as possible they would be committed to the flames. The clearing of the beach took all of the afternoon, for the act of destruction is far faster than the act of repairing the damage.

And it seemed doubtful whether the damage could ever be repaired. Critics of the king may have exaggerated the number of Lankans that fell in that hour, but when all the bodies were counted and mourned and cremated, there is little doubt that they numbered well over a thousand. Loyalists have claimed that nearly double the number of Vanara also died that day, but the fact brought small comfort to homes visited by grief. In all the history of our people there had been no comparable disaster save for that plague which forced us to abandon our mainland home a generation ago. Certainly the troops of Lanka, who were generally victorious, had never engaged in such a full scale war nor suffered such a loss.

That it was indeed a loss was not yet recognized by many. Lanka had not surrendered.
But KK in all his valor had also failed to drive the invader into the sea. When KK’s body arrived back at the palace an hour later we counted over 35 separate wounds. Not a single one of them was mortal, but together they had drained his life blood away. It was said that KK had killed an invader for every one of those wounds, and that the pile of bodies on which he had finally fallen were all Vanara, dozens of them: Vanara beneath him, Vanara on every side, and a number of slain Vanara on top of him whom his loyal guard had cut down in defense of the great warrior’s body.

I know that he would have been glad of that tribute, and had not been sorry to meet death in this way.

For quite a while no one was sure who would next assume command for Lanka, and in fact we were so engrossed with the death of KK that it was quite some time before we were able to even think of it. There were rumors that the king had been down to the beach to weep over his brother’s body, and that he had stayed to confer with the remaining leaders. He would have to take a bold step now. The faith of the troops had been shaken. There was talk that some had begun to desert, others had said they would refuse to make another such charge, not even if RV himself were to lead them. Those little villainous seeds of doubt that VB had previously planted now sprang into full bloom. The men—and women—were whispering that the king should meet the invader’s demand and hand over the captive woman, that she was not worth the price of a single more young Guard dying. Let them exchange Sita for VB, hang the traitor, and send the remaining invaders home.

The watchers in the tower soon saw a group depart from the Lankan camp with a flag of truce, and make their way toward the bloody stretch of sand which still stank of the dead so recently removed. Hanuman and a few other Vanara stepped forward to meet them, to hear the message of the king. Soon messengers from each party returned to their camps, within minutes retracing their steps. Back and forth they went a number of times. Then the central group disbanded and the sands were clear. Something had been decided.

The king had made an offer, the only sensible offer left for him to make if he wished to keep the faith of his people. Rama had accepted his terms. The war would be decided by single combat.

RV returned to the Great Palace to write his pronouncement. The terms of such a settlement are familiar to anyone who has followed the history of Lankan conquest, but it would be read publicly nonetheless, to the Lankan army, to the Vanara army in their own tongue, and before the palace gates to the people of Lanka before the sun set.

Thus we did not need to leave our vantage point to hear the herald make his proclamation. Before the assembled crowds it was announced: King RV would meet Prince Rama in combat unto death, there on the bloody stretch of sands where his brother had fallen, at dawn, by which time the tides would have washed away some of the gore. Should Prince Rama die, all Vanara and Aryan troops must leave the island immediately, upon penalty of death. The captive Sita should remain the property of Lanka. The traitor Vibishana should be released to the victors as captive. Yes, Vibishana:
my brother VB. His full personal name was recited aloud before the crowd of Suder and Satri alike to shame him, for he no longer was due the respect of a Satri or of a king’s brother.

Should King RV be the one to fall, the herald continued, Lanka must surrender to the invaders. The soldiers of Lanka should receive amnesty, but were forbidden on their honor as Lankans to lift a hand against the invaders upon penalty of death; and the captive Sita should be released at once into the custody of the victor, who might do as he wished with the kingdom from then on.

King RV spent that night in the palace library alone in meditation, readying himself for the ritual combat. At once the climate of public opinion shifted. He was the champion once more, ready to sacrifice himself in place of the young, to do honor to Lanka. His deeds were suddenly remembered and cherished. He would not be able to bring back the dead, but he would do the next best thing by Lankan reckoning: he would avenge them with the sword.

He came through the room where the women waited for him in the earliest hour of morning. He laid a hand of blessing on each of the three daughters. He neither touched nor spoke to MD, but gave her a solemn nod of understanding. She would not have been there waiting to see him go forth had she not been proud of him, and he acknowledged it.

He also laid a hand upon my shoulder, and smiled at me, but there was no laughter in the dark, serious eyes. He had seen our beloved brother dead of thirty five wounds. “This is what you wanted,” he said to me gently, as if offering a gift. “When he is dead I shall bring you the body to spit upon.”

Then the music began, the heart-rending royal ceremonial music: trumpets, gongs, drums. The chorus of voices shouting the verses of honor to the king. He walked between rows of the people, the crowds kept at a few paces distance by the surviving soldiers, for every man woman and child seemed to want to reach out and touch the king’s robe. At the edge of the beach he dropped the robe. The music ended, and in the silence King RV drew his sword and stepped forth onto the sands with only the sound of the breakers to accompany him.

In the distance a group of men approached, paused, and one of them in turn walked forward to meet him. I did not need the Vanara glass to know it was a thin, pointy-featured man, gray eyed, bent upon murder. Yes, Sita would have been proud of him, as proud as we all were of the king at that moment. There was no hesitation in their stride, either of them. They met, they bowed formally, they fought.

I need not describe that fight, how strongly one thrust, how quickly another dodged and parried. Others have done so, aggrandizing both warriors in great detail, immortalizing them in the Ballad of the King’s Last Stand and in the Chronicle of the Vanara War, and even in the Aryan poem Ramayana, which we call the Ballad of Rama. There is no need for me to sing of battle, or even write of it. My song was to be the elegy, as this chronicle is in itself an elegy.
Suffice it to say that KK had taken thirty five wounds. RV’s, when we counted them, were only ten, but the last of them was a blow to the head which rendered him unconscious. Rama’s wounds were never properly counted. Lankan poets say they were a dozen, or as many as twenty. I hear that in the Aryan version of the story he took only three scratches, and barely bled at all. But that I know is not true, for I, along with several thousand Lankans, watched Rama rise and stand over his enemy. He was covered with blood and it was clearly his own. He faltered, but he did stand; RV would never stand again. For nearly a minute Rama stood thus, getting his breath back, taking stock of the damage he had inflicted. Then in a sudden gesture he raised the sword—not nearly so quickly as I remember his brother Lakshmana striking, but it scarcely mattered—and brought it down on the corpse in one great blow. The king’s head rolled clear of his body.

I dropped the magic Vanara glass to the stone floor. It shattered. We did not need it to see the small figure turn away and walk toward the enemy lines, nor to hear the Vanaras cry out their victory in one great animal roar that arose from amidst the endless roar of the ocean and seemed to last forever.

And all Lanka was silent.
chapter 7: The trial

The conqueror did not make his formal appearance until mid-morning of the next day. No doubt he had needed that time to clean himself up, get his wounds dressed, find some suitable attire in which to appear before his new subjects. Formal word had been sent to us through the general Hanuman that we might use the intervening time to dispose of the body of the fallen king, complete the cremation of our dead and prepare the palace for receiving the king-to-be.

I had a servant take the news to Sita. I could not face her in my grief, and worse, I could not face her joy or her triumph. Soon she would have her Rama, and he would have all Lanka. I spent that day and night at the Great Palace, as I had the past three days, in the company of my former sister-in-law. MD, who had grieved loudly at the cremation ceremony, had gone all silent in the following hours. I imagined she was preoccupied with worries, as we all were, about what new horrors now lay in store for Lanka. Sita would be our queen, (a deplorable thought for MD) and Rama our king (a disgusting thought for me.) Eventually their children would rule over us. Vanara victors would rule the streets with their loose moral ways, and not one Lankan would be able to lift a hand against them, for our own dead king had bound us to his word.

Yet the next morning we arose and prepared ourselves and the palace for our new masters’ arrival. Few adult men of the Royal House of Lanka had lived to be present to greet the strangers; we women had to stand in their place. And so we stood together, seven or eight of us. And we all wore masks, I the green and silver, MD and the others a variety of disguises I had never seen before. I had not asked them to do so, but was flattered that they had chosen to express our unity in the face of the conqueror in this way. I had hoped never to see Rama’s face again. Well at least he at least would never see mine, or be able to tell which I was among them.

From behind the mask’s protection we all watched the long, formal procession of conquerors slowly approaching the palace. There were no musicians among them; it was a silent parade save for the low murmur that arose from the crowd of Lankans as they saw the faces of the leaders and recognized VB among them. There was Rama, and there—yes, Vanara medicine had saved him!—there walked the murderous Lakshmana beside him. Hanuman’s hideous face came next, side by side with the traitor’s. And beyond them, in ranks of four, an endless line of dark Vanara soldiers, indistinguishable from each other save for the limps and bandages by which we had given them individuality.

Now Rama stood before the assembled crowd and spoke slowly and clearly so that all might understand his words with their strange accent. I had hoped also never to hear his voice. Now it was unavoidable.

“Citizens of Lanka!” The citizens of Lanka fell silent. Most had never heard an Aryan speak, or seen one this close.

“You have fought bravely for your king and for your land. We honor you for this. Be
assured that your land is still your own. And you shall have another king of your own once more.” He paused for the murmur of the crowd to settle.

“This was not intended as a war of conquest. The people of Lanka are not to blame for what transpired, nor for your late king’s error. We will take the Princess Sita, and we will take the few supplies we need for the army’s return home. Nothing else will be taken. Neither persons nor property shall be molested. My troops have been given that order. And they shall obey it, just as you have most honorably obeyed the terms of your late king.

“Good citizens of Lanka, I have a kingdom of my own, a land called Ayodhya. It lies many weeks journey to the northwest. I could stay and rule this land.” He paused and there was a deathly silence. “I could rule it, but I would not be the best ruler. I do not know your customs and your ways. My brother Lakshmana who has no kingdom of his own could rule it as easily. But he too has no wish to live out his years in exile from his homeland. Therefore I have decided to return this kingdom to the Royal House of Lanka, to the royal brother who has proven wisest in his judgment, most devoted to justice, and most compassionate to the plight of the exiled Princess Sita.”

At that last comment I nearly choked. Never to my knowledge had VB even bothered to come pay his respects to the exiled princess. Had he come even in secret, she in her innocence would certainly have told me. She had been nothing more to him than a political impediment.

“Citizens of Lanka, your new ruler, King Veebee.”

A disturbed noise arose from the crowd as VB stepped forward. It was not quite a cheer, yet it swelled. Some no doubt were voicing their relief that they would not be ruled by the foreigners. Others quiet rightly could not forget that VB had betrayed the lives of their children as well as his own two brothers. The Vanara soldiers gripped their clubs and spears nervously. The two Aryans, unsure of our customs, could not tell if the roar was an indication of approval or mass outrage. Rama signaled quickly to Lakshmana, who gestured to someone unseen behind him. The royal crown appeared in a servant’s hand, was given over to Rama and quickly placed upon VB’s head without further word. At another signal the royal musicians drowned the crowd’s muttering with processional music—that same unfortunate music that had accompanied the late RV to his death the day before.

Yet to their credit, or perhaps their shame, not a single person in the crowd called aloud or raised a hand to impede the brief ceremony. They remembered: RV had said that the conqueror might do with the kingdom as he pleased. And they must keep his word as a matter of honor.

Rama turned aside to VB as the music ended and announced in a quieter voice, “Send word to Princess Sita, wherever she is being held, that I shall see her in an hour. Meanwhile, get us some food.” VB nodded obligingly and led the way inside. The crown might be on his head, but it was quite clear who was still giving the orders.

The men filed past into the safety of the palace. I had not the will to say a word to any of
them as they passed. VB might be a traitor and unforgivable, but it appeared that I would have to live with him nonetheless. Better him than Rama, though not by much.

MD, whom I assumed shared my sentiments, had more presence of mind than me. As the conqueror strode past, not stopping to look at any of us, she broke her long silence and spoke out—just casually but quite audibly. “Well then! Is she to be forgiven so quickly?”

Rama faulted in his stride, turned back to try to determine which woman had spoken. A row of impassive masks returned his gaze, and he averted it, spun on his heel and marched on as if to show that to take heed of the comments of women is beneath the dignity of an Aryan prince.

The men passed on into the dining hall to partake of their first proper meal in many days. We women had ordered it prepared, but would take no part in serving it. We waited in the outer chamber, and while we waited I puzzled over MD’s comment. And hour was not a very quick time at all, though I supposed that an hour more of separation was rather little after the ten months they had already been apart. It seemed that Rama would have it all done formally: the pronouncement of conquest, the coronation, the meal, and only then the ritual of Sita’s freedom. She would not have her dream reunion; he would not be rushing from battle straight to her arms. Somehow, seeing him there presiding over the table full of rulers I could not imagine him rushing into anyone’s arms.

Then my mind came back to the word “forgiven.” I was puzzled. Of course MD had never liked the woman, had been openly jealous of her even though her own marriage was quite over before RV ever laid eyes on Sita. Perhaps MD thought she might be expected to make public apology to her rival. But that did not quite explain Rama’s startled reaction, so quickly hidden away. Perhaps there was something more that MD knew, something about Aryan customs that she might have learned from the late king, something I had been told perhaps and had forgotten.

.. Then all at once I understood. And I knew that Sita would die. It was only a matter of how, and when.

I wanted to run down to the garden and warn her. But I realized she would never believe me. The faith that had sustained her for nearly a year had grown to invulnerable proportions. She would laugh at me; she would speak gentle reassurances that no harm could come to her because Rama loved her, and that I must not fear for myself either because she would tell Rama that I was her closest friend. Worse yet, she would pity me for the loss of my brothers. No, I told myself. It was not my job to kill that great faith, even if I could have done so to save her life. Some things are inevitable.

And somewhere inside I wondered if perhaps I was silent out of simple cowardice.

They brought her to the Great Hall of the Palace soon after the men had completed their repast. They had dressed her, not in Lankan garb, but in her own ragged and mended
wrap-around, which she had finally consented to give up to the laundress. It still looked worn and tattered, but a good deal better than it had looked a day earlier. Yet no one who saw her that moment would have noticed what she wore, for her thin face was radiant beyond belief, and the bright sunshine of her gaze was focused intently on only one thing: her husband’s face.

For a moment I thought she was going to lose that great dignity of which I knew she was capable, that she might cry out like a child or a simpleton and run to him. But she did not. She knew where she was, and although she had eyes for none of us, she did not forget for a moment that she was in the midst of an audience. With fortitude and visible restraint she held herself in check and walked toward him. I turned then toward Rama. I had never wanted to look in those eyes again, but now I did just that, searching to see if any small bit of her joy might find reflection there.

I saw it flash only so briefly—a yearning, like that yearning with which he had once looked upon me for less than a minute—and then a closing down into the hard coldness which I had also seen when he turned away from me so long ago. And now he turned away once more, just a little bit. He did not say a word; he only glanced away. The cruel sword that had disfigured me flashed before her, invisible but lethal. She stopped dead in her tracks and stared at him, wide-eyed, not comprehending.

“What is it?” And when there was no reply she added, “Lakshmana! What is it? What’s wrong?”

“You’ve been away a long time, sister,” Lakshmana replied quietly, evading.

It was VB who offered the explanation to any and all of the assembly who might not understand. “The Princess Sita was kidnapped you know, by the late king. For ten months she has been entirely at his disposal. Now we of Lanka all know that she rejected his suit at all opportunities; it is a matter of public record. Unfortunately there is no private record, and RV is no longer... available to give testimony to the matter. Among Prince Rama’s people we fear there would be doubt about her chastity, and that would cast a poor reflection upon them both were he to take her back home. It presents a bit of a problem, you see.”

My gut tightened. Their penalties for lack of chastity are barbaric, so my brother had once told me, when it was too late. I had gotten away mutilated, but alive. But to them I had been a stranger. She on the other hand was royalty, an ethical model to her people. What special horror might they have in store for a princess?

“What then hear me, my husband. Before all these people I swear to you that I have been chaste, that I love no other than you and would have killed myself before I let that barbarian touch me.”

Rama did not answer, did not even look at her.

“I never saw him save in the presence of others. Ever. Ask the Princess Espey. She was my chaperone whenever he visited me. She will swear that he never approached nearer than the width of an elephant, never!”
“Princess Espey?” It was not Rama, but Lakshmana who had answered and who now searched the row of masked faces curiously. My heart beat fearfully, wondering if he by some remote chance might remember that name and connect it with the incident.

My voice caught slightly in my throat, but I managed to say the words. “She speaks truly.”

I could see the puzzlement in Lakshmana’s face. Clearly he believed Sita, wanted his brother to believe as well. “Rama?” he inquired. Slowly Rama pulled himself erect and allowed his gaze to meet his wife’s eyes.

“There is one way. Only one way to clear my wife’s name in the eyes of our people. All people. Forever.” I could see Lakshmana’s face dissolve silently into a grimace. And Sita? Comprehension dawned on her. Her features settled into calmness. For a moment it almost seemed that she smiled.

“Yes,” she said in a small voice. “Let it be done.”

There was a brief, awkward silence, then VB broke in: “Let what be done?”

“A trial.” It was Sita’s voice that answered now, stronger, more assured. “The Great Trial of walking through the flame. The fire will burn away all doubts in the eyes of those who behold, and my name will be cleared.”

“She means to burn alive!” someone interjected.

“Oh no,” replied Sita. “The flames cannot hurt one who is truly pure, one who has done no wrong. I shall pass through the flames as easily as a dead person passes through to the other world. Yet I shall live.”

I know she believed those words. It was another of her silly superstitions of course. Only corpses go willingly into a fire. RV had told us stories of the widows of Aryan kings who willingly followed their husbands into the flame, but they too died. They always died, even if they entranced themselves into feeling nothing. No Lankan widow would ever consider such foolishness.

I do not think either Rama nor Lakshmana quite believed it either, for there was pity and anxiety in their eyes, a desperate longing for denial, or perhaps a fear that indeed she might prove impure and that after the great cost of regaining her they would lose her once more.

As for VB, the new king seemed almost amused. He certainly held no fondness for Sita, but I could tell he would be the first to prepare her the finest funeral pyre, the greatest public display she could possibly desire for her imminent demise.

All of Lanka heard the news, and no sooner was the trial announced than people began to assemble on the site, camping out there in the great courtyard of the Great Palace in hopes of claiming the best vantage point well before the fuel for the pyre was even gathered. They had suffered greatly in the past week. Now they would celebrate, celebrate the sacrifice of the despised slanty princess who had caused them all so much grief. The Vanara were also there in full force. There was no need of arms to keep the
crowd in check. No, they too were eager for a diversion, and would watch this ritual of public destruction with the same detached curiosity that an Aryan or Lankan might view the public copulation of the Vanara.

I saw Sita but once before the trial, which had been scheduled for the following dawn. In the evening I went down to her garden, her old familiar spot, and there she was, sitting ever so quietly beneath the tamarind tree, entirely alone. There was no need for her to be there; she was free. But once the trial had been announced she had of her own accord returned to her prison and could not be persuaded to sleep elsewhere. Seeing her I called out her name. A servant stepped forward quickly and told me that she was meditating and not to be disturbed. But she had heard my voice, and she beckoned to me.

“Come, sister.”

I came and knelt beside her and took her hand. She was one condemned to death and at peace with it, just as my brother RV must have been at peace when he bade me farewell the morning he died. A glow seemed to emanate from her, as if a spirit being had taken up dwelling within her, some spirit being whose name I did not even know.

“I do not like to see you die.”

“You will not,” she replied calmly.

“No, you should not. You have such great faith, Sita. Can’t you see that you are dying for a man who has no faith in you at all?”

“I do see that. But the flames will restore his faith. He will see the miracle and he will be freed. I know he loves me still!”

I thought of that brief look of longing so quickly suppressed. “Yes,” I agreed. “He does... But what good will that do either of you if you are reduced to cinders?”

“That will be decided by God Agni—what you would call the spirit being of fire.”

“And what if God Agni decides against you? Judges you harshly as these men have judged you? What then, Sita?”

She turned to me with that strange, illuminated smile. “Don’t you see, Espey? So long as Rama doubts me even the littlest bit, I do not wish to live.”

I could answer nothing to this.

“But I shall live, sister. You shall not lose me.”

“If the fire spares you, then you will return to Ayodhya.”

“Where you are most welcome to visit me.”

I paused before replying. “It’s hard to imagine my doing that.” Truthfully I could not even imagine her surviving the ordeal, but I allowed myself to join her in her fantasy. “The ways of your people are strange, dangerous. I don’t think I would wish to come. You are free, you see, but I am still in exile, and always will be.”
“You have made a beautiful thing of exile.”

“If you go—when you go—I should like you to have a gift to remember me by.”

“I should like that. And I have nothing here of my own to give you, but I shall see that something wonderful is sent to you once I am home.”

“Perhaps... perhaps I should give it to you now. I don’t know what will happen tomorrow, or if I’ll have the opportunity to see you privately again.”

“That is true. There is no telling what will happen next.”

I reached into my tunic pocket and withdrew my personal dagger, a small, jewel-hilted little thing that I had treasured since my seventh prime.

“A knife?” she inquired.

“Do you remember when you were kidnapped? My brother body-searched you then and you never forgave him. But he intended no dishonor to your person. He was looking for this. Every Lankan satri woman carries one all her life precisely so that no man may dishonor her. He did not know if you had one, and if you had and he had failed to find it, you would have killed him easily.”

Sita smiled and picked up the small dagger, examining it in the light of the dying day.

“It is a beautiful gift. But how could I use it? Among my people the women use men for their protection. We are not taught to fight or defend ourselves with force. I would not know what to do with it.”

“Just keep it. Keep it as a gift. I want you to remember me. And remember that a woman can be strong. You are strong; I know that already; I have seen it over and over.”

“But now you will have no knife.”

I had thought of that; I had thought of the treasured symbol of love from my parents melting in the fire along with her bones. But if that was the only part of my love I could send with her, then I would send it as my contribution to her beautiful and needless sacrifice.

“I will have another made,” I reassured her. “I will have your name engraved on the hilt so that I can never forget you.”

We embraced, and I left her to her meditation.

The next day, in the presence of four or five thousand people of three races, Princess Sita, clad in her plain white wrap-around with no finery whatsoever, stepped into the wall of fire on the public plaza before the gates of the Great Palace of Lanka. Through the smoke and flames we could see that she moved, as if by a miracle, one step after the other. The crowd fell absolutely silent, waiting for her to fall. I stood by MD’s side at the far end of the pyre, aware of my enemy her husband standing but a few paces away from me. His gray eyes were empty and haunted as though the death he was witnessing was his own.

But then the wall of smoke before us took form, and a human shape stepped forth from
it, accompanied by a great roar of four or five thousand human voices, louder than any cry of battle or of victory in the recent war. We could see her white wrap-around streaked all gray and brown from the flames, her feet black with creosote. When she looked up into her husband’s eyes, Miraculously I could see no sign of pain in her gaze, but there was no sign of joy either, no sign of the spirit being of last night. She seemed in a trance, and for a moment I thought she might be blind.

But then Rama took a quick step toward her. The fire had melted even his notoriously cold heart, just as she had said it would. “My wife!” we heard him shout into the general noise of the crowd. At for once he broke his composure and took her into his arms, there in front of everyone.

That evening the first of the Vanara boats departed for the mainland. The three Aryans were all on it, headed home for their distant Ayodhya.

I never laid eyes on Sita again.
Chapter 8: Masks and Mirrors

In subsequent years my brother VB proved himself not such a bad king at all. If he lacked the majesty and grandeur that had come so naturally to RV, he more than made up for it with his knack for diplomacy. I cannot say it was the kind of diplomacy Lankans are used to. He avoided international confrontation, appeared to act the lackey to both the Aryans and Vanaras. And yet within a year he had nevertheless rid the island of both races of invaders. Not an alien face was to be seen in the capital city, which was soon rebuilt and recovered from all traces of the war. As Rama’s advisor, he had convinced the conquering prince that his people were safe from Lankan aggression, and that a more pressing endeavor might be the reclaiming of his own rightful throne. And Rama had lost no time in departing to do so. The Vanaras, as VB had foreseen, had dispersed soon after. Without the person of Rama to unite them they went on their various ways, as they always had, drifting off in small groups.

True VB brought tribute from Lanka to the Aryan capital of Ayodhya once a year; and true he had agreed to enforce upon the young Lankans who roamed the mainland forest a policy of peace and protection toward the Aryan hermits who were so fond of it. And yet in return it appears that he managed to convince the powers in Ayodhya that the forests should be protected for the sole habitation of the hermits, thereby preventing Aryan farmers, as well as Lankan settlers, from encroaching on the disputed territory. It would be from henceforth a refuge for all wanderers, explorers, adventurers and recluses of any of our three races, and no one race could take it from any other. From the Lankan point of view this may have seemed to be a concession, a weakness. But in a deeper way it was a clever move. By playing upon the Aryans’ own fondness for their hermit-priest class, my brother created a buffer zone, a protected border area which would shield Lanka from the likelihood of any further invasion.

The truce between VB and myself came about more gradually. As the good diplomat he was conciliatory—why should he not be, having gained all a prince could desire? He demanded nothing of me, and honored me as the royal sister as thoroughly as his brother had before him. I was given anything I wished, but as it happened I wished little but to be left alone. I needed no coastal forest; the garden and Little Palace were hermitage enough for me. I spent my days weaving, studying the vast library that RV had left to me, contemplating KK’s volumes of poetry and setting them to song. I did not care to perform these songs before people, but occasionally small groups of people—relatives or friends of the family who had known KK—would ask to hear them, and in his honor I would sing. The world beyond the palace would know of me as the Mask Princess, but within I would sometimes be called by a more intimate name: the Song Weaver. In fact, I believe the nickname was started by my brother VB.

In time I thus forgave him his treason and his fratricide. As with all men there was good and evil in him, and towards me he had exhibited almost none of the latter. In fact, but for a single bothersome quirk, he treated me quite well.

That quirk was his determination to annoy me—deliberately, so it seemed—with the
visitation of various royal gentleman coming with offers of marriage. I made it clear from the start that I had no intention of marrying anyone, whether the king himself decreed it or not. And yet nonetheless once or twice a year I would be informed that a suitor was to appear on such and such a day, and that I must at least be so gracious as to grant him an audience.

I could never get a direct answer from VB as to why he encouraged suitors, or even sought them. If he thought it would be for my own good, I assured him he was quite mistaken. And if he sought heirs to the throne of Lanka then he ought to marry and produce them himself. He never explained his own aversion to marriage, though I rather guessed it. Yet so long as he would not out and out say the reason, I would not acknowledge any responsibility for myself to perpetuate the family. Yes, I would condescend to entertain—and to discourage—the bi-annual suitors. But if my brother insisted on a marriage against my will, I told him quite clearly that the poor suitor would feel my dagger between his ribs on his wedding night.

In six years I never had to make good my threat. My tongue proved a sharper weapon and not one of the princes my brother sent to me returned for a second visit. One would think that VB would have given up at last. But his penchant for amusing himself and annoying me—at the expense of the unsuspecting—seemed endless.

At length he must have run out of candidates. One spring day I was informed that a suitor had spoken to the king requesting my hand, and the king wished me to receive the man the following morning, in the garden. The man’s name was told to me: he was Ayurva. Just that. No “prince,” no initials; just Ayurva.

He wasn’t even a Satri, apparently.

And so I sharpened my tongue, burnished my mask, made ready to receive him, dismember him and dispose of him in short order. The Suder, or whatever he was, entered politely enough, spoke the cordialities, called me by my title. I gave him but one civil moment before pouncing upon him.

It embarrasses me somewhat to recall in detail the things I said. But I know I challenged him on his rank at once. What right had my brother to play such a joke on me? And what right had the lowborn to take advantage of the king’s tactlessness? He did not know me, nor I him. What claim might he have to me? What could he offer? Obviously he wished only the advantage that marriage into the royal household might offer, for indeed the husband of a princess becomes automatically a prince, the possible sire of heirs. I know I called him many names, most of them unkind, if not well-deserved.

He did not take his gaze off me through the tirade. At length when I gave him space to speak for himself he only answered: “I know it must appear that way to you, princess.”

“Well then? Can’t you speak for yourself, defend your ridiculous proposal?”

“I wished to meet you, princess. It is not easy for me to explain why just now. But my proposal is in earnest, as it was from the moment I discussed it with the king.”

“And can you tell me one reason why I ought to accept it?”
The Suder named Ayurva did not answer at once. Then he said, carefully, “You should accept it only when you wish to.”

“Be assured, Suder, that I shall not accept it one day earlier. And that day will never come because, as my brother has been so thoughtless as to forget to inform you, I have no intention of marrying anyone. Ever.”

“He did tell me that,” replied the fellow with an accepting nod.

“Then I take it you did not believe the king,” I snapped back. “You should. His sense of humor is perverse at times, but it does not extend to lies.”

“Princess, I sincerely believe you both.”

“And yet you came anyway. You are a fool indeed, and I see no point in prolonging this interview.”

He rose to his feet from the bench across from mine where he had been politely seated. A few paces away the guard straightened to attention.

“I shall leave you then,” said the foolish suitor. “But my offer still stands. Please consider it. I will return again tomorrow, and hope that my words will serve better to convince you.”

My retort froze on my tongue. In silence I watched him turn and retreat, escorted by the guard, to the gate. Who could possibly have told this man those words, those very words I had heard my brother RV say night after night to Sita here in this very garden? Was anyone else even alive who remembered them?

Because his words had—probably inadvertently—awakened the ghosts of the past, I forgot to mention anything to the palace guard about refusing the man entrance should he indeed return. And so with a bit of surprise I received the announcement the next morning that the Suder had come again. I took my time fastening on my mask, pocketing my dagger, and then I went forth from the inner garden to the outer, to the second interview.

I decided to be formal—not ungracious, but not in the least encouraging. “You have come again,” I observed. “What have you come to tell me this time?”

The man averted his face slightly. Although he could not see much of my face as I looked at him, I found it easier to study him nonetheless when he was not looking at me so directly. He was a very dark complexioned man, black-eyed, slighiter of stature than any of my brothers, though not unusually short. He was not very young, but no gray showed yet in his jet black hair. There was no mask to hide his features, which looked intense, preoccupied. Yesterday I had scarcely bothered to notice even this much.

“Princess, you had a right to question me. I will tell you what I can of myself, what I should have told you before.” He did not add that I had scarcely given him the chance.

“I am a widower; my wife died three years ago, leaving no children. I work among the Suders of Tirini, a village about an hour’s walk from here. I know medicine, and I practice upon their animals, taking care of their working beasts in exchange for my keep.
I know your brother the king from an earlier time in my life. And I know of you... all the people know of the Mask Princess. And some have heard of the Song Weaving Princess too. I have come to that time of my life that is a Changing Prime. I was given advice, or so it seemed. And that is the path that led me here to seek you, through your brother.”

Now he turned a fierce, troubled gaze to me. I tried to imagine what those black eyes must see. I knew the gold and gray mask as well, by touch and sight, as I knew any part of my own body. I knew it hid most of my features as well as my imperfections. But I was not sure if it completely hid the expressions in my own eyes from the outside.

“Alright then,” I replied. “You have been open about yourself. Let me tell you plainly then, since you have gone to such trouble to see me and have put up with my short temper and lack of kind words. If you know of the Mask Princess, then surely you know the story of why I wear the mask.”

He nodded. But I doubted he knew the real story. There was no telling what rumors about me circulated among the Suders. I decided to be blunt about it.

“My face was mutilated. Under my hair I have no ears; under the mask, no nose. What remains of my brows and cheeks bear sword scars such as would revolt a man to look upon. I cannot imagine any man wishing to marry such a disgusting sight save out of pity, and I do not wish to marry to be pitied.”

“And are you sure that every man would feel disgust and pity?”

“I certainly do not wish to marry to find out!” I retorted.

“Perhaps a man might not see you that way at all—if you could come to feel less pity and disgust for yourself.” The man stared at me with some intensity now, as it a gaze could penetrate the cloth and steel that was my only protection. His impudent words, spoken in a gentle, quiet tone, frightened me more than they angered me. I felt my hand sliding toward the pocket where the dagger lay. Between the man and the gate stood the two guards, silent and alert, listening for nothing but a cry, watching for nothing more than the signal of the sight of my dagger. They would kill him at once.

And yet he made no threatening move—it was only words. Only words I told myself.

“Be that as it may,” I replied with some semblance of calm, “I shall not put it to the test. It is as simple as this: no man living has seen my face, and no man shall.”

“I have seen it already, Princess.”

“You can’t have!” Surely he must have seen my brows lift on the far side of metal and cloth. Who? I asked myself in panic. The soldiers who had rescued me were dead. The old palace physician had retired long ago. RV was gone; KK was gone. Who lived?

“Some years ago...” the man spoke quietly and carefully. “At the time your accident happened I was in the service of the court. An apprentice, a student of medicine to the Vanara doctor, MV. I did not touch you, princess. But the doctor asked me to be there, to be his assistant. He wanted me to see, to learn.”

“Get out.”
The suitor stopped speaking and stood up.

"Turn quickly and don’t say a word or there will be arrows in your back," I commanded. He gave me a brief, silent look, then dropped his gaze humbly and turned as I said. And it is well that he did, for the guards had seen my sudden move and had their weapons already in hand.

"My visitor is leaving now," I announced loudly, to stay their arrows. "Walk," I added quietly to him.

And I seemed to hear him murmur as he went, "I’ll be back tomorrow."

When he was gone I gave orders to all that the man was to be denied admittance if he returned a third time.

He did return, the third day, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth. Each time he left me message that his offer stood, that he would come again the next day. But he was never admitted.

My first feelings were that I wished him dead; I berated myself for having stopped the guards. But within a day or two the anger was replaced by curiosity. It did not occur to me that he might be telling an untruth, yet he had scarcely told me enough to make any sense at all. Surely he must want some advantage of me. I must find out what it might be before he did any damage. I must find out all I could.

Without even leaving a garden a princess may find out a great many things. Through messengers, friends and spies I learned that the man called Ayurva had indeed been apprentice to the old physician MV. The senior doctor had thought well of his assistant and the young doctor had been in good standing in the palace right up to the time of his resignation. That had been three years ago, and entirely voluntary, corresponding to the time of his wife’s death. Also he had not been known as Ayurva in those years, but as AV. The Satri title was rightful, for his mother was Satri. My informants were unsure about his father, who was never recognized. Presumably he had not been Satri. Some rumors said he had not even been Lankan but Vanara, hence the young doctor’s dark complexion. Some even said AV was MV’s own illegitimate son. I wondered if the man Ayurva even knew his paternity. In any case the old doctor had died recently, in his seventieth year, just before the Prime of Wisdom. And now this Ayurva had given up people for animals, given up his Satri birthright for anonymity. And admittedly he was in a Changing Prime, maybe the 31st or 37th, maybe even the 41st. Men do often go crazy in their changing years.

The crazy man kept coming back and being turned away. I realized I could have had VB put a stop to it, but I did not. The fear and annoyance had passed. Was there no end to the man’s hopeless pursuit? It amused me to wonder how long he would continue, and to speculate why.

On the ninth morning the guards admitted him. I had told them to. This time after the formalities the man actually smiled at me. “I didn’t think you’d ever let me come again,” he began.
“I admire your persistence,” I replied. “My brother has sent a number of suitors. Not one of them has ever come a second time.”

“Perhaps that is because your persistence is even greater than mine.”

I laughed despite myself, thinking that indeed I had been quite a tiger to those unfortunates of past years.

“Princess, I wish to apologize for my impertinence on my last visit. It is easy to give advice, much easier than to take it or to practice it oneself.”

“You need not apologize for truth, doctor, even if it be painful truth. I have been self-pitying. I shall probably never outgrow the habit.”

“You call me doctor.”

“I’ve been finding out things about you,” I admitted. He nodded in reply. “For instance, I found out that the entire idea of a marriage proposal was my brother’s, not yours. He described your interview and told me so.”

The doctor smiled and nodded. “Still, I mean it.”

“You needn’t. If you merely wish to see me, you can do so without marrying me. I do not find all men objectionable; in fact I rather prefer them when they are not trying to marry me. What is it you first wished of me that you came to seek me out?”

“It might sound strange. But I wished to learn from you.”

“Learn what?”

“I’m not sure just what. But there is a secret. And it lies... behind your mask.”

“I have told you what is behind the mask. And you have seen it yourself, as you told me. Behind the mask is a self-pitying, self-centered woman with no room in her heart for anyone else. I freely admit it.”

“I might not see it that way.”

“No. You are a doctor, or were one. I imagine you could look upon human flesh in any condition with an eye of dispassion. That is your profession. But think. You have been married; a marriage cannot be dispassionate. And I do not think that even you, for all your profession, could look upon my bare face—for an hour, say—without passion, without those ugly passions, the ones I do not want.”

“And if I could, princess... might you then reconsider my offer?”

“I might, doctor, if I could make any sense at all of why you are offering it.”

“I would like that,” he said, “I would like that chance, if you would let me try.” He arose as he spoke. “And I will try to make sense.”

I realized then what must be done. I would have to bear it, that he might know the truth of my words. But it must be done in private. I signaled my guards that they might understand and turned, led my suitor through the door into the second garden.
There were benches there too, but we did not sit. I braced myself for that touch. There would be no sword, I reminded myself. The hands that reached out to my face were slow, cautious, gentle. But it seemed his fingers burned as they passed over my hair in the place where most people have ears. He found the tie, untied it. The mask fell away and the sea breeze felt cold on my exposed cheeks, even I imagined on my eyeballs.

Gray and gold, my familiar armor rested now in one of his hands. I did not even breathe as the other hand traced my brows, the place where the scars ran deep.

“You are amazing,” he said quietly. “A miracle.” I didn’t think he meant me; most likely he was admiring his master’s craft. In fact the scars were but pale silver lines now; I did not know this because there had been no mirrors in any of my rooms for all these years.

It was difficult to bear that touch. I made myself breathe, for otherwise I would faint. I could not possibly last an hour. “Sit, Princess,” he said, seeing my discomfiture. I sat, and he too seated himself a little way from me. Then there was only the sound of his voice.

“That time,” he began. “Years ago, when I saw the doctor MV work his magic on you, he said to me: look closely at this face. Remember it. He died, you know. That was only a month or two ago. He was seventy years, one short of his Prime of Wisdom. But he was wise, then and years earlier. I didn’t understand him. I often didn’t, in the important things. When he told me to look at your face, I didn’t understand, unless it was to admire his stitching, or to appreciate the horrors that men can do to each other’s flesh. Look closely, he said. Because you will never see this face again. It will heal, but some of it will never heal, and she will never let you or anyone look upon it again.

“I thought it was about the nose. I thought a man of medicine ought to be able to heal, to replace even that one thing, and I even chided my master why he did not even seek to try. Why shouldn’t you—or any injured person—be healed in every way? I was arrogant then. I couldn’t accept his reply: he had told me that it was all illusion, and that even the illusion of a nose would not undo what was done.

Maybe I learned the wrong lesson then. I took it upon myself as my mission to learn all I could of Vanara medicine as well as Lankan, to practice all the ways and if that wasn’t enough, to invent other ways. I became fascinated with healing torn flesh, and after the war with the Vanaras there were plenty of soldiers who had been terribly hurt on whom I could practice. I learned what I could do, and what I couldn’t, but I never gave up the belief that what couldn’t be done one time could perhaps be done later, when I had learned just a bit more.

“But then I found what my limits were. My wife died in childbirth—something that should have been simple, and yet I could not save her, or the child. After that... I gave up. I could not bear to have a human life in my hands. I farmed in the dirt with the Suders until they persuaded me to use my skill with their animals, if I would not help with their children. So that is what I have done ever since. Then my master died. I had not gone to see him since my... change of life. But he knew. He knew all about it. I expected him to chide me for giving up my healing work with people, or else I hoped he would direct me, tell me where I must go next. But he didn’t. He only said one thing: He said—I think
you have not learned the lesson of the princess’ face. I didn’t know even then if that was simply a reprimand, or if it was advice.”

He had been looking down at the ground as he spoke. Now he turned to me too. He had no mask on now either, I realized. All the pain, self-pity, self-loathing he had spoken of—he had lived them too, albeit in another way. They shone in his troubled countenance.

“And have you learned now?” I asked him gently.

“I think... he meant that there is much I can do, and some I can’t do. But that—that it is a balance. One I ought to accept, and not give up in self-pity... Do you think that is it?”

“It would seem a sensible thing,” I answered. It struck me then that he had been looking at me in the same way as thought the mask were there—that is, he looked at me, not at a nose, or lack thereof. The realization was almost frightening. It was a moment of appraisal for the both of us.

Then the moment passed. “You must forgive me Princess,” the doctor went on. “I see now that my offer of marriage was somewhat premature. A man should not ask such a thing so soon. I still hope for it, of course, but I should ask it of you later.”

I nodded again. The whole business had never been about marriage in the first place, and I was glad he knew it. It had been about masks, and letting go of them for a moment; it had been about mirrors, and his odd hope that my face might serve as one for him. Perhaps I too had been curious how his eyes would mirror my own reflection, that dread thing which I had avoided facing for years.

“There is something else I wish to ask of you instead,” the doctor went on. “I wish for the honor of Firstlove.”

So casual was his tone that it took a second to register on me. And then the absurdity, the utter cruelty of his words struck me hard.

“That has been done already,” I replied. “As you well know.”

“No, Princess, I think not.” He shook his head vehemently, and again that earnest look! “—At least not by the Aryans. You were very ill for a very long time. I’m sure that my master told your brother, but he might have forgotten to tell you later on... You see, they treated you most hideously, but that one unkindness—that they did not do. My master was sure of it...”

“And by offering me the honor of Firstlove, do you expect to heal me, doctor? Will that take the place of a nose?”

He shook his head. “Actually it was myself I had hoped to heal.”

“Give me my mask.” I rose to my feet, regally, I hoped, reaching out with one hand while unconsciously my other hand searched the pocket where the dagger should have been. It was not there. I remembered now where it was, in a place of little use. The guards were beyond the wall, though a cry would still alert them. But I could not cry, could not call for them with no mask on.
“Forgive me,” the doctor said, and he too rose, gave the gray and gold armor over to me. I snatched it and stepped back, then deliberately, carefully, I put it on. I had to hide my rush of emotions, the hate and the anger. By what right did the man live who knew more about the intimacies of my own body than I knew myself? I must be rid of him; I could not bear the thought of him knowing what he knew, imagining my shame and dishonor in his mind.

“It’s time for you to leave,” I told him. But he did not move. Even with my mask on, I could see he was looking at me that same way, Desperate, I thought. And sorrowful.

“The miracle is, your face is still beautiful, just as your body is. And the sadness, that you’ll never believe it, no matter who tells you.”

“Don’t tell me. Just go. No, come this way.”

He had started back toward the outer garden where the guards awaited, but I directed him instead to the other door, the one that lead to the private rooms. The poor man would have been safer with the guards. But I saw him turn back to me, and then I led the way without looking back. I knew that he followed me, silent, accepting, down the passages that could have led to another exit, but did not. We came at length to a door. Inside it was my bed chamber. And next to the bed, my dagger.
Chapter 9: Our Victory

Nowadays just about all the women of Lanka wear masks. It has become quite the fashion among young satri girls. My three nieces, MD’s daughters, tell me that no well bred girl would appear in formal dress without one, and mask-makers now design gaudy little play masks for the youngest girls to wear. These are particularly popular at parties celebrating 5th, 7th and 11th primes. They say it all started on that fateful day when the royal ladies appeared together masked to greet the foreign invaders at the palace door, and it was taken as a sign of defiance: these men might conquer our country but they could never force a princess to reveal her face. Wearing a mask every girl becomes a princess; even suder girls have taken to donning them on special occasions.

I suppose I should be flattered, being the inadvertent innovator of the fashion. I had never intended to set an example so that the women of Lanka should feel the need to disguise and mummify themselves like the poor Arnay slave wives. VB laughs at me and tells me that whatever I do the young girls will imitate; I am after all the matriarch of my people, mother of the heirs to the throne. And that is true. My two “Little Noses”—as they are affectionately called—will surely be kings after VB, for he has produced no children of his own to rival them and is most content not to be forced by popular demand to marry.

I have spared the king that need by marrying the Doctor rather than killing him. Often since I have been tempted to kill him, of course, for he maintains that habit of inconvenient and outspoken truth-saying. But he also reminds me too much of my late brothers when he stands there ready to bear my ire, just as they sadly but resolutely set forth to defend Lanka, knowing they were doomed. Seeing that in the doctor’s face, I always forgive him. And he in turn either forgives or has learned to bear my own temper and teasing, as he has from the first night we spent together when I chided him for having a nose on his face.

“You had best get used to the sight of it,” he countered. “I expect that all our children will be born with one.”

“Then you do know how to create a nose.”

“No. You and I together.” And thus came the nickname of our firstborn, the twins.

Engrossed as I became in my new roles I played scant heed to foreign affairs. If any Arnay emissaries came to our court I did not hear of it, nor was I asked as Queen Sister to receive them. In our communications with the distant conqueror both kings seemed to prefer to use Vanara as go-betweens. VB still sent tribute, but traveled to the distant court at Ayodhya only at the interval of every four or five years.

I always asked after Queen Espay when VB returned from his embassy. Invariably he would inform me that she was well, and that Rama was well. Each time I would ask if he had seen her and given her my greetings as I had asked. And each time he would reply that he had sent greetings indirectly. It would not be wise for the Arnay queen to be seen in person by a Lankan even though he be a king, so strict was the Arnay way. I
never supposed he spoke anything but the truth, and engrossed as I was with my young family I didn’t give much further thought to the matter.

But when I spoke to VB after his return from embassy the fourteenth year after the war, his tale was different.

“The war is truly over, SP,” my brother said. “And you have won it. You are avenged. Our brothers are avenged.”

Confusion reigned in my mind. Rama must be dead. Surely that was the only explanation. But had VB himself killed him, VB whom I had so long held to be the Traitor?

“Sita!” I said. “What of Sita?”

“Ha,” exclaimed my brother with little humor, “That’s the amazing thing. It couldn’t have happened but for her. You would have been proud of her I think.”

Then under my gradual prodding the story took shape.

Sita had not lived at the Royal Castle of Ayodha all these years. In fact she had not lived there for some time. VB knew, as surely as I had known, that Rama’s heart had been unworthy of her love and of her faith. Within a year of their return he had disowned her, not because of anything she had done—I think the trial by fire had truly convinced even him—but because of political expediency. True every king has his enemies within the kingdom, so there is no telling if the rumors that followed him home were sown by rivals or by vengeful Lankans. How pure had Sita been? How many Arnays besides the royal brothers had indeed witnessed the Trial? How much could the king’s eyes be trusted? Might not the crafty Vanara garbed her in magically protective clothing, or produced an illusion instead of a true flame of Agni? Yielding to pressure, that prince of fickle heart had cast her off without so much as a word of goodbye.

“I thought it much better for her,” commented VB. “Safer. And I think even you would have approved. She went back to the coastal forest, somewhere around her old hermitage, and he didn’t even bother to have her followed or to send protection.”

“But—you said you’d sent messages to her all these years! Have you lied to me?”

“Of course not. What I said is true. In fact your name came in handy. I didn’t think she’d care to know it was Lankan Foresters who guarded her hermitage all these years, or that I had sent them. We’d use a Vanara to send your greetings and inquiries after her health and safety. It’s more than Rama ever did for her. He never even found out he had sons.”

“Sons!”

“Twin boys. Like yours, but they’re nearly at their thirteenth prime by now. She must have been carrying them when he sent her off. But once she accepted her exile she made no special effort to tell Rama about them. Just as well that she didn’t. By then she wasn’t living alone any more; she’d moved in with an old Arnay hermit. Of course the fellow was a fool, a celibate for sure whose only love in this world is his own poetry. But let word get back to the court and they’d have had all the more reason to think her
unfaithful and to persecute her. I had my Vanara suggest to her that those boys were better off being raised by the poet than by the King."

“And when you saw Rama you never told him?”

“Would you have wanted me to?” He smiled smugly as I shook my head. “Unfortunately he did find out. Not because he was trying.”

The old hermit had been the problem. The spies all knew he was working, year after year, on his great poetic masterpiece, but no one thought it of much importance. Nor did anyone think it of much danger that the children were being taught to sing and recite their tutor’s work.

“What’s wrong with it indeed?” I said. “A prince may be a poet; even your late brother wrote poetry. And your sister sings it.”

“Your songs are harmless, dear sister. Effective, yes, but not dangerous here in Lanka. The old hermit had grander ideas, I’m afraid. He wanted all the world to hear his great poem about the Lankan war.”

“A pack of lies, no doubt.”

“Most certainly exaggerated, from the bits I’ve heard first-hand. But the fellow seemed most keen on singing the praises and great deeds of Rama.”

“That’s no surprise. The usual way is to sing your king’s praises while he’s in power.” Neither of us made mention of the fact that I myself had never sung a single song about King VB, either in praise or criticism. That was one of my terms of truce.

“Well, evidently the old meddler did too good a job. When he took the boys north to the Arnay towns to perform, they were so good at it that bystanders were moved to tears by the love story, of the devotion between Rama and Sita. Can you imagine that!”

“What did Sita think of the poem? Surely she didn’t want Rama to be reminded of her, did she?”

“Nobody seemed to know what she thought, or even to care. The old man took the boys. No doubt they were curious to see the civilized world of their people and meet this glorified father they knew only from the song. Sita stayed behind, of course. But word got to Rama. He didn’t seem convinced that the boys could be his, but he had his men bring in the poet and shake some facts out of him. There were details in his poem that he couldn’t have learned just from rumor, enough details that Rama was convinced the woman in the hermitage was indeed Sita.”

He sent soldiers for her. She went against her will, but this time apparently without a struggle. The rumored return of the Queen was a great event that put all Ayodhya in an uproar. The Lankan embassy had not yet finished their negotiations and so was forced to wait for the eventful day, which was declared a national holiday.

From marketplace gossip VB had ascertained that even after long exile the Queen was not without enemies. Stories about the trial by fire were revived, questions raised about why if he was so sure of her the King had sent her into exile in the first place.
Once again Rama opted for a public confrontation. No doubt he meant both to assure his wife and to still any public objection and gossip. VB as ambassador occupied a place of honor, standing alongside Prince Lakshmana just behind the king when Sita, in her humble hermitage attire, was brought before him, followed by the two half-grown boys and the old poet.

“He told her in front of a great crowd how he had been moved by the poet’s song. He claimed that he had no doubt at all but that the two young singers were indeed his sons and heirs. He said he had been let astray by bad advise, which he greatly regretted. He had never forgotten her, and he wished her to be his wife once more. The crowd was very still at first. Then someone somewhere in the mass of people called out something about another trial. You could see Rama’s eyes searching through that crowd as if he wished to burn the speaker on the spot. ‘The trial is long over!’ he cried. ‘Sita, you have my word as King and husband that there will never be a trial again.’

“I don’t think most of the people heard her reply. She spoke in a very soft voice so that only those of us nearby caught her words. ‘I fear, Rama, that in your heart I will always be on trial. I think it would be best if I go home now.’ We all thought she meant the hermitage. Nobody saw her move, and then it was too late. She had a dagger. It took me by surprise; I didn’t think Aryan women knew about them.”

“She killed him?”

“Him? No, she went for her own throat. There was blood everywhere before anyone could even catch her. She was dead in less than a minute.”

I was speechless as VB rambled on: “I suppose you could say she did kill him after all. They cremated her later that day. The next morning Rama was gone. They found him in the river, drowned in his sorrow and eight feet of water. All that experience with the Vanaras and he never had bothered to learn to swim. But really sister, it was you who killed him. You are the victor.” He reached into a pocket and drew out a short knife. “I took the precaution of having this removed from the plaza during the confusion. I don’t know whose it was, but I recognized it as one of ours. It wouldn’t do our Arnay-Lankan relations much good to have it found and identified. Keep it to remember her by. Whatever she learned of Lankan ways, she surely learned from you.”

What had she learned, and to what avail? I had been right of course. The spirit being of Blindfaith had deceived her as surely as Firstlove had deceived me. But there was little joy in learning that all these years I had been right. I thought of her sad predicament. She would have seen her sons elevated to princedom—and lost to her. She would perhaps have had her place by her husband’s side a while longer, or at least until he lost faith once more. She might once more be loved, but would remain always a political pawn. Arnay women do not fight with a knife, but through their men. How much it must have cost her to fight another way, to choose to use my gift! And she had not used it as I would have, but had found freedom in her own way.

“She has come home,” I said to VB, turning the dagger over in my hand. “This was once our mother’s... Sita is the victor. Not me.”