Star-studded Night smiled from her heavenly abode, but, at
Vaijayanta, Mahendra fretted. Arising from his
flower-bed, the celestial regions' lord sat mute on his
gemmed throne—other gods lay fast asleep in golden temples.

Feigning wounded pride, the queen of the skies spoke coyly, "By
what fault, O monarch of divines, has your thrall offended
you? else why do you withhold the touch of your feet from our
bedchamber? See there, Menakā's heavy eyelids droop shut
for a moment, then again she opens wide, startled; and
look at Urvaśī, practically unmoving now. Charming
Citralekha seems as if a painted doll. It is in
dread of you, husband, that respite-giving goddess Sleep keeps
her distance; for whom else does she have to fear? In dead of
night, tell me, please, who is still awake, anywhere? Is there
some Daitya army camped at heaven's gates, set to attack?"

Replied the foe of Asuras, "I am worried, goddess.
How will champion Lakṣmaṇa slay the Rākṣasa? Chaste one,
invincible is Rāvaṇi, Indra among warriors."

"You have, my husband, garnered weapons," responded ever
youthful Paulomi, "with which the champion Tārakāri
slew Tāraka. It is your good luck that Virūpākṣa
sides with you. Pārvati herself decreed, upon request
of me, her humble servant, that what you wish would come to
pass tomorrow. Māyā, queen among the goddesses, will
herself arrange the slaying—so, why worry, dearest spouse?"

Replied the foe of Daityas, "What you say is very true, queen of the Indra among gods; those weapons I, indeed, have sent to Laṅkā. But by what stratagem will Māyā maintain Lakṣmaṇa in his war with Rākṣasas, my wide-eyed one—that I cannot imagine. I am well aware Sumitrā's son is a great hero; but when, my goddess, is the elephant an even match against the king of beasts? I have heard the roll of thunder, my fine-featured one, the loud crackling of the clouds; I have seen the lightning flash, those streaks of fire ever scintillate upon my transport.

But my heart quakes, goddess, when Meghanāda roars enraged, when that archer sets to bow a fiery arrow cluster and howls his hideous howl; even Airāvata quails when faced with that one's ghastly bludgeon!" Heaving a sigh of dejection, the lord of the divines fell silent; herself sighing sadly (a true wife's heart laments her husband's grief always), heaven's queen took her seat beside the Indra of the gods. Urvaśī, Menakā, Rambhā, and the charming Citralekhā stood around them, just as on a pond at night beams of nectar from the moon surround in silence closed lotus blooms, or as a row of lamps surrounds Ambikā's
altar during the autumn Durgā Pūjā when Bengal,

beside herself with joy, welcomes home her ever longed-for

little mother! Without a sound the couple sat there. At

that very moment there arrived the goddess Māyā. A

refulgence born of gems increased two fold in that godly
dwelling, just as golden splendor from mandāra blossoms

in the paradisiacal garden, Nandana by

name, is accentuated from sunbeams' intertwining.

With much deference that god and goddess bowed before her

lotus feet. Māyā blessed them both, then took her seat upon

her throne of gold. Hands cupped in supplication, the wealth of

the divines inquired, "Your wish, Mother? Inform this slave."

Replied the one possessed of māyā, "I am setting off

for Laṅkā, Āditya; there I shall satisfy your

wish and crush the crown-gem of the clan of Rākṣasas this
day by stealth. Notice, Night slips away. Purandara, soon

that world-delighting Dawn will make her smiling presence known

upon the summit of the rising-hill; lotus-Laṅkā's

sun will then descend the setting-hill. I shall escort, O

enemy of Asuras, Lakṣmaṇa to the temple

of the sacrifice called Nikumbhilā. And I shall snare

the Rākṣasa in a net of māyā. Himself devoid

of weapons, that hero weakened by a blow from godly
weaponry and helpless (like a lion in a snare) will perish—who can contravene Fate's edict? Rāvaṇi shall die for sure in battle; but once the ruling Rākṣasa is informed, how will you rescue Rāmānuja, Rāma, and wise Vibhīṣaṇa, the Raghu's ally? Overwrought with grieving for his son, that champion will then join the fray, O Indra of the gods, fierce-armed like Kṛtānta himself. Who can best him? Consider what I say, lord of the gods."

Answered Śacī's husband, the slayer of Namuci, "If Meghanāda were to fall, felled by Saumitri's arrows,
O grand Māyā, I, with an army of the gods, would join the war against the Rākṣasas tomorrow and rescue Lakṣmaṇa. By your grace, O goddess, I have no fear of Rāvaṇa! You first strike a blow, Mother, spreading out your net of māyā. Strike down the pride of the Karbhāra clan, that Rāvaṇi, in war a fearsome fighter. Rāghava-candra is the favored of the god clan; the immortals would do battle for him, Mother, as though their very lives depended on it. I personally tomorrow shall go to earth, shall burn those Karbhāras with swift shafts of lightning."

"That is indeed your proper task, thunderbolt-wielding son of Aditi," said Māyā, "I am heartened by your words, best of gods. Now by your leave, I shall be off to Laṅkā."
With that, the queen of Saktis blessed them both and left. Sleep then drew near and humbly bowed before the Indra of the gods.

Grasping Indrāṇi’s lotus-hand lightheartedly, the great Indra went inside their sleeping chamber—blissful haven.

Citralekha, Urvasi, Menaka, and Rambha—all departed quickly for their own quarters. There they shed their bracelets, waistbands, jingling girdles, anklet bells, and other ornaments; they doffed their bodices, then lay upon their flower beds, those celestial beauties, figures just like sun-beams. Breezes—melodious, mellifluous—wafted, now through ringlets, now atop high breasts, now across their moon-like faces—amorous, they sported, as do tipsy honey-bees when they come upon full-blown blossoms in the forest.

Grand goddess Māya reached heaven’s golden gates; on their own those gold doors opened sweetly. That captivating woman, once outside, calling goddess Dream to mind, spoke liltingly,

"Go to Laṅkā, to where champion Saumitri is encamped.

Dressed as Sumitrā, take your seat at the head of his bed and tell him this, voluptuous one, 'Get up, my child, for Night has gone. At Laṅkā’s northern gate among a stand of trees there shines a lake; on its bank rests a golden Caṇḍi temple. Bathe in that lake, then pluck a bunch of flowers and offer worship most devotedly to that mother who
quells Dānavas. By her grace, celebrated one, will you
with ease destroy the frenzied Rākṣasa. Alone, my pet,
proceed into those woods.' Goddess Dream, without adieu, go
to Laṅkā. See there, Night retreats. There can be no delay."

Off went Dream, the goddess. Blue skies intensified while stars
appeared as if to flake away and fall to earth. Quickly
she descended into Rāmaṇuja's tent; disguised as
Sumitrā, that sorceress sat by his head and whispered
tenderly, "Get up, my child, for Night has gone. At Laṅkā's
northern gate among a stand of trees there shines a lake; on
its bank rests a golden Caṇḍī temple. Bathe in that lake,
then pluck a bunch of flower blossoms and offer worship
reverently to the mother who quells Dānavas. By her
grace, O celebrated one, will you with ease destroy
the frenzied Rākṣasa. Go alone, my pet, into those woods."

Startled, that hero rose and gazed round about. Alas, an
unchecked gush of tears made moist his chest. "O Mother," cried out
plaintively that Indra among warriors, "why are you so
callous toward this slave of yours? Show yourself again that I
might worship those two feet of yours; to take the dust from them
would gratify my heart's fond dream, mother fondest! When I
call to mind how much you wept as I bid farewell, my heart
breaks! In this worthless life of mine, Mother, shall I ever
see your pair of feet again?" Wiping dry the rivulets of tears, that elephant of warriors strode with the gait of pachyderms to where his lord, monarch of the Raghus, stood.

Said the younger-born, bowing to his elder brother's feet,

"I just saw a wondrous dream, sovereign of the Raghu clan. Near the head of my bed sat my mother, Sumitrā, who said most tenderly, 'Get up, my child, for Night has gone. At Laṅkā's northern gate among a stand of trees there shines a lake; on its bank rests a golden Caṇḍī temple. Bathe in the lake, then pluck a bunch of flowers and offer worship most devotedly to the mother who quells Dānavas. By her grace, celebrated one, will you with ease destroy the frenzied Rākṣasa. Alone, my pet, proceed into those woods.' Having said that, Mother disappeared. I cried out but got no answer. What is your command, gem of Raghus."

Vaidehi's joy asked Vibhiṣaṇa, "What do you say, O best among confederates? You are known throughout the world as Rāghava's rescuer in this land of Rākṣasas."

Replied the finest of the Rākṣasas, "There is in the woods, my lordship, a Caṇḍī temple on the lake shore. The ruler of the Rākṣasas worships Sati in that grove. No one else ever goes there, intimidated by that frightful place. I have heard that Śambhu—fearsome trident in
his hand—stalks about the entrance. He who worships Mother there is victorious throughout the world. What more can I say? If you have the nerve, Saumitri, to penetrate those woods, then, O charioteer, all your wishes will come true."

"O most excellent of Rākṣasas, this servant follows Rāghava's command," responded hero Lakṣmaṇa, "if ordered, I shall go forth with ease into that forest. Who is there to thwart me?" In honeyed tones the monarch of the Rāghavas declared, "You have suffered much on my account, dear one. When I dwell on that, my heart wants not to impose upon you further. But what am I to do? How could I go against a godly order, Brother? Proceed with care—and with the force of dharma, great hero! Let favor from the god clan protect you, as if armor made of iron!"

Bowing to Rāghava's feet and hailing Vibhūśaṇa, Saumitri, sword in hand, set off fearless, moving in haste toward the northern gateway. There confederate Sugrīva stood alert, the very image of a Vātihotra in amongst his troops. On hearing footsteps, the champion barked gruffly, "Who are you? For what purpose are you here on this dark night? Speak at once, if you wish to live! Otherwise, I shall crush your head with stones!" Retorted Rāmānuja good-naturedly, "Destruction to the clan of Rākṣasas, O
gem of warriors! I serve Rāghava." Advancing smartly,

Sugriva saluted Lakṣmaṇa his comrade, Indra

among warriors. Mollifying with kind words Kiśkindhyā's

king, the joy of Urmilā continued further northward.

    A while later, that one of mighty limbs reached the entrance
to the grove, and much to his surprise saw not far ahead

a gigantic figure. From its forehead shone a crescent

moon, just like the gemstone on a monstrous serpent's forehead.

Atop its head sat a pile of matted hair onto which

there poured the frothy waters of the Jāhnavī, like some

silvery streak of moonlight on an autumn night across

the surface of a mass of clouds. Its body had been smeared

with ashes; in its right hand, a trident massive like a

śāla tree. Saumitri recognized the lord of Bhūtas.

Unsheathing his shining sword, that lion among warriors

roared, "Charioteer Daśaratha, son of Raghu's son,

Aja, world-renowned—it is his son—this slave—who bows

before your feet, Candraçūḍa! Let me pass, for I shall

march into the woods and worship Caṇḍī; if unwilling,

then battle me, your minion! The overlord of Laṅkā

is engaged in deeds opposed to dharma; should you choose to

wage war on his side, Virūpākṣa, then let us fight—I

brook no delays! With Dharma as my witness, I challenge
you—if Dharma be for justice, I shall win for certain!"

As the king of mountains, hearing crackling thunder, answers

back with echoing rumbles, in like style Vṛṣadhvaja
bellowed gravely, "I do commend your bravery, Lakṣmana,
crown-gem of champions. How can I fight you? The propitious
goddess is pleased with you, lucky one." Kapardi, keeper
of the gate, stepped aside; Saumitri strode into the woods.

At a ferocious lion's roar that warrior stiffened. The
dense forest reverberated on all sides with sounds of
 crashing. Out leapt a lion whose yellow eyes shone blood-red;
he flicked his tail and gnashed his teeth together. With a cry
of "Hail to Rāma," that charioteer bared his sword. The

māyā-lion turned and fled, as does darkness in the face
of Hutāśana's might. Calmly, resolutely, that wise
one advanced bravely. Of a sudden clouds, booming, belching,
masked the moon. Winds whipped up, howling. Streaks of lightning lit the
skies, while the land, following those momentary gifts of
brilliance, seemed twice as dark. Thunderbolts clapped violently as
they struck the earth repeatedly. Prabhañjana, by strength
of arms, toppled trees. A forest fire gained access to those
woods. Golden Laṅkā shook, and a ways away the ocean
roared as though some thousand conch shells, blaring on a field of

battle, blended with the clatter of the strumming bowstrings.
Like a stolid mountain, the hero stood his ground in that hellish confrontation. Then, as suddenly as it all began, the conflagration was extinguished; the raucous storm subsided; the husband of the stars showed himself once more; and stars shone beautifully throughout the sky. Mother earth, coifed in her flower-tresses, gaily smiled. Sweetly scented fragrances cavorted while the gentle breezes murmured.

Wonder struck, the high-minded one with determination strode on. Suddenly the woods swelled with the tinkling of bells. A flute, a \textit{vina}, a \textit{mrdanga} drum, small cymbals, and a \textit{saptasvara} sounded; surging with that music were other tones born of women's voices, pleasing to the mind.

That hero saw before him, in a grove filled with flowers, a troupe of damsels, like some starry constellation that had fallen to this earth. A few of them were bathing in the lake, crystal clear, looking ever so like moonbeams at midnight. Fine silken bodices adorned the bank while their figures, in those limpid waters—ah, golden lotuses upon Lake Mānasa. Some gathered blossoms for bouquets; others dressed their locks of hair, those chains of love. Still others held in hand \textit{vina}s crafted out of ivory, pearls inlaid—strings of gold glistened from atop those repositories of music's \textit{rasa}. A number of the giddy maids were
dancing; in the cleavage, twixt two plump breasts, necklaces of jewels swung from side to side, ankle bells jingled round their feet, and ornamental girdles jangled on those buttocks.

Men perish from the fatal bite of deadly cobras—but, when they feast their eyes on those gem-studded serpents swaying to and fro, down the backs of maidens, men's hearts, from passion's venom, merely are inflamed. They flee in terror when they spot the hooded snake, Kṛttanta's messenger—yet, alas, when these other cobras bob and weave, how can men help but want to wrap them round their head and neck, as does Umā's spouse, the serpent-wearing trident-wielder. On tree limbs cuckoos, those companions of Springtime, were aroused and singing; not far off, water fountains splashed and played. Wantonly, breezes coursed, looting aromatic treasures from the flower houses.

Without the slightest trace of reticence, that troupe of maids crowded round the foe-conqueror, singing, "Welcome, O crown-jewel of the Raghūs! We are not Niśācaris but rather denizens of heaven. We dwell, O champion, in a golden temple within the paradisiacal park called Nandana; there we gaily sip elixir of eternal life. Unending springtime ever flowers in youth's garden; our paired lotus-blossom breasts are constantly in full bloom; the nectar never dries upon our pond-like
lips; we are immortal maidens, your lordship. All of us
extend to you our most cordial of welcomes. Come, sir, with
us—we shall give to you, O gem of virtues, the pleasures
men, age after age, performed severe austerities to
obtain. Disease, sorrow, and the like—all those worms which eat
away life's flower in this mortal world—not one of them
infests the land where we reside in eternal bliss." Palms
pressed together Saumitri spoke, "O covey of divine
lovelies, please forgive this slave of yours. My elder brother,
a charioteer renowned throughout the world, is Rāma-
candra; Maithili is his spouse; the lord of Rākṣasas
found her alone in the forest and abducted her. Once
I have overcome that Rākṣasa in mortal combat,
I shall free chaste Jānaki. Grant me a boon, maids divine,
that this pledge of mine might come to pass. I was born into
the world of man; I respect you all as though you were my
mother." With that the strong-armed one raised his head and saw the
woods deserted. The women gone as in a dream, or as
evanescent bubbles found in water. Who comprehends
Māyā's māyā in this mundane world of māyā? Again,
calmly and somewhat circumspect, the hero pushed on, awed.

Thereupon that best of champions spied a lake not far off.
On its bank stood the Caṇḍi temple, a hundred golden
gem-encrusted steps led down to the water. That hero
saw a lighted lamp in the temple; by the altar's base
lay a heap of flowers; a bronze gong, a conch shell, and a
bell were sounding; there was water in a pot; and smoke rose
from a censer, blending with the redolence of floral
scents, permeating the surroundings with sweet aromas.
That Indra among champions climbed down to the water and
there bathed; with utmost care he plucked a bluish lotus; at
that, the ten directions filled with luxurious perfume.

Saumitri, a lion of Indras among warriors, went
inside the temple and offered worship properly to
her who rides a lion.¹ "O Varadā," Rāmānuja
called out, prostrating himself, "bestow upon this slave a
boon. Let me slay the Rākṣasa champion, Mother, this I
beg of you. O Antaryāmini, can the human tongue
articulate all you know about man's inmost thoughts? Pure
woman, sate each unspoken longing of this heart." Afar,
clouds boomed; Laṅkā trembled under sudden bolts of lightning.
The woods, the temple, and the lake itself rocked shore to shore,
shaking violently—as though caught in a major earthquake.

Before him hero Lakṣmana saw the great Māyā on
her golden throne. The sheer intensity of her brilliance
dazzled his eyes momentarily with coruscation
as of lightning. Blinded, that hero saw about him a
darkened temple. Then Sati smiled. With that, the darkness at
once disappeared, and the high-minded one gained supernal
vision! as waves of honeyed voices wafted through the skies.

The grand Māyā spoke, "Most pleased with you today, son of chaste
Sumitrā, are all the gods and goddesses. Vāsava
has sent you weapons of the gods. On Śiva's orders I
myself have come to expedite this task of yours. Take up
your godly weapons, warrior, and then with Vibhiṣaṇa
traverse the city proper to where Rāvaṇi worships
Vaiśvānara in the temple of the Nikumbhilā
sacrifice. Pounce precipitately on that Rākṣasa,
as a tiger strikes, and destroy him. By my boon you two
will enter sight unseen; I shall sheath you in a veil of
māyā, like a sword inside its scabbard. Now go with a
stout heart, you of renown." That gem of champions bowed low to
the feet of Māyā, then proceeded in great haste to where
the best of Rāghavas awaited. Awake now, birds were
cooing in flower groves, like musicians at festivals,
who fill the land with propitious strains. Trees shed blossoms on
that best of champion's head; breezes blew in mellow murmurs.

"Your mother, Sumitrā, conceived you in her womb at a
most auspicious moment, Lakṣmana!" came a message born
of the firmament. "Songs that praise your deeds will fill three worlds
this day, I proclaim! You, Saumitri, shall do that of which
the gods have been incapable! You shall be immortal,
like that clan of gods!" Sarasvati spoke no further, but
the birds cooed more melodiously in their pleasure grove.

That cooing went inside the happy home, that gold temple
where the Indra of warriors, hero Indrajit, reposed
upon his flower bed. To music from the forest grove
awoke that elephant of warriors. That Indra among
charioteers held Pramśā's lotus hand in his, and
in a honeyed tone of voice, ah, goodness me, as when a
bee hums mysteries of love into a lotus blossom's
ear, he spoke (kissing her closed eyes affectionately). "The
birds, cooing, call you, my beauty, my golden Dawn. Open,
dearest one, your lotus eyes. Arise, my eternal bliss.

My wife, this heart of mine is like the sunstone, and you, a
picture of the sun—I, lackluster when you close your eyes.
You are the ultimate fruit upon the tree of fortune
in my world. The pupils of your eyes, priceless gems. Arise
and see, moon-faced one, how blossoms in that lovely arbor
bloomed with your stolen charms." Startled, that woman rose in a
hurry—as do those cow herdsman's wives at the flute's lush sounds!

Demurely, she covered her figure out of modesty.
Again, the prince spoke with affection, "Finally dark Night recedes. Were that not so, would you have bloomed, my lotus; would these two eyes of mine have been consoled? Come, darling, let us offer our obeisance before my mother's feet, then I shall take my leave. Later I shall proffer worship to god Vaiśānara and gratify, by a hail of arrows like terrifying lightning, Rāma's wish for war with war."

They dressed, that daughter-in-law and son of Rāvaṇa—both unequaled in this world: Pramālā, the finest among females, and hero Meghanāda, the finest of the males! The pair emerged from their bedchamber—like the morning star accompanied by the newly risen sun. Ashamed, pale-countenanced fireflies faded away (no longer sipping the elixir-dew off flower petals). Bees darted back and forth, in hopes of nectar; upon a tree limb sang a cuckoo his honeyed, fifth-note song.² Rākṣasas' melodic instruments resounded; guardsmen bowed; cries of "Victory to Meghanāda" rose into the skies! Joyously the couple took their seat inside their jeweled palanquin, which conveyance bearers bore to queen Mandodari's golden quarters. It was an edifice from which emanated splendor—embossed with emeralds, diamonds, ivory—unmatched in all the world. Whatever was eye-pleasing that Providence
created shone in or round about those quarters. Before
the door paced sentry maids, praharaṇas in their hands like
Death’s very scepter. Some were on horseback, some on foot. All
about sparked rows of stellar lamps. Vernal breezes wafted,
bearing fragrances from groves of myriad flowers. Soft
sounds of the vīṇā billowed forth, like some enchanting dream.

Into such a golden dwelling went the conqueror of foes
with gorgeous Pramīḷā whose face seemed like the moon. A
certain Rākṣasī by the name of Trijaṭā came on
the run. Said the lion among warriors, "Listen, my good
Trijaṭā, upon completion of the Nikumbhilā
sacrifice, I, according to my father's order, shall
fight Rāma, shall destroy the enemies of Rākṣasas;
and so, I wish to worship now my mother's feet. Go, with
this message. Say, 'Your son and daughter-in-law are waiting
at the doorway, O queen of Laṅkā.'" Prostrating herself
humbly, Trijaṭā (the horrid Rākṣasī) said to that
champion, "Prince, queen Mandodari presently is in the
Śiva temple. For your well-being she worships Umā's
spouse, forgoing food and sleep. Who in this world, champion, has
a son like you? And who has such a mother?" So saying,
that messengeress fast departed, showing lightning's speed.

A troupe of female eulogists, to accompaniment from
instruments, sang out, "O Krś tikā, O Haimavati,

come see your Saktidhara, your Kārttikeya, waiting

at your door with bright-eyed Senā. Come gaze with joy upon

your daughter-in-law, who even puts Rohini to shame,

and your son, whose good looks force the moon to admit he is

but stained. You lucky woman, you! Hero Indrajit, world-

conquering champion—pretty Pramilā, chaste world-charmer!"

The queen of Laṅkā exited the Śiva temple, where-

upon the couple bowed before her feet. Ecstatic, the

queen drew them both close to her, kissed the tops of their heads, then

wept. Goodness me, a mother's heart—in this world it is in

you that love is stored, just as flowers are the storehouse of

aromas, and oysters, pearls' containers, those gem-filled mines.

An autumn moon of a son, a daughter-in-law who is

autumnal moonlight, and the queen of the Rākṣasa clan

herself the very essence of star-crowned Night—streams of dew-

tears fell upon her leaf-cheeks, making them more beautiful.

Said the Indra among warriors, "Your ladyship, bless this

thrall of ours. Once the Nikumbhilā sacrifice has been

properly completed, I shall go to battle on this

very day and vanquish Rāghava. That scoundrel slew my

baby brother, Virabāhu. I want to see by what

power he can stop me. Give me, Mother, your foot-dust. With
your blessings I today shall free Laṅkā from this danger
with volleys of keen arrows. I shall shackle, then haul back
that traitor, Uncle Vibhiṣaṇa! shall plunge Sugrīva
and Aṅgada beneath the sea's unfathomed waters!" The
queen replied, wiping tears with the gemmed end of her sari—

"How can I bid farewell to you, my child? To the dark sky
of my heart, you are the full moon. That heroic spouse of
Sitā is in battle dauntless; the champion Lakṣmaṇa
is overpowering; Vibhiṣaṇa, compassionless,
acts like a deadly serpent. Intoxicated on the
wine of greed, an idiot can kill with ease his own, just
as a tiger racked by hunger kills and eats his cubs. I
tell you, it was at an inauspicious time, child, that my
husband's mother, Nikaśā, conceived vile Vibhiṣaṇa
in her womb. That venal one has wrecked our golden Laṅkā."

Smiling, the charioteer answered to his mother, "Why,
Mother, do you fear that Rāghava and Lakṣmaṇa, those
enemies of Rākṣasas? Twice on father's order I
overcame them both in hard-fought combat, with volleys of
flaming arrows. By the grace of your two feet this humble
servant has always proved victorious in warfare with
gods, Daityas, and the men. Uncle Vibhiṣaṇa knows, your
ladyship, the prowess of your son; so do the god clan's
charioteers, lightning-flinging Sahasrākṣa foremost of their lot; likewise does the Indra among Nāgas in Pātāla; and so the Indra among mortals on this earth. Why, tell me Mother, do you fear for me today? That Rāma is beneath contempt! Why should you, pray tell, fear him?"

The queen, with warm affection, kissed his head and said, "He is a man with a wizard's powers, my child, this husband of Vaidehī, or else he is assisted by the whole god clan. When you bound them both with nāgapāsas, who was it who then loosed those bonds? Who saved them, in a fight at night, when you shackled Rāghava and all his forces? All this I fail to comprehend. I have heard tell that when Maithili's lord so orders, stones float on water, fires die, and rains pour down! A man of wizardry, this Rāma! How, my dearest child, can I bid you leave to vie with him again? Alas, Fate, why oh why did star-crossed Sūrpanākhā not wither in her mother's womb!" So saying, the queen wept silently.

Said the elephant of warriors, "By dwelling on events gone by, you lament now, Mother, for no good reason. Our enemies are at the city's gates. How could I relax until I crush them in pitched battle? When Hutāśana attacks a house, who is there who stays asleep inside? The Rākṣasa clan, famed, feared in all three worlds by gods, Daityas,
and men alike, should I—your ladyship, O Mother—should

I, Indrajit, the son of Rāvaṇa, let Rāghava

inflict infamy upon our clan? My grandfather, your

father, Maya, an Indra among Danu's scions—what

would he say if he learned of this? What of all my uncles,

your charioteer brothers? The entire universe

would laugh! Command your humble thrall. I shall go do battle,

Mother, shall destroy that Rāghava! Just listen: birds are

cooing in the garden. The sun's foe yields. I must worship

my deity of choice and then, with a contingent of

Rākṣasas most difficult to overcome, I shall join

the fight. Return now, madam, to your residence. Soon I,

victorious in combat, shall be back and with fervor

worship at your pair of lotus feet! Father's permission

I have gained—now please give me yours. Who can contend with your

slave, your ladyship, once you have yielded him your blessings?"

Then wiping tears away with the jeweled free end of her

sari, the queen of Laṅkā answered, "If you have to go,

my dear—may Virūpākṣa, guardian of Rākṣasas,

guard you in this deadly conflict. This I beg at his two

feet. What more can I say? You desert me in this room now

void of my affections' fancy." The queen cried as she spoke,

but glanced toward Pramilā. "Stay with me, little mother; I
soothe my wretched heart gazing at your moon-like face. Mother

earth during Moon's dark fortnight is cheered by beams of starlight."

That one of strong limbs bowed before his mother's feet, then took

his leave. Weeping, the royal consort with her son's wife went

again to her quarters. Shunning his palanquin, the prince

walked the path leading to the woods—with determination

that best of charioteers strode on down the flowered path-

way to the entrance of the temple of the sacrifice.

Suddenly, from behind, there came the sound of ankle bells.

Ever recognizable, ah yes, to a lover's ears

are the sounds his woman's footsteps make. That Indra among

warriors smiled, embracing rapturously in the confines

of his arms that lotus-face, that Pramālā. "Alas, my

lord," said the pretty one, "I had planned on going with you

to the temple and outfitting you in your warrior's garb.

But what was I to do? Mother-in-law would have me take

refuge in her home. Yet I, however, could not stay there,

without gazing once again upon your feet. I have heard

that even just a sliver of the moon shines bright from the

brilliance of the sun; so is it with this slave of yours, O

sun among the Rākṣasa clan! Without you, I swear, the

world is gloom, my lord!" Then onto her pearl-studded breast, her

eyes rained pearls of even greater radiance. Compared to
530 those, what worthless things are dewdrops upon lotus petals?

Responded the finest of warriors, "I shall soon return,

after overcoming Rāghava in battle, O my

Laṅkā-beautifier. Go back, my darling, to our queen

of Laṅkā. Rohiṇi, chaste wife of mine, rises prior
to the moon! Did Fate create, faithful wife, those lotus eyes
to cry? Why, my pet, have storm clouds gathered in those vaults of

light? Give your consent, beauteous one—just look, Night, tipsy

on the liquor of delusion, has fled quickly, thinking

you to be Dawn—grant me permission, most chaste woman, that

I might carry on, to the temple of the sacrifice."

540

As when the champion Kusumeṣu, on Indra's orders,

left his Rati and set off that fateful moment to break

Śiva's meditation; just so, alas, set off then this

Kandarpa-like hero Indrajit, leaving his pure wife

Pramālā, the epitome of Rati. At a most

ill-fated time Madana embarked upon his journey;
at an equally ill-fated moment set off hero

Meghanāda—the hope of the Rākṣasa clan, in all

the world invincible! Ah, the march of destiny, who

has the power to impede its progress? As Rati once

lamented, so too, presently, did youthful Pramilā.

550 All this time the Rākṣasa wife had been brushing back her
tears. She stared in the direction of her husband some ways
off and spoke in a mellifluous voice, "I know why you
roam dense forests, O king of elephants. Once you have seen
that gait of his, how could you, shameless, show your face again,
vain one? Who would say your waist is slender, lion, once his
eyes have seen the beast with yellow eyes amidst our clan of
Rākṣasa? That is also why you remain forever
exiled to the forest. You may slay the elephant, but
this lion of a warrior with his awesome bludgeon has
subdued in battle Vāsava, eternal enemy
of the clan of Daityas and sovereign of the clan of gods."

With this, that chaste wife, her hands together in a sign of
supplication, gazing toward the sky, still weeping, prayed, "This
Pramālā, your humble slave, O daughter of the Indra
among mountains, beseeches you. Cast your glance of mercy,
maid of mercy, upon Laṅkā. Protect him, the greatest
of the Rākṣasas, in this struggle. Clothe that champion in
impregnable armor. I, a vine, supported always
by you, Satī, this vine's life depends upon that kingly
tree. Please see to it, Mother, that no battle-ax befalls
him. What more can your servant say? You are Antaryāmī.
But for you, O Jagadambā, who is there to save him?"

As breezes waft a wealth of fragrance into the quarters
of the king, just so the voice-bearing firmament bore those prayers of Pramilā to the residence on Kailāsa.

Indra trembled fearfully. Observing this, the sovereign of the winds, with a zephyr's speed, floated them away. That chaste wife, wiping her teary eyes, turned back—as cowherd wives, about to lose their lover, bid good-bye to Mādhava on the Yamunā's shores, and empty-hearted return to empty houses, so, weeping still, that woman went back home.

Thus ends canto number five,
called "preparations,"
in the poem

_The Slaying of Meghanāda_