THE COMPLETE RAMAYANA

BOOK 3

RAMA GOES INTO EXILE

PARO ANAND

juggernaut

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To Chiki Sarkar,
who knew I could do this, though I didn't.

And to Keshav,
whose love gave me the confidence
to take the leap.

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FROM CHITRAKOOT TO DANDAKA

After Bharata and all the others had been persuaded to leave Chitrakoot and return to Ayodhya, Rama, Lakshmana and Sita settled down to what they thought would be a long, peaceful stay in the ashram of Chitrakoot. However, that was not to be. Every now and then, strange sounds like cruel laughter would come from the depths of the forest, as though the forest itself was mocking them all. Worse was that sometimes, when the rishis set about their business of collecting fruits and flowers for

worship, there would be a cry of pain, followed by deathly silence. And the rishis would never be seen in the ashram again.

Rama had been watching the ashram for several days now. Whenever he approached a group of rishis, they fell quiet, eyes turned to the ground. He began to suspect why.

He sought out the kul-pati – the head of the ashram – and went to him with folded hands.

'Maharishi, please tell me the truth. Have I brought sorrow to this serene place?'

The old sage hesitated. Rama had been through so much already, but the truth was what it was.

'You have, child. But not by any fault of your own,' he sighed. 'The rakshasas of Janasthana have heard that you are nearby. The cruel laughter you hear at night – that is them. The rishis who go into the forest and do not return – the demons devour them.'



Rama's face fell.

'They think you and Lakshmana are easy prey,' the sage went on. 'Two princes alone, against an army. They could not be more mistaken, but until they learn that, no one here is safe. So we have decided that the ashram must be abandoned.'

Rama's hands tightened.

'Then it is not the rishis who must go,' he breathed. 'It is we.'

Thus, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana became wandering hermits once more.

During the early years of their exile, the trio wandered through the dreaded Dandaka Forest. They met wise rishis and received their blessings. The sages shone with the power of their deep tapas. Their meditation, good deeds and sacrifices had given them powers unknown to ordinary men.