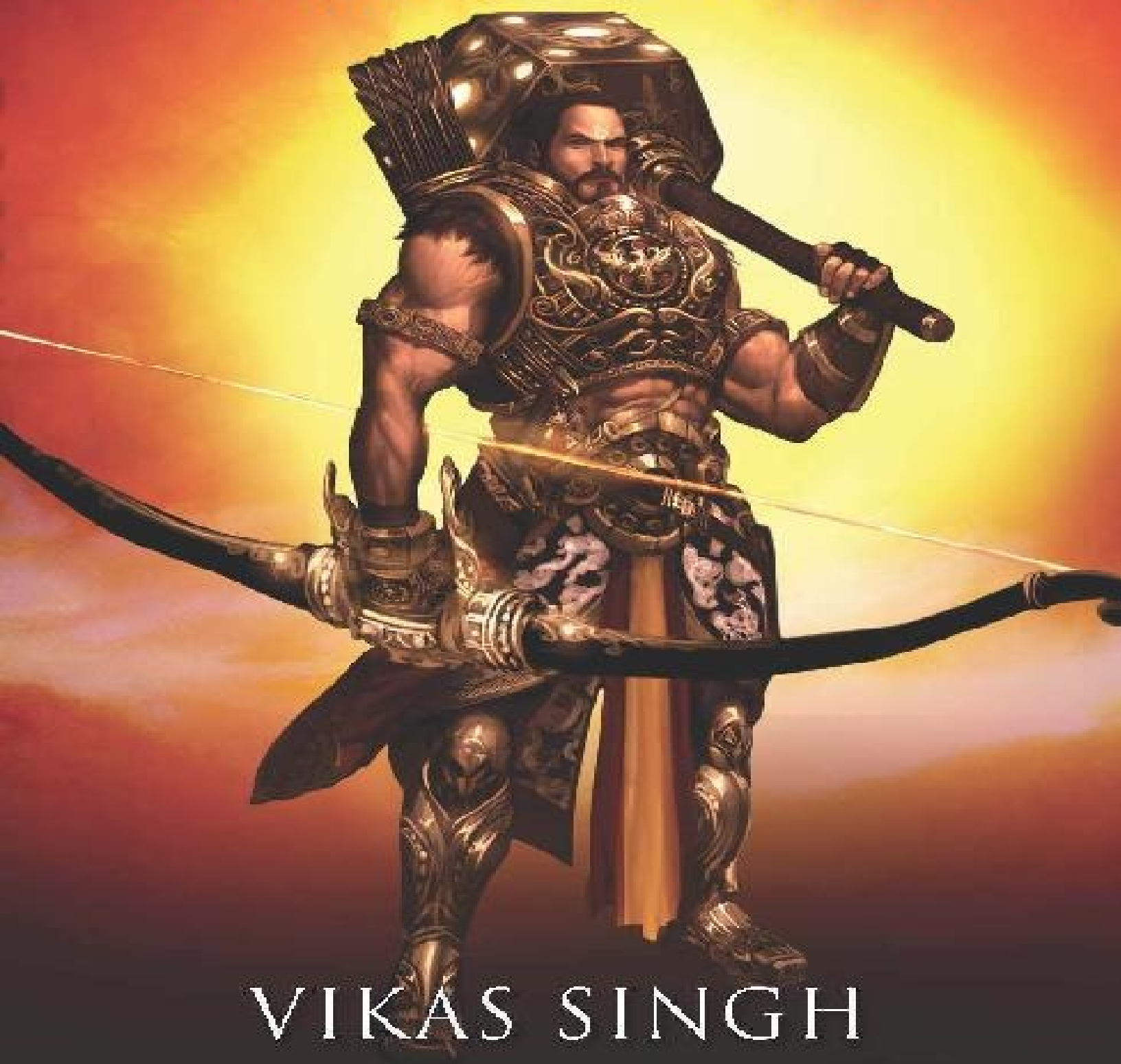


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VIKAS SINGH



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westland ltd

61, II Floor, Silverline Building, Alapakkam Main Road, Maduravoyal, Chennai 600095

93, I Floor, Sham Lal Road, New Delhi 110002

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To Premlata and Shyampriya
Wonderful grandmothers and fabulous storytellers

CHAPTER 1

Dusshasana lies whimpering at my feet. He's pleading for mercy, but all I can hear are Draupadi's cries as he dragged her through the gambling hall, her menstrual blood staining the pristine marble floor. He raises an imploring hand – the same hand with which he had brutally yanked her hair as she tried desperately to hold on to one pillar after another; and then, scrabbled frantically at the floor.

This memory has consumed me for years. It has eaten away my insides, burnt my gut. Every morning, I flinch when I see Draupadi's unbound hair. I have come to dread sleep, because I know the nightmare will return every time I shut my eyes. That I will wake up screaming in anguish. And rage. Rage at Duryodhana and Dusshasana, Shakuni and Karna. Rage at the ostensibly wise and powerful men, who mutely watched that despicable spectacle. Rage at the wilful stupidity of Yudhishtira. And, above all, rage at my own helplessness – at the impotence of a warrior who could not protect his beloved wife.

Many times since that day, I've contemplated killing myself. But I made many vows on that terrible day, and I intend to fulfil all of them. That is the one thing that has kept me going all these years.

"Please," begs Dusshasana, bringing me back to the present. "You've already killed ninety-eight of us. Can't you spare just two, for the sake of our parents? Please, brother."

I laugh out loud. Even to me, it sounds hollow and chilling. Yes, I have killed ninety-eight of those incubated freaks – though I suppose I'm the last one who should talk about unnatural circumstances of birth. I killed most of them matter-of-factly, without feeling any great emotion. They were, after all, essentially inconsequential characters trapped in circumstances far beyond their control.

But in Vikarna's case, I had actually felt a pang of regret – he was the lone Kaurava to have protested against the way Draupadi was treated. But Vikarna had taken the field against us, perhaps out of a misguided sense of loyalty to his brothers. I know the feeling. Hadn't I done the same, when Yudhishtira had tied my hands, forced me to watch the love of my life being dragged across the floor and exposed barbarically for strange men to gaze lustfully upon? I made sure to give Vikarna a quick death, snapping his neck with one fluid motion.

But Dusshasana was different. This one was personal. I was going to take

enormous pleasure in this.

I drop my mace. A look of relief crosses Dusshasana's face. He seems to think he's going to get a reprieve. Then he sees me flex my fingers and his eyes widen in horror.

"No," he bleats. "No, please."

A red haze settles before my eyes. I'm acutely aware of what I'm doing, but my mind feels disconnected from my body. It is as if I'm watching someone else.

I grasp Dusshasana's right arm and rip it out of his body as he utters a long, agonised wail. Then I plunge my fingers into his chest and tear his torso apart. I yank out his heart and bite into it. I bend over him and swallow a mouthful of his blood. I rip out his entrails and unceremoniously dump them into his helmet, along with his heart. Then, I pick up the helmet of another fallen warrior and fill it with Dusshasana's blood. I made a promise, I will keep it!

"Rest in pieces, brother," I mutter, and march back to our camp, holding my grim booty. In some recess of my brain, I vaguely notice that allies and foes alike are taking care to give me a very wide berth. I couldn't care less.

I walk unceremoniously into Draupadi's tent. Her ladies-in-waiting take one look at my blood-stained face and shriek in terror.

Draupadi leaps up, shocked. "It's still daylight. And, you've returned from the battlefield? Is everything all right?"

I hold up the helmets with trails of blood running down the sides. "I've brought you Dusshasana. His blood, his heart and his gut."

One of the women slumps to the ground. Draupadi's face is very still. "Take her away and leave us alone. All of you," she says.

The women are only too happy to comply. Draupadi is still wearing an inscrutable expression. "Wash my hair," she purrs softly.

I pour the blood over her head. I use Dusshasana's entrails to finally tie up her tresses. And I use his heart to decorate her hair.

Draupadi looks into the mirror and nods slowly, approvingly. Then she turns to me. There is a hungry look on her face. A lustful look. My heart thuds uncontrollably.

"Sit," she says urgently. I obey. She leaps on me ferociously. She shoves her tongue into my mouth. There is a metallic taste in my mouth from the blood that I have consumed, but it only inflames her further. She rapidly helps me out of my armour and rips off her clothes in a frenzy. She straddles me, already wet and hot.

Usually, when I'm with her, I try my best to be gentle, acutely conscious of the

disparity between my gigantic body and her fragile frame. Our love-making tends to be slow and tender. But today is different. She licks my face. She claws at me. She bites me ferociously. She rocks up and down, back and forth. She shoves her breasts into my mouth. I've never seen her so passionate. A violent shudder runs through her body, and I feel her inner sheath clamp tight around me. Dimly, I realise that her eyes are shut and she's moaning something. I strain to hear what she's saying.

"Arjun," she sighs. "Oh, Arjun."

I feel as if a bucket of cold water has been dumped on me. I shove her away angrily, almost viciously. Her eyes fly open.

"What's the matter?" she asks. Then as if realising what she has said, she covers her mouth with her hand, almost as though trying to force the words back. "I'm so sorry. I didn't..."

Her words trail away as I stalk off, furious.

I have committed the ultimate sin, of fratricide. Not once but ninety-nine times already. And, I will do so again. All for the love of a woman. The love of a woman who loves someone else. Even in our most intense intimate moments, she imagines she is with him.

My name is Bhima. The second Pandava. The man forever destined to live in the shadows. This is my story...

CHAPTER 2

I fell hopelessly in love with Draupadi the moment I first saw her. Rather unfortunate, since her parents had raised her with the specific intention of getting her married to Arjun – a fact that she was constantly reminded of. Indeed, she had been told tales of his valour and prowess so many times that she probably fell in love with the romantic hero long before she ever cast eyes upon the actual man.

In all fairness to Arjun though, Draupadi would probably have been smitten by him even if she had never heard a word about him. He is, after all, extremely easy to love. He's relatively tall – which is to say that he barely makes it to my chest but is taller than most other people. It's strange how he can make me feel inadequate even though I tower over him. He has a well-muscled, but lithe body. He is handsome, in a very masculine way, unlike Nakula's pretty boy looks. He's articulate, witty and charming. And, of course, he just happens to be the greatest living archer on earth – never mind what Karna might have to say on the subject.

Arjun conquers kingdoms and women with equal ease, and is unfailingly gracious while doing so. Drupada, if you remember, was defeated and captured by Arjun, who then presented him to our guru, Drona, in chains. Drona had then proceeded to mercilessly humiliate his unfortunate captive, reminding Drupada of how he had forgotten his childhood vow to share his good fortune with his impoverished friend. "Today, everything you had is mine. And it is you who stands like a beggar in front of me," Drona had taunted. Eventually, he had returned half of Drupada's erstwhile kingdom to him, but the scars of his tongue-lashing had never faded from the embittered monarch's heart.

Not exactly the most propitious of circumstances under which to meet someone for the first time – and yet the defeated king was so charmed by the young warrior that he had resolved there and then to make him his son-in-law, even as he swore vengeance upon Drona for his humiliation.

I had played a role in that battle too, single-handedly holding back Drupada's bodyguards as Arjun leapt onto Drupada's chariot and subdued him, but that went unnoticed. As usual. I've spent a lifetime being cast into the shadow by the splendour of my charismatic younger brother.

In any case, I'm no father's idea of a gallant, young groom for a beloved daughter. I'm massive, ungainly and awkward – everywhere except on the

battlefield. The contrast with Arjun couldn't possibly be any greater. We're both used to being stared at. The difference is that people usually look at Arjun with appreciation and admiration, and at me with astonishment and apprehension.

Do I resent him? Well... not any longer. When we were children, it hurt to see the way our mother doted upon him, despite her protestations of loving us all equally. I'm not sure whether she deliberately lied to us. Maybe she truly believed what she said. But then, she couldn't see her own face, or the way it lit up when she looked at him.

If I had any illusions, they ended the day she caught me cuffing Arjun around his ears. I've forgotten what the provocation was. It must have been one of those minor spats that siblings keep having. But Mother was not happy.

"Stop it, Bhima," she had scolded me. "You are not to raise your hand on your younger brother. Do you understand?"

"But he started it," I had protested.

"He is a child and doesn't know any better, but you are his elder. Surely you can show some maturity," she had shot back.

The injustice of this became immediately apparent to me. "How come the same logic doesn't apply to me and Yudhishtira?" I had protested.

Mother hadn't deigned to respond. She had simply given me a look that reduced me to instant, quivering silence. Till her last day, she had that effect on me.

She was always a formidable woman, but Arjun could cuddle and kiss and tease her in a way that none of us ever dared to, least of all me. Since I was completely hopeless at displaying affection through words or gestures, I tried to do so through actions. I would tirelessly run errands for Mother, or do things that I thought would make her happy.

This pattern, set in early childhood, would become a recurring theme later in all my relationships with the women I cared about. Sometimes, they noticed. Mostly, they took it for granted. Still, I was grateful for any scraps of attention that came my way.

It didn't help, either, that Arjun was always the star pupil while I was the proverbial class dunce. I tried. I really did. But words and numbers were my enemies, floating mockingly around as I tried despairingly to pin them down. When I look back, I recollect a sad, lonely, severely obese child, constantly gulping down huge portions of food. I ate long after my hunger had been satiated, because there was another void within me that I was trying to fill. But no matter how much I ate, I just felt progressively more miserable.

And then, one morning, my life changed. Our cousins Krishna and Balaram had come to visit us at our jungle home for a stay over. I rose early, headed out of the *ashram* to take a crap and was returning, mission accomplished, when I saw a sight that left me completely puzzled. Balaram was on all fours. Then, he dipped down so that his chest touched the ground, and then he pushed himself back up. He performed several repetitions of this strange act as his huge muscles rippled like coiled snakes under his skin. There was a light sheen of sweat on his body, but he didn't seem to mind. Actually, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

He looked up and saw me. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"It's called a push-up," he replied. "Want to try?"

I assumed the position, tried to gently lower myself down, and promptly fell flat on my face.

I looked up at him, red-faced and humiliated, waiting for the inevitable burst of laughter. There was none. "Maybe we should start you on something gentler," he said kindly. "Would you like to join me in my workout?"

It was the beginning of a life-long passion. Balaram and I exercised together every single day that he was there. On the day that he was leaving, he drew up an exercise schedule for me, as well as a diet chart. I cheated on the diet all the time, but scrupulously did the exercises.

Every time we met thereafter, Balaram would check on my progress – which was gratifyingly rapid. Pretty soon, I could manage push-ups. Then, I moved on to doing them with one hand, and then, on my fingertips. And when even that got too easy, I started doing them with Nakul or Sahadeva sitting on my back.

The flab melted away gradually, and muscles developed, even as my height spurted. Suddenly, I had a sense of self-worth. As I began to enjoy the abilities of my newly honed body, I looked for more ways to express my physicality. I developed a passion for wrestling, and then for fighting with the mace. As the years went by, I also learnt special moves and tricks from *rishis* who had forsaken the use of weapons but were masters of hand-to-hand combat, capable of using the head, elbows, fists, knees and even feet as deadly weapons.

Now that I was finally good at something, I found that I could make my peace with the fact that Arjun would always be the shining star among us five brothers. I had found an aptitude for something, and it was better to focus on developing that, rather than wasting time and energy on envy.

Yes, I owe Balaram a debt that I can never repay. But every now and then, I wonder why he took me under his wing. Was it simply out of a sense of pity? Or, was it empathy? After all, who could understand better than him what it felt

like to constantly live in the shadow of an extraordinarily gifted, charismatic younger sibling?

CHAPTER 3

I met my natural father for the first time on the day that my mother's husband died. It also happened to be the day that I killed someone in combat for the first time. It was quite a day, though I had no inkling any of this would happen when I had woken up that morning.

The day started uneventfully enough. We had a rare holiday from our classes (even though we were living in the forest, Mother insisted that we receive an education appropriate for princes; and so, most mornings were spent grappling with subjects that bored me to tears). But once a week, we were allowed to take a day off. On that particular day, we were playing hide-and-seek.

The boundaries of our *ashram* had been clearly demarcated, and it had been repeatedly impressed upon us that we were not to venture beyond them under any circumstances. But that day, I was feeling adventurous. My new-found strength had given me a certain arrogant confidence about my invulnerability. Besides, I wasn't a child any more. I'd turned eleven a few days back and was already as tall as Father. Broader too, come to think of it – Father always was rather gaunt.

"I won't go too far into the forest," I told myself. "Just a little distance, so that no one will be able to catch me, and then I'll double back."

That was the plan anyway. But when I tried to return home, I found myself confused. Was I supposed to go left or right? Both paths looked identical. I gambled on right, and soon found myself standing at another confusing crossroad. I blundered on for a while till I had to acknowledge that I was hopelessly lost.

I wasn't really alarmed, but was irritated at my own stupidity. I knew I was going to be in serious trouble with Mother when I got back, which would probably mean no dessert for a few days. And Mr Goody Two Shoes Yudhishtira would doubtless give me a long lecture on rules and responsibilities, I reflected sourly. Father spent most of his time in prayer and penance for the terrible sin of having killed the *rishi* Kindama and his wife after mistaking them for a pair of deer while hunting. This had happened well before we were born, but the guilt still consumed him and he spent most of his time miserably re-living that fateful moment. So, Yudhishtira had appointed himself to fill in the vacuum created by Father's indifference to us.

Not for the first time, I reflected that someone should have told Father that while he had certainly made a terrible mistake, it was, after all, not deliberate. So he really didn't need to be so guilt-ridden that he allowed one episode, however unfortunate, to colour the rest of his life – and ours as well.

And, Yudhishtira really needed to get a life. I could never recall him behaving like a child, he always seemed to be a mini-adult. Why did he always have to take himself so damn seriously?

Years later, with greater maturity, I would look back with sympathy – indeed, almost pity – for Yudhishtira's predicament. He had not asked to be born into those circumstances. Or for that matter even to be the first-born. He coped as best as he could, and given his acute sensitivity and over-developed sense of responsibility, it was sadly inevitable that he would never really experience the joys of childhood. But I only became capable of such insight years later.

At that particular moment, I was hopelessly lost in a dense forest, and starting to feel both hungry and thirsty. And then, things got seriously worse.

I stumbled upon a clearing in the forest. And suddenly, I had this uncomfortable sensation of being watched. An instant later, my instinct was proved correct as six large figures emerged from the woods. Each one of them comfortably stood at least a head taller than me and their bodies were coated with thick fur.

“*Rakshasas*,” I whispered, trying to remember whatever I had been told about the demon species. Apparently, humans and *rakshasas* shared a common ancestor, but at some point in the evolution process, we had branched out into two different species. They weren't as intelligent as humans but were taller and a lot stronger. As the two species competed furiously for the same space, we often clashed – and in the course of these battles, *rakshasas* had come to develop a taste for human flesh.

The six standing in front of me were positively drooling. “Well, well, what have we here?” hissed one of them, the tallest. “A poor little lost human?”

“Not so little, by their puny standards,” said another. “Actually, he'll make for a delicious meal. Lots of juicy meat.”

I felt a jolt of something go through me. Fear? I'd be a liar if I said that I wasn't feeling scared. But there was more. Much more. There was a sense of excitement. Anticipation. Exultation. And utter, indescribable joy. I could feel the blood pumping in my veins. I felt gloriously, headily alive. Suddenly, I wanted this fight. And, to hell with the consequences.

“Run, little man-child,” crooned the *rakhasa* who had spoken first. Probably

their leader, I thought. "Make it a little more fun for us."

I thought about flight and rejected the idea. Not when every pore of my body was screaming for action. I deliberately pointed at them one by one, and then beckoned them closer. "Bring it on," I taunted.

They exchanged surprised glances. "Well, well, well! The manling wants to fight," said their leader. "Aren't you the brave one? So noble. And, so pathetic!", he spat.

He was right in front of me now, and reached out towards me. I grabbed his wrist, pivoted and threw him over my hip. He landed hard on the ground, with the breath knocked out of him.

His companions bellowed in rage and charged. The first one to reach me wrapped his huge ham-like hands around my neck. I didn't bother trying to break the choke-hold. Instead, I simply punched him, very hard, right on his heart. He released me and crumpled to the ground. The next one tried to envelope me in a bear hug. I gripped both his forearms and let myself fall back. As I landed on the ground, I planted my feet in his stomach. Using the momentum I had generated, I pushed out with my legs and sent him flying through the air. He landed awkwardly on his head.

By this time, the other three had descended upon me. Two of them grabbed hold of an arm apiece. The third came up behind me, locked his muscular arm around my neck and began to cut off the air supply to my brain. I kicked out at the two holding my arms, to no avail. Then, I dug my teeth into the arm that was choking me. I bit deep and hard, and drew blood. The *rakshasa* cursed loudly, but held on. The harder I bit, the tighter his hold became, almost strangling me. I began to feel consciousness slipping away.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light and a stranger emerged, quite literally out of the blue. He seemed human – but different, mainly because his skin glowed, exuding an almost blinding radiance. Through my blurring vision, I vaguely saw that his well-muscled torso was completely covered with tattoos of strange symbols.

The stranger gestured with his hand; and suddenly, one of the *rakshasas* holding my arm flew several feet through the air before landing on the ground with a thump. He repeated the gesture, with the same effect upon the other *rakshasa*. Then he turned to the one trying to choke me. He said a few words and gestured again. Suddenly, the *rakshasa* let go of me and grabbed his own neck. His chest heaved, and gasping sounds emanated from him. He tried to speak, but no words came out. His face turned blue, his tongue protruded, and he soon

fell to the ground, dead at his own hands.

Three of his companions took one look at his fate and bolted. I massaged my throat and took several deep breaths, trying to get some oxygen back into my tortured lungs. As I did so, the stranger examined the two other *rakshasas* left lying on the ground.

“This one’s heart stopped when you punched him there,” he said clinically. “It must have been pumping extra hard because of all the excitement and that blow, delivered from such close quarters at that precise moment, caused instant cardiac arrest. I’ve heard that it’s theoretically possible, but I’d never actually seen it with my own eyes till today. And this one broke his neck when he landed awkwardly on his head. He’s never going to use his limbs again. I might as well put him out of his misery.” Which he proceeded to do with some more murmuring and gesticulating.

Then he turned towards me. I could have sworn that I saw a flash of pride in his eyes. “Quite a scrapper, aren’t you? In another part of the world, they’d probably call you a berserker. No surprise, I guess. You have excellent genes, even if I do say so myself.”

None of what he’d said made any sense to me. So, once I’d got some breath back, I said, “Thank you very much for saving me. But who on earth are you?”

He smiled. “Well, on Earth, they call me a *deva*. Or at least in this part of the Earth anyway. Humans have different names for us in different parts of the world. But everywhere on the planet, they worship us as gods. Between you and me, the truth is that we’re just aliens, keeping a benevolent eye on our backward earthling cousins.”

“Eh?” I said. It was all my even more befuddled brain could come up with.

He smiled. “There are many parallel universes, inhabited by different beings, at different stages of evolution. Ordinarily, it is not possible to travel from one universe to another. However, my people have managed to create portals through which we can do so. Some of us have dedicated our lives to acting as guardians of other universes. We usually keep a low profile, but every now and then, we have to step in, like I did just now.”

“You’re not a god?” I asked. “But what I just saw you do was completely supernatural.”

He shook his head. “It’s all science. Technology only seems supernatural to the uninitiated. What would you say if I told you that you could talk to someone thousands of miles away, using a simple device?”

“I’d say, you are joking. That it is impossible,” I replied immediately.

He threw back his head and laughed. "It's already happening in half-a-dozen universes, and I have no doubt that humans will get there too, in maybe a few thousand years. In the case of my race, we've bypassed the device and can communicate using telepathy. But believe me, most things that are called magic can be explained by the laws of physics or chemistry or biology. You just have to look long and deep and hard enough."

"You mean there's no such thing as God?" I asked, desperately trying to process all the startling new ideas being hurled at me.

He looked thoughtful. "There are still some questions to which we haven't been able to find answers, and that is one of them. In my very long life, I've found that the more information you acquire, the more you realise just how little you actually know."

"If you say so," I replied. It was a lot of stuff for me to take in at one go. "Er, do you have a name?"

He nodded. "Vayu. But in your case, it would probably be more appropriate to call me Father."

My head snapped up at that. "What did you say?" I thundered, eyes narrowed. "I'm the son of King Pandu. How dare you imply otherwise?"

I suddenly realised that I'd clenched my fists.

He held up a calming hand. "Peace, young warrior. I can see there's a lot that you haven't been told. Well, suffice it to say that your father was biologically incapable of siring children."

"What does that mean?" I demanded. "You get married and you have children and that's that."

He clutched his brow in mock despair. "Son, I think someone really needs to have a man-to-man talk with you at some point. Maybe I will, in a couple of years. But for now, just trust me when I say that the birth of children is, umm... a bit like raising crops from a field. The male provides the seed and the woman acts like the earth, nurturing the seed and eventually producing the crops that are harvested."

"Wait," I said, genuinely puzzled. "How does the male seed get into the female earth?"

"This is not the time for Biology 101," he replied hastily. Really, he had such a strange way of expressing himself. "Suffice it to say that, errr... the seed that resulted in your birth came from me and it was all done without any physical contact between me and your mother. In all the multiple universes, the only races with which we're capable of cohabiting or producing children are the ones

found on earth, which is why we take a particular interest in this planet.”

“Wait a minute,” I interjected again, as a thought suddenly struck me. “If my father is incapable of, um... providing the seed, what about my other brothers?”

“All of them are half-human, half-alien. An interesting experiment on our part. As best as we’ve figured out so far, the alien genes within you will give each one of you some special skills and powers, but you’ll otherwise be driven by completely human emotions.”

“But, but...” I stammered. “Why did you and the others father the five of us?”

A shadow momentarily crossed his face. “It’s a long story. Some day, you may want to ask your mother that. For now, I think you should return to the *ashram*.” He gestured, and a shining light formed a trail along the ground. “Follow that path, and you’ll get home. I suspect the journey that lies ahead of you is a long and difficult one, but never forget who you are and where you came from. Make me proud.”

And then, he disappeared. Just like that. One second he was there, and the next he was gone.

CHAPTER 4

I stumbled back home, completely dazed. As I entered the *ashram*, I realised that something was very, very wrong. My brothers were weeping. Mother was sitting on the ground, leaning against a cottage wall. Her whole body was rigid and she had a faraway look in her eyes, as if she was only holding herself together by sheer force of will.

“Where the hell have you been?” yelled Yudhishtira.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, already knowing that the answer would be something dreadful.

“Father is dead,” replied Yudhishtira. “His heart suddenly stopped while he was frolicking with Mother Madri. She’s so consumed with guilt that she has decided to join him on the funeral pyre. We’ve made all the arrangements and have been looking for you for ages so that you could be present at the cremation.”

At that point, my brain shut down. It had simply had too much thrown at it within the past few hours. I numbly watched the proceedings without registering a thing. Towards the end, I heard a cracking sound as the bones split and melted. It struck me then, with the force of a physical blow to the stomach, that the man I had called Father all these years was gone, and that I would never see him again. My half-mother too was gone. Nakul and Sahadeva had been orphaned twice over. And that’s when I finally broke down and howled my grief out to the indifferent sky.

Later, Mother addressed the five of us. “All of you are my children, and my responsibility. We have been invited by your uncle, King Dhritarashtra, to return to Hastinapura. Life in the palace will be far more comfortable than it is here, but it will also be full of intrigue. No matter what happens, the five of you must always stay united, because you can only truly trust each other. Promise me that you will obey Yudhishtira no matter what, and never challenge or question him.”

As she uttered the last sentence, she looked intently at me. I somehow sensed immediately what she was thinking. I was younger than Yudhishtira by barely a couple of years, far more physically powerful and infinitely more headstrong than him. He would never be able to withstand any challenge to his authority by me. If I stayed in line, the others would too.

In retrospect, I wish I could have seen the future. If I could have foreseen how

I would come to regret making that promise, perhaps I would have refused to promise to do so. Or at least, I would have beseeched Mother for an exit clause. If I had, I would not have been forced to mutely watch the terrible atrocities and injustices meted out to Draupadi in the gambling hall at Hastinapura. But unfortunately, we have to act as we see best at a certain point in time, and live with the consequences that follow – intended or otherwise.

I looked Mother squarely in the eye. And very slowly, I nodded. “I promise.”

CHAPTER 5

Krishna winks surreptitiously at Arjun and inclines his head slightly. Arjun nods, rises and begins to walk towards the bow. It's probably the first time since we took our seats among the Brahmins at the gathering that he's taken his eyes off Draupadi. Nor is he the only one who's been staring fixedly at her. Hundreds of male eyes, including mine, have been gaping at her all day, awestruck by her beauty.

If Draupadi feels self-conscious, she's done an excellent job of masking it. She has been sitting serenely throughout the day, rarely revealing any expression. The audience has laughed and cheered, groaned and sighed as hundreds of warriors have attempted and failed at the challenge set before them, but her face has remained expressionless.

In fact, she spoke only once, but her words fell upon the gathering like a thunderclap. It was when she informed Karna that the son of a charioteer could not possibly be a contender for her hand.

Karna's face had turned absolutely red. "He's looking like a rainbow," sniggered Arjun. "Red face, yellow hair."

I had smiled, though I didn't really find it funny. Actually, I had to grudgingly admit that the usually golden-complexioned warrior had handled the awkward situation with commendable dignity. He had gently set the bow back on the bench on which it was placed, bowed to it, then bowed to Drupada, turned around and marched out of the hall without saying a word.

Even though he's Arjun's foremost rival and Duryodhana's best friend, I couldn't help feeling a pang of sympathy for him. No brave warrior deserved to be publicly humiliated like this. If his birth disqualified him, why had they invited him to participate in the first place? Sure, excluding him right from the start would have been a snub, but it would have been a relatively mild affront compared to this colossal insult. Draupadi, quite clearly, was a woman with a mind of her own, and was perfectly willing to speak it.

Arjun is certainly going to have a stimulating time with her, I think, and unexpectedly, I feel a dagger go through my heart. "She's going to be your sister-in-law," I tell myself sternly. "This is completely inappropriate. For heaven's sake, get a grip on yourself."

By now, Arjun has reached the bow. He shuts his eyes, folds his hands and

takes a couple of deep breaths. I know he's centering himself, marshalling his formidable powers of concentration to the point where everything but the target ceases to exist. I watch him, fascinated. Even though I must have seen him do this a thousand times by now, I never cease to be spellbound by the sight of a master going about his craft.

Arjun picks up the bow, notches an arrow, goes down on one knee and looks at the vat of oil in which the rotating fish is reflected. His movements are elegant and unhurried. He waits, as the wheel suspended above him turns once, then twice. He makes minute adjustments.

And then he shoots.

Bull's-eye! Or should that be a fish-eye?

There's pin-drop silence. And then, all hell breaks loose. The Brahmins are cheering wildly. The Kshatriyas, on the other hand, are on their feet protesting.

"This is an outrage," they cry. "We won't allow ourselves to be mocked like this."

The young prince of Panchala, Dhrishtadyumna, and the palace guards quickly form a protective cordon around Draupadi and the king. But Arjun is standing there alone.

There's a swishing sound as one of the kings pulls out his sword. "If the princess will not marry someone of royal blood, then she will not marry at all. This upstart Brahmin who doesn't know his place will not leave here alive," he bellows. Others too draw their weapons. They think they'll be fighting one lone young priest. Well, they're about to find out the hard way that they're very wrong.

I quickly vault into the enclosure. The first king to draw his sword charges at Arjun, but I intercept him. I seize his right wrist and twist it, none too gently. He cries out in pain, and the sword clatters to the floor. Then I pick him up by the throat and casually toss him away, as if he were a doll. He lands on three others and they all go down in a heap.

The other Kshatriyas pause. I look around for a weapon of any kind and notice the bench on which the bow had been lying. It's big and broad, and looks like it's made of good, solid metal. In the right hands, wielded like a sort of battering ram, it can do considerable damage. I pick it up and glare at the wide-eyed warriors and kings standing before me.

"Anybody who wants to get to him has to go through me," I announce calmly.

"And us," chime in Nakul and Sahadeva. The twins have snatched up a couple of swords from the four kings lying in an undignified heap, and are now flanking

me on either side. They have broad grins on their handsome faces.

A couple of seconds later, Yudhishtira joins the line. He has managed to acquire a spear from somewhere, probably from one of the guards. He doesn't say anything, just brandishes the spear with a meaningful flourish. He doesn't particularly like fighting, but I know that when he puts his mind to it, he's a formidable warrior to have in your ranks.

Krishna quickly steps in. "Come now," he says soothingly. "The rules were made clear before the contest began, and there is no denying that this young man has won fair and square. It ill-behooves the cream of Aryavrata to behave like sore losers. I request all of you to graciously accept the result, and bless the young couple. Victory and loss – be it in a contest or in a battle – are not in our hands. But the one thing that is in our control, the one option that we can always exercise, is to show generosity of spirit. As the greatest warriors of this realm, surely you can find it within yourself to be as gallant in defeat as you would have been magnanimous in triumph?"

I smile grimly. My honey-tongued cousin has just given these rats a face-saving way out. I have no doubt that we can take them on. But I suppose that from the organisers' point of view, it would be rather unfortunate if Arjun has to step over a pile of bodies to get to Draupadi.

The Kshatriyas mutter and mumble amongst themselves. Clearly, having seen Arjun and me in action, they have little stomach left for a fight. Finally, one of them clears his throat. "Krishna has, as usual, spoken wisely. Let us not turn this joyous occasion into a bloodbath. My warrior brothers, I request you to kindly take your seats and let the ceremony continue."

All of them sheathe their swords and return to their seats. Krishna pats me gently. I look at him uncomprehendingly. "You might want to put the bench back, cousin," he whispers into my ear. "Even given your strength, it must weigh quite a bit."

Oops, I'd completely forgotten I was holding it. I hastily restore it to its original position. But I keep a wary eye on the assembly anyway, just in case anyone takes it into his head to stir up trouble again.

There is a burst of applause. I snatch a quick look backwards. Draupadi has just garlanded Arjun. He leans forward and whispers into her ear. Her face lights up and she looks intently at each one of us. Clearly, Arjun has revealed our identities to her. They don't say anything more, but their faces are shining. A young couple, beaming with unalloyed happiness, clearly deeply attracted to each other.

“May they have a long, happy wedded life and bring great joy to each other,” I think wistfully. And, try to force down the envy that I’m feeling for Arjun.

I thought I had forever left that envy behind once I became a formidable warrior in my own right. But it turns out that I had only managed to suppress it, and it would constantly return to haunt me for the rest of my life.

CHAPTER 6

Much has been written and said about Mother's instructions to us to share whatever prize Arjun had won at the tournament. Personally, I have always found it strange that she uttered those exact words at that precise moment.

When we had left for Drupada's kingdom, she knew full well that we were going for Draupadi's *swayamvara*. So when Arjun joyously yelled out to her to come and see what he had won, a woman of her intelligence could hardly not have guessed whom he was referring to.

Years later, Draupadi told me that she was convinced that Mother had thought long and hard while we were away, and concluded that Arjun's siblings would be so envious of him if he had the world's most beautiful woman all to himself and that it would threaten our unity. "It wasn't an absent-minded remark. One way or another, she would have manipulated the situation to get this outcome," insisted Draupadi.

If that's true, then Mother certainly put on a great act of appearing shocked and contrite when she eventually emerged from the cottage and saw Draupadi. "Oh no, what have I said," she exclaimed, clapping a hand over her mouth. "Please ignore my remark. I had no idea Arjun was referring to a young woman."

But of course Yudhishtira would have none of it. "Any words you speak are like a command from the gods themselves for us," he said. And then he proceeded to rattle off multiple precedents of polyandry.

I was only half listening to what he was saying, because part of my brain was pointing out to me that if all five of us indeed married Draupadi, then as the eldest brother, Yudhishtira would be the first one to consummate the marriage.

Was he really just being a dutiful son, or was he a pious hypocrite, I wondered. Or could it be a gloriously happy coincidence for him that he would get to simultaneously act as a great upholder of *dharma* and enjoy marital bliss with Draupadi?

I was still trying to figure that out when Mother turned her eyes upon me. "Bhima, what do you think?" she asked.

"Say no," screamed a voice within my head. "This is wrong. It's grossly unfair to both Arjun and Draupadi."

But deep within my treacherous heart, another voice urged me to seize this opportunity. I wanted to enjoy the delights of Draupadi's heavenly body. But

more than that, I also wanted to experience emotional intimacy with her. I already knew I was in love with her. I had never felt this way before. And if I spurned this chance, I would probably regret it for the rest of my life. I wanted Draupadi. And if the only way to get her was to share her, so be it.

Forgive me, Arjun, I thought. And then I turned to Mother. I shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “Whatever you and Yudhishtira decide is fine by me,” I said.

The twins too were quick to indicate their acceptance.

All eyes turned upon Arjun. Multiple emotions were playing upon his face. He was torn between anger, resentment and duty. What would I have done in his place, I wondered. Maybe I would have just taken Draupadi’s hand and walked away from there forever. For one wild moment, I actually hoped he would do precisely that. It would avert the terrible injustice that was about to be perpetrated due to the lust of his brothers.

Then he spoke, his heart clearly not in it. “Whatever is mine is also my brothers’,” he said in a choked voice, his face ashen.

Something seemed to die within him as he uttered the words. My heart went out to him, and also to Draupadi, who seemed completely appalled at this turn of events. But my sympathy lasted only momentarily. Then it was replaced with a wild exultation.

“Yes,” I thought. “She’s mine.”

I gazed lasciviously at Draupadi, vivid fantasies already forming in my head. And the best part: I no longer had to feel guilty about it.



A few days later, all of us are seated in the dining room in King Drupada’s palace waiting for Yudhishtira. As we wait, I muse upon the events that have brought us here.

Within a few hours of our decision to collectively marry Draupadi, Drupada had turned up, accompanied by his army and Krishna. Apparently, Dhrishtadyumna had followed us into the forest and overheard our deliberations. He had gone rushing back to Drupada, who was overjoyed to learn that his son-in-law was none other than Arjun, but understandably not too thrilled at the prospect of getting four more sons-in-law in the bargain.

Krishna, though, brought him around. He narrated a tale about how in a previous birth, Draupadi had asked Shiva for a husband who was honest, strong,

brave, handsome and knowledgeable. Shiva had apparently replied that it was impossible to find all these qualities in one man, so in her next birth, she would have five husbands who would be the very epitome of these virtues.

I have always been a little sceptical about this whole business of rebirth, but Krishna certainly told the story very convincingly. Besides, it was singularly convenient for all of us. And so, Drupada assented to this unusual situation. Further, he requested all of us to stay as guests in his palace and individually go through the marriage ceremonies with Draupadi. So we did, after which Yudhishtira and Draupadi retired to their marital bedchamber. And now, we were waiting for Yudhishtira to join us for breakfast.

He walks in right then, a sullen look on his face. He nods absent-mindedly when we greet him, and takes his place next to me. "You look, er... dissatisfied," I mutter.

He scowls darkly. "We talked," he says abruptly.

"That's all?" I ask incredulously.

"Yes," he replies. "She asked me if we could put off consummating the marriage till we had got to know each other better."

"And you agreed?" I ask.

"Of course," he replies, a trifle bitterly. "What was I supposed to do?"

I silently digest this information. That night, as I approach the bed on which Draupadi is seated, I am acutely conscious of my plain features, made worse by my broken nose, and irregular teeth, and by the multiple scars on my face and body. These marks tell a story, of the multiple battles that I have fought and won. Till today, I had always worn them with pride. But suddenly, I am embarrassed about them. For a moment, I wish I looked like Arjun. No doubt, so does my new bride.

I look at my large, rough, calloused hands. Draupadi looks so fragile that I am terrified of hurting her. I reach out, trying to touch her as gently as possible. She violently flinches away.

"What's the matter?" I ask, trying to make my voice as soft as possible.

"Well, to be honest, you frighten me," she replies.

It's a line I've heard from many people, on many occasions. This time, it really hurts.

"Don't worry, I promise I'll be very gentle," I say and push her back on to the bed. I nuzzle her neck. She lies there, stiff and unmoving. A corpse would have been more animated.

After a while, I give up trying to arouse her. "So, do you want to talk?" I ask

her.

“Yes please,” she replies with an enthusiasm that is positively insulting.

We try, but I’m hopeless at small talk and our stilted conversation soon degenerates into an embarrassing silence.

Finally, I throw my hands up. “Look,” I say. “I am terrible at wooing women. But I would like you to think of me as a friend. A dull, slightly dim-witted, not very amusing friend perhaps, but a friend nevertheless. And if you ever need something, just ask me and I promise I’ll move heaven and earth to get it for you.”

She is silent for a while. Then she says, “Thank you. I appreciate that.” There is a tone of surprise in her voice, as if she is noticing something that she hadn’t expected.

I turn my back to her and try to sleep. But I can’t. I am painfully aware of her lying right next to me. And what happens if I fall asleep and have an erotic dream, I suddenly wonder. Will I be able to restrain my subconscious from acting out its primal urges?

I sigh and rise from the bed. The floor is lushly carpeted. I sink down onto it.

“What are you doing?” asks Draupadi. “There’s enough room for both of us on the bed. If you’re feeling awkward, let me sleep on the floor instead.”

“No, no, that damn bed is just too soft for me. I prefer a harder surface to sleep on,” I lie.

It’s a long, restless night and I walk into the dining room in a foul mood. Arjun takes one look at me and raises an eyebrow. “We talked,” I snarl and begin heaping my plate with food.

Arjun nods. “I better start thinking of some funny jokes,” he says. “She seems like a great one for talking.”

The next morning, he enters the dining room with a jaunty stride. He’s trying very hard not to grin, and he affectionately slaps me on the back as he sits down. His torso is covered with a thin shawl but it parts as he takes his seat. He quickly covers his chest, but not before I notice that it’s covered with what look suspiciously like scratches and bite marks.

“Talked?” I ask sarcastically.

He nods, and the grin he’s been trying to suppress bursts forth in all its glory, like the sun emerging from the clouds. “Lots and lots. Before, during and after.”

Incandescent rage swirls within me. I have an overwhelming urge to punch the smirk off Arjun’s face. I clasp my shaking hands tightly and look down, so that he won’t see my expression. Then I recall my own farcical night with Draupadi

and despite myself, I can't help laughing. As I'd noticed on the day of the *swayamvara*, Draupadi certainly has a mind of her own.

CHAPTER 7

“So how many women have you slept with?” asks Draupadi.

It’s been six months since that first night together. In this period, we’ve achieved a certain chatty friendliness. In fact, she’s even let me kiss her a couple of times. The second time, greatly encouraged, I tried to caress her breasts, but she very gently but firmly removed my hand. I relented with a sigh.

“Well?” she prompts, nudging me none too gently.

“It wouldn’t be terribly gentlemanly to answer that,” I reply.

“Oh, to hell with being gentlemanly. Telllllll meeeeeee!” she coaxes.

“Well, that depends on whether you’re considering only humans or other species too,” I reply.

She sits up at that. “Really? You’ve been with females of other species? Tell me about it.”

“Actually, I’ve only been with females of other species,” I reply, a bit shamefacedly. “One Naga and one *rakshasi*. That’s the sum total of my sexual experience.”

“I’m all ears,” she says. “Details please.”

I shrug casually. “What’s in it for me?”

She tilts her head coquettishly. “Tell me the gory details first. If they’re suitably interesting, I’ll see that you’re suitably rewarded.”

“It’s a long story,” I warn.

It’s her turn to shrug. “So? We’ve got the whole night.”

“I’d rather be doing other things the whole night,” I say wistfully.

“Not a chance, my friend,” she replies. “So you might as well just tell me the story.”

“All right then,” I say, as I begin to reminisce. “In a strange way, I suppose you could say that I really had Duryodhana to thank.”

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“Sons of *devas*, ha. Probably more like the bastards of *rishis* passing by in the forest. And now they’ve come to live off us, the parasitical beggars.”

Duryodhana’s snide remark carries clearly to me. I flush and start to turn back.

Yudhishtira places a hand over my arm. “Ignore him,” he says calmly.

I have no intention of doing so. But right now, as we wait for Dronacharya to arrive and begin the day's classes, is not the opportune time. I glance at Sahadeva, whose intuitive understanding of what is going through people's minds borders on the telepathic. I catch his eye and silently mouth, "Later." He nods ever so slightly.

After the classes end for the day, Sahadeva quickly engages Yudhishtira in a discussion on some intricate metaphysical point. Soon, the two are busy in an animated discussion. Nakul and Arjun are laughing and chatting about something that I'm sure is considerably more trivial. I deliberately slow down so that I lag far behind my brothers.

Duryodhana comes up behind me. There's plenty of room for him to pass but he roughly shoulders me, exactly as I'd hoped he would.

"Oops, sorry," he says and marches past me.

I shoulder him right back, sending him sprawling face down into the ground.

"Oops, sorry," I mutter.

He springs up, his face mottled with fury. "You bastard," he says and tries to punch me.

I block his fist with my palm, then close my hand around his trapped fist and begin to squeeze it. He struggles to free himself, but I'm too strong. "Let me go, jungle boy," he hisses.

I smile grimly. "Say 'please'."

His mouth sets in an obstinate line. I squeeze harder. Tears of pain spring to his eyes, but he still won't beg. He's a proud one, I'll grant him that. Well, the prouder he is, the more he'll hurt.

Dusshasana rushes to his brother's aid and tries to pry my fingers open. I casually backhand him, sending him sprawling. "Children shouldn't interrupt when their elders are speaking," I say.

More Kauravas rush to Duryodhana's aid and start raining blows upon me. I ignore the pain and squeeze even harder. Any second now, Duryodhana's bones are about to fracture. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Arjun and Nakul racing back. They have just realised what is happening. This is about to turn into a brawl.

"Duryodhana, Bhima, stop this at once! What do you boys think you're doing?"

It's grandsire Bhishma. I groan silently. Usually, I'm delighted whenever he pays one of his impromptu visits to check on us, but this one time, I'd much rather his busy schedule had kept him occupied attending to some urgent matter

of state.

I give Duryodhana's hand one final squeeze, and have the pleasure of seeing him wince. Then I let go. He clutches his hand and begins to vigorously massage it.

"He started it, Grandsire," he says in a whining tone.

"I don't care who started it. I want it to stop right now. It's not a very pleasant sight to see the princes of Hastinapura fighting like street urchins, especially when several of them have ganged up against just one," says our grandsire brusquely. "I don't want any repeats of incidents like this. Have I made myself clear?"

We all nod. The episode certainly seems to have had a salutary effect upon Duryodhana, because he stays well away from me for the next couple of days. Then, early one morning, he turns up just as I'm finishing my workout.

"I'm truly sorry about that day, Bhima," he tells me. "I feel terrible about what happened. Please accept my apologies."

I'm startled, but also pleased. I'm glad that Duryodhana has seen the error of his ways. "That's all right, cousin," I say. "What say we let bygones be bygones?"

He nods eagerly. "Absolutely. By the way, as a peace offering, I've got you some ladoos. I know you really like them."

Looking back now, I'm stunned by my own naiveté. The truth is, I always wanted to believe the best about everyone, and it took several disillusioning experiences to rid me of the habit. Besides, while I knew that Duryodhana disliked us, I hadn't really gauged the depth of his hatred. And I was feeling hungry after all the exercise. So I cheerfully accept the vessel full of ladoos and begin gulping them down.

"Have some?" I offer between mouthfuls.

"No thanks, I got them specially made for you," he replies.

"Thanks," I say. "I hope everything is fine between us now."

Duryodhana's face clouds over. "It would have been, if Yudhishtira didn't want what's rightfully mine – the throne of Hastinapura."

"How can it be rightfully yours?" I ask, irritated. "Yudhishtira is King Pandu's heir."

"Yes, but the king was my father's younger brother," retorts Duryodhana. "My father should have inherited the throne. He was denied his rightful inheritance because he was blind. But it came to him anyway, when your father abandoned Hastinapura. I am my father's eldest son. There is nothing wrong with me."

My head is starting to spin. This sounds like one of those family property

disputes that a king is constantly being asked to resolve. But things are pretty clear from where I stand.

“You can forget about the throne, Duryodhana,” I scowl. “As long as I am alive, nobody but Yudhishtira is going to follow your father on it.”

“I know,” he replies. His tone is soft, but I can still discern the malice – and the glee – in his voice. “Thankfully, that won’t be an issue much longer.”

“What?” I demand, but my voice slurs. The utensil falls from my hands. I stagger, trying to keep my balance.

Duryodhana gives me a gentle push and I reel to the ground. His brothers, who had been standing in the background till then, rush up. Rough hands seize and bind me. Then they lift me. I try to struggle but my limbs are completely paralysed. They carry me a short distance, all the while cursing my weight. And then they fling me.

I land in water with a splash. The cool touch of the river as I sink into its depths is the last thing I remember before I pass out.

CHAPTER 8

I wake up with a start. I'm lying on a bed but I don't recognise the room. I look around. It's tastefully furnished, but there are no windows of any kind. Some sort of glittering stones are embedded in the walls. I peer closely at one and register that it seems to be a gem of some kind. I reach out to touch it and a hissing sound emanates from near the foot of the bed.

I glance down and see a very large snake. I freeze. Then very slowly, with very exaggerated movements, I withdraw my hand. If snakes could nod, then I'd swear that this one does. Then it slides out of the room and hisses again. A series of hisses echo down the corridor outside the room. It's almost as if a message is being conveyed down the passage.

I hear the distinct sound of footsteps. A large, powerfully built male and a tall, athletic girl enter the room. They both have smooth, completely hairless skin which has a slightly greenish tinge. Their eyes are silver-grey, and there appears to be a thin film of some sort over them. Both have small snakes wrapped around their biceps, almost like arm bands. Another one is curled around the man's forehead, making it seem as if he himself is hooded. I gape at them, fascinated.

"Woken up, have you? And about time," says the man.

"Where am I? And how long have I been here?" I ask.

"You've been here for almost two days, and spent most of the time throwing up and crying out deliriously," replies the male. "That was a very nasty poison you'd been administered. Luckily for you, my daughter Aryaki and her friends were swimming in the river when you were tossed in, and brought you here immediately. And even more fortunately for you, nobody knows more about poisons and its various antidotes than us Nagas."

Nagas! I nod slowly. That explains a lot. I try and remember whatever I've heard about them. Like *rakshasas*, they too shared the same ancestors as humans but branched off down the evolutionary chain. I've heard that they are capable of communicating with snakes and prefer to live underground.

"So this must be..." I begin.

"Bhogavati," replies the male. "Yes, you are in the fabled underground city of the Nagas. The first human to come here in a very long time, I might add. And as and when you leave here, you will have to do so blind-folded. I'm afraid we don't want too many humans finding out the location of the city where the

streets are paved with precious stones. I was initially furious with my daughter when she brought you here.”

I turn to the girl. “So, it seems I owe my life to you, My Lady. My thanks.”

She laughs. “Oh, you were the first human I’d ever seen up close. So curiosity drew me to you. And then, when I asked who you were, you mumbled that you were Bhima, son of Kunti. That’s when I realised that you were a kinsman. I could hardly let you die after that.”

Kinsman? I wrack my brains. Vaguely, I recall that Mother was a descendant of Yadu, the son-in-law of a Naga king called Dhumravarna. But if I am their kinsman, then this must be...

“Vasuki,” I blurt out. “You’re the Naga, King Vasuki.” I fold my hands and try my best to bow given that I am reclining in my sick bed. “My apologies for not recognising you earlier, My Lord.”

He laughs. “That’s all right, young man. I know all this must be very strange for you.”

“It certainly is,” I agree. Then a thought strikes me. “Good god, my mother and brothers must be completely panic-stricken about me. I must get back to them immediately.”

I swing my legs out of bed and try to stand up, but my knees immediately buckle and I have to grab the bedpost to prevent myself from falling face down.

Vasuki raises a hand. “I appreciate your concern for your family, my boy. But as you can see for yourself, you’re in no state to go anywhere. I would suggest that you spend at least a couple of days resting to regain your strength. I will try to get word sent to your mother that you are all right. Right now, I suggest that you eat some food and try to go back to sleep. I will have a meal sent for you.”

I nod my assent. What he’s saying makes sense. As they leave the room, Aryaki gives me a long, appraising stare. For some reason, it makes me feel rather uncomfortable.

That night, I’m fast asleep when somebody prods me. I wake up with a start, alarmed. Then I realise that it’s Aryaki. And she’s very naked.

“Scoot over,” she whispers.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I hiss back. “Your father will kill me if he finds out.”

She laughs. “Don’t worry. We Nagas don’t have the silly hang-ups you humans do. Now, be a good boy and do as you’re told.”

“But really, are you sure about this? Somehow, it doesn’t seem right,” I gabble.

“Oh shut up, you fool. You talk too much,” she replies. “Besides, I saved your

life, didn't I? You owe me."

Well, I suppose when she puts it that way... I make space and she slides in under the covers next to me.

"Ah, that's better. Now let me see if you're just as big all over." Her hand reaches between my thighs and I'm instantly erect. "Well, at least one part of you seems happy I'm here," she says, stroking me gently.

My mouth has gone completely dry and I can hear my heart thudding rapidly. "Oh, don't look all helpless and virginal," she says. Then she pauses, "Wait a minute! Is this really your first time?"

I nod, grateful that she can't see my face in the dark. "Well, well," she says. "You certainly got lucky that I decided to take that swim when I did." She lies down and gently guides me into her. Her breath catches as I fill her up. "Oh, that feels good," she says.

I thrust experimentally, and she moans. I stop, alarmed. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No, you idiot," she answers. "Do more of it. Harder."

I comply. Her moans get louder and louder. Initially, I'm worried that someone might hear us. After a while, I stop bothering as I feel a whole new set of sensations overwhelm me. Then suddenly, without any warning, I ejaculate.

"No," she groans in frustration. She tightens her muscles and wraps her legs firmly around me, trying to keep me inside her, but my limp member slides out.

"I'm sorry," I say apologetically.

She heaves a long sigh. Then she picks up her discarded garment from the floor and starts wiping my penis clean.

"Don't worry. I'm sure a young, strong lad like you will bounce back soon enough." She bends and her soft mouth envelopes me.

Sure enough, I'm hard again. And this time, I stay that way for a long, long time.

~

"So, was it good for her finally?" asks Draupadi.

I return to the present with a start. "I guess so. She seemed happy enough when she left. And she came back every night while I was there," I reply, a trifle embarrassed. Actually, the night before I was to leave Bhogavati, Aryaki had wept and told me it was the best sex she'd ever had. But I'm too mortified to tell Draupadi that.

“What did her skin feel like?” persists Draupadi.

“Cooler than human skin. And, slightly reptilian,” I answer.

“Wasn’t that a turn-off?” she asks.

I laugh. “To a randy teenager? Not a chance. Actually, it was kind of kinky.”

“Oh,” says Draupadi, a little sniffily. I take a closer look at her. Her face seems to be flushed. Her breathing is slightly ragged. And she looks distinctly cross.

“Hold on a moment,” I say. “You’re not jealous of Aryaki, are you? For one thing, it was a long, long time ago. I didn’t even know you then. And for another, it’s not as if we’ve been, umm... intimate. So you really have no cause for complaint.”

“Oh shut up, you fool,” she replies. “You talk too much.”

Now, where have I heard that before? She pats my penis, and I’m startled to find that it’s erect, and seems to have been for a while.

“Hmm,” says Draupadi. “You certainly seem to have very fond memories of that Naga girl. I think it’s time you found out what humans have to offer.”

She gives me a long, lingering kiss, and then unhurriedly unties her blouse. Her perfect breasts brush against my chest.

“Women,” I think. “I’ll never be able to figure them out.”

It’s the last conscious thought I have for the next several minutes as nature takes its own sweet course. Finally!

CHAPTER 9

“And, who was the second one?” asks Draupadi the next time we’re together.

I fidget with the bedcover. “I don’t really like to talk about her,” I say.

“Why not?” asks Draupadi.

“I treated her badly,” I say. “Actually, I feel wretchedly guilty about the whole thing.”

Draupadi’s voice turns serious. “Based on whatever I’ve seen of you so far and what I have learnt of you, I find it very hard to believe that you could treat any woman – human or otherwise – shabbily. Please tell me what happened. I’d really like to know.”

I feel a little surge of happiness within me at her inadvertent praise. “Well,” I say, “She really loved me. Actually, I think she’s the only woman who has ever truly loved me.”

I pause, giving Draupadi a chance to contradict me if she chooses to. She doesn’t. Well, at least she’s honest. Though really, would a little white lie have mattered? I feel a wave of resentment wash over me. Why am I pouring out my most intimate secrets, my most painful memories to someone who cares so little about me? I see it as an opportunity to get closer to her, but for her it is just voyeuristic, I think viciously.

Maybe she understands what’s going through my mind, because she quickly breaks the silence with a question. “And, you didn’t love her?”

I stay mutinously silent. She gently caresses me on the back. “I really want to know. I want to understand everything that has made you into the man you are.”

I sigh and relent. “I think sometimes, it’s very easy to just let yourself be loved,” I reply. “Especially when all you have to do is just give the other person a few scraps of fondness and affection. Does that make me sound terribly selfish?”

“No,” she replies, “Just human. I’m sure most of us have done the same at some point of time or the other. The only thing that would be wrong is if you lied to her and said you loved her too.”

I shake my head. “I did care for her, but I never loved her. I always made that very clear, all through the time that we lived together. But in the end, I left her, and though she tried very hard not to show it, I’m sure it broke her heart.”

We sit in silence for a while. “And you know the strangest thing?” I say eventually. “She managed to find it within her heart to love me even though I’d

killed two of her brothers.”

Draupadi puts her hands on my shoulders and gently kneads them. “You should tell me all about it, if you feel you are ready to talk about her. I’d really like to hear. Besides, I think you need to get it off your chest. It might be cathartic.”

I heave a deep sigh. “All right,” I say. “Maybe you’re right. Here’s what happened...”

~

I look at the horizon. It won’t be long now before the sun sets. “We need to find some shelter for the night,” I say. “Why don’t all of you rest here and I’ll go on ahead and see if I can find something?”

I gently lower Mother, whom I’ve been carrying, under a tree. My four brothers, who’ve been trudging alongside, sink to the ground with sighs of weariness and relief. “I’ll be right back,” I say.

As I stride deeper into the forest, I muse on how life seems to have come full circle. Having spent our early years in the jungles, we’re back in them, for God knows how long.

It seems like forever, but actually, it had been barely a month or so ago that we had moved into the grand palace especially constructed for us, only to find to our horror that it was actually a fire trap. Luckily for us, Uncle Vidura somehow sniffed out the plot to kill us and had got a secret tunnel constructed. We had fled through it the night the palace burned down.

Though we survived, we had no idea whom we could trust any longer. How high up did the conspiracy go? Did it reach all the way to the blind king, our uncle Dhritarashtra, himself? We decided that it would be best to let the world believe that we had perished in the fire, at least till we were able to forge some powerful alliances.

And so, we wandered through the forests, disguised as Brahmins. Every now and then, we would come upon a village. We would carefully conceal our weapons outside the village, and only then enter it. We depended upon the generosity of the villagers to feed us. As we gathered alms, I would recall Duryodhana’s taunts about being parasitical beggars, and be filled with self-loathing. Whenever Yudhishtira noticed, he would counsel me about how patience and humility were also a warrior’s weapons. I would nod, but my heart still burned.

We never stayed in one place too long, and made sure to keep a low profile. With one exception. At a village called Ekachakra, a young Brahmin couple gave us shelter for the night. They were exceedingly hospitable. But that night, we heard the wife weeping. When Mother asked her what the matter was, she explained that the village had struck a grim bargain with a *rakshasa* called Bakasura, who had been terrorising them. Every fortnight, a villager would drive a bullock cart laden with food to Bakasura's cave. No one had ever returned alive. The next morning, it was the young Brahmin's turn to go to Bakasura.

"One of my sons will go in his stead," Mother told them, overruling their protests. "It is the least we can do after all the love and honour you have shown us."

And so, the next day, I drove the bullock cart to Bakasura's cave, with Arjun tagging along just in case I needed any help. We took our time getting there, because first we finished all the food in the cart – with me having most of it. It was the best meal I'd had in a long time. I then proceeded to sleep it off – after all, I didn't want to start cramping up in the middle of the fight. By the time we finally reached Bakasura, he was hopping mad. After a fierce battle, I killed him, without any intervention from Arjun. Then, we loaded Bakasura's body on the bullock cart and drove it back.

Arjun and I got off at some distance from the village, confident that the bullocks would find their way home and the villagers would learn that they no longer had to live in perpetual fear. The rest of our family was waiting for us at a predetermined location. We left immediately, not wanting to face the villagers and their curiosity about the humble Brahmins who had killed a fierce *rakshasa*.

And a few days later, here I was, looking for a place where my exhausted family could take shelter for the night.

As I look around, a shadow falls upon me. My battle reflexes take over and I jump back, just as a giant form leaps out of a tree.

The creature swings a massive club even as he descends. I instinctively parry with my mace. The club shatters as it collides with the mace, but the bone-jarring impact knocks the mace out of my hand. The next instant, he is upon me. We tumble to the ground together, and roll over and over till we crash into a rock, with his head taking the brunt of the impact. As he lies there, momentarily stunned, I scramble to my feet. He rises too, more slowly.

I look at his face. The resemblance to Bakasura is unmistakable. "Come to avenge your brother, have you?" I ask.

He nods. "I've spent the last few days searching for this mysterious Brahmin

family, specially the so-called giant, who is the last person known to have met my brother before he turned up dead. I saw the sorry bunch of you a few hours ago and I've been tracking you ever since. When you started walking this way alone, I took a short cut through the forest to get here before you. I've been eagerly awaiting this meeting."

"Your brother had it coming," I respond shortly. "He shouldn't have terrorised those poor, innocent villagers."

He laughs. "Typical bloody arrogant human. You invade our habitat. You wreck our hunting grounds with your agriculture. You ruin the exquisite, fragile balance of nature to the point that we are threatened with starvation. And then, you blame us for seeking food? Well, there will be one less of your sickening kind soon. And, after I am done with you, it will be the turn of your brothers and mother. I'll save her for last."

I roar with anger and charge at him, arms raised. He lets out an equally loud yell. We grip each other's hands and push. Neither of us is able to budge the other. We shove and strain till the veins on our arms and our foreheads stand out. It's no use. We're completely evenly matched.

Suddenly, he tries to knee me in the groin. I block with my thigh, but the impact throws me off balance. As I totter, he wraps his hands around my lower back and lifts me. Then he begins to squeeze, exerting enormous pressure on my spine.

I put my hands against his massive chest and push, trying to break his hold. It's no use. He relentlessly increases the pressure, trying to break my back. In desperation, I jab my thumbs into both his eyes. He shuts them and rears back, and his grip loosens. I smash my head into his nose with all the force I can muster. He grunts and releases me, as blood spurts from his nose.

We circle each other warily. Suddenly, he lashes out with his fist. I block with my forearm, and then I connect to his jaw with a perfectly timed punch. It's a blow that could knock out an ox. I wait for him to collapse.

He totters on his feet briefly and his eyes glaze. Then he shakes his head and his eyes are clear again. That shakes me up a bit. He has just taken my best shot, and he's ready for more. He's going to be a tougher opponent than his brother.

He hurls another punch at me. I duck and hit him in his well-muscled stomach. It's like hitting a wall. He barely notices. And then, he unleashes a flurry of blows. I retreat, ducking, weaving and parrying. A few of his punches get through my defences and set my ears ringing. I need some breathing space. I clinch him tightly, then shove him back. He falls to the ground but gets back up

immediately.

We're both breathing hard by now. He pauses to suck in some oxygen. So do I. My brain is racing. He's stronger, faster and more agile than any opponent I've ever encountered. Brute strength alone won't do. If I am to defeat him, I'll need to figure out a strategy. But before I can come up with an idea, he lunges at me. He grabs my right leg, trying to upset my balance.

I immediately lock my arm around his neck, so that his head is trapped between my right arm and chest. We hop around in a clumsy tango. With my left arm, I rain down blows on his head, neck and back. With his free hand, he pulverises my left ribcage.

Suddenly, he changes tack. He releases my right leg, and instead encircles both my legs with his arm. With the other hand, he grips me around the waist. And then, with a heave and a grunt, he straightens his torso. Suddenly, I am horizontal in the air. Cradling me like a baby, he charges and rams me into a tree. The breath is knocked out of me in an explosive gasp and my grip around his neck loosens. He pivots like a dancer and hurls me through the air. I land with a thud that sends a shockwave through my entire body.

I get back onto my feet. As I suck in a deep breath, pain lances through my left side. Not a good sign. It could be a busted rib, maybe two. I need to finish this fast. I deliberately clutch at my side, and wince, hoping to lull him into making a mistake.

It works.

He grins, then tries to kick me in the left ribcage. I grab his leg so that it's trapped mid-air, and then I kick the kneecap of the leg on which he's standing. That leg is supporting all the considerable weight of his body, which has built up forward momentum. My foot, swinging in with considerable leverage of its own in the opposing direction, strikes him at that precise moment.

There's a cracking sound as his knee fractures. He crumples to the ground, screaming in agony. I'm all over him in a frenzy. I batter him till he lies there, limp and senseless.

I get up off him, my breath coming in great heaving gasps. I see my mace lying where it had fallen, right at the start of the fight. It's time to finish off this battle. I walk over to the mace, pick it up and turn back to where my vanquished opponent is lying, fully intending to smash his head in. And just then, a *rakshasi* comes charging up and flings herself over him, shielding his body.

"No, please," she pleads. "Please don't kill him."

Was she pretty?" asks Draupadi.

“Huh?” I ask stupidly, my mind still back in the jungle.

“The *rakshasi* who made that dramatic intervention,” says Draupadi patiently. “Was she pretty?”

I shrug. “She was a *rakshasi* and she had the features of one. So no, she didn’t have the sort of looks that would make a human fall in love at first sight.”

“But you saw something in her, didn’t you?” prompts Draupadi.

“I looked into her eyes,” I reply. “They were full of fear, and a terrible sadness. Not emotions that one normally associates with *rakshasas*.”

“So you stayed your blow?” asks Draupadi. “And, you got to know her better? How did that happen?”

I nod slowly, and my mind returns to that day when I first met that remarkable woman...

~

“Please,” she pleads. “Please, you’ve already killed one brother of mine. Please let this one live.”

Arjun bursts onto the scene just then, an arrow already on his bow. He takes one look at her and immediately pulls the string back, ready to shoot.

“Whoa,” I say. “Hold on. Don’t shoot.”

He pauses. “We got worried when you took so long. I decided to come looking for you. What’s been going on here?”

I nod at the prone body of the *rakshasa*. “Bakasura’s brother.”

“His name is Hidimba,” she says. “And, I’m his sister Hidimbi. And I mean you no harm, I promise.”

Arjun and I exchange glances. “Well, we’d better be moving on,” he says. “We still haven’t found any shelter.”

“There’s a large cave up in the hills, not very far from here, where my brother and I have been staying,” she says. “It’s well stocked with food and furs to keep out the cold. If you will help me to get my brother there, you’re most welcome to spend the night with us.”

Arjun leans close to me. “Can we trust her?” he whispers. “She could be leading us into a trap.”

“We don’t have much choice,” I answer. “It’s either that or spend a night out in the open, and it’s getting distinctly chilly. Besides, I’m sure the five of us together can handle any number of *rakshasas*.”

He nods. “I’ll be right back with them,” he says and heads off quickly.

With a sigh, I sink to the ground, propping my back up against a rock. “How much of the fight did you see?” I ask.

“Only the last part,” she replies. “You get a pretty clear view of the valley from that cave. I saw my brother preparing to ambush you, and came rushing down to try and stop him. I was too late to stop him, but hopefully not too late to save his life.”

“I’m sorry to tell you this, but he may still not survive,” I say as gently as I can. “He’s taken a tremendous battering.”

“But he still has a chance,” she says. “Thank you for at least giving him that.”

It’s a very, very slender chance, I think to myself. My guess is that he’s already slipped into coma. Only advanced medical attention can save him now, and the chances of him getting any here are remote. But I keep quiet.

We wait in silence. My family comes bustling in. Nakul, always so skilled with his hands, has already created a rough stretcher of sorts, using some big branches tied together with vine. We load Hidimba’s heavy body onto it. Hidimbi grips the front of the improvised stretcher. I get up and start towards the back end.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” she says gently. “I suspect you may have suffered some injuries too and heavy lifting might aggravate them.”

I’m completely flummoxed at this show of concern by her. My brothers look at each other and grin slyly. Then Yudhishtira steps forward, his face serious. “We can all take turns carrying the stretcher,” he says. “And Bhima can just walk.”

Some time later, we stagger into the cave. Actually, it would be more correct to describe it as one large cave that is naturally divided by rock formations into several smaller caves. Animal skins serve as curtains, affording some degree of privacy. We lower the stretcher into one of the smaller caves indicated by Hidimbi.

“I’ll stay here with him,” she says. “There is food and firewood in the largest cave. Please make yourselves comfortable.”

We’re too exhausted to eat, so we all spread some furs on the floor and collapse onto them. Then Yudhishtira sits up. “One of us should stay on guard at all times tonight. I’ll take first watch. The rest of you get some sleep. Bhima, I’ll wake you up in a couple of hours.”

I nod, and lie down. I toss and turn, but it’s useless. I’m too edgy to sleep. The adrenalin from the battle is still coursing through me. Besides, I’m still feeling the pain from the blows I took. After half-an-hour, I curse and sit up. Yudhishtira is standing near the entrance of the cave in which Hidimbi is with her brother.

"I can't sleep," I say. "It's all right. I'll keep watch. You hit the sack."

He nods gratefully and goes to lie down. I pace up and down. Suddenly, I think I hear Hidimba's voice. Has he regained consciousness? I lift the flap and rush into the cave. Hidimbi is speaking to him softly, urgently. Then I hear him emit a death rattle and his head falls back.

Hidimbi looks up at me, despair writ large on her face. "I'm sorry," I say, and the words sound completely hollow and meaningless to me. "He was the bravest, strongest opponent I ever faced."

She gently strokes his forehead. "He died peacefully, in the arms of a loved one. It's a better death than most of the people he killed got. Neither of my brothers was kind, or compassionate. But they were my brothers, and I did love them."

She breaks down then, and begins weeping. Awkwardly, wordlessly, I put an arm around her. She buries her face in my chest. I stroke her hair. Suddenly, I realise that I am aroused.

"What sort of animal are you?" I ask myself, disgusted. I try to gently disengage from her. She senses my withdrawal, and the reason for it. She pulls me even harder towards herself, and lifts her face towards mine.

"Please," she whispers. "Don't leave me alone."

I kiss her tears away and we make love gently, soundlessly. Right next to the body of her brother, killed by me with my bare hands. I fall asleep in her arms.

When I wake up, I realise it's morning. I curse, quickly pull on my clothes and enter the next cave.

My family is already awake. Their eyes turn to my face. I flush. "Hidimba died in the night."

"And you were consoling his sister?" asks Nakul, his voice deadpan.

"I don't think that's funny," I say, suddenly furious.

"It wasn't meant to be funny. I'm sorry, brother," he replies, contrite.

Mother steps in. "I think we should help make the funeral arrangements."

So we gather the wood, and perform the last rites for Hidimba. As his body burns, Hidimbi rests her head on my shoulder. Nobody offers any comment.

We stay on there, even after the funeral. Initially, the excuse is that we need time for my injuries to heal. Then we say that winter has set in and we should let it pass. Hidimbi is respectful to Mother, solicitous about my brothers and hopelessly devoted to me. She tells me later that she fell in love with me the moment I looked into her eyes and didn't deliver the final blow to Hidimba.

My feelings towards her are more complex. I live with the guilt of knowing

that I killed her brothers, and I'm grateful to her for her magnanimity in forgiving me. And yes, much as I might pretend otherwise, there's a part of me that loves being pampered by her. She will never be beautiful, but I begin to find her face attractive, in its own way.

And then, one day, Mother sits me down and has the conversation that I always knew was inevitable. "All of you are princes of Hastinapura, and this is not your destiny. You need to reclaim your legacy. You know that, don't you?"

I nod slowly, sadly.

"Given the human prejudice against *rakshasas*, Hidimbi can't stay with us when we go back," adds Mother. "It would cause too many complications."

I nod again.

"Will you talk to her, or would you like me to?" she asks.

I finally find my voice. "I will talk to her. I owe her that much, at least."

I've fought many mighty warriors, but none of those encounters filled me with the kind of trepidation that I feel as I walk towards her. She smiles as she sees me approaching. Then she sees my expression, and her smile fades.

"Are you leaving?" she asks.

I nod miserably, unable to meet her eyes. She gently takes my chin and forces me to look at her.

"I always knew this moment would come one day," she says. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"Where will you go?" I ask her.

"Oh, I'm sure there are still plenty of my kind higher up in the mountains," she replies. "I will find a tribe sooner or later. We had good days together, didn't we?"

"Yes," I say in a choked voice. "Yes, we did."

"And good nights too," she smiles. "I'm grateful for that. No matter what happens, I will always have a part of you with me." Then she gives me a long, tender kiss. "Now leave. I want your last memory of me to be of a smiling face."

I spin around and walk away. I don't turn back. But just as I near the exit of the cave, I think I hear muffled sobs.

I feel something wet on my shoulder, and I realise Draupadi is shedding tears. "What a sad story. She seems to be a really special person," she says.

"Now you know why I don't like talking about her," I say.

Draupadi nods gently. "But it's a beautiful tale. Thank you for sharing it with me." Then suddenly her brow furrows. "What was the last thing she told you? Before that bit about wanting your last memory of her to be of a smiling face?"

“No matter what happens, I will always have a part of you with me,” I recall.

“What do you think she meant by that?” asks Draupadi.

“I guess that she would always have the memories of our days together,” I answer. “Why?”

Draupadi frowns. It’s as if she’s trying to make up her mind whether or not to tell me something. She opens her mouth, then shuts it again. Then she shrugs. “Oh, nothing much. I had a thought that I wanted to share, but it’s slipped out of my mind now. Couldn’t have been anything too important.”

CHAPTER 10

“Meat?” asks Draupadi. The five of us are eating, while she serves.

“Yes, please. I would love some. It’s very nice,” I tell her.

She nods perfunctorily, ladles out some meat for me, and then turns to Arjun.

“I’m stuffed,” he says hastily.

“Oh come on, it’s my special recipe. Don’t you like it?” she asks, pouting coquettishly.

He looks at her with a twinkle in his eye. “How much am I supposed to shove into my stomach?”

“You’re so skinny. How do you manage to lift that heavy bow? Really, I worry about you. Eat!” she orders.

“Your wish is my command, Your Highness,” Arjun says in a mock-humble tone.

“Good, let’s keep it that way,” she says and serves him a generous helping.

Both of them laugh. It’s as if they are the only people in the room – in fact, the whole world – and nobody else exists. You can feel the crackling chemistry between them: they just want to rip the clothes off each other right there.

I have a sudden desire to seize them both by the necks and crack their beautiful faces together. I try to tamp down the anger. But every time I push it down, it resurges, in progressively stronger waves. I leap up and hastily leave the room.

“I’m not feeling well,” I mumble as Yudhishtira looks at me, concerned.

“It must be something serious if he’s abandoning his food,” I hear Arjun say. Draupadi’s tinkling laughter pierces my heart.

In a blind fury, I rush to the gymnasium. I need to work off my anger, and fast, before I lash out at someone. I seize a mace, and begin attacking the pole set up in the gymnasium, which vaguely resembles a human figure.

“I hate her, I hate her,” I mutter under my breath as I swing viciously at the pole. But deep down, I know that’s not true. I also know that a part of me wishes there was a human there instead of the pole. A human whose name I dare not acknowledge. So I just swing away harder and harder, panting in frustration.

“That pole is pretty much done,” says a voice behind me wryly.

I swing around, mace raised. “Easy, brother, it’s me, your loving cousin,” says Krishna, smiling endearingly.

I lower the mace and mop the sweat off my brow. “What brings you here?” I ask.

The smile vanishes from Krishna’s face. “I had something important to discuss with the five of you. The others are already assembled in Yudhishtira’s chambers. I learned that you were here and came to get you.”

Then his lips twitch, ever so slightly. “If all goes according to plan, you might soon be facing a worthier opponent than that pole.”



Draupadi’s eyes are swollen from weeping. She has spent many hours arguing with Arjun, pleading with him not to embark upon this dangerous mission, but he has naysayed her. Now, she quietly rotates the *aarti* in front of him, puts the sacred *teeka* on his forehead. Then, handing the *thaali* to a maid, she embraces him. She clings to him tightly, fearfully. He strokes her hair and says some soothing words.

Politics, intrigue, statecraft... in the end, this is what they all boil down to, I think. Men and women saying their farewells, unsure if they will ever see each other again. The women scared and emotional, the men equally so but doing their best to conceal it under a veneer of bravado. Every masterful strategy that is discussed in the abstract, ultimately has to be implemented by a person, and that person will, inevitably, have loved ones who will be terrified for him and wish the task could have fallen upon someone else.

Draupadi turns to me next. She performs the rituals, but she’s only going through the motions. Her heart isn’t really in it; she’s too worried about Arjun. To my great surprise, she embraces me too. Then, she whispers in my ear, “You will bring him back safely, won’t you?”

I heave a deep sigh. “I don’t want to distress you, but I’m not even certain I’ll be coming back myself.”

She shakes her head, almost angrily. “Nothing will happen to you, I know it. Just promise me that you’ll make sure he’ll be fine.”

The old bitterness wells again within me. “That’s all I am to her,” I think sourly. “A bodyguard for her beloved. If he’s such a great warrior, let him take his chances like the rest of us.” But another part of me feels ashamed of my own pettiness. So I nod and tell her gruffly, “I will die before I let anything happen to him. You have my word.”

She nods and releases me. My heart aches, both for her and for myself. For

her, because it's hard to see someone you love in such obvious distress. And for myself because I secretly wish that some of her concern for Arjun could have been directed my way. I suppose I should feel flattered that she has such faith in my prowess. But I'm not so certain about the outcome, because the man we are on our way to assassinate is a legendary warrior himself.

Jarasandha. The mighty Emperor of Magadha. A man who has never been defeated in single combat. Conqueror of ninety-five kingdoms, whose kings are in his captivity. Rumour has it that he plans to capture a hundred monarchs, and then slaughter them all in a great sacrifice. He would probably have done so already, if he hadn't become obsessed with killing cousin Krishna.

In all of India, Jarasandha is probably the worst person to antagonise, and Krishna had done so quite spectacularly by killing the man's son-in-law, Kansa – who also happened to be Krishna's maternal uncle. The Yadavas, long groaning under Kansa's tyrannical rule, had welcomed Krishna's coup and happily reverted to their old ways of being a republic, which had been suspended when Kansa had imposed his dictatorship. But a furious Jarasandha had sworn vengeance and repeatedly attacked Mathura.

Krishna and Balaram had fought him off many times but each victory was a pyrrhic one. The Yadavas were few in number and could ill-afford to keep losing men. Jarasandha had a huge population at his disposal from which he could keep inducting soldiers, and he was willing to sacrifice as many as it took to destroy the man he called usurper. In the long term, it was a war that Krishna could not have possibly hoped to win. And so, he had abandoned the Yadava capital, Mathura, and led his kinsmen on a long march to the virtually impregnable stronghold of Dwarka, earning the title of *Ranchor* – or the man who runs from war – along the way.

Jarasandha had tried to chase him, but Krishna had waged a masterful guerrilla campaign, constantly stinging his army but avoiding direct confrontation. Finally, a frustrated Jarasandha had turned back. But on his return, he had entered Mathura and had it razed to the ground. It gave him a small measure of satisfaction, but his heart still thirsted for vengeance.

Meanwhile, having married Draupadi and with King Drupada as our ally, we had declared our real identities. And the thorny succession issue had cropped up once again. Who would succeed to the throne of Hastinapur, Yudhishtira or Duryodhana? Uncle Vidura had brokered a compromise: a partition of the kingdom. Dhritarashtra had promptly handed us Khandavaprastha, the thickly forested, thinly-populated part of the kingdom.

“They should feel right at home in the jungles,” Duryodhana had muttered slyly when the announcement was made.

Grandsire Bhishma was none too pleased about the partition but as Uncle Vidura had gently pointed out to him, the whole situation would never have arisen if he hadn’t been so adamant about his vow of celibacy. So he too grudgingly went along with the division.

Yudhishtira had uncomplainingly accepted the apology of a kingdom handed over to him. “Good governance can do wonders. You’ll see,” he had assured us.

And, he had set to work. But even as we were starting to settle in, Krishna arrived with disturbing news.

Jarasandha, fully aware of our closeness to Krishna, was planning to attack us, take Yudhishtira prisoner and make him a victim in his grand sacrifice of a hundred kings. Going by past experience, if attacked, we could hardly rely on our uncle and cousins to come to our aid. Even a confederacy of the Yadavas, Drupada’s army and our own pitifully small ranks would be outnumbered by Jarasandha’s imperial forces. Could we defeat him in a pitched battle through clever strategy and sheer valour? Maybe, but I wasn’t going to bet on it.

“There’s only one way to deal with this menace without causing immense bloodshed,” said Krishna, as a worried Yudhishtira paced up and down. He then proceeded to outline his plan.

It was simple, devious and utterly brilliant. I hated it. Because it involved exploiting one of Jarasandha’s few redeeming virtues – his generosity – and that thought made me deeply uncomfortable. I would much rather have simply gone to war and taken our chances. But Yudhishtira, Mother and all my other brothers agreed with Krishna’s plan. And, I always preferred fighting to endless strategising and plotting. If everything went according to Krishna’s plan, there was a very real possibility of me getting to meet Jarasandha in a fair fight. So I nodded my assent too.

And so, Arjun, Krishna and I took our leave from Draupadi and head for Magadha, disguised as Brahmins. We made our way to the temple where Jarasandha always offered his morning prayers.

That morning too, Jarasandha arrives to a flourish of trumpets and loud cheering from the people assembled at the temple. Well, well, I think, he appears to be a popular ruler, because the cheers don’t seem faked.

A little later, he emerges from the temple. We stand in line as he doles out alms. He is a tall, imposing figure, shorter than me but broader – and it’s all muscle. He reaches the three of us and proffers a gold bag to Krishna.

“O great King, we do not seek any material gifts from you,” says Krishna.

Jarasandha pauses and frowns. “Nobody who ever meets me at this temple after I have prayed goes away empty-handed,” he says. “Ask for whatever whatever you want.”

“In that case, choose one of us to battle you to the death,” says Krishna evenly.

Jarasandha rocks back, startled. “Who are you, Brahmin?” he asks. “And why have you grown so tired of life that you seek to effectively commit suicide?”

Krishna shrugs. “You asked what we wanted, and I have told you. Now, it is your turn to make a decision.”

Jarasandha peers hard at him and then his eyes widen in recognition. “Krishna, you deceitful coward. It is you, isn’t it? Well, I intend to mete out a long, painful death to you soon enough, but it is beneath my dignity to engage in hand-to-hand combat with a snivelling wretch, who abandoned his capital rather than die a hero’s death on the battlefield. No, Krishna, meeting Jarasandha in the wrestling arena is an honour that you have done nothing to deserve. But rest assured, having come this far, you will not leave my kingdom alive.”

He turns to Arjun. “And who might you be, my lad? The marks on your arms seem to indicate long hours spent in archery. Could you be Arjun, I wonder?”

Arjun nods shortly. Jarasandha throws back his head and roars. “And you seek to engage me in physical combat? The fight will be over in seconds. I won’t even work up a sweat. No, it will give me no pleasure to battle such a hopelessly mismatched opponent.”

Then, he turns his attention towards me. I realise that I have been holding my breath, dreading that he might actually pick Arjun. Now, as he looks me over from head to toe, I feel profound relief wash over me. At least, I will get to fulfil my promise to Draupadi.

“Judging by your size, you must be Bhima,” he says. He feels my biceps as if I am a slave on an auction block and he is assessing my value, and nods appreciatively. “Well, the gods are certainly beaming upon me today. I’ve heard that you are the real muscle in Yudhishtira’s little operation. Good! I shall shred you to little pieces with my hands. Then, I will have Krishna tortured to death. Arjun can spend the rest of his life in my dungeons. With the three of you taken out of the equation, my plan to capture Yudhishtira will become even easier to implement.”

He turns to his guards. “Escort our honoured guests to the palace and keep a close eye on them. Make sure to feed them well.” He turns to me. “I will meet you in a duel to the death tomorrow morning. Enjoy a hearty dinner and get a

good night's sleep, my young friend. They will be your last.”

CHAPTER 11

The next morning, the three of us make our way to the ring, escorted by Jarasandha's guards. Jeers and hisses ring out from the crowd that has gathered. As I am about to enter the arena, I reach down, touch the ground and bring my hand to my heart, and then to my forehead in a gesture of reverence. I embrace Arjun and Krishna, and then formally enter the arena and start to warm up.

"Just stretch," advises Krishna. "Don't burn up too much energy right now. You're going to need it."

I nod and move my head from side to side, gently loosening my neck muscles. There is a huge roar as Jarasandha makes his way to the arena.

"His people seem to adore him," I say to Krishna, confused.

He nods. "Just because he's your enemy doesn't mean he's completely ruthless. Magadha has enjoyed unprecedented prosperity under him. He has been a good ruler. If only he could have been content with that, we would not have needed to come here. But remember, the well-being of his subjects that makes him so popular with them is founded on the misery and exploitation of countless other people from various kingdoms. Your family and kingdom are his next targets. He is a threat we need to finish. Show no mercy."

Jarasandha has walked up to me by now. "Are you ready to die, Bhima?"

I smile at him. "I'm always ready to die, My Lord. It's the only way for a warrior to live. But somehow, I don't think this is the time or place it's meant to be."

Several hours later, I'm not so sure. My body is one throbbing mass of pain. Every part of me hurts. Every time I punch him, I feel a jolt of agony in my battered knuckles, which I have repeatedly hammered into him.

Jarasandha and I have been at it for hours. We've tried holds, throws, blows, kicks and virtually every trick in the book. Only sheer bloody-mindedness is still keeping us on our feet.

His face is completely puffed up. His eyes have turned into bloodshot little slits. I'm sure I look the same, if not worse. I wipe the blood and sweat away from my face and wait for him to make his move.

I'm considerably younger than him, but so far that hasn't proved to be much of an advantage. I'm stronger, but he's wilier. I'm hoping he'll finally run out of steam before I do, but so far he's shown no signs of doing so.

He punches me again. I feel the jolt all the way down to my knees. I stagger a step or two, then slug him back. There is not even a pretence of any sort of finesse in our moves any longer. This has turned into a contest of wills.

Suddenly, he charges at me, with his arm held out sideways. It connects with my throat, and I go down on my back, gagging. Luckily, the momentum of his charge takes him past me. By the time he turns back, I'm ready. I do a leg sweep, knocking him off his feet. He lands on his butt. I lunge at him. He scrambles away, but I manage to get a choke hold around his neck from behind while he's still on his knees.

I start to squeeze. He rams his elbow repeatedly into my stomach. I cling on for dear life. He slowly rises, still battering away at me. Just as he starts to stand on his feet, I let go of his neck, join my hands and club him hard, right at the point where his spine begins.

He goes down, stunned. I grab him under his armpits from behind, clasp my hands around his chest and then arch backward, using the momentum to hurl him over my head. His skull and neck take the brunt of the impact as he hits the ground.

He forces himself onto his knees but he seems dazed now. His eyes are unfocused and he's barely registering what's going on. I grab his head and trap it between my legs. I get a grip around his stomach and try to lift him upside down. But he's not done just yet.

Jarasandha, in turn, tries to lever himself up so that he can stand upright and throw me off. It's a tense moment and the fight hangs in the balance. I heave, grunt and strain. I must, must pull off this move. Because if I don't, I'm really not sure if I can last much longer.

Suddenly, the strength seems to drain out of him. Bit by bit, I haul him up. He is now dangling completely upside down, his feet pointing towards the sky. I hold the position for a while, letting the blood drain down towards his head, making him dizzy. He struggles feebly, trying to free himself before he loses consciousness. But I hold on. And then, I brutally slam him down, head-first into the ground. At the very least, that should fracture his skull.

He lies there, very still. I spit out blood, wipe away perspiration, rub my sweaty palms on my body in a bid to dry them. Then I bend over him.

Suddenly, impossibly, he plays his last card. He grabs my neck and locks his legs around my waist. He begins to squeeze my ribs. The pain is excruciating. Initially, I'm too stunned to react. What the hell will it take to finish him off? I pick him up and slam him down on the hard ground, again and again. "Die, god

damn you, die!" I scream at the top of my lungs in utter frustration. But the leglock stays as tight as ever.

From the corner of my eye, I see Krishna gesturing frantically. I look at him. He's holding a twig in his hands. He snaps it in two, then tosses the pieces away. I nod gratefully.

I grab a hold of Jarasandha's legs, and slowly, grimly try to force them apart. He responds by trying to tighten the leglock even further. But after all these hours, he has finally run out of steam. Bit by bit, I push his legs apart so that they no longer squeeze my body. Then, I flip him over. He is face down on the ground. I squat on his lower back, face away from him, with each of his legs hooked under one of my arms.

I force his legs upwards, even as I press down on his back. I let out a loud yell, using it to channelise all my remaining strength into one explosive burst of energy. My roar merges with his agonised scream as his back snaps.

The sound of our combined voices can probably be heard for miles as a stunned silence descends upon the audience.

The great emperor lies there, paralyzed. I bow to him respectfully. Then I give him a quick, merciful death.

CHAPTER 12

It is undoubtedly one of the ironies of life that few people are aware that they are living their best days when they are actually doing so. Talk to the young and they will, almost invariably, say that their best days lie ahead. Talk to the aged and they will inevitably hark back to the past. Is it because nostalgia endows days gone by with a golden sheen that never truly existed? Or, is it because with the benefit of hindsight, we are able to see how trivial the worries that once seemed to loom so large actually were? And how what then seemed like minor joys were actually the source of our greatest happiness, if we'd only taken the time to notice and savour the moments?

As I survey the years of my life, I have no doubt in saying that the best ones were during Yudhishtira's reign in Khandavaprastha, which prospered so rapidly under his able governance that it soon came to be renamed Indraprastha. In retrospect, I only wish that I had savoured those days more. None of us did, because the future seemed to glitter endlessly before us, rich with promise and hope.

It was during this period that Yudhishtira truly came into his own. Unfortunately, most chronicles of our lives tend to give this period only a passing mention. That's not surprising, I suppose, because conflict and turbulence make for much more dramatic reading than peace and stability. But the truth is that Yudhishtira was a truly outstanding king and has never really gotten his due.

He was a superb administrator and an inspiring institution-builder. He worked diligently and tirelessly and ran a clean, efficient government. Traders and migrants flocked from far and wide as Indraprastha increasingly came to be known as the land of opportunity. Yudhishtira would govern just as wisely after the terrible war at Kurukshetra, but never again with the same sense of boundless enthusiasm and optimism.

The only irritant during those golden years, at least from my point of view, was that every now and then Yudhishtira would try to get me involved in the day-to-day functioning of the kingdom. I would always beg off, because frankly, it bored me to tears.

"There are people who are meant to fight in troubled times, and people who are supposed to govern in good times, and I am firmly in the first category," I told him once, when he was being particularly insistent.

Yudhishtira's face took on a sombre look. "You should take on more responsibility. After all, should something happen to me, you would have to ascend the throne of Indraprastha, at least till we have grown-up heirs."

The reference to heirs made me frown, because it was a touchy topic. In the initial days after we had married Draupadi, we had each visited her at least once a week, by turn. So if Yudhishtira spent Monday night with her, it would be my turn on Tuesday, Arjun's on Wednesday and so on. But as Krishna pointed out, such a system would cause great confusion about establishing the paternity of our children when they were born.

"Why can't they just be our collective children?" I asked. "Why do we have to specify who came from which one's loins? If we can share a wife, we can share children too."

But Draupadi was adamant. "Children deserve to know who their fathers are," she said.

And so it came to pass that we evolved a system whereby she would spend a year at a time with each one of us, during which period she would be sexually off-limits for the rest of us. That effectively meant having a platonic relationship with her for four years. I saw the logic of the system, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

"So you will attend court a little more, won't you?" Yudhishtira prompted me again after a few days, returning to the subject. He really could be quite a nag when he got something into his head.

"Brother, can you really see me running a kingdom?" I asked. "I'd be a total disaster. If you're so hell-bent on drawing up a succession plan, nominate Arjun instead."

He shook his head. "Arjun has even more of a restless warrior spirit than you. And, if I nominate either of the twins, the other one might feel slighted. You know, Bhima, you have a certain earthy wisdom. I'm sure that if you actually gave yourself a chance, you might be surprised at how well you could do as an administrator."

I was suddenly seized by an inspiration. "Nominate Draupadi," I said.

"What!" exclaimed Yudhishtira, genuinely startled.

"Why not?" I said, all excited about the idea. "I know you spend hours discussing statecraft with her. You rely on her to give you advice, and it's usually sensible. She could run an administration quite competently, and Arjun and I would ensure the security of the realm. I'm sure it would work out very well."

Yudhishtira seemed genuinely tempted for a while, but ultimately he was too

much of a conservative, so he never really got around to announcing a number two. It was broadly understood, though never explicitly stated, that should the need ever arise, the mantle would fall upon me.

I prayed fervently that it never would, and cheerfully went about my daily routine, making sure to stay in shape. But there were only so many hours that one could exercise. So I used the abundance of free time to seriously work on something that was just a hobby to begin with – cooking.

I still remember Draupadi's startled expression the day I first walked into the royal kitchens. "Bhima, what on earth are you doing here?" she asked.

"I demolish such vast quantities of food, it's only fair that I should spend some time and effort making it too," I quipped.

She laughed. "The mighty warrior with a ladle in his hand instead of a mace. This is a sight I really have to see. Just make sure you don't eat up all the food while pretending to taste it." And she granted me free access to what was, after all, her undisputed domain.

I spent many happy hours in the kitchens. I came to genuinely love cooking. And having Draupadi around helped. My new-found interest gave us something to bond over. We would celebrate when recipes turned out well, and she would console me when something went wrong, which was distressingly frequent to begin with, but got rarer and rarer as time went by.

I have to confess, there was something about putting the ingredients together and watching a delicious dish take shape that made me feel like we were partners, engaged in co-creation. It wasn't quite sex, but sometimes it felt almost as good.

But while I was quite content to potter around Indraprastha, Arjun chafed at the inactivity. He was constantly agog to explore new lands, and seek out fresh adventures. I suspect too, that the sexual tension between him and Draupadi during the years when he wasn't allowed to be with her greatly bothered him, and his frequent sojourns outside Indraprastha, usually accompanied by Krishna, were actually an excuse to get away from her and the hunger that they both shared but couldn't satiate.

He would return with fascinating tales of amazing adventures and wielding powerful weapons, ostensibly gifted to him by some *deva* or the other to whom he had rendered some service. From memories of my meeting with Vayu, I deduced that the aliens were visiting earth with increasing frequency. I just hoped that boded well.

On two occasions though, Arjun returned with individuals. Both meetings

were unforgettable – and both would leave a lasting impact on our lives.

CHAPTER 13

Yudhishtira and I are conducting an inspection of the fortress ramparts when we suddenly see a cloud of dust in the horizon. It looks like a lone chariot, being driven at some speed.

"It's Arjun," I say, perplexed. "And he seems to have a young woman with him."

The chariot comes racing in through the gates. The horses are foaming at the bit and virtually at the end of their tether. They've obviously been driven at some speed over a vast distance. Nakul would wince if he could see them right now, I think. I had once teased him that he loves horses more than women.

"No, but I do find it easier to make sweet talk to a horse after I've ridden it," he had retorted.

Arjun and the young woman dismount, their faces weary, their clothes crumpled and travel-stained. I look at the woman keenly. I've never seen her before, but somehow the features seem familiar, as if I've seen them on another face.

Arjun gestures at us. "My older brothers," he says. "Yudhishtira and Bhima."

The girl immediately touches Yudhishtira's feet, then turns towards me. I step back, embarrassed. "Please, please," I say. "A *namaste* will do just fine for me."

She smiles, and it reaches all the way upto her eyes. They light up with a mischievous glint that I can't help but warm to, and that's when it hits me.

"Krishna," I say. "You have Krishna's eyes. And Balaram's mouth and fair skin. Who are you?"

"This is Subhadra," says Arjun. "Krishna and Balaram's sister."

Yudhishtira and I exchange startled glances. "But I thought Balaram was planning to get her betrothed to Duryodhana," I state.

It's true. Duryodhana had been taking great pains to ingratiate himself with Balaram of late, and the latter seemed to have taken a liking to him. I try not to mind, because I owe Balaram far too much, but their growing closeness had been bothering me.

"What have you done, Arjun?" asks Yudhishtira anxiously.

Arjun looks momentarily abashed, but then a stubborn look settles upon his face. "We fell in love. She asked me to rescue her from a miserable marriage with that arrogant ass. So I did."

Yudhishtira clutches his head. “What? You’ve given Duryodhana one more reason to hate us? And, you may just have turned our closest allies, the Yadavas, into our bitter enemies. What on earth were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t thinking,” says Arjun. “I simply followed my heart. And I’m sure Krishna will understand. After all, he too eloped with Rukmini. And he did it when she was practically on her way to the altar to get married to Shishupala. Matters had reached a far more advanced stage there than in this one.”

“I’d better send an emissary to Dwarka right away and ensure that your foolhardy action hasn’t jeopardised our alliance,” snarls Yudhishtira. “And we’d better get you two formally married soon, so that her brothers will understand that your intentions were honourable.”

Typical of Yudhishtira, he’s thinking in terms of realpolitik. I’m not too concerned on that front. I know Krishna thinks Arjun can do no wrong, and he’s bound to find a way to placate Balaram and the other Yadavas. No, what worries me is how Draupadi will react.

We all know Arjun has had many amorous dalliances, but he’s taken great care to be discreet about them thus far. How will she handle being told that the only man she truly loves has brought home a younger co-wife? I have a sinking feeling that she won’t like it one bit.

She doesn’t. In fact, she throws a fit. She retreats to her chamber, and doesn’t emerge the whole day. She refuses to eat or drink anything, or meet anyone. Arjun is beside himself with guilt, but clueless about how to mollify her.

Finally, I decide to take matters into my hands – quite literally. I prepare a dish that is my specialty – a coconut milk-based mixture of vegetables and spices. To be honest, I had come up with the recipe quite accidentally one day, when Draupadi had challenged me to create a new dish and I had simply thrown together everything that was readily available. But amazingly, it turned out quite delicious and she too loved it – in fact, it’s one of her favourites.

I make the dish – which we simply refer to as *aviyal* or the mixture – and take it to her chamber. It’s bolted from inside. I knock. “Go away,” she yells.

“It’s me,” I say. “Open up, I want to talk to you.”

“I don’t want to talk to anyone,” she yells back. “Just leave me alone, the whole lot of you.”

“Hey, you’re angry with Arjun,” I retort. “Why take it out on the rest of us? Now open the door or I’m going to break it.”

“Just try,” she says sullenly.

All right! Now I’m starting to get seriously irritated. I ram my shoulder against

the door. It gives way. I step in, and duck as a jug comes flying straight at my head. It shatters against the wall.

"Peace," I say, holding up a hand.

She looks around for some more objects to throw. I hastily put down the vessel I'm carrying. She sees a huge vase and tries to pick it up. Fortunately, it's too heavy for her to lift. I make a heroic effort, and manage not to laugh.

"Careful," I say gently. "You don't want to sprain your delicate back."

"Fat lot you care," she scowls.

"I do," I say. "That's why I'm here. Now come and eat. I didn't have my dinner when I heard you'd been hungry the whole day, and I'm really starving."

"Why? Didn't that white cow whip up a delicious meal for her paramour and his brothers?" she asks bitterly. "At least now we won't need any lamps in the palace. Her fair skin will light up the place. Poor Arjun, having to make do with a darkie all these years."

I sigh. "Draupadi, you know we all find you utterly beautiful. Since when have you developed a complex about your skin? Just because Arjun finds someone else attractive doesn't mean you've suddenly become any less gorgeous. This sudden insecurity about your looks doesn't become you at all. Now, I know how you're feeling..."

"No, you don't," she interrupts. "You have absolutely no idea how I'm feeling."

"Don't I?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. "Loving someone who loves somebody else? Oh, I think I know a little bit about that. I have, for years."

She opens her mouth to retort, then stops. The anger in her eyes is replaced by misery, and she comes up and hugs me tightly.

"Curse this stupid thing called the heart," she says. "There should be a law of nature that if you love someone, the object of your affection must reciprocate and have eyes only for you. The world would be a simpler, far better place."

"I second that completely," I say.

In her misery, she doesn't even notice my sarcasm. Ironically, there is probably no one better qualified than me to advise her on the subject of unrequited love. Should I even bother, I wonder. Why not just let her stew in her misery? It would serve her right for all the heartache she has inflicted on me all these years. But I can't find it within me to be so cruel to her at her most vulnerable. So I share the bitter lessons that she has forced me to learn.

"In a perfect world, that's certainly how things would be. But the world we live in is an imperfect one, and we just have to make the best of it. So let me give you some advice, based on personal experience. You can allow envy to diminish you

as a person. Or you can understand that possessiveness is not a sign of love, it stems from selfishness and insecurity.”

“Every person is an individual in his own right, with his own set of feelings and emotions,” I go on. “We can’t force someone else to feel a particular way about us. So, if you feel that someone doesn’t love you as much as you’d like him to, you have two choices. You can choose to be resentful and angry and make both him and yourself miserable. Or be grateful that this person is part of your life, in whatever capacity, and try to be a positive factor in his life. I’ve experienced both options, and personally, the latter one makes you feel a lot better about yourself and the world.”

She gazes at me in silence, and then says, “You know, you never cease to surprise me. Who’d have thought you’d be capable of such sensitivity?”

“Hey, the heart is a muscle too, you know,” I joke. “And speaking of hearts, just because Arjun has found Subhadra doesn’t mean he loves you any less. He’s got a huge heart. There’s enough room for both of you.”

She smiles wryly at that. “I can’t believe you’ve come to plead on his behalf,” she says.

“I’m not pleading for him,” I reply. “I’m here because I care for you, and I can’t bear to see you miserable.”

She caresses my face gently. “Why couldn’t I just have fallen in love with you rather than with that heart-breaker?” she says wistfully.

“We can’t pick the people we love,” I answer. “But we can at least choose the people we care for. And, as long as I fall into that category for you, that’s good enough for me. Now eat, and promise me you’ll be kind to Arjun and Subhadra. Especially Subhadra. She’s not a wicked harridan, just a very nervous young girl who’s desperately seeking the approval of the people who are important to her husband.”

She nods. “I don’t think I’m ready to meet them just yet. But I will in a while. And yes, I will try my best to be nice to her. Now, can we hurry up and eat before the food turns ice-cold? It certainly smells delicious.”

Later, as I leave her room after dinner, I wryly reflect that I wouldn’t have been half as articulate if someone had told me to tell Draupadi how much I love her. Why is that, I wonder.

Maybe because deep down, I know Draupadi will always be more receptive to hearing about Arjun than me. Or maybe, it’s just easier in general to plead someone else’s case. That way, you don’t run the risk of inflicting further damage on an already badly battered sense of self-esteem in the very likely event of a

rejection.

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The next day, Subhadra pays me a visit. “I know you don’t like having your feet touched,” she says. “So can I give you a great big hug?”

I nod. She can’t quite get her arms around me but she nestles against me anyway. “I was missing my brothers,” she tells me. “But I think I’ve just gained one that I’m going to be very fond of. Draupadi *didi* met me and spoke very affectionately to me. I know it only happened because you spoke to her. I don’t think I can ever tell you how grateful I am.”

I shrug. “If you want to thank me, promise you’ll always greet me with your lovely smile.”

And for many years thereafter, she always did. Until the day her only child, Abhimanyu, died, part of a generation of sons who perished valiantly while their unfortunate parents lived on to mourn them.

CHAPTER 14

A few months later, true to form, Arjun is off again – inevitably accompanied by Krishna. Just as I had anticipated, our charming cousin had talked Balaram and the others into accepting Arjun's elopement with Subhadra. Krishna and Arjun are closer than ever before, and it shows. There's an air of excitement and anticipation about them as they prepare for their latest adventure.

"You're not planning to bring back another wife, are you?" I ask, only half-joking. "Draupadi's aim with jugs is bound to get better with time and practice."

Arjun laughs. "We've heard there are some bandits who attack travellers and then vanish into the thick forests on the outskirts of Indraprastha. We're planning to track them down. So no, I doubt there will be any opportunity to come across any great beauties."

But when the two return, they do have company, though it's not a woman. It's a copper-skinned man with features similar to those of the hill people whom we met during the time we went underground after escaping from the lac palace.

"He was being held hostage by the bandits while they waited for a ransom to arrive for him," explains Arjun. "We rescued him from them."

"What happened to the bandits?" asks Yudhishtira.

Arjun shrugs. "They refused to surrender. So I wiped them out to the last man. And for good measure, I burned down the woods in which they used to hide after conducting their raids."

"Good god," I say, appalled. "Wasn't that a little extreme?"

Arjun spreads his arms. "As long as those forests existed so close to civilisation, there would always have been a temptation for outlaws to use them as bases from which to plunder and pillage innocent people. I didn't see any other viable option."

I shake my head, saddened at this wanton destruction. But Yudhishtira has already shifted his attention to the man rescued by Arjun and Krishna.

"Who are you?" he asks.

"My origins are from a land far across the ocean," replies the man. "My people are called the Mayans, and are the greatest builders the world has ever known."

"Really? And how did you get here?" asks Yudhishtira, intrigued.

"My father was out on a boat one day, but got caught in a violent storm," he replies. "By the time it ended, he was far out in the ocean, hopelessly lost and the

sole survivor left on the boat. He drifted along for many days, somehow surviving on whatever fish he caught and whatever rain water he could collect. Just when he was on the verge of dying, he was rescued by a trading ship whose passengers included an Indian merchant and his daughter. My father fell in love with the girl and decided to make a new life for himself in India. But he named me Maya in honour of my origins, and passed on the architectural secrets of our people to me. For rescuing me, as services rendered, if you permit, I will build you a palace that will amaze all who see it.”

“Please go ahead,” says Yudhishtira.

And Maya proved true to his word. The palace indeed turned out to be every bit as beautiful as he had promised. In fact, it came to be known as one of the wonders of the world. Honestly, it was a little too ornate and a bit tacky for my taste, but Draupadi loved it and was immensely proud of it, and I delighted in her happiness. Little did we know that it would play its role in leading us to what was undoubtedly the worst day of our lives.

But wait. It isn’t really fair to blame Maya or the palace. Perhaps the seeds of that catastrophe were sown the day Yudhishtira decided to hold the *Rajasuya yagna*, effectively declaring himself emperor of the North. Or perhaps they go even further back, to the day that a blind elder brother was passed over as heir to the Hastinapura throne in favour of his younger brother, creating resentment and insecurity and setting in place a tragically inevitable chain of events.

Actually, why stop there? One can keep going endlessly into the past in search for explanations for why things worked out the way they did. It’s tempting to do so. But that still doesn’t absolve one of responsibility for one’s own actions.

Anyway, once Yudhishtira – greatly encouraged by Krishna – took it into his head to hold the *yagna*, events moved with gratifying rapidity. The ninety-five kings who had been freed from Jarasandha’s captivity after I killed him were only too happy to accept Yudhishtira as their overlord, especially after it was made clear to them that they would retain their sovereignty and be required to pay only a modest tribute. Other kingdoms too were quick to fall in line when confronted with our army. Occasionally, a foolhardy monarch resisted, and was swiftly shown the error of his ways.

Soon enough, we had acquired enough vassals and conquered enough kingdoms for it to be deemed acceptable for Yudhishtira to hold his precious *yagna*. Invitations were duly sent out to friends and relatives. Naturally, that included our beloved cousins.

CHAPTER 15

Many years have gone by since those days spent together under the tutelage of Guru Drona, but as I behold our cousins, it is clear that nothing has changed. I chuckle to myself. There are two types of people that one understands really well – one’s closest friends and one’s bitterest foes. I know exactly what is going through Duryodhana’s mind. He is predictably, almost painfully envious, though he’s trying his best to put on a brave face.

“You’ve certainly done well for yourselves,” he says.

“Yes cousin, not bad considering what we started out with,” I reply. “And how is Hastinapura? Prospering, I hope? As are you?”

He flushes. We both know that Hastinapura has stagnated under Dhritarashtra, and that Duryodhana has remained a crown prince for years even as Yudhishtira is set to be formally crowned an emperor. Yudhishtira places a warning hand on my arm.

“Be gracious, Bhima,” he says softly, then turns to Duryodhana and his entourage. “Come cousin,” he says. “Let me show you to the quarters we have prepared for your stay.”

Yudhishtira’s graciousness is completely wasted on Duryodhana. If anything, it only makes matters worse. As Yudhishtira gives him a guided tour of the palace, I can see Duryodhana’s jealousy growing with every step that he takes. He gapes open-mouthed at the wondrous sights and sounds around him. He is particularly fascinated by the roof, painted blue and so cleverly bedecked with clouds and birds that it is almost impossible to tell whether or not one is looking at the actual sky.

Unfortunately for Duryodhana, as he walks along staring at the roof, he doesn’t notice the pool of water right in front of him. Yudhishtira’s warning comes a split second too late as he walks straight into the pool.

Duryodhana clammers out red-faced, trying desperately to hold on to his shredded dignity. All of us are poker-faced, pretending that nothing has happened. And just then, there is a peal of laughter from the balcony of Draupadi’s chamber.

“The blind son of a blind father,” we hear her say distinctly.

A murderous expression crosses Duryodhana’s face. It’s so intense that for a moment, I feel a sense of foreboding. Then I shrug it off. “Let him do his worst,

we can handle it,” I tell myself.

Yudhishtira quietly shows Duryodhana to his quarters, then marches towards Draupadi’s chamber. His face is an emotionless mask and his back is completely rigid – a sure sign that he’s totally livid. I follow him. If he’s going to have a fight with Draupadi, then I want to be there to support her.

Yudhishtira storms into Draupadi’s room. Her maids take one look at his expression, and quickly file out. Soon, the three of us are the only ones left in the room.

“How could you say something so crass, foolish and unkind?” demands Yudhishtira.

“But it’s true,” I mutter.

Yudhishtira turns and glares at me. “I’ll thank you to keep out of this.”

Then he turns to Draupadi. “It was highly disrespectful to Duryodhana and it showed a total lack of sensitivity not just to Uncle Dhritarashtra, but also to others who are handicapped. Do you think he likes being blind? Is it his fault that he was born that way? Do you think his children like to be reminded of their father’s infirmity? Count yourself lucky that you were born without any defects, and be more considerate towards those who weren’t. I want you to apologise to Duryodhana at the first opportunity you get.”

“No,” says Draupadi, stubbornly. “I won’t apologise to that idiot.”

Yudhishtira is taken aback. “What is your problem with him, anyway? Whatever problems may have existed have been between us five brothers and him. What has he ever done to you that you dislike him so much?”

“I have never liked the way he looks at me,” snaps Draupadi. “It’s as if he’s mentally disrobing me and raping me. It gives me the creeps. Actually, I wish he was really blind.”

“But has he ever behaved indecorously or disrespectfully to you?” asks Yudhishtira.

“You wouldn’t understand,” says Draupadi. “You have to be a woman to understand how someone’s gaze can make you first feel dirty and violated, and then furious at yourself for feeling that you’re somehow to blame for the sick fantasies of a creep. First ask Duryodhana to apologise for all the lustful, nauseating glances that he has directed at me and then – and only then – will I apologise to him.”

Yudhishtira turns to me, helplessly. “Talk some sense into her, will you?” he asks, almost plaintively.

I shrug. “You asked me to keep out of it, as I recall. In any case, I think all of

us should retire for the night. The *yagna* starts early tomorrow and we want to be nice and fresh for it, don't we?"

Yudhishtira storms out of the room. Draupadi and I exchange glances. We're careful not to laugh out loud, but we quietly clasp each other's hands.

"Thanks," she murmurs.

"I didn't do a thing," I say and wink. As I walk away, her shoulders are heaving in silent laughter.

CHAPTER 16

The priests are droning on as they bathe Yudhishtira in water, milk and honey. Rather him than me, I think, as I stifle a yawn. The ceremony has already been going on for what seems like hours.

Duryodhana makes a late entry and strides up to the dais, where Draupadi is seated by Yudhishtira's side. I tense, wondering if a confrontation is coming. It isn't. Duryodhana performs a *namaste* in the general direction of the couple. He virtually looks through Draupadi – certainly no lustful glances today, I note wryly – but acknowledges her presence with the most millimetric of nods. She responds in kind. Yudhishtira smiles and indicates that Duryodhana should take a seat.

The chief Brahmin interrupts his chanting to say, “Your Highness, it is now time to choose a guest of honour for this ceremony. Please name the person among those assembled here whom you hold in the highest esteem.”

Well now, I think, this should be interesting. I had no idea that there was any such requirement. I wonder if Yudhishtira was aware of it, and has thought through his decision.

Yudhishtira rises slowly to his feet. He folds his hands, and addresses the gathering. “It is my privilege to have received the love and blessings of all of you. I am well aware that none of this could have been achieved without your support. I hold everyone gathered here in the highest esteem. It has been a truly difficult challenge to single out one person for the honour of being the chief guest. But in my humble opinion, it cannot possibly be anyone other than our beloved friend, guide and cousin Krishna.”

Arjun cheers loudly and begins clapping. Others join in. But I notice there are some sullen faces too. Krishna stands up, bows to the gathering and makes his way to the dais. He is just about to settle down when a strident voice rings out.

“Will Maharaja Yudhishtira please take the trouble to explain why, when the greatest kings and mightiest warriors of India are assembled here, has he chosen to honour someone who is neither? By choosing to confer this accolade upon a cowherd, who is also a coward, he has in fact mocked everyone present here today.”

Shishupala, the King of Chedi. Why am I not surprised? When Jarasandha was alive, Shishupala had been one of his closest allies. He had also been

betroted to Rukmini, whom Krishna had abducted – with her complete and delighted consent – even as she was on her way to the wedding site. It's no surprise that he hates Krishna.

“Mind your tongue, Shishupala, or you just might find yourself holding it in your hands,” bellows a furious Arjun.

“So you want to fight me on his behalf, do you, Arjun?” asks Shishupala. “Well, isn't that just typical of this manipulator, getting others to do his dirty work for him? He couldn't possibly have defeated Lord Jarasandha in fair combat, so he tricked him into a duel with Bhima. He's nothing but a petty thief. As a child, he stole butter. Then he graduated to stealing milkmaid's clothes, then on to stealing the fiancés of others. And now, he seeks to usurp an honour that could rightfully have been given to dozens of other people – in fact, virtually anyone present here, rather than him.”

Arjun is about to retort but Krishna stops him. “Shishupala is my cousin, just like you, Arjun,” he says. “Obviously, he has been holding a lot against me in his heart for a very long time. Let him get it off his chest. It might make him feel better.”

“I don't need your permission to speak, you filthy murderer of your own uncle,” spits out Shishupala. “Do you want me to enumerate your numerous sins for the benefit of all assembled here? Very well, I shall do so with pleasure.”

He embarks on a foul-mouthed rant. Krishna hears him out calmly, an enigmatic smile playing on his face.

What exactly is going on here, I wonder. Krishna is the wittiest, most effective conversationalist that I know, or am ever likely to. I'm sure he could easily shut Shishupala up with a clever remark, or an unassailable piece of logic. So why is he allowing him to go on spewing his vitriol? And how long will he allow this to continue?

After an almost interminable passage of time, Krishna holds up his hand. Shishupala pauses.

“You always were an obnoxious brat, Shishupala,” Krishna says gently. “Once, when you were a child, you had insulted me. Your mother, my father's sister, had begged me to forgive you. She was a wonderful woman, who really deserved better than a fool like you for a son. So I had promised her that I would forgive you not one, but one hundred insults. Over the years, I've been keeping count. Be warned, you just reached the magical mark. From now on, you can no longer count upon my patience or forgiveness.”

“You'll forgive me, you miserable, scheming wretch?” yells Shishupala. He

draws his sword and lashes out. Krishna blocks it with his forearm. The sword clangs into Krishna's metallic arm-band, preventing any serious damage. Krishna whips out his discus and in one smooth motion, beheads Shishupala.

A stunned silence descends upon the gathering. It is broken by the sound of some people retching. Yudhishtira beckons the guards. "Please take away King Shishupala's body and have it sent back to his kingdom so that it can be cremated with full state honours," he says.

The ceremony is about to resume when Draupadi suddenly notices a thin trickle of blood on Krishna's arm. The edge of Shishupala's sword must have nicked it when it clattered into his armlet. "Get me some medicine and a clean piece of cloth," she tells a maid. "Make it fast."

The maid scurries off, and returns with the items. Draupadi carefully cleans Krishna's wound and binds it up.

Krishna nods gratefully. "Thank you for stopping my bleeding with this piece of cloth, Draupadi," he says. "Hopefully, someday I will be able to repay your kindness."

"Oh, don't be silly. It's just a small thing," laughs Draupadi.

"I don't forget insults, and I don't forget favours," says Krishna. Then he turns to the priests. "Perhaps we should re-commence the proceedings. This unfortunate interruption has gone on for far too long."

Later, I overhear a couple of guests talking. "Blood was shed during a sacred ceremony," says one. "That is an extremely inauspicious note on which to formally begin a reign over an empire."

The other nods sombrely.

I gently put my arms around them. They look up, startled. "If you really think about it, gentlemen, no empire is ever created or held together without a certain amount of blood being shed. So, I wouldn't worry too much about it."

"Yes, yes. You're so right," they both gabble.

I see naked fear in their eyes. I let them go. They scuttle away with, what seems to me, almost comical relief.

Of course, at that point of time, I had no idea that my words would be proved both tragically wrong and right. We would go on to lose an empire without a drop of blood being shed. And we would eventually regain it only after so much blood had flowed that it turned the soil of the battlefield a sodden, dirty reddish-brown for miles and miles.

CHAPTER 17

Draupadi is slumped against the cottage wall, gazing vacantly into the distance. Her eyes are open, but she isn't really seeing anything. When we talk to her, she answers in monosyllables. The food that I had heaped on a banana leaf and placed next to her some hours ago lies untouched. She hasn't even changed out of the clothes she wore the previous day.

My heart aches to see the proud, fiery empress reduced to this hollow shell of a woman. She has slipped into a depression ever since that terrible day in the gambling hall. The details are too well-known to need recounting, but I will say this much. That day changed all of us forever. It seared our souls and branded them for eternity. We will never again laugh with the carefree joy of youth or enjoy the peaceful sleep of someone who believes in the essential goodness of human nature.

That day taught me many things. One of them is that you can undergo more shame, humiliation and degradation than you ever thought you were capable of bearing, and still go on living. You can force yourself to hold on to life even when your mind and heart are crying out to you to end it. You just need to give yourself a reason to live. And I have given myself a reason – actually, a hundred reasons. I intend to kill each and every one of the Kauravas.

I look at Draupadi's misery, and use it as fuel to stoke the fire raging in my heart. Thirteen years is a long time, but they will pass somehow. And when the time for revenge comes, I will be ready.

A chariot enters the compound. We look up. It is Krishna. For the first time since we have come into the forest, I see a sign of animation in Draupadi. She rushes up to him, weeping. He holds her gently and soothes her.

"I have five husbands and they sat there watching my humiliation. You alone saved me. I can never thank you enough," she tells him.

"I told you at the *yagna*, I would repay your kindness one day," he replies.

I don't usually believe in miracles, but I can't deny what I've seen with my own eyes. And I have to acknowledge that what happened that day was nothing short of a miracle. As Draupadi was being stripped, she had cried out to Krishna for help. The Kauravas had roared with laughter, since Krishna wasn't even present there. But their laughter had changed to puzzlement as the menses-stained cloth that Draupadi was wearing just kept expanding endlessly till Dusshasana finally

abandoned the effort and slumped to the ground in exhaustion.

“What actually happened that day, Krishna?” I ask. “How did you accomplish that feat?”

He smiles and gently pats my shoulder. “Sometimes, it is better to just let some things remain mysteries, Bhima. Otherwise, the world would be a very boring, prosaic place, wouldn’t it?” he says, changing tack. “I’m hungry. Is there anything to eat?”

Draupadi looks around sheepishly. “I haven’t been doing much cooking. Bhima has mostly been in charge of the kitchen since we got here.”

“I last cooked some hours ago,” I reply. “Most of the food is finished. But I can whip up some basic stuff for you if you like.”

Krishna looks around and points to the dish next to Draupadi. “What about that?” he says.

“Oh, it’s just some rice and *daal*. It must have gone completely cold and tasteless by now,” she says.

Krishna shrugs. “I’m so hungry I could happily eat it.” He turns to Draupadi. “Mind sharing it with me?”

“You can have all of it,” she replies. “I’m really not hungry.”

Krishna gently cradles her face in his hands. “Draupadi, you want to see those who humiliated you get their just desserts, don’t you?”

She nods wordlessly.

“And how do you intend to do that if you starve yourself to death?” he asks her.

She nods again, and they sit down together and share the meal. After they are done, Krishna wipes his mouth and burps appreciatively.

“That wasn’t bad at all. But I have something that might be a little better.”

He brings out a horn-shaped container from his bag and hands it over to Draupadi with a ceremonial flourish.

“What is this?” she asks, puzzled.

“Oh, something that some friends of mine from a faraway land very kindly agreed to lend me for a few years,” he says. “They call it a cornucopia. Any time you need food or drink, just throw in some grass and water, recite a simple *mantra* that I will teach you and you will have as much as you need.”

“But how...” I begin, and then pause as Krishna turns his gaze on me. “Oh right, let some things remain mysteries,” I say.

“For the next few millennia anyway,” he says, and laughs.

Krishna spends the day with us, and even sleeps over. The next day he leaves.

After a while, Nakul and Sahadeva go off into the forest to gather some firewood.

Draupadi resumes what has become her normal position against the cottage wall. I'm scared that she'll lapse back into prolonged silence. So I walk up to her. "What are you thinking?" I ask.

I'm fully prepared to hear her usual answer, which is "Nothing." But she doesn't. Instead, she looks me full in the eye. And then she says, "I was remembering my *swayamvara*, and the moment when I rejected Karna. And I'm wondering what would have happened if I hadn't."

"Draupadi, the man practically called you a whore on the day you were dragged into the hall," I say, horrified. "Are you seriously thinking that you would have been better off with him than with us?"

She shrugs. "The first insult came from me, on the day of the *swayamvara*. Can I really blame him for hating me? Who knows what would have happened if I had kept quiet? Maybe I would have wound up with one husband, not five. But a husband who would have died before he let me be gambled away like some cheap, valueless possession."

There's a loud crash. I turn around. Arjun was making a crude wooden bench. He has just kicked it away and his face has turned a bright red. Quite clearly, he has heard every word Draupadi said. I look around. Yudhishtira too was obviously within hearing distance, because he looks completely stricken.

Arjun rushes into the cottage, and emerges a few seconds later, fully armed.

Yudhishtira gathers himself. "Arjun, where are you going?"

"To Hastinapura," Arjun snarls. "To find that bastard Karna and kill him right now. And then take back what is rightfully ours."

"Arjun, you can't," says a horrified Yudhishtira. "We are oath-bound to spend thirteen years in exile."

"To hell with you and to hell with your oath," screams Arjun at the top of his voice and storms off. Yudhishtira runs after him.

I curse fervently. This is the first time any of us has ever openly defied Yudhishtira. And given Arjun's present frame of mind, I'm genuinely worried that he could strike our eldest brother – or worse. I need to intercede, but that would mean leaving Draupadi alone.

As I hesitate, I see a couple of the *rishis* who live nearby walk up. "Is everything all right?" asks one. "We heard loud voices, so came over to investigate."

"I need to go find my brothers," I say gratefully. "Will you please stay here till

I return with them?”

Not giving them a chance to answer, I race into the forest. The raised voices of Arjun and Yudhishtira guide me to them soon enough.

“Arjun, this is against *dharma*,” says Yudhishtira.

“Oh, give me a break,” snaps Arjun. “What about your *dharma* towards your wife? What about your *dharma* towards your brothers? Did you think of any of that when you were wagering us? Admit it, brother, you’re a gambling junkie. And you had no right to make us suffer for your addiction.”

Yudhishtira makes a helpless gesture. “Arjun, there isn’t a moment when I don’t regret what happened. I share the same misery as the rest of you. And in my case, it is multiplied many times over because I know that I am to blame. But if it is any comfort, remember that Lord Rama too had to stay in exile for many years and emerged from it a better person.”

“There’s no comparison between the two situations, brother,” says Arjun. “Lord Rama went into exile of his own volition. We were hounded into it after being treated in the most disgusting manner possible.”

Yudhishtira shakes his head. “Yes, but he was offered the option of ending his exile and returning to Ayodhya as soon as his father died. He chose to stay true to his word, and so will I. Arjun, I burn for vengeance, just as much as you. But if we have to fight the Kauravas eventually, I want it to be very clear that we have right on our side, and how can that be possible if we turn into oath-breakers?”

Arjun shakes his head. “Words, brother. Mere words. I want some blood right now.”

Yudhishtira opens his arms wide. “If that is what you really need, just kill me and satisfy your bloodlust. I would rather die than have it said that a Pandava broke his word.”

“Here now,” I interrupt. “There’s no need for that kind of talk.”

And just then, we hear Draupadi scream. “Arjun, Bhima, save me,” she shrieks.

“Oh dear god,” I say. “This is taking the Ramayan analogy too far.”

And then I turn and race back towards the cottage, Yudhishtira and Arjun hot on my heels.

CHAPTER 18

I reach the cottage, my heart thudding with apprehension. What I see only makes me more fearful. The two *rishis* are lying on the ground; bruised, bound and gagged. There is no sign of Draupadi.

We quickly untie them. “What happened?” we ask. They grimace. “King Jayadratha of Sindhu appeared shortly after you left,” says one. “He told Lady Draupadi that she deserved to live in comfort and splendour, not undergo such hardship in the forest, and asked her to accompany him to his kingdom. When she refused...” he hesitates.

“Go on,” I say grimly.

“He forcibly seized her and threw her into his chariot,” replies the other. “When we tried to protest, his soldiers thrashed and bound us.”

“Which way did they go?” I ask.

They point towards the north. “They may be headed for Hastinapura. King Jayadratha is in his chariot. There are some thirty men with him, all on horseback.”

“They’ve got a head start and they’re mounted,” I say, my heart sinking.

Arjun taps me on the back. “I know a shortcut through the ridge,” he says.

“So what are waiting for?” I ask. “Lead on.”

He begins running immediately. Yudhishtira and I race after him. It is a rough trail, most of it uphill. Arjun, a natural athlete, swallows up the ground in smooth, easy strides, not even breathing hard. Because of my build, long-distance running isn’t exactly my forte. But I determinedly keep up with him, forcing my protesting legs and lungs to go on. Yudhishtira tries his best but soon lags behind.

We round a corner and suddenly the trail turns downhill. “This will intersect with the main path,” says Arjun and starts running down.

I scramble behind him. Towards the end of the slope, I trip and fall, rolling over and over. My descent ends as I crash into a tree. I quickly gather myself, and snatch up my mace. I don’t even bother trying to wipe the dust off my clothes. There’s no time for that.

“Well, that’s one way of covering some distance,” quips Arjun, and then starts running again. I follow.

Suddenly, we burst through the dense vegetation and hit the main trail. I

frantically look left and right. Then I see a trail of dust behind us. After our frenzied dash, Arjun and I have actually managed to overtake Jayadratha and his men.

Just then, his chariot comes into view. Jayadratha and Draupadi are in the back. She is struggling to free herself but he has pinned her down.

“Bring down the horses, Arjun,” I yell. “Immobilise that chariot.”

He nods, draws and shoots several arrows without even bothering to break stride. The two horses drawing the chariot neigh piteously and collapse. Jayadratha’s charioteer suddenly slumps forward, an arrow lodged in his heart.

Jayadratha takes a moment or so to register that his chariot has suddenly ground to a halt. He gapes first at the charioteer, then at the horses, his brain struggling to comprehend what his eyes are telling him.

Then he looks up and sees Arjun. He lifts his bow and tries to pull out an arrow from his quiver. A split second later, he is left staring horrified as an arrow fired by Arjun shatters his bow into two pieces.

Jayadratha dives to the floor of his chariot. His men charge. Against Arjun, at that distance, they don’t stand a chance. He calmly releases arrow after arrow, and every time he shoots, a saddle empties.

I watch the carnage as I catch my breath. And then I tell Arjun, “Leave some for me.”

By then, there are barely a dozen riders or so left. Arjun slings his bow back onto his shoulders. “All yours,” he says.

I let out a roar and charge. All the pent-up fury of the last few days erupts as I wade into the riders, swinging my mace indiscriminately, killing man and horse alike. Duryodhana’s face, twisted in an ugly sneer, swims before my eyes. I see him patting his obscenely exposed thigh and inviting Draupadi to sit on it.

I imagine that each one of these riders is Duryodhana and I hammer away at them like a demented man. Skulls shatter, bones fracture, blood spurts. I swing again and again and again. And suddenly, I realise that there is no one left standing to oppose me.

I stand there, taking deep breaths, trying to clear my mind off the battle frenzy. Draupadi rushes past me, straight to Arjun. He puts his arms around her. “Are you all right?” he asks anxiously.

“Yes,” she says sobbing. “I am now.”

“Thank god,” he says hoarsely. “Did that son of a bitch...?”

She shakes her head. “If you’re asking if he raped me, no. Though I’m sure he planned to do so later, in more comfortable surroundings, rather than in the back

of a bouncing chariot.”

Jayadratha suddenly bolts from the chariot, in which he has been cowering, and makes a dash for it. I run after him, and grab him by the hair. He pulls away and keeps running, leaving a tuft of his hair in my hands. I curse, fling the hair away and resume the chase. A couple of seconds later, I catch up with him again. Cornered, he lunges at me with a dagger in sheer desperation. I easily knock it away, then pick him up by the neck and slam him down hard on the ground.

I place my knee on his chest, and put a chokehold on his throat. “You bastard,” I yell. “How long have you been planning this abduction?”

He shakes his head vigorously from side to side. “It was pure coincidence that I arrived at your cottage when I did. Please, please, let me go. It was a terrible mistake. Please don’t kill me,” he pleads, weeping.

“Oh, you just happened to turn up at the exact moment that we left Draupadi alone and unguarded? Isn’t that a little too pat? And you expect me to believe this? How big an idiot do you take me for?” I ask him.

“I swear it’s the truth,” he whimpers, wheezing for breath now. “Please Bhima, I beg you.”

I cuff him across his face. “Quit yapping, you cur. Did you listen to Draupadi’s pleading when she asked you to release her? What did you think? That just because we had to helplessly watch those shameful proceedings in Hastinapura, any man could henceforth do whatever he liked with her? Well, I’ve got news for you, my friend. I’m going to make such an example of you that no one will dare to even look at her ever again!”

“Please Bhima,” he wails. “Forgive me just this once. I have a wife and a young child. Please just let me go to them and I’ll never ever come back.”

“Oh, you’ll go home all right, Jayadratha,” I say grimly. “But not in one piece. Different parts of you will fetch up at different times. Your family can have a great time re-assembling the jigsaw puzzle that your body will be by the time I’m done with you. Which limb should we start with?”

“Bhima, stop.” It’s Yudhishtira, who’s finally caught up with us. He walks up, panting. “He’s Dushala’s husband.”

Dushala is the only sister of the hundred Kaurava brothers. Her brothers dote on her, as do her parents.

“So what?” I ask. “He’ll still have to pay for what he just did.”

“Bhima, Dushala isn’t just the sister of the Kauravas. She’s also the only cousin sister we have. And whatever her brothers may have done to us, she’s never been anything but generous and affectionate. Do you really want to kill her husband

and make her a widow?" asks Yudhishtira.

I glare at my brother, infuriated. "I suggest you start worrying a little more about your own wife and a little less about others," I tell him. "In any case, Draupadi is the aggrieved party in this case. If anyone has a right to decide what to do with this wretch, it's her. I believe we should let her take a decision and agree to abide by it."

"Let him go." It's Draupadi. Her voice is flat and emotionless.

"What?" I exclaim in utter disbelief. "Draupadi, what are you saying?"

"If you kill him, his misery will be over. But the real punishment will be borne by Dushala and her child. Too many women and children suffer for no fault of theirs, because of foolish actions by men who think with their balls rather than with their brains. I'll be damned if I'll add to that suffering," she says.

I suck in a deep breath, slowly count to ten, and let out a long exhalation. "Draupadi, in thirteen years, we will be creating a whole lot of widows and orphans. You'd better make your peace with the idea."

She narrows her eyes. "That chain of events has already been set in place. I am well aware of the likely consequences, and as and when they occur, I will welcome them. But right here, right now, we have an opportunity to avoid kicking off yet another cycle of misery and retribution. I believe we should take it."

"Bravo, Draupadi," says Yudhishtira. "I'm proud of you. Today, you have realised that forgiveness is the highest form of courage, and become a better person for it."

"I don't have that kind of courage and I hope I never will," I growl. "But I said I would abide by Draupadi's decision, and I will. First, though, I'm going to give our dear brother-in-law here a little souvenir of this meeting. He's already shed some hair today. Let's add to it."

I grab the dagger that I'd knocked away from Jayadratha's hand and use it to lop off his hair roughly, unevenly. He shuts his eyes and sobs.

"Just be thankful that I'm only taking your hair, not your scalp too, you little piece of shit," I growl. I shave his head completely, leaving only four tufts of hair sticking out at odd angles. "That should remind you of your meeting with the four of us," I laugh. "My, aren't you a pretty sight. The next time you're tempted to prey on a seemingly helpless woman, Jayadratha, remember this day."

He crawls away, still sobbing. We walk away, without giving him a backward glance. We won't meet again till many years later, at Kurukshetra. And when we do, I will bitterly regret not killing him when I had the chance.

CHAPTER 19

The strange object descends gently on the ground. It vaguely resembles some sort of other-worldly bird, with a long, thin body, protuberances that look like wings on either side and a slim, stick-like object where the beak should be. But it's clearly not made of flesh or bone. Its body is composed of some kind of metal that I've never seen before.

Arjun starts to speak but his voice comes out all strange and hoarse-sounding. He clears his throat and says, more distinctly, "Well, I suppose I'll be on my way then."

I nod silently, still stunned at the spectacle unfolding before my eyes. Right till this moment, I hadn't actually believed that Arjun had been summoned to Amaravati, the capital of the *devas*. But now there is incontrovertible evidence that such is indeed the case.

It was just a few days ago that he had quietly told us all as we assembled for breakfast, "My father came to me in a dream last night."

"You mean our father, King Pandu," said Yudhishtira.

"No, I mean my father, Indra," replied Arjun. "The chief *deva*."

"And what did he have to say?" enquired Yudhishtira.

"That he needed my help in a war against their enemies," said Arjun. "And also that some of the *devas* are equipping the Kauravas and their allies with technology far superior to anything that exists on Earth. He promised to pass on weapons of mass destruction to me too if I agreed to fight for the *devas*."

"That's certainly an interesting dream," I said. "Pass me some more rice, will you?"

Arjun shook his head. "You know, it didn't feel like a dream. It was almost as if we were having a real conversation. In fact, Indra specifically mentioned a time and rendezvous point and said he would send a celestial vehicle to pick me up. Apparently, there is a deserted mountain peak which is about a four-day walk from here. At the crack of dawn on the fifth day, his vehicle will arrive to transport me to Amaravati."

Arjun got up and began packing his meagre belongings in a cloth.

"You're not serious about this?" asked Draupadi. "You're going haring off because of a dream?"

"What's the worst that can happen?" asked Arjun. "I'll have wasted a few days

for nothing. But what if it was an actual vision? We can't afford to have the Kauravas better armed than us."

"If the *devas* are so powerful, why do they need a human to fight for them?" asked Draupadi, acerbically. "Are you sure you aren't having delusions of grandeur?"

Arjun scratched his head as if trying to recall something. "He said they needed a sharpshooter for some covert operations. See, that's why I'm convinced it was a real conversation. I couldn't possibly think up something like that because I have absolutely no idea what it means. But even supposing I imagined it all, there's very little to lose. And, potentially, lots to gain. So yes, I will make my way to the mountain. At worst, I'll make a fool of myself and come back embarrassed. But it will still be better than not going to the peak at all and spending my life agonizing over whether Indra truly sought my assistance."

"Then we'll all accompany you till the mountain," said Yudhishtira decisively. "If a celestial vessel really comes down to Earth to pick you up, I want to behold the sight with my own eyes."

And here we are, actually beholding the sight with our wonderstruck eyes. A section of the craft that would have been the mouth of this bird-like object falls open, like a jaw dropping and a celestial being levitates out. Like Vayu, he looks almost human, apart from the fact that he exudes a dazzling radiance.

"Welcome, Arjun," he says. "I am Matali. Your father, Lord Indra, has sent me to fetch you. I am delighted to see that you could make it. As for the rest of you, I must request you to keep our little meeting a secret forever."

"Don't go, Arjun," says Draupadi suddenly, in a panic-stricken tone. I realise that like me, she too had not taken Arjun's dream seriously and it is only now that she understands that he is actually embarking upon a fantastic voyage. "The *devas'* powers are far beyond our comprehension. Just imagine how powerful their enemies must be. You're getting in way over your head. You may never return."

Arjun laughs, his face aglow with excitement. "I'm sure Lord Indra will do his best to keep me safe, Draupadi. But even if he doesn't, do you really imagine I'd pass up the adventure of a lifetime?"

She grabs him then and gives him a long, fierce kiss, oblivious to the rest of us. "You come back to me safe and sound," she says.

"I fully intend to," he answers. And for once, he's not laughing.

Arjun says his farewells to Yudhishtira and the twins too. Meanwhile, I turn to Matali.

"May I ask you a question?" I ask.

"By all means," he replies.

"I met my father, Lord Vayu, once," I say. "I distinctly recall that he simply appeared and disappeared. Why did you need to fly down in this object?"

Matali smiles. "I didn't need to. But we need it for Arjun. Human bodies, even those with *deva* genes, aren't always capable of handling materialisation and dematerialisation. In the past, there have been certain accidents when all that turned up at the other end was a heap of ashes. We'd rather not risk that happening with Arjun."

By now, Arjun has made his way to me. We embrace, and as we do so, he whispers in my ears, "You'll take care of her, won't you?"

"You know I will," I reply. "And we both know that she won't even notice, because she'll be too busy pining for you."

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder," he says, his eyes twinkling. "You should try it some time. Instead of constantly showering her with love and affection, try ignoring her a little. It might make her more appreciative of you."

"Really?" I ask. "Is that why you keep running off all the time?"

"No," he laughs. "That's simply because no matter how much I may love a place or a woman, I'm incapable of staying tied down to either for too long without getting restless and wanting to explore others."

I laugh and ruffle his hair. He really is a rogue, but a truly charming one. For a moment, I consider his advice to ignore Draupadi a little so that she will stop taking me for granted. But even as I think about it, I know that I'm incapable of such subtlety. I'm simply too transparent. I love Draupadi and as far as I'm concerned, that is that. I have no use for silly psychological games.

Arjun turns to Matali. "How do I enter the vehicle?"

Matali slaps his forehead. "Oh, how foolish of me. I forgot that you're incapable of flight." He gestures with his hand. There's a hissing sound and a ramp slowly descends from the vessel. In a strange way, it reminds me of a ship waiting for passengers to come on board.

Arjun takes a deep breath, squares his shoulders and marches up the ramp. As he reaches the top, he turns around, waves at all of us and then walks into the strange flying ship. He disappears from sight as the ramp shuts with a hiss.

"Don't worry, I'm sure we'll meet again soon," says Matali. "And good luck for the future. Though as long as you have Krishna on your side, you really don't have much to fear. Now, if you'll please back off a little and cover your ears. This could get a bit noisy."

We do as he says. The vessel rises slowly, making a sound like a thousand fires roaring simultaneously. It ascends higher and higher, and then there is a flash of light and it shoots out of sight.

We look at each other, too dazed to speak. Not for the first time in my life, I feel a pang of jealousy. Lucky Arjun, I think, off to fight for the *devas*. What adventures he's going to have, what sights he's going to see. Why couldn't it have been me in his place?

Yudhishtira finally speaks up. "Somehow, after witnessing such a sight, I find myself reluctant to return right away to the cottage and resume our usual mundane activities. What say we embark on a pilgrimage, see all the holy places in the region and absorb whatever wisdom and knowledge we can from the *rishis* who inhabit them?"

We all agree enthusiastically and set off on our journey. But as we walk, somehow, my mind drifts back to the one encounter I had as a child with Vayu.

"Father, did you ever think about me after that day?" I wonder. "Did you ever worry about me, or did you just forget about me?"

Suddenly, I'm filled with a longing to see him again – or at least to meet some other *devas* or demi-gods. Like they say, you should be careful what you wish for. You might just get it.

CHAPTER 20

I'm in the middle of a sit-up when I hear a mellifluous voice ring out. I pause, enchanted. Draupadi is singing. I abandon my workout and follow the sound. On the way, I pass a herd of deer, listening intently. I smile. Music, the universal language that speaks to humans and animals alike, I think. There has been too little of it in our lives of late.

Draupadi is sitting under a tree, lost in the beauty of the song. After a while, it ends. She looks around, a look of utter bliss on her face. Then she sees me, and starts.

"How long have you been here?" she asks.

"For a while," I smile. "It's been a long time since I last heard you sing. You really should do it more often."

She beams. "I was sitting here thinking that it's such a beautiful morning. And just then, the wind carried this beautiful flower to me." She holds it up. It's an exquisite golden lotus. "I inhaled its fragrance and it was so gorgeous that it moved me to sing. Here, see for yourself."

She holds it up to my face. I breathe in obediently. The delicacy of the fragrance is beyond description. It's utterly ethereal.

"I wonder what flower this is," I say.

"I'm sure Rishi Dhaumya will know," she replies. He's been staying in the forest for so many years, I doubt there's a plant or animal that he's unaware of."

By that logic, we should be experts in botany and biology too, I think. But I don't say it out loud. I don't want to ruin her sunny mood, a rarity these days.

We make our way back to Rishi Dhaumya's *ashram*, where we've been staying as guests for the last few days, in companionable silence. It's one of the happiest, most peaceful mornings of my life.

Sure enough, the *rishi* identifies the flower in a jiffy. "It's the Saugandhika," he says. "But it's found very rarely. In fact, the only time I've seen them in large numbers is in a lake near a village called Alkapuri, inhabited by the Yaksha tribe, high up in the Himalayas. The Yakshas believe the lake is sacred."

Draupadi smells the flower one more time. "If just one flower can give off such a beautiful fragrance, that entire lake must smell simply divine. Well, I guess I will have to make do with this one for as long as it lasts." She arranges it carefully in her hair and goes off to wake up the twins.

A thought strikes me. Draupadi's birthday is coming up in a few days. There's not much I can give her as a present in our current impoverished state. But a bouquet of Saugandhika flowers... now that would be something special.

I quietly confide my plan to Rishi Dhaumya and ask him to tell my brothers so that they won't be too alarmed.

"Be careful," he frowns. "The Yakshas can get a little touchy about strangers. They don't like intruders trampling around the place."

"I'll ask them really nicely," I say. "Do you mind giving me directions to the pond?"

He hesitates. "Well, normally I wouldn't. But it is a bit strange that this particular flower was borne all the way here by the wind. Perhaps you are meant to visit the Yakshas."

He gives me the directions.

As I'm leaving, I run into Draupadi. "Where are you off to?" she asks.

"Oh, I thought I'd go off exploring the forest for a few days," I say cheerfully. "I'm getting a little restless in the *ashram*."

"All right, have fun. And come back soon. I'll miss you," she says.

Those last three words of hers brighten what is already a beautiful day. I stride through the jungle merrily, warbling away tunelessly, swinging my mace as I hack my way through vegetation. I don't really need to, I could just negotiate my way carefully through it, but I'm in too much of a hurry to bother.

I make rapid progress. The vegetation gets thinner, the air colder. Suddenly, I come upon a fallen tree blocking the path. Try to climb over it? Go around it? No, wait. Here's a chance to make up for the workout that I had abandoned in the morning, so many hours ago.

I grunt and heave, and lift one end of the tree clear off the ground. Exulting in my strength, I push it so that the tree topples over to the other side. There's a loud crash as it falls. Many birds take flight, alarmed. I laugh out loud in sheer exhilaration.

There's a low, coughing growl. I pause. I see the eyes first. And then the rest of the snow leopard slinks into view. It growls again menacingly. I growl right back, and laugh.

"Come on, my friend," I say. "You'll make a nice rug. Actually, let's make this a fair fight." I carefully set down my mace.

The leopard leaps. I catch it mid-air. The impact knocks me off my feet. I feel its hot, fetid breath on my face. We roll over and over. It claws at me and tries to bite. I grab hold of its jaws and start forcing them apart. Its snarls turn to

whimpers and then to a howl as I rip its face apart. I roar in triumph.

As the echo of my roar fades away, there's frantic twittering and screeching. The birds and animals are signalling to each other that some terrible predator is on the prowl. That would be me, I think, amused.

"You really didn't have to kill the poor animal, you know," a voice says softly. "A thwack or two of the mace would have been enough to scare it off. That was wanton destruction, a misuse of power for the sheer sake of exercising it."

The speaker is standing in the shadows.

"Who are you?" I ask. "Step out into the light where I can see you."

He does so. He's an emaciated-looking fellow, one of those primitive proto-humans who have barely evolved beyond the apes. In fact, they often exhibit the same characteristics, living together in large groups and largely subsisting on fruits and roots. What's the name for them, I try to recall. Oh yes, *Vanaras*.

"You use a lot of big words for an ape-man," I say. "And what are you doing here? Aren't you a long way off from your normal habitat?"

He smiles. "And you're a very arrogant young human. Perhaps it's time someone taught you a lesson and made you a little more humble."

I laugh. "Oh really? And, who's going to teach me a lesson? You? Did you see what I did to that snow leopard? If I breathe too hard, you might just be blown away."

"You're a lot of talk, my friend," he says. "Can you back that up with action?"

By now, I'm getting irritated. "Just look at your size, you fool. I could break you into two without even working up a sweat. If you value your life, get out of my way."

He folds his arms across his chest, and stands there resolutely. "Make me," he says.

"Fine," I say, furious by now. "But later, don't say that I didn't give you fair warning."

I lunge at him. But he's no longer there. I stumble as I clutch at thin air and go down on all fours. I look around, confused. He must have sidestepped at the last moment, leaving me blundering around foolishly.

Then I look at him again. Is it a trick of the light, or has he somehow become bigger and broader? I shake my head to clear it. I lunge again, with exactly the same results.

I unleash a barrage of punches on him. He bats them away casually, almost playfully, with insulting ease. Once or twice, he allows a punch to slip through but at the very last instant, averts his face or twists his body so that my fists go

harmlessly past him. After a while, my shoulders begin to ache from constantly hitting out but encountering only air. I am bedraggled and rapidly tiring, he isn't even breathing hard.

I suddenly drop to the ground and sweep out with my leg, intending to trip him. He leaps nimbly over my outstretched foot. It's as if he's reading my mind. I feel like all my moves are in slow motion, and he's easily countering them.

"Stand still and fight," I snarl.

"All right," he says in an agreeable tone.

I look at him again, closely. Yes, there's no doubt about it. He has definitely gotten bigger. The thin, weedy chest has expanded and muscles have sprung up where bones were sticking out earlier.

"What kind of sorcery is this?" I growl.

"Having second thoughts?" he laughs. "Want to end this fight?"

"Never!" I shout and try to grab him with both hands.

He catches my hands in his. Our fingers interlock. For a while, we strain at each other. Then, he gradually turns his wrists so that my trapped palms are facing downwards. He begins to lift upwards. Slowly, he forces me on to tiptoe. At this rate, he's soon going to lift me clear off the ground.

I struggle to free my hands but he's too strong for me. Suddenly, I jump in the air and kick him squarely on the chest with both feet. That manages to get my hands free, and I land sprawling on the ground. But he just soaks up the impact and stands there calmly. He hasn't even budged a step backwards.

I pick myself up slowly. Then I take two steps and hurl myself horizontally at him, trying to knock him off his feet. Except that he catches me in mid-air as if I'm a baby. And the next thing I know, he's holding me aloft in the air above his head, his arms fully extended.

"There are about a dozen ways I could kill or cripple you from this position," he says conversationally. He is not even breathing hard. "You do know that, don't you?"

"Yes," I say, utterly humiliated. "So which move are you going to use to finish me off?"

He laughs. "You just needed your ass kicked, which I think you'll agree I've done very effectively. But what sort of person would I be if I inflicted lasting physical damage on my half-brother the very first time we met?"

CHAPTER 21

He puts me down gently on the ground. I stare at him, perplexed. My brain is whirring furiously. A *Vanara* who is also my half-brother? And then, it all falls into place.

“Hanuman!” I blurt.

He nods with a smile, and suddenly he is transformed into a magnificent physical specimen, radiating vitality.

“Bhima, my brother,” he says and extends a hand. I take it warily. He laughs and pulls me into a hug. “It’s good to meet you at last,” he chuckles.

“Well, why didn’t you just introduce yourself right at the start?” I ask, bewildered. “What was this whole drama about?”

He smiles. “Our father Vayu had asked me to keep an eye on you ever since he heard about your recent troubles. I’d been observing you for a while, brother. You needed to be taught some important lessons. The first is that there is a thin line between confidence and arrogance. Confidence is good, arrogance can often prove fatal. Too many warriors cross that line without realising it, and it leads to their downfall. Remember, no matter how strong, brave or skilled you may be, there will always be someone, somewhere, better than you. When you bear that in mind, it will be easier to retain a sense of humility. And it will also, hopefully, teach you to be a little more diplomatic and understand that the solution to every problem is not to try and smash your way through it.”

I nod. “Any other lessons?”

“Never take people at face value,” he says. “And most certainly don’t underestimate an opponent just because he looks weak. Your nature makes you completely transparent, but many wily opponents can use deception as a strategy. Try to see through it, that way you may avoid walking into traps. I could have told you the same things without first beating the hell out of you, but I thought you would probably be in a more receptive frame of mind if you were first given a demonstration of what I’ve been talking about.”

I bow my head, humbled. “You are absolutely right, brother,” I say. “I will take these lessons to heart. But can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” he says.

“You’re so mighty and powerful. But first you served Sugriva as his minister, and then Lord Rama. Were you never tempted to carve out a kingdom for

yourself?" I ask.

"You're so mighty and powerful, but you happily play second fiddle to Yudhishtira. You even ignored all his well-meaning attempts to involve you in the administration of the empire. Aren't you ever tempted to carve out a kingdom of your own?" he replies.

"*Touché*," I say. "But the truth is, I know that I would be disastrous as a ruler."

Hanuman smiles. "Even our father isn't the king of the *devas*, though he is arguably the most powerful among them. Maybe there's something in our genes that makes us uninterested in leadership roles. But, based on whatever I've learned in the long years of my existence, let me tell you something. Not everybody is cut out to handle the onerous responsibilities of leadership. But that doesn't mean one can't contribute in other ways."

"Great leaders need great followers too. In fact, I'd go to the extent of arguing that the true hallmark of leadership is the kind of followers you inspire," he goes on. "Too much attention is focused by bards and historians on leaders, but the truth is that ultimately any leader is as strong or weak as his followers. Great leaders recognise that, and work hard to help their followers attain their full potential, perhaps even go beyond it. Great followers understand that they may not be cut out to handle leadership, but they still have a crucial role to play, and draw their motivation and happiness from becoming team players and helping the team go from strength to strength. Great followers bring tremendous energy and talent, and superb leaders know how to pool all their efforts and ensure that the team becomes even better than the sum of its parts."

I nod. It certainly is proving to be an educational meeting. "Tell me something more," I say. "You said that Vayu knows what has befallen us. Indra too has been in contact with Arjun. But why didn't any of the *devas* intervene to prevent our misfortune? Why did they abandon us then?"

Hanuman smiles gently. "The *devas* did not intervene because they know that sometimes misfortune can actually be good for you. What do you expect, brother? That you will only enjoy success and triumph and somebody else will bear your share of heartbreak? To be alive is to know both joy and sorrow. People instinctively prefer joy, but what they don't realise is that it is sorrow that defines you, that makes you more empathetic to others. It is misfortune that makes you resilient, and teaches you humility and courage. You perceive the low points of life as setbacks, when the truth is that they are actually opportunities to emerge as a better, more evolved person."

I'm not sure I'm completely convinced, and it must show on my face. "Think

for a moment,” says Hanuman. “When have you felt happiest? When something was handed to you on a platter, or when you achieved it after a hard struggle?”

“The latter,” I answer unhesitatingly.

“Exactly,” says Hanuman. “People crave uninterrupted leisure and comfort because they think it will make them happy, but it doesn’t. After a while, they simply start taking it for granted and crave something else. On the other hand, most people dread taking on hard tasks, not realising that genuine happiness comes only from constantly challenging yourself to go beyond your limitations.”

“But sometimes you fail, and that makes you unhappy,” I argue.

“Yes,” says Hanuman. “But that brings me back to the point I made earlier. Heartbreak is a fact of life too. Seen from the proper perspective, it can also help you to grow. There is no shame in trying and failing. What is unfortunate is when people either don’t try something out of fear of failure, or deliberately don’t put in their best effort so that they can later console themselves by saying, ‘Oh, it didn’t really matter to me’. Whatever it is that you put your mind to, give it your best shot. If you succeed, you’ll be genuinely happy. If you fail, you will still have grown as a person. So truly, it is a win-win situation.”

I absorb his words. “It’s certainly a whole new line of thought,” I tell him.

He pats me gently on the back. “Don’t just take my word for it. Apply it in your own life and experiences, and see if it works for you. This is a philosophy that I have arrived at after many years of observing both myself and others, but ultimately everybody must figure out whatever works best for them. Now, if you’ll permit me, brother, I must be on my way. Oh, and one last thing, when you do reach Alkapuri, the best way to handle the situation will be with tact and diplomacy, not brute strength. Ask respectfully, rather than demand something as your due. Goodbye Bhima. And always remember, you will never walk alone.”

CHAPTER 22

I am in a considerably pensive, not to mention mellow mood by the time I finally trudge up to Alkapuri a couple of days later. A wooden stockade runs around the village, and two guards are at the gate.

"I'd like to meet your chief," I say as politely as possible.

"Chief Kuber doesn't meet just any piece of riff-raff. Be off with you," sneers one of the guards.

I feel my temper start to flare up but I do my best to keep it under control. "Please tell him that I've come from a very long way and I would really appreciate it if he took just a little time to meet me."

"Are you deaf, you big buffoon?" says the same guard. "We don't like strangers around these parts. Now, run off before I stick this into you."

He jabs his spear at me, bringing it to within an inch of my chest.

I raise my eyes to the sky. "I tried, Hanuman. I really tried," I think. Then I reach out and in one smooth motion, snatch the spear out of his hand before snapping it in two across my knee.

The other guard lunges at me. I sway back and feel his spear glide past me, almost brushing against my skin. Then I sock him on the jaw. His eyes glaze and he collapses, out cold even before he hits the ground.

I turn to the first guard, whose eyes are wide open with shock. "I'm seriously tempted to shove the sharp end of this spear up your arse," I tell him. "But I won't if you run along like a good boy and tell your chief that Bhima the Pandava wants a word with him. Now, what's it going to be?"

He takes off as if a bunch of *rakshasas* are on his tail. A little later, the chief bustles up, followed by a bunch of armed men.

"Bhima," he exclaims. "Your fame has spread even to this remote village of ours. And you certainly match the descriptions I've heard. But what could you possibly want with us humble folk? Have we offended you in any way?"

I shake my head. "I come in peace, with a humble request," I say.

He relaxes perceptibly, and signals to the other Yakshas. They lower their weapons. "We are honoured to have you as our guest. Please come in and share some food and drink with us."

Later, after the formalities are over and done with, he asks me to state my request. When I tell him what it is, he strokes his chin thoughtfully.

“My friend, I would love to be able to help you,” he says. “But the truth is, the pond is sacred to a deity we worship. People can only take flowers from there with his express permission. Some fools tried to steal flowers from there but promptly died slow, painful deaths.”

“So how does one get his permission?” I ask.

Kuber purses his lips. “Every full moon night, if one propitiates him, he appears. By a stroke of luck, tonight is one such night. I will personally escort you to the pond. After that, we’ll just have to see what fate has in store for you.”

True to his word, he leads me to the lake. The moonlight falling on it makes for a breathtaking sight. The fragrance of multiple Saugandhika flowers is intoxicating. The whole scene is an overwhelming feast for the senses.

“Magnificent,” I breathe out slowly.

“Isn’t it?” smiles Kuber. Then he shuts his eyes, folds his hands and chants an invocation.

There is a flash of light and the deity appears, in much the same way as Vayu had on the day I met him. Like Vayu and Matali, he too exudes a powerful radiance. But unlike their milky-white complexion, he is almost charcoal black. I notice that he is standing in mid-air above the lake, his feet a few inches above the water.

Kuber prostrates himself before the deity of the lake, who I’m by now convinced is one of the *devas*. I briefly hesitate, then follow suit.

“Rise and tell me what you want,” says the *deva* in a voice that sounds like distant thunder.

Kuber rises to his feet and explains. The *deva* turns his gaze upon me.

“Who are you, stranger?” he demands.

“I am Bhima, son of Vayu, brother of Yudhishtira and Arjun,” I say. There seems to be a flicker of interest in his eyes at that.

“And why should I give you flowers from my lake?” he demands.

“Because showing kindness to a guest is the greatest virtue,” I reply.

He shrugs. “I didn’t invite you to come up here, so you are no guest of mine. However, you intrigue me. So I will give you one chance. I will ask you a question. Get the answer right, and you can take a dozen flowers. Get it wrong, or refuse to reply, and you will have to stay here for a month, serving the Yakshas as a humble slave. Is that acceptable to you?”

I am tempted to say no, but having come all this way, it would be cowardly to pull out at this stage. For one long moment, I wish Yudhishtira was here. I could really use his wisdom right now. Well, he’s not and I’ll just have to do the best I

can.

"I accept," I say.

He nods and rubs his hands. "Good. So, answer me this. What is the most amazing thing in the world?"

My mind races frantically. I have myself seen so many wonderful things, and heard of many more. How can there possibly be one correct answer to this question? And what is to stop him from declaring any answer that I give wrong? It's hopeless. I feel myself sinking into despair. And then, in some remote corner of my mind, I recall a fragment of a conversation that I had overheard between Yudhishtira and Rishi Dhaumya, a few days ago.

What was it, what was it, I wrack my brains desperately. Then it comes back to me. Well, here goes, I think.

I draw a deep breath, cross my fingers and say, "The most amazing thing in the world is that everybody dies one day, but everybody acts as if he will live forever."

The *deva* tilts his head to one side and looks at me appraisingly. "Did you just think that up by yourself?" he asks.

"No," I reply honestly. "I have heard my brother Yudhishtira say so."

"Your brother is a wise man," he replies, and the note of pride in his voice is unmistakable. By now, I am almost certain of who he is.

"I'll make sure to tell him you said so, Lord Yama," I reply.

Yama arches his eyebrows. "You certainly are full of surprises, young Bhima. I would not have expected such perceptiveness from you. But I guess being around my son has been beneficial for you. Some of his insightfulness has obviously rubbed off on you."

"Yudhishtira is the wisest person I know," I concede readily. "But I have never understood how an intelligent person like him could make a terrible blunder like agreeing to play those games of dice."

"He is half-human, and to be human is to make mistakes," replies Yama shortly. "There is no shame in making mistakes, only in refusing to learn from them. Well, Bhima, I am pleased with you. So I will offer you yet another opportunity. Would you like to double the wager? Two dozen flowers, against two months of slavery?"

I am seriously tempted. I feel the word 'yes' tremble upon my lips. And then I understand. Yama is showing me the temptation that gamblers feel. This is the seduction that Yudhishtira was unable to resist that day.

"Thank you, My Lord, but no," I say politely. "It was sheer providence that I

got the right answer and I would rather quit while I am ahead.”

I don’t know if Yudhishtira has learned anything from that mistake of his, I think, but I most certainly intend to.

Yama nods, and there is a grudging smile on his lips. “Take a dozen of the best flowers and go with my blessings,” he says, and disappears.

I quickly gather up the flowers, thank Kuber and begin my journey back, not heeding his entreaties to at least wait till the morning. I am eager to get back to Draupadi with the flowers. It has been quite a trip but I wouldn’t trade it for anything.

The hours pass in a fever of impatience till I am finally back at the *ashram*.

“Draupadi,” I yell loudly. “Look what I got for you.”

Her delight makes all the pains of the journey worthwhile. She holds my hands and kisses them with genuine affection.

“You great big softy, who’d have thought you’re such a romantic underneath that fierce exterior,” she laughs. “Oh my, you’ve turned completely red. You’re just too adorable for words.”

Then she smiles. “One wonderful surprise deserves another in return. Krishna was on his way here when he ran into someone searching for us. He brought him along. I think you should meet him.”

She gestures, and I see Krishna standing with a tall, powerfully built stranger.

As I approach them, my brows furrow in puzzlement. I know that face. And then, suddenly, my heart seems to stop. I gape open-mouthed, robbed of speech. I am looking at my own face when I was a strapping teenager, except that this young man’s hair is dense and curly as opposed to my long, straight locks, and his body is covered in thick fur.

“Father,” he says, his eyes amused. “You’re just as tall and broad as Mother always described you, but I fear she may have exaggerated the part about your good looks somewhat.”

CHAPTER 23

Ghatotkacha. My son. The boy I never even knew I had all these years.

I stare at Ghatotkacha as he walks up to me and embraces me. I hear Krishna joke about how lucky I am that I was spared all the pains of parenting and am getting to meet a full-grown son at an age when he can be a friend. But I don't feel lucky. I feel deprived. I wish I had been there to witness his bawling entry into the world. I wish I could have heard his first words, seen his first steps. I wish I had been there the first time he came home bleeding from a childhood fight, to nurse his wounds and advise him on dirty tactics.

As I wrap my arms around my son, I reflect on the irony of my situation. I have known two fathers – Pandu and Vayu – and yet spent my life feeling the lack of a male parent. And all this while, my son never had a father even though the man who impregnated his mother was alive and well.

"Why didn't you come to me before, son?" I ask. I realise my voice is choked.

He looks away. "I wanted to. But mother wouldn't let me."

"How is she?" I ask eagerly. "Why didn't she accompany you?"

His face sags and suddenly he looks like a child. "She died some time ago, trying to protect a child from a wild boar that had entered the camp and was running amok. That was so typical of her, putting others before her till the very end. Once she died, I decided that I would track down this father whom she would always talk about so lovingly."

I sit down, overcome with emotion, and weep for the only woman who ever truly loved me selflessly. Actually, I wish she had been slightly selfish. It might have made both of us a little happier.

Draupadi walks up to me and puts her hand on my shoulder. I look up at her through my tears. And with complete clarity, I remember the expression on her face the night I told her about Hidimbi's parting words to me.

"You knew, didn't you?" I ask. "That night, when I told you about Hidimbi, you almost told me she was pregnant when I left?"

She nods sadly. "I wasn't certain. But yes, I did suspect it."

"Why didn't she tell me?" I ask in anguish.

"I can't presume to speak on her behalf since I never met her," says Draupadi. "But speaking as a woman, my guess is that she didn't want you to feel trapped into staying on with her."

“And why didn’t you tell me?” I ask.

Draupadi sighs. “I almost did. But then I thought about the consequences. What would you have done, Bhima? Would you have abandoned your mother and brothers to go looking for her? Are you even sure you would have found her? And if you had, would you have lived with the *rakshasas* or would you have brought her back with you? Either way, one of you would have been a misfit and would have ended up hating and resenting the other. And just suppose you’d decided to not go looking for her, it would only have added further to the massive burden of guilt that was already crushing you.”

“I could have at least visited them once in a while,” I say.

Draupadi shakes her head. “All that would have done is ensure that Hidimbi would never have a chance to move on and find another mate. You would have spent a few days in a year with them, and that might even have assuaged your guilt somewhat. But what about them? No *rakshasas* would have been willing to associate with them even when you were not around. They would have been forced to live lonely, secluded lives, treated as pariahs even by the *rakshasas*.”

“Yes, I made a mistake,” she adds. “I didn’t consider the fact that Hidimbi would never get over you and refuse to eventually settle down with one of her kind. It didn’t occur to me that she might choose to spend the rest of her life as a single parent. And, the only defence I have to offer is that I did what I felt was best for you under the circumstances. If you want to hate me for it, you’re welcome to. But you cannot undo the past. Your son is standing here before you right now, and you can take this opportunity to try and make up for some of the time together that both of you have lost out on.”

“You had no right. I should have been allowed to make my own decision, especially on such an important subject,” I reply stiffly. “I know you thought you were acting in my best interests, but you should have trusted me enough to let me make up my own mind, rather than doing so on my behalf.”

She glares at me and flounces away angrily. I stare at her, furious and upset. It’s one of the rare occasions that I’ve snapped at her. Whenever I’ve done so in the past, I’ve been quick to apologise. But not this time. I let her go and turn towards my son. I see the apprehension in his eyes. I recall the first time I had looked into his mother’s eyes, and seen fear there, and I feel my heart melt.

“We’ve been apart too long, son,” I say. “Let’s try and make up for some of that lost time.”

And over the next few days, we try our best to do so. I spend as much time as I can with my son. Initially, we are awkward around each other. But our

tentativeness soon makes way for genuine fondness. Even when I'm not talking to him, I often observe him covertly. I stay up late into the night, just watching him sleep. Sometimes, when a troubled expression crosses his face, I gently stroke his forehead and he settles back into restful slumber. Once, he mumbles something incoherently, takes hold of my hand and kisses it. He's still in a state of sleep, so I don't think he even registers what he's done. But I know, right then, that this is one of the best moments of my life.

Often, I think it's a good thing that I met Ghatotkacha after my encounter with Yama. Because if Yama were to now repeat his question about what I think is the most amazing thing in the world, my truthful answer would have to be that it is the mystery of how two disparate individuals can sometimes combine to produce a third one who exhibits their best characteristics but is still very much his or her own person. Ghatotkacha is strong yet tender, infuriated by injustice and capable of enormous compassion. And he has a wickedly irreverent sense of humour.

"Mother must really have loved you very much, you know," he tells me once. "That's the only way I can explain her description of you as dashing and handsome."

"Yes, I think people in love are incapable of seeing the object of their affection objectively," I concede readily. "That description – dashing and handsome – suits your uncle Arjun much better."

"He almost shot her when he first saw her, didn't he?" asks Ghatotkacha.

"We were in a strange place and constantly fearful about threats to our life," I reply. "Don't judge your uncle too harshly."

"And you stopped him in the nick of time," he says. "No wonder she thought the world of you."

This conversation is turning a little too emotional for my liking. "You talk too much, puppy," I mock-growl. "Did anyone ever teach you how to fight? Come here."

I grab him around the neck with both arms in a mock stranglehold. The next instant, he isn't there. I'm clutching thin air.

As I look around, bewildered, a tiny voice squeaks behind me, "Over here, father."

I whip around. He's shrunk to a fraction of his size.

"Eh, what, how?" I splutter.

"Is peering at me straining your aging eyes?" he mocks. "Here, this should make it easier."

And even as I look on, astounded, he grows larger and larger till I have to tilt my head back to look at him. He laughs at my obvious astonishment. "Isn't that a neat trick?" he says. "Came in very handy whenever some *rakshasa* bullies tried to pick on me."

"Is this ability common among *rakshasas*?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I never met any other *rakshasa* who could do it," he says.

Suddenly, I remember my meeting with Hanuman and how he too had transformed before my eyes. "How do you do it?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I just think about it, and it happens," he says. "Though I can't sustain changed sizes indefinitely, it's too tiring. After a while, I revert back to my normal size."

"A half-brother of mine can do it too," I say thoughtfully. "I wonder..."

I shut my eyes, concentrate hard and will myself to grow larger. I open my eyes. Everything is exactly the same.

"Vayu can change shape at will too," says Krishna, coming up from behind me. He had left on some work for a few days, but has obviously returned to visit us. "I suppose the gene remained dormant in you, but has expressed itself in Hanuman and young Ghatotkacha."

"I won't even pretend to understand what you're talking about," I say.

He smiles. "Yes, don't bother. By the way, there's someone else I'd like you to meet." He turns towards the cottage and yells, "Come on out, young man."

A lad emerges and strides confidently towards me. The initial impression he conveys is of slenderness, but when you look closer, you realise that he has broad shoulders that taper down to a narrow waist. His arms are thin, but have excellent muscle tone. Then I get a good look at his face, and begin to laugh.

"What's so funny?" asks Krishna.

I shake my head. "I've just about gotten used to seeing a younger version of myself," I chuckle. "And now, I get to see a copy of Arjun too. Apart from his complexion, which is Subhadra's contribution, I guess."

Krishna nods. "Meet your nephew, Abhimanyu. He doesn't just look like Arjun, he's almost as good an archer. In fact, I'd go to the extent of saying that he's a better archer at this age than Arjun was."

"Really?" I say. "I'd love to see him display his skills some time." I turn to Abhimanyu and open my arms wide. "Come here, my boy. Your maternal uncle has very selfishly kept you all to himself for too many years. It's time you got to know your father's side of the family."

As we embrace, I hear a slight scuffling sound behind me. Ghatotkacha is

kicking at some pebbles. He's feeling possessive, I realise, amused. And then a thought strikes me. Abhimanyu and Ghatotkacha are first cousins, just like us and the Kauravas. "Please god, don't let them have a relationship similar to that between the Pandavas and Kauravas," I think.

Abhimanyu walks towards Ghatotkacha, who is standing absolutely still. I tense, ready to instantly step in if required. They look at each other appraisingly. Then Abhimanyu reaches out and gently strokes Ghatotkacha's arm. "I love the fur. It must be a big hit with the ladies when they're looking to get warm on cold winter nights," he says.

Ghatotkacha roars with laughter, and the two hug and slap each other's backs. I let out an audible sigh and sag with relief.

From that moment on, they are virtually inseparable. Their childhoods have been completely different – one raised in the jungle, the other in a palace – and yet they manage to forge a bond that is all the more endearing, precisely because it is so improbable.

One day, they're frolicking in the spring near the *ashram*, splashing water at each other. I watch them indulgently as I lie on the ground, soaking up some sunshine. This must be what it feels like to be a normal family, I think. It's a good feeling. I could easily get used to it.

"What's on your mind?" asks Draupadi, walking up to me. I still haven't completely got over my anger with her, but we're talking again. I point to them. "They're such a beautiful sight," I sigh. "It does my heart good to see them, even though it makes me realise that I'm getting old."

"How dare you say that?" she snaps angrily.

I turn towards her, startled. Her eyes are blazing. "Draupadi, what's the matter?" I ask.

"You have some vows to fulfil with regard to the Kauravas, Bhima, remember?" she rages. "And when the time comes, you will need to be a fierce warrior, not a contented dotard. So put all thoughts of aging out of your mind. I forbid you to grow old till every last Kaurava is dead."

I nod. The day is still sunny but it has lost its brightness. I don't say anything to Draupadi, but I feel irritated with her. The time for war and death will come soon enough, I think bitterly. Why grudge a few rare moments of peace and happiness?

I look at the two young men who have come to mean so much to me in such a short span of time. And I realise, with a start, that they are both old enough to go into battle should the need arise. A cold sliver of dread pierces my heart. It's

the first time I've ever felt fear while thinking about the possibility of battle. Love, I think. What a strange thing it is. It can turn cowards into heroes, and heroes into cowards.

Ghatotkacha and Abhimanyu are wrestling playfully now. Suddenly, Abhimanyu slips, and they both tumble underwater. They come up spluttering and laughing, their faces aglow with the joyful lightheartedness of youth. That image lodges in my mind – and heart. In the years to come, this is how I will forever remember them.

CHAPTER 24

Abhimanyu, Ghatotkacha and I are on our way back from a hunt. As usual, the two are in high spirits, arguing about who should get the credit for killing the deer that is now slung across Ghatotkacha's shoulders. Abhimanyu's arrow had thudded into the deer at the exact moment that Ghatotkacha's spear had pierced its heart. Both of them are insisting that it is their weapon that killed the animal, and jocularly mocking the other's claim. I smile as I listen to their banter, and then suddenly, I frown.

"Quiet," I say. "I think I heard something."

Both fall silent. We strain our ears. Sure enough, we hear the sound of a scream. It's coming from the direction of our *ashram*. We exchange glances and then rush towards it.

As I near the *ashram*, I pull up, appalled at the sight before me. A *rakshasa* is holding Draupadi from behind, a dagger pressed right to her throat. Nakul and Sahadeva are both down on the ground, out cold. Yudhishtira is bleeding freely from the nose and mouth. He has a spear in his hands and is gesturing with it threateningly, but the *rakshasa* is using Draupadi as a shield.

Oh, for heaven's sake, I think, can't I ever trust the three of them to take care of her even for a little while? Then I turn to Ghatotkacha. "Do you know him?" I ask.

He nods. "Jata. He was part of our tribe but we threw him out because he was such a troublemaker."

Yudhishtira speaks up. "What you are doing is a grave violation of a guest's *dharma*, Jata," he says. "You came to us pretending to be badly injured and claiming to be a kinsman of my nephew Ghatotkacha. We took pity on you and gave you food and shelter. And you suddenly attacked us and are trying to abduct our wife. Do you have any idea what a great sin you are committing?"

I stare at Yudhishtira, completely gobsmacked. Even at a time like this, he can't stop prattling on about *dharma*. Jata, too, is completely unimpressed.

"Stay away from me if you know what's good for you, little man," he says. "Don't worry, I'll return your woman to you after I'm done with her. Though it could take a while. I don't think I'll get tired of her in a hurry," he laughs, pressing hard against her.

I feel the fury rise within me. Abhimanyu and Ghatotkacha snatch up their

arms, ready to use them. I raise a hand. "Don't," I whisper. "That dagger is too close to Draupadi's throat. Even if you hit him, he could involuntarily end up slitting her throat in his death spasm. There's another way. Let me handle this."

I step into the clearing and say in a loud voice, "I suggest you let her go."

Jata spins around. At the sight of the three of us, he presses the dagger even closer to Draupadi's skin. A tiny trickle of blood starts to run down her neck. "Let us go," he snarls. "Or I'll cut her throat in front of you."

A wave of panic threatens to engulf me. I fight it down. This will have to be handled carefully. I shrug, feigning indifference. "Fine, kill her," I say casually. "What purpose will that achieve? You'll have lost your bargaining card; and then, we'll kill you very slowly and painfully. I'm afraid it's a no-win situation for you. However, I can offer you a better alternative. Fight me hand-to-hand. If you win, I promise you will be allowed to walk out of here unharmed. Everyone present here will respect my word."

Jata thinks about it. "Do I get to take her too?" he asks.

"No," I reply immediately. "But you get to live on to enjoy many more women. I know she's stunning, but think about it, is she more beautiful than life itself?"

He thinks some more, and then nods. "Fine," he says, releasing her. She rushes straight to us. Abhimanyu and Ghatotkacha immediately flank her protectively.

Jata puts his dagger back into his sheath. I move my neck gently from side to side and flex my shoulders, loosening up. Then I roar and charge.

He swings at me. I block with my forearm and slam a stiff-armed jab into his nose. His head snaps back. It's the first exchange, and he's bleeding already.

He shuffles a little, and then takes another roundhouse swing at me. I duck under it and lunge, looking to wrap my arms around his waist. But before I can get a good grip, he seizes me by both arms, whirls me around and throws me in the air.

I land on my knees. He comes charging up and aims a vicious kick at my jaw, which would have taken my head clean off if the blow had connected. Fortunately, I manage to block it in the nick of time. He punches me again. I deflect with one hand, and hit him in the sternum with the other. He grunts and pauses.

I rise to my feet, unleashing an uppercut with my right hand along the way. But he manages to sway away. I only manage to land a glancing blow to one cheek, rather than connect with the jaw as I was hoping to. I get ready to follow up with a left hook, but he is faster. He slams an open palm into my forehead,

leaving me momentarily stunned.

As I stand there, disoriented, he wraps both his hands around my throat and starts to squeeze. It's only a matter of time before I pass out. If I had needed to gather my wits before I could react, the fight would have ended right there. But fortunately for me, I don't have to think about my next move. Over the years, in the wrestling arena, I have spent many hours practising for exactly such an eventuality, till the moves are embedded in my muscle memory. So what follows is almost a reflex action.

I use my left hand to grip his right arm from below, and put the other hand on his forearm. Then I push up hard with my left hand, even as I bear down equally hard with the right one. There is a snapping sound, and he screams in pain as his arm flops down uselessly. I take his left arm, pivot and smash my elbow into his face. Then I flip him over my shoulder. He lands on his back. I am still holding his arm. Using both my hands to exert unbearable pressure in opposing directions, I methodically break his left arm as well. Once again, there is a snapping sound accompanied by a scream.

I step away, take deep breaths and rub my bruised throat. He painfully rolls over on to his chest and tries to prop himself up, but his broken arms can't support his weight. He flops down on his face. After two more failed attempts to get up, he painfully raises his head to look at me. The arrogance has vanished, replaced by a look of utter dejection.

"If you will help me up, I will leave," he says.

I shake my head grimly. "You didn't hear me clearly, Jata," I reply. "You only get to walk out of here alive if you win."

I see the despair flood into his eyes. Then I grab his chin with one hand and his temple with the other, and wrench hard. There's a snapping sound and his head lolls forward. I don't have to bother checking his vital signs. There's no way he's going to survive that.

"Well, you certainly took your time getting here," says Yudhishtira. "But thank god you arrived when you did. I don't think I could have kept him engaged in conversation much longer."

I look up at him, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Yudhishtira shrugs. "I knew I was no match for him physically. But I also knew that the three of you weren't too far away. I was hoping to keep him talking till you got back, or at least delay his departure so that you wouldn't have to go too far to track him down. Thankfully, you got here before he left."

"Hmm," I think. "Maybe Yudhishtira isn't quite the naïve idiot he sometimes

seems to be.” Then I turn to Draupadi. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she sniffs. “As if you care.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, completely confused.

“You told him he could kill me. That it wouldn’t bother you one bit,” she says. “Don’t bother denying it. I heard it clearly.”

“Draupadi, I was just bluffing. It was the only way I could get him to release you. I would never let any harm come to you. Surely you must know that?” I say.

“If you say so,” she replies, still sounding unconvinced.

“You don’t believe me? Then, all I have to say is that you still don’t know me after all these years,” I say, hurt and angry.

I storm away from them to my room in our cottage.

It’s useless, I think bitterly. No matter what I do for that woman, it will never be enough. Why do I let her torture me like this? It’s all my fault. If only I could stop loving her so damned much. That’s it, I decide. From now on, I refuse to let her hurt me anymore. She can go to hell as far as I am concerned. She can do what she pleases with whom she likes. I refuse to let her get under my skin. I refuse to give her that much importance...

After a while, Draupadi walks into the room. I turn my back on her. She wraps her arms around me and puts her head on my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Bhima,” she says. “I was still scared and wasn’t thinking straight. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I say huffily.

“No, you’re still upset with me. I don’t like seeing you like that,” she says.

I grunt in response. She runs her fingers gently down my torso. I tense, and despite myself, I feel a flutter in my stomach. Then her hand reaches further down, and I forget that I’m supposed to be angry.

CHAPTER 25

The next morning, Yudhishtira announces he's had a dream. "Arjun will be returning shortly. Matali will drop him off at the same peak from where he had taken him to Amaravati."

I immediately look at Draupadi. Her face is glowing for the first time in months – actually, the first time since Arjun left to fight for the *devas*. I feel a pang. With Arjun away, Draupadi and I have become closer than ever before, and I know that his return will consign me right back into the background as far as she's concerned.

Then I feel ashamed. I should be delighted that my brother is returning, safe and sound, from such a hazardous adventure, I tell myself. Truth be told, I am happy at the thought of seeing him again. But I know that I would have been even happier if Draupadi hadn't been so obviously pleased. She can't help loving him but does she have to be so utterly callous towards me? Thanks to her, I'm experiencing a curious combination of delight and distress – and it isn't pleasant to feel so conflicted.

"Why does it have to be so bloody complicated?" I groan to myself. "They're welcome to each other for all I care."

But that just makes me feel more miserable. I give up trying to make any sense of the emotional mess that I am. Just for a moment, I wonder if any of my other brothers are experiencing the same dilemma that is gripping me. If they are, they certainly don't show it.

A few days later, we watch the bird-like object land again. Even though we've seen it before, it remains an awe-inspiring sight. But on closer scrutiny, it looks much the worse for wear. The metal no longer gleams and there are places where it seems to have been badly damaged and hastily repaired. Yes, it's been in a war all right.

The ramp descends. Arjun walks out slowly, looking around him like a man waking up from a dream. The months away have changed him. He seems drawn and exhausted, almost haggard. As he sees us, he gives a tired smile, and walks into a group embrace.

"It's good to see all of you," he says.

"We have lots to talk about," says Yudhishtira eagerly.

"Maybe later," says Arjun. "Right now, I'm looking forward to hitting my bed."

I feel like I could sleep forever.”

“But what about your adventures with the *devas*?” I ask. “We want to hear all about them.”

Arjun shakes his head. “I’d rather not talk about them. I’ve seen and done some terrible things, and I’m not proud of them. By the end, it wasn’t so much a war as a genocide.”

In the years that follow, he never talked about his adventures, but I know that the experience had scarred him deeply. In retrospect, it may well have contributed to his sudden reluctance to fight on the first day of the Great War.

“Did you at least get the celestial weapons that you had been promised?” asks Nakul.

“The *devas* are so far ahead of us technologically, it’s terrifying. They have rods that spit fire and orbs that, when hurled on the ground, explode and cause tremendous devastation. The *devas* felt it wouldn’t be right for me to bring back technology that is completely out of sync with what is available on Earth, so they didn’t let me get those. But they did modify some of their weapons so that I could shoot them in the form of arrows, if required,” Arjun says.

As we start walking back, I pull Arjun to one side. “Is everything all right with you?” I ask. “Did you suffer any wounds?”

He smiles wryly. “I did, but the irony is that they weren’t inflicted by the enemy. Once, when I was briefly at Amaravati for some rest before my next assignment, I was hit upon by an *apsara* named Urvashi.”

“Urvashi,” I repeat. “The name sounds familiar. Wait a minute, hadn’t she descended to Earth several decades ago and married one of our ancestors, Pururava?”

“That’s the one,” confirms Arjun. “But as far as I was concerned, it had happened so long ago – well before even our grandparents were born – that it really wasn’t an issue. So I took her to my quarters, and then – well, nothing happened. Maybe the whole Pururava issue was bothering me more than I had realised. Or, maybe it was because of the constant stress that I’d been under. Or I’m just getting old. I don’t know what the reason was, but for the first time in my life, I couldn’t get it up.”

“Urvashi took it rather personally,” goes on Arjun. “Apparently, it was also the first time that someone had failed to get a hard-on when she was hot and ready, and she felt hugely insulted. I kept trying to tell her that it wasn’t about her but about me, but she wouldn’t believe me. She stormed off. I fell asleep, and when I woke up, I found that I had been castrated. She must have come back and

sedated me while I slept, because I didn't feel any pain at all till I woke up and found that I was missing my member."

"Good Lord!" I say, utterly appalled.

I can only imagine how devastating it must be for Arjun, who revels in his masculinity, to be stripped of his manhood. But wait a minute, he seems to be holding up rather well under the circumstances.

"You don't seem to be as bothered by it as one might expect," I say.

He nods. "Fortunately for me, the *devas* have also mastered the technology of using cells to grow body parts which are then used to replace worn-out ones. It's why they never age. Whenever a body part or organ becomes old and starts acting up, they simply discard it and replace it with a new one."

"So did they fix you up with a new prick?" I ask. "Is it as good as the lust, sorry, lost one?"

He shakes his head. "It will take a little while before the, er... replacement is fully ready and functional. Lord Indra has promised me that the missing penis will be re-attached to my body as soon as it is safe and advisable to do so. In the meantime, he said that this unfortunate situation could actually work to our advantage. We have to spend the thirteenth year of our exile incognito, remember. If we're recognised, we would have to go back into exile for another twelve years. My father pointed out that nobody would ever think of Arjun as a eunuch, so it could actually prove to be a very handy disguise. And the thirteenth year starts in just a few days."

I nod. "Hmm, he's probably right. Say, whatever happened to Urvashi? Was any action taken against her?"

Arjun shrugs. "I couldn't prove that she'd done it, even though I'm convinced that it couldn't have been anybody else. Besides, she's part of a powerful faction of the *devas* whom Lord Indra could hardly afford to antagonise while he was in the midst of battling their enemies. I gather he gave her a bit of a dressing-down, but that was about it."

"The compulsions of politics," I say. "I'm glad I'm such a simpleton when it comes to it. It seems that in the process of gaining some celestial arms, you might have temporarily lost your most powerful weapon. But it's good to have you back."

Then a thought strikes me, and I tease him. "Draupadi will be very disappointed when she finds out. I think she was rather looking forward to being re-united with you."

I stress the 'united', so that he knows exactly what I'm getting at. He flushes.

“Yes, it will be a little awkward to tell her about it, especially the circumstances in which it happened.” Then he brightens. “Wait a minute. As you pointed out, Pururava was our ancestor. So, from now on, the official version is that I turned down Urvashi because she had been married to one of our ancestors, and she cursed me with the loss of manhood, which Indra then persuaded her to moderate to a limited period of time.”

“You really think anyone will buy that?” I snicker. “You expect people who know you well to believe that you could turn down the most beautiful *apsara* of Swargalok?”

“Well, that’s my line and I’m sticking to it,” says Arjun. “I may not have too many inhibitions, but I draw the line at incest.”

“Yeah, right,” I snort. Then a thought strikes me. I cover my mouth to avoid making a sound, but my shoulders heave with silent laughter.

“Now what?” he asks.

“I just wish I could see Draupadi’s expression when you tell her,” I say.

“Asshole,” he growls, and punches me hard on my arm. “You’re just delighted at my discomfiture, aren’t you?”

I don’t say anything but I just keep laughing soundlessly. I know it is mean, but I can’t help myself.

“Hard luck, Draupadi,” I think. “No wait, ‘hard’ is probably the wrong word in this context.” And tears of mirth run down my eyes.

CHAPTER 26

I skulk in the dark, my body covered by a robe. I am not looking forward to what I am about to do, but it has to be done. For the first time in my life, I am going to murder a man in cold blood. I have fought and killed many, but this is the first time I intend to take one by surprise and kill him without giving him a chance to fight back. I am violating the *kshatriya* code of honour that I have solemnly sworn to uphold all my life. And I am doing it for Draupadi.

As I wait, my mind races through the events that have brought me to this. Shortly before the thirteenth year of our exile was to begin, Krishna advised us to seek employment in the court of King Virat of Matsya under various assumed identities. Yudhishtira disguised himself as a Brahmin called Kanka, an expert at dice who could also engage the King in conversations on philosophy and statecraft. My choice was straightforward, I would serve as a cook called Vallala.

As advised by Indra, Arjun decided to use his unfortunate condition to his advantage by posing as a eunuch called Brihannala, allowing him to gain access to the royal harem, where he would teach the ladies dance. I must confess that it came as something of a shock to me that Arjun of all people had, over the years, become an accomplished dancer. I wouldn't really have associated him with something so, well, feminine. But then, my brother always was a man capable of throwing up surprises. Maybe that was one of his great attractions as far as women were concerned.

Nakul called himself Damagranthi and said he would seek employment in the royal stables while Sahadeva took the name of Tantripala and decided to offer his services as a cowherd. And Draupadi, the former empress whom queens had once vied for the honour of serving, presented herself as a maid named Sairandhari to Virat's queen, Sudeshna. Her cover story was that she had been abandoned by her husband and was desperately in need of employment till she figured out a way to find him.

We'd had to endure many hardships during our exile, but nothing hurt me as much as the thought of Draupadi being reduced to dressing and braiding the hair of a minor queen and being ordered around by her companions. Our twelve years in the forest had put us through many upheavals, but I'd done my best to shield Draupadi from them and tried to make her life as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. But now, she would have to live the life of a servant,

performing menial tasks, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Once again, I felt the old, familiar fury at my utter and complete helplessness. I couldn't wait for the year to end.

In order to maintain secrecy, we had agreed to minimize contact and act as strangers if we did run into each other. But every once in a while, Draupadi would come into the kitchen, usually having been dispatched by the Queen or someone else to convey a request for a particular food item or to carry some dish back to their chambers. She always avoided eye contact with me. I'm glad she did, because I couldn't bear the thought of having to look into her eyes and see the humiliation writ large in them.

One day, I was summoned to the dining hall. "Is everything all right?" I asked, anxiously.

"Oh yes, the King's brother-in-law, General Keechaka, liked one particular dish and wanted to meet the person who cooked it," replied the attendant, who had been dispatched to fetch me.

I walked into the hall and was introduced to Keechaka, a bull of a man with a thick neck and huge shoulders. "I've just returned from a campaign and found the food in the palace has improved immeasurably since I've been away," he said. "So I thought I must meet the new cook and personally compliment him."

"Thank you, My Lord. You're too kind. I'm glad my humble efforts pleased you," I said, trying hard to look modest and unassuming.

He sized me up. "You have a fine build for a cook. Why don't you try your hand at wrestling? I'm always on the lookout for good training partners."

"But, My Lord, I have never wrestled in my life. I know nothing about it," I said hastily.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll learn soon enough," he replied. "You can train with me early in the morning and report for duty at the kitchen later. Isn't that right, brother-in-law?" he said, turning to King Virat.

"Of course, Keechaka, whatever you say," said Virat hastily.

I gathered from the kitchen gossip later that Keechaka was the real power behind the throne. Virat was a weak, ineffectual ruler, fully aware of his limitations. He relied upon Keechaka to defend his kingdom and maintain law and order and would never deny him anything he asked for.

So the next day, I dutifully presented myself at the royal gymnasium and became Keechaka's training partner. I took great care to hide my skills and let him win every time, though I made it progressively harder for him as the days went by. His style was fairly predictable, based on sheer brute strength, with no

room for finesse. And god, was he cocky. He would strut around the ring, flexing his muscles and gloating over his victories. It wasn't enough for him to win, he delighted in rubbing his defeated opponent's face in the dirt.

I often longed to unleash my repertoire of moves on him, but restrained myself. I didn't want awkward questions being asked about how a cook who claimed to be a novice at wrestling had suddenly learned fancy tricks. So, I swallowed my dislike of Keechaka and tolerated him. Till the night that I heard a soft knocking on my door and opened it to a sobbing Draupadi, who walked in.

"What on earth are you doing here?" I asked, looking around nervously to make sure no one had seen her enter the room before quickly shutting the door. "You know we're not supposed to meet. Is everything all right?"

In return, she lifted her garment and showed me her left thigh. It was covered with a dark, ugly bruise.

"How did that happen?" I asked.

"Keechaka," she replied. "He has been harassing me for days. Today, the Queen asked me to go to his chamber and give him a jar of wine. I'm quite sure he put her up to it. I begged and pleaded with her not to send me alone but she insisted. Sure enough, when I entered his room, he grabbed my hand and tried to pull me on to his bed. I ran to the court, screaming for help. Keechaka followed me in there and kicked me on the thigh, in everyone's presence. Then he caressed his crotch, made an obscene gesture at me and swaggered away. Nobody present there said a word. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I'm building up quite a record of being humiliated in courts while people look on silently."

"Wasn't Yudhishtira there?" I asked, my blood boiling.

"Of course, he was. He told me that I should learn to put up with my lot till my husband returns to reclaim me," she said.

"What?" I exclaimed, completely livid. I sprang to my feet. "I'm going to kill Keechaka right now."

"No," said Draupadi. "If you do it openly, our identities will be revealed. All our pain, all our sacrifice will have been for nothing. No, I want him dead, but there's another way of doing it. I've thought it through."

She told me of her plan to kill Keechaka. Her tone was matter-of-fact, as if she was discussing the weather. I gaped at her, astounded at her ruthlessness. And then I shook my head.

"You're basically asking me to murder this man," I protested. "It completely

violates my *dharma* as a *kshatriya*.”

“Oh, for god’s sake, Bhima, stop talking like Yudhishtira,” she hissed. “I came to you because I thought you were the only one I could turn to for help, not to be lectured about stupid codes of conduct.”

“Why don’t you ask Arjun?” I sneered. “Why is it that I’m the one you always come to whenever you need any dirty work done? Your hero is too noble to sully his hands, is it?”

Her eyes flashed with anger. “I came to you because I thought you were the one person who would understand my pain. I apologise for being so stupid. I keep forgetting that even though I may have five husbands, I’m actually alone and unprotected. I’ll just settle for being raped by Keechaka, I guess. And afterwards, I’ll come and narrate all the gory details to you. You can explain to me which *dharma* states that a man should allow his wife to be sexually abused by a stranger and refuse to do anything about it.”

She got up and started to leave. I imagined Keechaka’s gross body on hers, his fleshy lips seeking her desperately averted face, and felt nauseated. I noticed that she had quickly sidestepped the question I had raised about Arjun, but I’ll admit that deep within, a part of me was happy that she had come to me, rather than go to him, when she really needed help.

I reflected on what she wanted me to do – attack an unsuspecting man and kill him in cold blood. It violated my warrior code. “My soul will rot in hell for this,” I thought in agony.

As Draupadi approached the door, she stopped and turned back. “I wish I could meet whoever codified *kshatriya dharma*”, she said bitterly. “I would tell him there is no greater duty for a warrior than to protect the weak and oppressed. That there should be no dishonour greater than to turn away somebody who comes seeking your help against a cruel, tyrannical bully. But what right do I have to speak on *dharma*? I’m just a body to be used and abused by everybody who takes a fancy to me.”

Her words ripped through my defences and revived the horrific memories of the day she was dragged to the gambling hall. “It’s a sin to murder someone. But wouldn’t it be a greater sin to just stand by and let that bastard Keechaka violate Draupadi?” I asked myself.

Suddenly, the answer is clear.

“Wait,” I said, grabbing her by the hand. “I’ll do it.”

~

The sound of approaching footsteps jolts me back into the present.

Earlier in the day, Draupadi had met Keechaka and told him that she too reciprocated his desire and wanted to rendezvous with him. But she had cited her married – albeit abandoned – status to insist that the meeting be completely private. She had asked him to meet her in the dance hall late at night.

Keechaka enters the hall. I wait. My body tenses. He swaggers up. Even though my back is turned to him, I can smell the liquor on his breath.

“Don’t be shy, my dove. You’ll be moaning with pleasure before too long,” he says and puts his hand on my shoulder.

I whip around and the robe falls off. His eyes widen and his mouth hangs open in shock. I don’t waste time on words. I will have the element of surprise only for a few precious seconds, and I need to make the most of them.

I knee him in the testicles. He doubles over in agony, clutching at them. As his face descends, my other knee rises to meet it. It catches him on the chin, exactly where it was intended to. His face snaps backward, his eyes already starting to glaze. I grab him before he can fall.

I position myself so that our backs are touching. His lolling neck is now being supported by my shoulder. I reach back and put a hand firmly under his jaw. Then I drop to the ground, pulling him down along with me. His neck snaps cleanly. He’s dead before he hits the ground.

His eyes are still wide open and have a startled expression. I shut them and fold his arms across his chest. I’ve just become a murderer, I think. What else does life have in store for me?

Draupadi emerges from the corner where she had been hiding. “I thought I’d told you to stab him in the heart with a dagger,” she hisses. “What if he’d survived your initial onslaught and raised an alarm? We would have been done for.”

I look at Draupadi, not bothering to mask my disgust. She recoils when she sees the expression on my face.

“Don’t presume to tell me how to kill a man, Draupadi,” I tell her, my teeth clenched. “I may have agreed to kill one by deceit for your sake, but I’ll be damned if I’ll use a weapon on an unarmed man. Now get back to your quarters and get some sleep. All hell is going to break loose when his body is discovered in the morning.”

CHAPTER 27

Sure enough, there is an uproar in the palace the next day. Sairandhari is summoned to the court for interrogation. I make my way to the packed hall. Ordinarily, a cook would never be allowed into such exalted premises but there is such a crowd of curious onlookers that nobody notices me. I look around and am glad to see that Nakul and Sahadeva are also part of the throng. Arjun, in his disguise as Brihannala, is seated with the ladies in their enclosure. All of us look at each other, and exchange the briefest of nods. No words are needed. If things turn ugly, we intend to step in, and to hell with the consequences.

“Sairandhari, what can you tell us about the mysterious death of General Keechaka?” asks Virat.

“Your Majesty, how could I, a poor, weak woman, possibly have anything to do with the killing of such a mighty warrior?” she replies in a piteous tone. “Please have mercy on me.”

“You’re lying, you bitch,” snarls a voice. It’s Sucheeraka, the younger brother of Keechaka. “I say that we burn her on Keechaka’s pyre. I’m sure she’ll start singing once she feels the flames.”

I tense, ready for action. But mercifully, for once Yudhishtira speaks up. “My Lord,” he says to Virat, “I share your grief for General Keechaka. But we should not let emotion blind us to logic or cause injustice to be perpetrated. The fact is that there is absolutely no evidence to show that this poor woman has any hand in the death of your brother-in-law. Perhaps he was assassinated by enemies of the state who were fully aware of how important he was to its defence.”

“Of course,” says Sucheeraka in a mocking tone. “Keechaka chases her into court and kicks her one day and the next day, he’s dead. And, she has nothing to do with it. A remarkable coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps the gods were displeased at the insult inflicted upon a married woman, My Lord,” says Yudhishtira equably. “After all, no normal man could have killed the general with his bare hands. Should we again invite the wrath of the gods by heaping further injustice upon this poor maid?”

His playing on their superstitions is a masterstroke. But Sucheeraka is not ready to relent. “You old women can keep talking,” he sneers. “I’m going to drag this woman to Keechaka’s pyre. Let me see if her divine protectors come forward to save her.”

He grabs her hand and begins to pull her out. This is it, I think and start to shoulder my way through the crowd. Then a voice whispers urgently to me, “Bhima, don’t. Not here.”

I look around, startled. I can’t see anyone. “It’s me, Vayu,” adds the voice. “Act normal and listen to what I’m saying. Get out of here quickly and get to a deserted place.”

I look at my other brothers who are all getting ready to spring into action. I shake my head very slightly and touch my chest. Thankfully, they get the message, “Don’t do anything. I’ll take care of it.”

I race out of there and head for the royal gardens. I quickly duck behind the bushes. Suddenly, Vayu’s head appears. Then the rest of him follows suit. “What the hell?” I exclaim, involuntarily.

He steps out of a strange garment that encases his body from head to toe. “Get into this, quick,” he says. I obey. The garment moulds itself around me, like a second skin. It is jet black, except for a slightly grey patch near the eyes, probably to allow sight. “What in god’s name is this?” I ask.

“A camouflage suit,” he replies shortly. “The very latest in *deva* technology. Based on some pretty complex laws of physics. Anyway, all you need to know is that once you have this on, you are for all practical purposes invisible. But this is strictly a one-time deal. If word gets out that I shared this with you, I’m going to be in big trouble with my fellow *devas*. Now, go save your wife.”

I nod gratefully and race towards the cremation ground. I feel weird running in that strange outfit in full public view, but it seems to be working because nobody gives me a second glance. I see Sucheeraka dragging a struggling Draupadi. There is a tree nearby. I lean upon it and push with all my might. It topples towards them. Draupadi sees the tree falling and screams. Sucheeraka looks up and involuntarily releases her hand. She leaps away in the nick of time. He tries to scramble away but trips and tumbles to the ground. He can only look on helplessly as the tree falls on him.

“Oh no,” I groan. I’d only intended to frighten him, not kill him. I check for a pulse. He’s dead, crushed by the impact.

“Bhima? Are you here somewhere?” whispers Draupadi. “I think I heard you.”

“Hush,” I tell her. “Yes, I’m here. Now keep quiet. Don’t worry, I won’t let anything happen to you.”

The courtiers, who had been following at some distance, catch up and gape at the sight before them. Then Yudhishtira speaks, “Exactly as I had feared. The gods are protecting this woman. I would suggest that we leave her alone. I wish

Lord Sucheeraka had listened to me. It is a sad day for the Queen. When she went to sleep last night, she had two brothers. Now, she has none.”

Thankfully, everybody heeds his advice this time. In fact, there is much muttering of incantations and making of signs to ward off the evil eye. Good, I think grimly. Hopefully, Draupadi will be left alone now.

Later, after the two brothers are cremated, I stand alone in the garden, having returned the camouflage suit to my father with profuse thanks. Yudhishtira walks by and suddenly stumbles.

“My apologies, sir,” I say courteously, reaching out to steady him.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” he whispers into my ear. “You killed both of them?”

“The second one was an accident, the first one was deliberate,” I confirm.

“Damn you,” he hisses. “We have just a few days to go for the thirteenth year to end. Why couldn’t you have checked with me first?”

“Because I know what you would have said,” I reply shortly.

Yudhishtira glares at me. “Word of these strange events will get out, you know. What will we do if the Kauravas arrive to investigate?”

“I’m sure you’ll figure out something,” I reply shortly, and turn away. That question has been bothering me too, but I’d rather not think about it.

As the days go by uneventfully, I allow myself the luxury of hope. Finally, the last day of the thirteenth year arrives. I spend it in utter agony, willing time to move faster. Every time anybody approaches me, I brace for bad news, and heave a silent sigh of relief when it turns out to be some mundane thing.

The anxiety gnaws away at me. Please don’t let anything go wrong after we’ve come this far, I pray. And at the same time, with every passing hour, my excitement builds up.

I try hard not to think about our impending freedom, because I don’t want to jinx it. But the more I try to shut my mind to the thought, the more I find myself unable to focus on anything else. “So close, so close, so close, so close...” the litany plays out, unbidden, like a chant in my head. I make a mess of the meal and get a tongue-lashing from the head cook. I nod and apologise, but I barely hear a word he says.

CHAPTER 28

Finally, the sun sets. I finish off the day's work, wish everybody a good night, apologise once more to the head cook and bound to Yudhishtira's room. I knock on the door. He opens it, sees me, and rolls his eyes.

"Come on in," he says.

I walk in and find all my other brothers already there. We embrace and giggle, like heady teenagers about to embark on some prank.

"It's over, isn't it?" I ask.

Yudhishtira nods. "I've checked every possible calendar, lunar or solar, and we've clearly fulfilled the condition. But I'd like us to stay in disguise for a couple of days more, just to ensure that there's absolutely no scope for dispute later."

"Oh," I say, the excitement fizzing out of me.

"Don't look so downcast," laughs Yudhishtira. "I'm just being extra cautious. Two more days, and then we can come out into the open."

But fate has other plans. The next morning, as I go about my daily work in the kitchen, a rumour spreads like wild fire. Matsya has been attacked, though no one is clear yet who the attacker is.

I turn to my boss. "Sir, I believe that right now, the kingdom needs my services in another capacity." And I hurry to the court.

When I get there, Virat is slumped on his throne, in utter despair. "Susarma, the King of Trigarta, has attacked our southern borders. Most of our soldiers stationed there have either surrendered or deserted. Keechaka is dead. Who will lead our forces?" he moans.

How about doing your own fighting for a change, you idiot, I think.

Yudhishtira voices my thought, though a lot more diplomatically. "Your Majesty, such hopelessness does not become a powerful king like you. You relied on General Keechaka for so long that you have lost your self-esteem. The fact is that you are still vigorous and capable of fighting. So rise up and take charge of your army. The sight of you leading them will boost the morale of your troops immeasurably," he exhorts Virat.

"But I haven't led an army for years," whines Virat. "I've forgotten whatever I'd learned about strategy and tactics. What sort of leadership can I provide?"

"Have no fear, Your Majesty," answers Yudhishtira. "Military history and strategy has long been a passion of mine and I have extensively read treatises on

the subject. If you will allow me to advise you, I am sure we will inflict a crushing defeat on the invaders.”

“But much of our army is already decimated,” mumbles Virat. “We will surely be heavily outnumbered.”

“Oh, for god’s sake,” I think. “The man just keeps wringing his hands about his problems without trying to find a solution.”

I step forward. “Your Majesty, I have no experience of battle, but I am able-bodied and can fight. You very kindly gave me employment in my hour of need. Please allow me to repay your generosity by volunteering my services against the enemy.”

Nakul and Sahadeva too step forward. “We would like to assist you too,” they say.

“You see, Your Majesty,” says Yudhishtira. “I am sure that many more patriotic young civilians will volunteer to defend Matsya in her hour of need. We can use them to reinforce the army and proceed to repulse the invader.”

A few hours later, I am pacing back and forth on a hill as I look down upon the valley where the opposing armies are arrayed. “We should be down there, not here as part of the reserves,” I growl.

“Relax, big boy,” says Sahadeva loudly. Then he puts an arm around my shoulder and whispers, “You do realise why Yudhishtira put us here?”

“I know,” I whisper back. “He would rather not risk exposing us unless he is in dire need.”

“It’s the sensible thing to do,” says Sahadeva.

I grunt and resume my pacing as trumpets sound and the two armies charge at each other. Virat, advised by Yudhishtira, is doing a good job, I note grudgingly. For a while, the battle hangs in the balance.

Then Susarma charges into the fray in his chariot, shooting arrows with rapid speed and deadly effectiveness. He isn’t quite in the same league as an archer as Arjun, but I have to concede that he is fairly impressive in his own right. He is accompanied by his elite regiment of guards, who take a heavy toll of our troops. The central divisions of the Matsya army begin to buckle under the attack. The flanks hold up, but the centre starts to cave in.

“This could turn into a rout any minute,” I mutter in anguish. Then suddenly, I realise that this crisis has actually given us an opportunity. With the flanks still standing firm, the retreating Matsya troops at the centre have formed a sort of funnel. In his eagerness, Susarma has charged straight into it. We have a chance to trap him.

Yudhishtira looks up at me and waves a green flag. It's the signal for the reserves to attack. "The wily devil, he's set it up beautifully," I laugh. Then I let out a battle cry at the top of my lungs and charge down, followed by the twins and the rest of the reserves.

As we race into the melee, the retreating Matsya troops part, allowing us a straight run at Susarma and his guards. I feel the familiar burst of exhilaration go through me and laugh out loud. I savour the sights, sounds and smells of battle. I feel like a beached fish that has just been put back into the water. This is my element and I revel in it.

On either side of me, the twins have broad grins on their faces. We scythe a bloody trail through the ranks of the Trigarta soldiers as we head for Susarma's chariot.

Susarma sees me coming and showers arrows upon me. I deflect most of them with my mace. A couple get through; one grazes my elbow and one lodges in my thigh. In my adrenalin-fuelled frenzy, I barely notice. Then I reach his chariot. He drops his bow, draws a sword and slashes at me. I duck and hear the sword whistle above my head. It is so close that I actually feel a swish of air as it passes by harmlessly.

Then I stand up tall and thump my mace into his chest. Even though he is heavily armoured, the force of the blow knocks him off the chariot and he sprawls on the ground, badly winded. I place my knee on his chest, pick up his sword and put it across his throat. "Surrender or die," I growl.

"There is no shame in being defeated by a warrior like you," he says. "May I know your name?"

"I am Vallala," I say. "And I take you prisoner in the name of King Virat."

"Funny," he says. "I thought you might have another name. Could it be..."

I punch him on the jaw before he can complete the sentence, knocking him out cold. Then I sling him over my shoulder, clamber onto his chariot and announce at the top of my voice, "I have captured Susarma. The battle is over."

The Matsya troops cheer loudly. The demoralized Trigarta soldiers hesitate, unsure of what to do.

Yudhishtira whispers in Virat's ear. Virat steers his chariot forward and yells in an unusually authoritative voice, "No one else needs to die today. If the soldiers of Trigarta lay down their weapons, I will allow them to leave unharmed."

The Trigarta soldiers quickly accept his offer and beat a hasty retreat. It is a comprehensive victory, probably the first that Virat has enjoyed in his life, and he is exultant. "Come, my friends," he says, to Yudhishtira and me. "You have

rendered yeoman service to me and I will make sure that you are richly rewarded. But first, let us get your wounds tended to and celebrate.”

We have barely settled down in his tent when a young soldier comes racing in. “I have terrible news, Your Majesty, he gasps. “While you have been engaged in battle here, the army of Hastinapura has attacked Matsya from the north.”

CHAPTER 29

“What!” The goblet falls from Virat’s hands. “We left behind only a skeletal force to protect the capital. The Kauravas will simply march into the kingdom unopposed.”

Yudhishtira and I exchange glances. We should have guessed. Susarma is an ally of Duryodhana. They must have hatched the plan together. Susarma’s attack was always meant to be a feint, intended to draw Virat’s army to the south, leaving the north of the kingdom unguarded.

“I have heard that Prince Uttar Kumar has mustered whatever forces he can and marched to oppose them,” says the soldier. “The eunuch, Brihannala, is acting as his charioteer.”

“Oh dear god, no,” wails Virat. “Uttar is just a boy, taking on some of the greatest warriors of India. He has gone straight into the jaws of death.”

Yudhishtira coughs. “Don’t give up hope, Your Majesty. I believe that Brihannala has some skill in arms. All may not be lost.”

The panic-stricken Virat takes out his desperation and fear on the man he considers his helpless servant. “Have you taken leave of your senses, Kanka? The likes of Bhishma, Drona and Karna are a part of that army and you expect a boy and a eunuch to combat them? I can only hope that they take pity on the lad and let him surrender honourably rather than killing him on the spot.”

“Your Majesty, trust me,” says Yudhishtira. “Nothing will happen to the Prince as long as Brihannala is with him.”

“Enough of your nonsense, Kanka,” screams Virat, and punches Yudhishtira on the nose. He then storms out of the tent.

I am so furious that I can barely breathe. I start after Virat, fully intending to smash every bone in his body. But Yudhishtira holds up his arm to block me.

“I am going to kill that son of a bitch,” I rage. “How dare he have the nerve to touch you? Has he already forgotten that when the day began, he was groaning and whining about the calamity that had befallen him? You deliver a great victory to him and he’s acting as if it was all his doing. I think he needs to be put in his place.”

“He’s frightened for his son,” says Yudhishtira, wiping his bloodied nose. “You can’t hold that against him. And when all is said and done, we owe him a lot. I forgive him, and I forbid you to harm him in any way.”

I shake my head. “Just for once, can you act like a red-blooded man instead of some benign saint?”

Yudhishtira smiles. “When the time is right, I will. But this is neither the right time nor the right place. Now come, let’s go help Virat before he lands himself in serious trouble.”

We walk out of Virat’s tent. I’m still trying to calm down. Meanwhile, Virat is bellowing orders. “Charioteers and cavalry, mount up. We must ride north at the greatest speed possible. Infantrymen, follow as fast as you can.”

He gets into his chariot and drives off in a swirl of dust.

“It’s a long walk back,” I groan.

Then I notice that some of the chariots of the Trigarta army are still on the battlefield. The horses are milling around aimlessly. Their charioteers are presumably either dead or must have abandoned their charges and fled in terror when the Matsya reserves, led by me, mounted the frenzied dash that changed the course of the battle. “Let’s get ourselves a ride,” I say.

Yudhishtira jerks a thumb at Susarma’s chariot. “We might as well travel in style,” he grins.

We mount up and race back towards Matsya. The twins follow suit. Soon, we catch up with the other chariots. But as we approach the capital, we’re stunned to see it festooned with decorations. Citizens are dancing and singing the praises of the young prince.

A mystified Virat moves towards his palace. Prince Uttar Kumar is standing at the top of the steps leading to the main entrance, grinning away. Father and son race towards each other. They meet in the middle of the steps and embrace tightly.

“Bless you, my boy, I feared I would never see you again,” says Virat as he kisses his son’s forehead. “But tell me, how did you manage to defeat the mighty Kaurava army?”

The Prince shakes his head. “It wasn’t I who did it, Father. Come inside and I’ll tell you the full story.”

He leads Virat to the room where the royal family usually entertains honoured guests. Virat stops short as he sees Brihannala seated there, with the Queen and her companions, including Sairandhari, fussing around the eunuch.

“What the hell is going on, Uttar?” he asks.

“I rode out of here full of bravado, Father,” says the Prince. “But when I saw the mighty Kaurava army, I panicked and wanted to run away. Brihannala saved our honour by offering to fight if I would drive the chariot. Then he unleashed

an arrow that emitted smoke that stung the eyes of the opposing army, leaving them weeping, and coughing and gasping for breath.”

“One of the *deva*’s weapons?” I ask Arjun in a whisper.

“Something they call tear gas,” he whispers back.

Meanwhile, Uttar is going on with his story. “The enemy’s horses panicked and stampeded, taking most of the mighty warriors away from the battlefield even as their charioteers helplessly struggled to bring them under control. While those left were still trying to recover, the handful of Matsya troops led by us charged and slaughtered them. It was a complete disaster for the Kauravas.”

Virat folds his hands. “The gods have been kind and granted us two remarkable victories in a single day,” he says gratefully.

“The gods have been kind indeed,” says Uttar. “But the hard work was all done by some remarkable men who have chosen not to reveal their identities so far.” He gestures at Brihannala. “Allow me to introduce you to the legendary archer, Arjun himself.”

Virat gazes numbly at Arjun, who smiles and greets him with folded hands. “May I also present to you my brothers,” he says, pointing at us. “Meet Yudhishtira, Bhima, Nakul and Sahadeva.”

Virat turns towards us, dazed. Then his face turns a bright scarlet and a panicky expression appears on it. “My Lord,” he wails to Yudhishtira. “In my ignorance, I struck you. Please forgive me,” he says, falling to his knees.

I can see that Yudhishtira is about to make a gracious speech, so I quickly speak up first. “There is someone else whose forgiveness you need to seek, King Virat.” And I turn to Sairandhari. “Come forward, Draupadi.”

“My lady, you have suffered great hardships and humiliation in my palace,” whispers a mortified Virat, now beside himself with fear.

Any moment now, he’ll start wringing his hands, I think.

I see the Queen too turn pale as she recalls all the indignities heaped upon Draupadi. By now, Virat has practically prostrated himself before Yudhishtira. “Please forgive us for all the mistakes unintentionally committed by us. If you had only revealed yourselves to us, we would have accorded you all the honours due to you,” he says in the tone of someone pleading for his life.

Yudhishtira bends down and gently pats Virat. “Rise, O noble King,” he says, as I roll my eyes. “We had to stay anonymous for a year as part of the terms of a wager that I had lost, which is why we could not tell you who we were. We have no complaints against you. If anything, this year has taught us to be kinder and a little more considerate to those who serve us. Most of us tend to treat them as

less than human. You have nothing to fear from us. We do not bear any grudges against you. All we ask is that you agree to be our ally in the days ahead.”

“Of course, My Lord,” says a hugely relieved Virat. “In fact, I have a proposal to make. Let us forge a marital alliance. I would be grateful if your noble brother, Arjun, would consent to marry my daughter, Uttara.”

“Here we go again,” I think. “What is it about fathers that they seem unable to meet Arjun without offering to get their daughters married to him?” From the corner of my eye, I get a glimpse of Draupadi’s face. She seems none too happy at this turn of events. Uttara is a pretty girl, if a bit young for Arjun, I would have thought.

But Arjun has yet another surprise up his sleeve. “I thank you for your very kind offer, sir,” he says to Virat. “But Uttara was my student. I consider her a daughter. It would be highly inappropriate for me to marry her. I have another suggestion. If you agree, Uttara can be married to my brave and handsome son, Abhimanyu. I believe they will make a wonderful couple.”

Well, well, well, I think. My younger brother seems to be growing up. Virat and Sudeshna concur eagerly. Draupadi’s face is radiant.

“And now, please allow me to escort you to your new quarters,” says Virat.

“We can just keep staying in our old rooms,” shrugs Yudhishtira.

“Please, My Lord, don’t mock me. That is completely unthinkable,” says Virat. “You will stay in the best accommodation my humble abode has to offer.”

As we make our way to our suites, I notice Arjun and Draupadi leaning close to each other, talking. I know it’s rude but I can’t help myself. I strain my ears to hear their conversation.

“I’m so proud of you, my hero,” murmurs Draupadi. “It’s too bad about your condition. I can’t reward you the way I would have liked to.”

“I’ve been in touch with my father,” replies Arjun. “He says everything is ready and I can have the operation performed any time I wish.”

“That’s good news indeed,” winks Draupadi. “Can you get it done before the marriage? After the wedding ceremony is completed, we can enjoy a marital night of our own while the young couple celebrates theirs. Why should kids have all the fun?”

Isn’t that bloody typical, I brood. I captured Susarma and helped repulse the invasion by Trigarta. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that I turned the tide of the battle at a crucial moment. And everybody, including Draupadi, has already forgotten about it because on the same day, Arjun virtually single-handedly defeated the Kaurava army.

“Second fiddle,” I mutter bitterly. “I’m always going to be the second fiddle.”

Then I feel a twinge in my thigh where the arrow had hit it. I’d better go see a healer before the wound gets infected and I really have good reason to feel sorry for myself, I think, as I gloomily limp off to seek some medical attention.

CHAPTER 30

Abhimanyu's wedding celebrations were truly magnificent. Sadly, but inevitably, they also turned into an intensely political occasion. Kings were invited from all over Aryavrata, ostensibly to bless the young couple, but they spent hours closeted with Yudhishtira, Krishna and Drupada.

Everybody's mind was on the future: would we have to go to war with the Kauravas to reclaim what was rightfully ours? And if we did, then who could we count upon to support us?

Some kings were quick to assure us of their fealty. Others gently but plainly said that while they may have agreed to attend the wedding out of politeness, their loyalty lay with the Kauravas. And then there were the ditherers and the fence-sitters. Yudhishtira and Krishna spent hours working on them, pointing out that we did not really want war but would be forced to fight if the Kauravas refused to return our possessions even after we had fulfilled all the conditions of the wager, in which case justice would be on our side.

Yudhishtira was still optimistic that war could be avoided but those hopes took a major beating after King Dhritarashtra, Queen Gandhari and the rest of their huge family pointedly ignored our wedding invitation. Instead, grandsire Bhishma was dispatched to attend as their official representative. We were genuinely delighted to see him. It was an emotional reunion. But the meeting soon turned gloomy after he told us how the winds were blowing in Hastinapura.

Apparently, Duryodhana had been furious after his forces were routed by Arjun. He insisted that we had been exposed before the thirteenth year had ended and should now go back into exile. When the elders, including Bhishma, Acharya Drona and Uncle Vidura remonstrated that this was not the case, he erupted in anger and accused them of being partial to us. He only subsided when the court astrologers told him categorically that there was no way the dates could be fudged to suit him. But he was still not willing to return our kingdom.

After that meeting, I plunged into the festivities with renewed fervour – singing, dancing and eating as if there would be no tomorrow. Soon enough, that would be true for many of us. So we might as well make the most of these precious moments of joy, I reasoned.

The big night arrived, and Abhimanyu and Uttara were duly married. I looked

at their smiling faces and was transported back to the time when the five of us had married Draupadi. God, how the years had flown by. What kids we were then and how wise and mature we had believed ourselves to be. We had no idea that life had so many bitter lessons lined up for us. Just as well, I suppose.

While the young couple settled into matrimonial bliss, emissaries were dispatched back and forth between Matsya and Hastinapura. It was slow, ponderous going and I waited restlessly. We were trapped in limbo and the uncertainty was excruciating. Let's just take a decision one way or the other, I often thought. The intricacies of diplomacy, which so fascinated Yudhishtira and Krishna, only left me anxious and irritated.

Frankly, I wasn't even sure why we were bothering to negotiate. After all, I had several vows to fulfil, and I sure as hell wasn't going to be able to do so if the Kauravas amicably returned our possessions to us. But Yudhishtira, the eternal peacenik, was bent on seeking a non-violent solution.

Once, when I reminded him of my oaths, he sharply told me that they were not more important than the lives of thousands, possibly lakhs of people. I lapsed into a sulky silence and sent up a silent prayer that Duryodhana's natural arrogance would help me fulfil the mission that my elder brother was threatening to scuttle with his compassion and benevolence.

As we waited for news on the political front, there were glad tidings on the personal one. Draupadi walked up to me one morning while I was seated by myself in the garden. She had a huge grin on her face.

"Well, somebody certainly seems happy today," I said, basking in the warmth of her smile.

"You bet," she replied. "It gives me great pleasure to inform you that Uttara is pregnant."

"Wow, Abhimanyu certainly has great aim," I joked. "He didn't waste any time hitting the target."

"Please," she made a face. "Refrain from making crude jokes. You're going to be a grand-uncle now. No, wait. I'm Abhimanyu's step-mother, and you're my husband too, so that will make you both the child's grand-uncle and grandfather."

"That poor kid is going to be really confused," I laughed. Then it hit me. "Wait a minute. I'm going to be a grandfather?"

"Yes," she laughed. "Does the thought depress you?"

"Not at all," I replied promptly. "What is more depressing is the thought that I'll be sleeping with a grandmother."

“Idiot,” she said, punching me on the shoulder. “You don’t have to if it’s such an ordeal, you know.”

I shook my head. “It’s not an ordeal at all. You’ve never looked more beautiful.”

It was the honest truth. The years had been kind to her. She had put on a bit of weight, but it suited her. The fine lines that had started to appear on her hitherto flawless skin gave her face a certain character that only enhanced her beauty. And of course, she had acquired immeasurable grace and poise over the years.

I told her so but she just shook her head. “Flatterer,” she said, slapping me gently on the back and turning away. But I thought I saw her smiling as she walked away.



Within a few hours, though, the mood turns sour again. Krishna, who had personally gone as our envoy to convey Yudhishtira’s willingness to accept even five villages, returns with the announcement that Duryodhana had refused to concede land equal to even a needle’s tip.

“It looks like war then,” says Yudhishtira heavily. “And not just a war, but a just war.”

“Oh good, then I seem to have arrived right on time,” says Ghatotkacha cheerfully, as he strides into the hall, enfolding Abhimanyu in a tight embrace. “I’ll be leading my *rakshasa* tribe into battle on your behalf.”

“Like hell you will,” I growl. “This is not your fight, boy. Stay well out of it.”

“Bhima, if you are going into battle, how can your son not be there by your side?” asks Krishna.

“Oh, he wasn’t good enough to live with us, but he’s good enough to die for us, is it?” I snarl. “I think that’s the worst form of racism and I refuse to countenance it. And Abhimanyu, I think you should stay out of the war too. Your place is here, by Uttara’s side.”

“No, Uncle Bhima, my place is in the front line at the side of my father and uncles,” answers Abhimanyu. “Would you have it said about me that I hid behind my wife’s skirts while the greatest war in the history of this land was fought?”

“Don’t give me lip, boy,” I say. “Or I’ll put you across my knees and paddle your bottom. You haven’t grown up so much that I can’t still do that.”

"You'd killed many men by the time you were his age, brother," says Arjun, walking up to me and gently putting his hands on my shoulders. "I know exactly what you're going through right now. But just think for a moment. Soon, we will be putting hundreds of thousands of parents in exactly the same situation as us. How can we, with a clear conscience, ask them to let their sons risk their lives on our behalf, if we aren't willing to let our own children fight in this war?"

"Father, since we last met, I've become the chief of my tribe," says Ghatotkacha. "And I'm here on their behalf to negotiate an alliance with the once and future emperor." He turns to Yudhishtira. "My Lord, if we fight on your side, will you give me your word that the area inhabited by my tribe will be left exclusively for us, and humans will not be allowed to intrude upon it?"

"Yes," says Yudhishtira promptly. "We will mark a substantial chunk of land on the map. As long as I and my descendants rule, that area will be reserved for the *rakshasas* and humans will be forbidden to enter it, unless specifically invited to do so by a member of your tribe. I am prepared to formally sign a treaty to that effect with you."

Ghatotkacha shakes his head. "Your word is good enough for me, My Lord." He turns to me. "Father, I am here not just as your son but also as the leader of my people, who are now formally allied to the Pandavas. Much as I love and respect you, I cannot let your emotions stop me from fulfilling my duty."

I feel both pride and despair as I see him standing proudly before me. I walk up to him, a lump in my throat, and embrace him tightly.

"You are old enough to take your own decisions, Ghatotkacha. And you are doing the right thing for your people. You have the makings of a great leader. May you have a long and happy life and lead your tribe to great progress and prosperity." But even as I say the words, and put on a cheerful face, I feel a shadow settle upon my heart.

Later that night, Vayu comes to me in a dream. "Well, this is a change," I tell him. "Yudhishtira and Arjun have met their fathers in dreams, but you usually appear before me only in the most dramatic of circumstances."

He laughs, "Yes, I thought that for once it would be good to meet when you aren't about to risk life and limb."

"So, how does this whole dream-talk thing work?" I ask. "I mean, if I know that I'm dreaming this, then why don't I just wake up? And dreams are usually imaginary, right? So how can this be both real and imaginary at the same time?"

Vayu strokes my brow. "Always so curious. I don't think any of your brothers asked this question of their fathers. They just unquestioningly accepted what was

happening. It's a little hard to explain but I'll try. There are different levels of sleep, ranging from extremely light to extremely deep. We've found that there's one particular level at which the brain is most receptive to telepathy. So this isn't exactly a dream; it's more of a telepathic conversation you're having with me in a half-asleep, half-awake state. I'm communicating with you via thoughts. As your subconscious brain is receiving my signals, it's forming my image inside your head, based on how it's interpreting my thoughts and the emotions behind them. It's quite an amazing thing, the brain. No matter how much one learns about it, it never ceases to surprise."

"That makes sense, kind of," I say. I'm not sure I fully understand, but I get at least some part of it.

"Good," he smiles. Then he turns serious. "Listen, I've come to see you because all the *devas* are being allowed to meet their respective progeny one last time before the war begins. After that, we won't be able to talk to you or help you in any way."

"But why?" I ask.

"Because we have children and disciples on both sides," he replies. "If we start actively interfering on their behalf, we could easily end up having a civil war among ourselves. Indra and Surya almost had an altercation. So, it has been decided that none of the *devas* will get involved in any way in the war from here on. We can watch, but we can't help or even advise anyone on either side."

"Indra is Arjun's father," I ponder. "But why did he get into a tiff with Surya? Does Surya have a human child too?"

"I can't answer that, son," says Vayu. "I'm sorry. Hopefully, you will find the answer to that one day. But it's not for me to reveal."

"So, is this goodbye for us, father?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I'd like to believe it's more of an *au revoir*, son. I'm very sure you will come through the war alive, though it's foolish to pretend that it will not exact a terrible price on all who participate in it. You know, I'm truly proud to have fathered sons like you and Hanuman. I'm sure you'll play just as major a role in this war as he did in the conflict against Ravana."

He starts to move away, and then he turns back. "I just have one piece of advice, Bhima. You are immensely strong physically, probably the most powerful human alive today. But in the days to come, you will need enormous emotional fortitude too. Brawn can help you defeat most opponents, but your worst enemy will be your own negative emotions – shock, grief, and yes, even fear. Your biggest challenge will be to cope with seeing loved ones cut down in battle in

front of your eyes. That is when you will understand the true meaning of courage. That is when you will have to draw upon your real strength. The strength which lies within the heart, not in the limbs. To survive the war, you will have to find the will to live and fight on even as those whom you love, die around you. Remember my words, son. I haven't brought you any material gifts, like a fancy weapon or device. But I believe this advice is the best thing I could have offered you. Heed it well, and you will walk away triumphant from the battlefield."

CHAPTER 31

And finally, we are at war. The moment that has been in the making for months – no years, or perhaps even generations – is upon us. The envoys are all talked out, the complex negotiations have broken down, the peace parleys are done. Everything has now been reduced to that most fundamental of premises: kill or be killed. Being confronted with this stark, simple truth can bring out either the best or worst – and sometimes both – in a man. I look around, and wonder which it will be for the heroes and soldiers arrayed on either side.

The two armies are a dense sea of humanity, stretching as far as the eye can see. Collectively, almost four million fighting men have assembled under the banners of the two sides. The Kauravas outnumber us eleven divisions to seven, but we have spent our lives overcoming unfavourable odds, so those numbers don't bother me too much. No, the figure that interests me is one hundred – the number of Kaurava brothers, all of whom I intend to annihilate before the war is done.

Every renowned warrior in India is present here on the battlefield – with the notable exception of Balaram, who has chosen to stay neutral, and Karna, who, according to our spies, is sulking in his tent, having refused to fight under the generalship of grandsire Bhishma.

The sun rises, reflecting light off millions of gleaming weapons and glittering pieces of polished armour. The horses stamp and snort. I share their restlessness. Now that the time for action has arrived, I can't wait for it to start. I tap my toes, then bounce on the balls of my feet.

Suddenly, a murmur runs through our army. At first, it is a gentle swell, and then it turns into a loud chorus. "Arjun is not going to fight. He has thrown down his weapons."

"Nonsense," I say, disbelievingly. But the voices grow louder and more insistent. I tap my charioteer on the shoulder. "Take me to where Arjun's chariot is stationed."

We race to the spot. And I am left stunned at what I see. Arjun is slumped on the floor of his chariot, weeping. His weapons are lying all around him in disarray. Krishna is counselling him, obviously urging him not to bring shame upon himself and his ancestors. They talk endlessly. Finally, to my huge relief, Arjun wipes his tears, bows to Krishna, and picks up his weapons. They both

loudly blow their conches to signal the beginning of battle.

The soldiers yell out their war cries and charge. Both armies come together with a resounding clash. Blood spurts; limbs are hacked off; breathing, living humans with virtues and vices, hopes and fears, senses and emotions turn instantly into corpses that slump lifelessly to the ground. The carnage has begun.

Much later, after the war had ended, I had asked Arjun exactly what Krishna had told him that day. My brother launched into a long monologue. After a while, I held up my hand. “Wait,” I had said. “Let me see if I can summarise it. Basically, he said, ‘Live in the moment. Don’t waste time and energy regretting the past or fretting about the future. Control the controllable, and don’t worry about stuff that you can’t influence. Understand that you cannot always control events, but you can certainly control how you react to them emotionally. You can be miserable even in the midst of luxury, or find fulfilment in adversity – it’s all in the mind. Focus on your actions, which are in your own hands, rather than on outcomes, which are unpredictable at best. Whatever you decide to do, just give it your best shot and let the results take care of themselves.’”

Arjun had opened and shut his mouth a couple of times, and then looked helplessly at Krishna, who had laughed uproariously. “Well, it was a little more complex than that. But yes, as summaries go, it’s not so bad,” said Krishna after his laughter had subsided. “You’re quite the philosopher, you know,” he added, patting me fondly on the back.

“No, Krishna,” I had wanted to say. “I’m no philosopher. Because try as I might, I can’t rationalise all the terrible wrongs that were committed at Kurukshetra in the name of *dharma*. When we ourselves stooped to the level of our opponents, how can we possibly describe the Great War as the victory of good over evil? Let’s just be honest and say that we did whatever it took to win, and luckily for us, it’s always the winners who get to write history.”

But I held my peace. We owed Krishna too much and it would have hurt Arjun deeply to see me arguing with his beloved friend and mentor.

But this I can say: I certainly didn’t feel philosophical on that first day, least of all when the chariot of the first Kaurava I was to kill drove into my view. I can still recall every second of that encounter.

~

Dushkarnan glares at me and shoots an arrow. I easily cut it into two with an arrow of mine and laugh at the expression of shock on his face. I’m actually a

better archer than I get credit for, and in the forest, I've spent long hours practising secretly. But somehow, when it comes to the Kauravas, I prefer to do my killing from up close rather than from a distance.

"Dushkarnan," I yell out across the deafening noise of battle. "Want a little duel, man to man? Pick your weapon."

I know that he fancies himself with the spear. Sure enough, he snatches one up and vaults off his chariot. I smile grimly, pick up my mace and get off.

We close in. He feints to my right and as I move to cover it, he suddenly brings the spear straight at my chest. I bat it away with my mace in the nick of time.

"You have no idea how privileged you are," I tell him as we circle cautiously. "Frankly, I doubt I'll remember the exact order in which I kill all hundred of you. But the first one is always special, so I'll never forget you."

His face twists in an ugly sneer. "You're the one who will die, Bhima. You and all your precious brothers. And after that, all hundred of us will take turns with your beloved Draupadi."

He feints again, but this time I'm prepared. He's too predictable for his own good. Sure enough, the spear sweeps in towards my chest. This time, I hit hard and downwards with my mace, so that the tip of his spear lodges in the ground. Dushkarnan struggles to extricate it. I calmly take a big stride forward and smash my mace into his face. He groans and clutches at it, letting go of the spear. I deliver an open-handed slap hard across his cheek. He reels around. As he stumbles, I kick him hard on his lower back, sending him tumbling on to his hands and knees.

I squat beside him and put an arm around his shoulder. "I'm going to kill you now, Dushkarnan," I tell him conversationally, almost companionably. "But you know something? You really shouldn't have said all those nasty things about Draupadi. For that, I'm going to have to punish you severely."

I grab his hair from behind and pull his head back, exposing his throat. I draw a dagger and cut into his larynx, severing his vocal chords. He dies slowly and painfully, drowning in his own blood as it pours into his windpipe, unable to cough it out. As he falls, I hear howls of grief and rage. I look up and see two more Kauravas charging at me, their swords drawn.

I throw my head back and laugh. I'm not sure of their names, though I think they are Subaahu and Dushpradharshan. It gets a little difficult keeping track of all of them, you know. Not for the first time, I wonder how their parents manage to get their names right all the time. No matter. In a few days, they won't have

to bother.

I spread my arms wide open. "Come to me, children," I say. "You're just making my task easier. Sparing me the trouble of having to go looking for you."

Subaahu slashes at me. I parry with my mace, hard enough that the impact knocks him off balance. Dushpradharshan tries to sneak up from behind and lop my head off. I duck under his blow and pivot, swinging my mace up as I complete a full turn. It crashes into his jaw and he crumples.

Subaahu has recovered and strikes again just as I turn to face him. I leap back in the nick of time. His arm continues on its downward trajectory, and for a moment his guard is down and he is wide open. All the opening I need.

I smash my mace into his ribs. He winces in pain. The next blow takes him on the chest. He totters back. Even though he is wearing armour, the pounding I am inflicting is hurting him. My next shot is to his forehead and it knocks him down, his helmet falling off his head. I kick it away and unleash a vicious swing to his skull. Blood, fragments of bone and bits of brain explode from his head. I nod grimly and turn back to Dushpradharshan.

He is trying to get to his feet, but he is still clearly feeling the effects of the blow to the jaw. He tries to raise his sword, but it's only halfway up before I drop my mace and seize his wrist. Slowly, I twist it so that the sword now faces him. I look into his eyes as I push his own sword into his stomach, burying it in his body right up to the hilt.

He sighs and collapses onto me, almost as if we are two lovers locked in an embrace. I pat him gently, almost tenderly, on the cheek. Then I shove him away with one hand even as I brutally yank out the sword with the other. It comes out of his body with a sucking sound, coated in his blood. He clutches the gaping hole in his stomach and wordlessly sinks to his knees, then topples forward, face down in the dust.

"Three down," I say as I throw away the sword, retrieve my mace and walk away. Before the day is done, I will add four more to that tally.

CHAPTER 32

“Seven,” I boast to Draupadi when I return to camp that night. “I took out seven of the brothers in a single day.”

She nods briefly, but her smile seems forced.

“Aren’t you happy?” I ask her.

“I’m just relieved that all of you are back safe and sound,” she replies. “I’m beginning to wonder if women don’t have the worst of it when their men are out fighting. I know that fighting is dangerous, brutal and tiring work, but at least your mind is occupied so you really don’t have too much time to think. We, on the other hand, have nothing to do the whole day long but think about all the terrible things that could happen, about everything that could go wrong. It’s enough to drive you mad.”

I open my mouth to answer but we hear a heart-rending wail from Virat’s tent. Draupadi and I rush there. The young prince, Uttar Kumar, is lying dead. His mother and sister are weeping over his body.

Virat is beside himself with grief. I remember our desperate rush back to Matsya after defeating Susarma, his fear that his son would be slain by the Kaurava warriors, and his pride and relief when he found Uttar standing alive and well on the palace steps. The eventuality that Virat feared the most had come to pass after all; it had just been postponed by a few months.

After a while, Subhadra gently puts her arms around her daughter-in-law, Uttara. “Come away, child,” she says. “In your condition, you cannot afford to distress yourself unduly.”

Subhadra leads Uttara out. Draupadi and I follow, at a distance. “It is a terrible thing to see parents weeping over their son’s body,” I murmur.

“Dhritarashtra and Gandhari will be weeping for seven of them right now,” says Draupadi softly. It’s almost a whisper, but I hear it all the same.

I look at her, irritated. “Draupadi, what on earth is wrong with you? All this while, you have been my single biggest motivation to wipe the Kauravas off the earth. For thirteen years, you have goaded us endlessly with your taunts. Don’t tell me, you of all people are going soft now?”

Draupadi sighs. “You can hate someone fiercely while they are alive. But there is a certain finality to death that you only really understand when you see it before you.”

I throw up my hands. “And exactly what is that supposed to mean? All I know is that I have to kill all of them, and I intend to. And, I’m not going to lose focus at this stage because of some philosophical mumbo jumbo.”

~

For the next few days, I pursue my goal with single-minded dedication. There is a larger war going on out there, but I am oblivious to it, bent as I am upon pursuing my personal vendetta. Every night, our generals draw up plans for the next day. Every morning, before we set out for battle, the plans are quickly reviewed. I nod through the meetings, disinterested.

“Just place me where I can kill the maximum number of Kauravas,” I say.

Initially, the Kauravas come looking for me, bent upon avenging the siblings that I have already killed. But as I relentlessly slaughter them, they wisen up and start trying to avoid me. So I hunt them like a predator, roaming all over the battlefield looking for them. I kill them with arrows, sword, spear, mace or my bare hands, as the situation dictates. Some of them go down fighting, shouting insults at me till the very end. Others plead for mercy. Either way, it makes no difference to me. I mete out death clinically, efficiently.

Sometimes, my eagerness to get at a Kaurava almost backfires on me. On at least two clear occasions, I find that I have blundered into traps set for me, using one of the brothers as bait. Ghatotkacha saves me once, Abhimanyu on the other occasion. The irony is not lost on me. I should be keeping them safe, and not the other way around. But after I observe them in action, I come to the conclusion that they are abundantly capable of taking care of themselves.

Ghatotkacha and his small band of some 200-odd *rakshasa* warriors strike terror in the hearts of the enemy whenever and wherever they appear. But it is Abhimanyu, the youngest warrior on the battlefield, who is a true revelation. Initially, the opposing warriors are indulgent towards him, treating him as a child. But soon, it becomes apparent that he is more than a match for any champion on the field. All those who witness him in action are left in awe at his prowess. Soon, there is talk of how he will be the greatest warrior of our clan, his fame outstripping even that of his father, uncles and legendary ancestors.

But even as the youngest warrior is carving out a formidable reputation for himself, the oldest one on either side is more than living up to his own. Grandsire Bhishma fights with all the canniness and wisdom that he has acquired over the long years of his life, but with the vigour of a youth one-third

his age.

At the end of the ninth day, we convene for another conference. Thus far, I have pretty much ignored the bigger picture, focusing on my personal mission. But that day, it soaks into even my revenge-obsessed brain that the war is going badly for us.

“As long as Bhishma is alive, we can’t hope to win,” says Dhrishtadyumna, who has been appointed the commander of our army. “It’s not just his own skill as a warrior that is hurting us, it’s also the fact that he’s a superb strategist and tactician. He knows exactly when and where to attack to maximise our casualties, and how to pull back his troops to ensure that they don’t suffer heavy losses when we start to get the upper hand. And he seems invincible. There seems to be just no way to kill him.”

“There may be a way,” says Krishna, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

“Well, what is it?” asks Dhrishtadyumna impatiently.

“We all know that King Drupada’s eldest child, Shikhandi, is a woman trapped in a man’s body,” says Krishna. “It’s really been tough for poor Shikhandi. Hopefully, some day human medicine will advance to the extent that we can perform sex change operations. Or at least, society will evolve to the extent that there is less prejudice and more understanding of those who happen to be born different. Gender and sexuality is a lot more complex and ambiguous than we realise. It’s truly sad that people should be crudely defined on the basis of a few body parts and then be condemned to lead a life in which they are made to feel alienated from their own natural personas. I digress... But the point is that Shikhandi’s misfortune can be turned to our advantage.”

“How?” asks Drupada. His dislike for his eldest child is all too evident; he can’t even speak about Shikhandi without his face wrinkling into an expression of distaste.

“Bhishma knows about Shikhandi,” replies Krishna. “He will not take up arms against someone whom he perceives to be a woman. If Shikhandi fights from Arjun’s chariot, Arjun will get a clear opportunity to shoot at Bhishma unopposed.”

“You can’t be serious, Krishna,” I burst out. “That would be murder, plain and simple.”

“Why?” asks Krishna. “You don’t have a problem with using a shield, do you? That’s perfectly acceptable within the rules of warfare. So just think of Shikhandi as a human shield.”

"It's not the same thing, Krishna, and well you know it," I retort.

"Bhima, I understand how you feel," begins Krishna.

"No, you don't," I retort. "Grandsire Bhishma is just a distant relative for you, so you can plot his death so calmly. But he was one of the few friends and protectors we had when we were growing up alone and insecure in Hastinapura. He did his best to ensure that we never felt the absence of a father. I haven't forgotten that."

"If he loves the five of you so much, why is he fighting against you, especially when he knows that your claims are just?" asks Krishna.

"You know the answer to that," I reply. "He didn't wish to oppose us. But he is bound by his oath to protect the kingdom of Hastinapura against all attackers."

"In other words, he has put his sense of duty above both his love for you and his sense of righteousness," says Krishna. "Shouldn't you be doing the same?"

I know that I'm never going to win an argument with Krishna, so I stop trying. Yudhishtira, who is always quick to invoke *dharma*, has stayed silent all this while. I look at him. He avoids my gaze. Well, well, the noble soul seems to be turning into a scheming, calculating warlord, I think.

Then I turn to Arjun. "Are you going to go ahead with this?" I ask him.

Arjun's face is agonised, but he nods. "If that is the only way to defeat him, then yes, I will," he says.

"Well, make sure I'm not around when you commit this dastardly act," I tell him. "I can't bear to watch it."

CHAPTER 33

The next day, some perverse curiosity drives me to follow Arjun's chariot. I watch with horrified fascination as Shikhandi shoots arrows at our grandsire. Most don't even reach him; the few that do bounce harmlessly off his armour. When he sees that it is Shikhandi who is shooting at him, with an exquisitely chivalrous gesture, he puts down his bow. He really does embody the best of old-world courtesy, and it is going to cost him his life.

Arjun acts quickly. Later, he confesses to me that he didn't give himself a chance to think that day, because he had feared that if he did, he would probably not have been able to go through with the plan.

There appears to be no hesitation on his part that fateful day as he swiftly notches almost a dozen arrows simultaneously on his bowstring. He releases them in the air. They rise, rise, rise, and then descend in a parabolic arch. Every single one of them thuds into grandsire's body. Suddenly, he resembles a human pin-cushion. He stands stock-still for a moment, looking at all the arrows lodged in him. Then, with a sigh, he gently topples back like a giant oak that has been chopped down.

A shocked silence descends upon the battlefield. Nobody actually calls a ceasefire but by some strange telepathy, everybody stops fighting to gather around the spot where grandsire Bhishma has fallen. Arjun throws down his bow and rushes to him, tears streaming down his face. He gently cradles him in his arms. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," he repeats over and over again.

I get off my chariot and walk towards them, as though in a trance. Unbidden, a memory comes to me – of the first time I met grandsire Bhishma. He had come to visit us in the forest. I was all grubby from playing in the mud. He had laughed and scooped me up in his arms, completely uncaring of the fact that I was wrecking his spotless white clothes. Driven by curiosity, I had pulled at his long grey beard. He had winced playfully and made mock sounds of pain.

And now, he is lying in front of me, his body riddled with arrows, in acute agony. "Water," I hear him whisper.

Arjun looks around helplessly. "Is there any water here?" he asks.

I nod and gesture to my charioteer. I always make sure to carry some waterskins in my chariot. The last thing I want is to get dehydrated in the middle of battle. He tosses one of them to me. I wordlessly hand it over to

Arjun. He brings it to grandsire's lips and helps him drink. Some of the water runs down Bhishma's chin and onto his chest. It turns red as it mingles with his blood. After a while, he nods gratefully and indicates with his hand that he's had his fill.

"Forgive me, Grandsire," says Arjun again.

Bhishma smiles gently. "No, Arjun. You don't need to ask for forgiveness. I should thank you for relieving me of this oppressive burden on my conscience."

I squat down next to them. "I'll tell you a little secret, though it's quite silly," I say. "I was always very proud of the fact that our names, Bhishma and Bhima, sound so similar. Just an extra character or two between them."

He smiles and winks at me. "I'll tell you a little secret," he responds. "I was very proud of it too."

I choke up and turn away. Just then, there's a flash of light, followed by four more in quick succession. A stunningly beautiful young woman appears, followed by four males who are carrying a box made of some shimmering metal, unlike anything I've ever seen before.

The woman walks up to grandsire as Arjun steps away. She holds his hand, strokes his brow and whispers something to him. A look of indescribable happiness sweeps across his face.

"Are you *devas*?" I ask one of the males.

"Yes," he replies curtly. "And you must be Bhima, by the look of you."

"Why are you here?" I ask curiously. "I thought the *devas* had decided to stay out of the war."

"We have sworn not to fight on behalf of either side, or even advise anyone," he replies. "But this is different. As you might know, Bhishma is half-*deva* himself, from his mother's side."

"Is that her?" I ask, pointing to the young woman.

"Yes," confirms the *deva*. "That is the Lady Ganga. When she and Bhishma last spoke, he had expressed a desire to live on till the war ended. Our vessel is not too far from here, safely concealed from humans. We're going to put him on life support and hopefully keep him alive till the whole miserable lot of you are done with killing each other, after which we'll pull the plug on him. Who knows, you might even get a chance to bid him farewell one last time."

As is usual for me while conversing with a *deva*, I only half-understand what he's talking about. But before I can ask him to explain, Ganga turns towards him with a frown on her face.

"Oops," he says. "Time to go. Well, it was nice talking to you, cousin."

He hurries forward and the four of them lift grandsire and put him inside the box. Then they race away, almost faster than the eye can follow, their feet barely touching the ground. Ganga departs with equal rapidity. It's only after they've receded into the horizon that I realise that I have no idea what the name of the *deva* who called me cousin, is. I hadn't even thought to ask.

There is a prolonged silence which nobody seems willing to break. Finally, Yudhishtira bows to Acharya Drona, who is standing next to Duryodhana. "In honour of the great Lord Bhishma, I propose that we end the fighting for today and resume only tomorrow."

"Agreed," says Drona promptly.

Both armies start returning to their camps, the soldiers talking in hushed tones about the amazing sight that they have just witnessed. I know what they're feeling. Having *devas* suddenly pop up in your midst can be rather overwhelming.

As I enter our camp, I see Krishna. "Congratulations," I say, and I'm unable to keep the sarcasm and bitterness out of my voice. "Your plan worked brilliantly. Grandsire Bhishma may still be clinging on to life, but he's no longer a factor on the battlefield. You should be very happy today."

"It gives me no happiness to see others in pain, Bhima," says Krishna, in his usual gentle tone. "But I do what needs to be done. Your grandsire himself harbours no ill-will towards Arjun; if anything, he feels thankful to him. You heard him tell your brother exactly that in so many words, didn't you?"

"Yes," I concede grudgingly. "Well, I guess that takes care of your biggest worry."

"Not really," sighs Krishna. "Actually, it just gives me something new to worry about. Because now that Bhishma is no longer in command of the Kaurava army, Karna will finally take the field against us. And if there is anyone capable of killing Arjun, it's him."

CHAPTER 34

Late that evening, Ghatotkacha walks into my tent. I'm getting a rub-down from a masseur. "Sorry, do you want me to come back later?" he asks.

"No, no, we were just finishing," I say. "Come on in."

The masseur bows to me and leaves. Ghatotkacha gestures at him. "That must feel nice after a hard day's fighting."

"I'm getting old," I grumble. "I ache all over like I never used to. If it wasn't for the massages, I'd probably feel sore permanently. They should allow holidays and weekly off days during a war."

"I'm sure your man does a very good job, but wouldn't you rather have a pretty maid performing the same chore?" he asks, his usual irreverent humour coming to the fore. "Unless you're worried that the massage will quickly turn into something else. That might help, you know."

"It'll probably just make me feel even more tired," I retort.

"I'm not so sure. It can act as a tonic for some, I've been told," he answers. "You go back into battle the next day refreshed and revitalized."

"I don't think you want to go into battle too happy," I say. "A little frustration and crabbiness helps. Anyway, it's a debate that I've been hearing since I was a kid – which reminds me, are you sure it's all right for a father and son to be having this sort of conversation?"

"Well, we haven't exactly had a conventional parent-child relationship," he answers.

"That's true," I say, a trifle sadly. "But that's mostly because I wasn't around when you were growing up. Anyway, why did you drop by? Not to advise me on my sex life, I hope."

"I just wanted to check on how you were feeling," he says. "I know you really love Lord Bhishma and seeing him like that must have been hard on you."

I nod. "Yes, it's really unfortunate that he had to suffer like that. The Kauravas deserve to die, for sure. But people like grandsire Bhishma will end up as collateral damage. And, that's a real pity."

He looks at me keenly. "Did you love my mother?" he questions me suddenly.

"Whoa, where did that come from?" I ask, startled.

He shrugs. "Seeing death and suffering makes one contemplative, I guess. Are you going to answer me?"

I ponder over his question, because I feel I owe him an honest reply. “I always liked and respected her, but I truly appreciated her only after I realised that she was lost to me forever. I wish I could have offered her a different life. But I’m glad that I found you. You’ve brought me immense joy.”

He nods, satisfied, and we make some more desultory conversation. I get the distinct feeling that he’s holding something back. “Is there anything you want to tell me?” I ask finally.

He shakes his head. “No,” he says. And almost immediately, he shakes his head again. “Actually, yes. I wanted to tell you that I love you, father.”

“And I love you, son” I reply.

We embrace for a long time. Finally, reluctantly, we pull away. “Take care of yourself, father,” he says, and leaves my tent.

That was a nice conversation, I think. A little strange, but nice.

Later that night, I’m in the midst of restless sleep when I suddenly come wide awake. I hear screams, shouts, weapons clanging – clear sounds of a battle in progress. But it’s pitch dark outside.

“What the hell is going on?” I wonder. For a moment, I think that I might actually be dreaming. I pinch myself on my wrist. No. I’m wide awake.

I make my way out of the tent, quickly pulling on some armour. I look towards the battlefield. And I feel my heart sink. Silhouetted against the darkness, I can clearly see Ghatotkacha. He has expanded himself to a giant size and entered the Kaurava camp. And, he’s wreaking havoc on their army. He tosses elephants around like they’re toys. He stomps on tents, crushing them under his feet. He picks up chariots and hurls them hundreds of metres away. As my eyes adjust to the dark, I see that his small band of *rakshasas* is fighting by his side.

“What’s happening?” I ask around. Nobody seems to know. Many warriors from our side emerge from their tents, just as confused as I am. Then, I see Krishna standing a little distance away from the Kaurava camp. He’s yelling something. I can’t hear him, but it’s clear that he’s urging Ghatotkacha on.

I start running towards Ghatotkacha. From what I can figure out, he has launched a night raid upon the enemy, in a clear breach of the rules of warfare. And somehow or the other, Krishna is involved.

My son must have already made up his mind when he came to meet me earlier in the evening, I realise with a burst of sudden clarity. That’s what the meeting was all about. He had come to say goodbye. Well, he’s not going to die. Not if I can help it.

I run as fast as I can and have almost reached their camp when a flaming arrow

suddenly lights up the night. It flies straight and true, and pierces Ghatotkacha's heart.

"Noooooooooooooooooooo," I scream at the top of my lungs. "Noooooooooooooooooooo, nooooooooooooo, nooooooooooooooooooooo."

I feel a fierce physical pain within my chest, as if I'm the one who has been hit by the arrow.

Ghatotkacha totters backward, one leg raised in the air. He fights for balance, and rights himself. And then, very slowly, he topples forward. Even in his dying moments, he makes sure to fall upon the enemy, crushing many more of their troops, meting out enormous damage to them right to the very end.

I run up to him. He has shrunk back to his normal size. I turn him over and yank the arrow out of his chest. It is no longer flaming, I note absently. In fact, its head looks like a candle wick that has been stubbed out. I look at my son, the best child anyone could ever have asked for. He has a contented smile on his face. I feel totally numb. I pick him up in my arms and, like a sleepwalker, walk back in the direction of our camp. Somebody takes my arm and gently guides me towards my tent.

I enter the tent and slowly lay him down on the bed where he had sat and bantered with me just a few hours ago. It occurs to me that we will never again chuckle our way through an inappropriate conversation. And that's when I break down.

I weep for all our lost moments. I weep for the moments I never shared with him when he was a child, and the ones we will never get to share now that there is no future for him. I throw my head back and howl my grief to the heavens.

I feel a hand on my shoulder. It's Draupadi. "Compose yourself, Bhima," she says. But she's weeping herself.

I look around the tent. Krishna is standing near the entrance, with a curiously detached expression on his face. A thought strikes me. "Ghatotkacha would never have thought of that raid by himself," I say. "Who put him up to it?"

There is an awkward silence. As I look at the people present there, they avert their eyes. My gaze meets Krishna's. "It was my idea," he admits.

I reach him in three strides and wrap my hands around his neck. There is a shocked intake of breath by Arjun. "Brother, what are you doing?" he asks.

I ignore him and glare at Krishna. "I'm going to rip out your throat, Krishna," I growl. "But first, I want to hear why you did it."

Krishna looks at me calmly. "It's a long story, Bhima," he replies evenly. "And I will be able to speak a little more easily, if you relinquish your hold."

I ease my grip slightly, but keep my fingers wrapped around his neck. “Speak,” I say.

“Well, Indra had gifted Karna a celestial weapon,” he begins.

“Hold on a moment,” I snarl. “Indra is Arjun’s father. Why would he gift Karna of all people a celestial weapon?”

“Surya had gifted Karna a special armour that could not be breached by any weapon,” explains Krishna. “A few days before the war began, Indra disguised himself as a beggar and asked Karna for alms, right after he had finished his prayers. You must have heard that Karna never turns down a request for charity.”

“So Indra asked for Karna’s armour?” I ask. I vaguely recall Vayu telling me that Indra and Surya had almost had an altercation, after which the *devas* had decided to stay out of our fight for the duration of the war. It’s all starting to make sense to me now.

“Yes,” says Krishna. “Even though he realised that he had been duped by Indra, Karna kept his word. Indra was so impressed that he offered him a boon in return. Karna asked for a celestial weapon of his own to counter the ones Arjun has accumulated. As long as Karna had it, he posed a huge threat to Arjun. But in the heat of battle tonight, amid all the confusion and mounting losses of the Kaurava army, Karna used the weapon on Ghatotkacha, exactly as I had surmised he would. And like all *deva* weapons modified for humans, it can only be used once.”

“What?” I roar with anger. “Are you telling me you deliberately sacrificed my son? You sent him on a suicide mission just to safeguard Arjun?” I begin shaking Krishna violently, as though he were a rag doll.

Krishna’s hands move in a blur and suddenly my own hands are knocked aside. “I understand your grief, Bhima,” he says gently. “But it’s not as if I forced Ghatotkacha to go on that raid. I explained the situation to him, and he launched the attack of his own volition.”

“You could have sent me instead,” I mumble. “I would happily have died in his stead.”

Krishna shakes his head. “It would demoralise our troops terribly if any of the Pandavas died. We need all of you to stay alive if we are to win this war. Besides, Bhima, the fact is that the *rakshasas* are an endangered species, on the brink of extinction. As the human population grows, the *rakshasa* way of life will come under even greater stress. Eventually, the only way to ensure their survival will be to create special forest reserves for them, as if they are some exotic form of wildlife. Ghatotkacha was intelligent enough to foresee this. He chose to die a

heroic death in his prime rather than growing old and seeing his once proud people reduced to a shadow of their former glory. All of us will perish one day, Bhima. But only a blessed few get to enjoy a glorious death like your son, while also inflicting a terrible blow to the enemy's hopes. By grieving for him, you disrespect and belittle his sacrifice."

I sink down to the floor. "My selfless son. Like your mother, you thought of everyone but yourself. But I wish you'd thought of your father too. Couldn't you have considered what would happen to me after you died?"

"He did think of you, Uncle Bhima," says Abhimanyu. He settles down on his knees in front of me and takes my hands in his. "Just before he left, Ghatotkacha came to me and explained his plan. He said that he knew his death would hurt you deeply, and asked me to take special care of you. I tried to talk him out of it, but his mind was made up. Uncle, I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am for your loss. But from today, please think of me as your son."

I nod and pat his hand gratefully. A young *rakshasa* comes up to me and coughs deferentially. "My Lord, please forgive me for intruding on this moment of terrible grief for you. But your son was a *rakshasa* tribal chief. With your permission, we would like to give him a funeral appropriate to his status. May we take him away and prepare him for his final journey?"

I lean across Ghatotkacha's prone form and kiss his forehead. It's so cold, so unlike the warmth that he exuded when he was alive. "Take him away and do what you like," I say heavily. "And leave me alone, the whole lot of you. I'm done fighting."

"Bhima, what are you saying?" exclaims Yudhishtira. "What about the war?"

"To hell with you," I reply morosely. "And to hell with your wretched war."

CHAPTER 35

“Lord Bhima, you are urgently needed on the front. Please come quickly, sir,” says the young page, bursting into my tent.

I blink and shield my eyes as the sunlight pours into the darkened tent. “Go away, boy,” I say. My voice comes out hoarse. My tongue is heavy, my mouth is dry and feels as if it is stuffed with cotton. I haven’t ventured out of my tent in two, or is it three days? I’m not sure.

I scratch my stubble, which is irritating my face. I haven’t shaved or bathed since that dreadful day when my son was taken from me. I haven’t even changed my clothes. I’ve pecked listlessly at some food every once in a while, but I’ve eaten without any appetite or enjoyment. In fact, I’ve had food only to ensure that my stomach isn’t empty.

The one thing I’ve done is drink, and drink, and then drink some more. I must have run through several barrels of alcohol by now. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve drunk myself into a stupor. But I don’t stay asleep too long, because the memory of the arrow embedding itself into Ghatotkacha’s chest wakes me up before too long. Each time, I reach for some more liquor.

“My Lord, Prince Abhimanyu is trapped in a *chakravyuha*. We need your help to get him out. Maharaja Yudhishtira has sent word for you to come at once,” says the page desperately.

It takes a minute or two for the words to seep into my alcohol-soaked brain. A *chakravyuha*! The dreaded circular formation in which an army traps a warrior. Once enmeshed, it’s virtually impossible to fight your way out. As the words register, I sit up sharply. The sudden motion sends a flash of pain through my head; it feels as if someone is hammering away inside it. I wince and clutch at my forehead.

“How the hell did he wind up in there?” I ask.

“My Lord, Acharya Drona has taken over as the commander of the Kaurava army following the fall of Lord Bhishma. Today, he deployed the *chakravyuha* formation and trapped Maharaja Yudhishtira inside it. Prince Abhimanyu rushed to rescue him along with a few soldiers and managed to breach the formation for long enough to allow Maharaja Yudhishtira to escape. But his own escape route was cut off before he could get out. We’ve been trying to break in

but haven't succeeded." The page is almost in tears by now.

"Where is Arjun?" I ask.

"King Susarma of Trigarta harassed the division he was leading with constant hit-and-run tactics. Irritated, Lord Arjun decided to chase him down and finish him off once and for all. They're battling many miles from here. Messengers have been dispatched to fetch him too, but by the time we reach him and he returns, it may be too late. Susarma's tactics were probably part of a larger plan to draw Lord Arjun away while Maharaja Yudhishtira was taken captive. Only Prince Abhimanyu's bravery prevented that from happening, but he is himself in grave danger right now. Please, My Lord," says the page, wringing his hands.

I run my fingers through my hair, then over my face. Ghatotkacha is dead, I think. I can't let Abhimanyu die too. Vayu's words come back to me, "Your biggest challenge will be to cope with seeing loved ones cut down in battle in front of your eyes. That is when you will understand the true meaning of courage... you will have to find the will to live and fight on even as those whom you love, die around you."

There is a pitcher of cold water lying near the bed. I pour it over my head, and feel my system come awake with a jolt. I turn to my attendant. "Get me my armour. Hurry, man, hurry."

Minutes later, I am on my chariot, racing towards the front. The *chakravyuha* entry point is being blocked by a chariot. I recognise its occupant.

"Jayadratha," I say incredulously. "Have you forgotten the last time we met? Go away if you value your life. I won't spare you this time."

"No Bhima, I haven't forgotten," spits out Jayadratha venomously. "In fact, I've thought of little else all these years. And, I've prepared very hard for our encounter. Come, see for yourself."

Enough talking, I think. I shoot an arrow. It flies straight at him. And then, when it's barely an inch or so away from him, it stops as if it has hit an invisible shield.

"What the hell," I mutter. I shoot several more arrows, with exactly the same result.

Jayadratha laughs. It has a grating, gloating ring to it. "Did you think you Pandavas were the only ones with access to *deva* technology, Bhima? You happened to inherit some *deva* powers because your father was one, so you thought you could bully and torment mere mortals. Well, let's see how strong you are now that the playing field is levelled."

"You've got selective memory, Jayadratha," I retort. "You were the one bullying

and tormenting a helpless woman, and you were rightly punished for doing so. In fact, if you ask me, you got off way too lightly that day because you happen to be Dushala's husband. But never mind, I'll finish the job today. *Deva* technology or not, I'm still strong enough to kill you with my bare hands."

I dismount from my chariot and charge towards him. He gets off his chariot too, sword in hand, and waits for me on foot. I swing my mace with all my might. An inch from him, it suddenly stops, as if it has hit a wall. I feel the vibrations of the impact go through my entire body.

Jayadratha laughs and his sword suddenly flicks out. A thin trickle of blood runs down my arm where he has nicked me.

"I can finish this in a second, but I'd like to draw it out a bit, Bhima," taunts Jayadratha. "I've thought of this moment for such a long time; let me savour it for a while. Come on, don't you want to get to your beloved nephew?"

I swing at him again and again. But I can't break through the invisible barrier that is protecting him. He stands there, laughing that hateful laugh. Every once in a while, he inflicts yet another cut on me. This goes on for what seems like an eternity. Sweat runs down my body by the bucketful. I'm exhausted by the effort, dizzy and nauseated from the loss of body salts and blood.

In desperation, I throw away my mace and reach for him with my hands. A shock goes through me, and my whole body jerks and vibrates as I touch the air close to him. He roars with laughter, then smashes the haft of his sword into my mouth. I go down on my knees, tasting blood. A tooth has come loose. I spit it out.

"Behold the mighty Pandava hero," jeers Jayadratha. He brings his sword down to take my head, but suddenly his sword is blocked by another blade.

It's Dhrishtadyumna. He pushes Jayadratha's blade away, wincing as a shock wave travels through his body from the impact. "Get him out of here, quick," he says. Nakul and Sahadeva grab me by my arms, pull me to my feet and start hustling me away.

"No," I say disbelievingly. "Abhimanyu is still in there. We have to go get him."

Sahadeva shakes his head. There are tears in his eyes, but his mouth is set in a determined line. "None of us is being able to beat Jayadratha today, brother. We need to find out what his mysterious secret is, and then return to defeat him."

"But what about Abhimanyu?" I protest.

"We will avenge him. But we need to live to do that," says Sahadeva.

"No," I roar. "No, I won't abandon Abhimanyu." With the last ounce of

strength left in me, I shake them off. “Hold on, Abhimanyu,” I yell. “Hold on, my child. I’m coming to get...”

And then the world turns pitch black and I feel myself falling.

CHAPTER 36

I wake up with a start. I am lying on my bed. It has turned dark outside. A physician is applying herbal paste on my numerous wounds.

“Abhimanyu,” I whisper.

He shakes his head sadly and turns away. I leap out of my bed.

“My Lord,” he says. “You need to rest.”

I ignore him and run towards Arjun’s tent. I hear the wailing from a long way off. I burst into the tent.

Uttara is sitting in a corner, a dead, vacant look in her eyes. My heart goes out to her. She’s lost her brother and her husband within a fortnight. Subhadra is holding Abhimanyu’s body, weeping.

“Talk to me, son,” she says. “Open your eyes just once. Don’t leave me like this.”

Arjun is sitting next to her. He sees me enter and walks up to me. I have no consolation to offer him. From my own experience with Ghatotkacha, I know that words are meaningless in such a situation.

“They killed my boy, brother,” he says in a voice choked with tears. “The greatest warriors of Aryavrata couldn’t take on a child in single combat, so they ganged up on him like a pack of hyenas. When he killed Duryodhana’s son, Lakshman, in a fair fight, Duryodhana went mad with rage and said he wanted Abhimanyu dead at any cost. That whore-son Karna cut his bow from behind. Acharya Drona, my guru, the man I had taught Abhimanyu to revere, killed his horses and charioteer. When he fought with a sword, Ashwatthama shattered it with an arrow. He fought on with a chariot wheel, till he went down under a shower of arrows. And then they danced around his body as though they had accomplished some great feat of heroism.”

I hold him tightly, unable to speak. He clings to me, weeping. After a while, he lets me go and returns to sit next to Abhimanyu’s corpse. I slump down in one corner of the tent.

Draupadi walks up and sits beside me. “When I heard Abhimanyu was trapped in the *chakravyuha*, I despaired for him. Then I heard that you had gone to rescue him, and I was sure you’d get him back safely. When I saw you brought back unconscious, I knew we’d never see Abhimanyu alive again.”

I shake my head bitterly. “I’m not much use to anyone, am I? I couldn’t save

my son, and I couldn't save Arjun's either."

She gently pats my hand. "It's not your fault, Bhima, it's mine," she says. "I should never have told you to release Jayadratha that day."

"You acted generously, hoping that he would see the error of his ways," I reply. "You were counting on the goodness of human nature. That's nothing to be ashamed of."

She shakes her head bitterly. "It was stupid. You know Bhima, I was stripped of my personhood long before I was disrobed in the gambling hall. My father decided I was to marry Arjun. Your mother ordained I would be shared by the five of you. Yudhishtira wagered me away in a game. No one even considered seeking my opinion. All my life, I've just been treated as an object – to be coveted, desired and fought for. Nobody seems to think that I might have a mind and feelings of my own. The debate on what to do with Jayadratha was one of the rare occasions when I got to make a decision. Such an empowering feeling. Maybe I was generous to him because I was happy to finally be seen as a person in my own right. And look how that turned out."

This time, I pat her hand. "I've always seen you as a person, not an object," I tell her. "I see you as you are, with all your qualities and all your flaws, and I accept you in your entirety. I love you with all your quirks and shortcomings, because they too go into making you the person you are, the person I love. So you committed an error of judgment. Can you show me one person in this gathering who hasn't?"

She's about to answer when I hear Krishna say something about Jayadratha. "Wait," I tell her. "I want to hear what he just said." Then I address Krishna. "Could you repeat that last part about Jayadratha, please?"

Krishna nods. "From whatever I've heard about today's fighting, it seems Jayadratha was protected by a force field that must have been provided to him by a *deva* he propitiated. If that is the case, then no human weapon will work against him. He can only be killed by using a celestial weapon."

All eyes turn to Arjun. He nods grimly. "Abhimanyu will not be cremated yet. I will only light his pyre after I have killed Jayadratha. And if I'm unable to do so by sunset tomorrow, I will go up in flames along with Abhimanyu."

There is an uproar. My brothers, King Drupada and Dhrishtadyumna all rush to Arjun, asking him to reconsider. He shakes his head furiously. "I have made my vow, and I will fulfil it. Between Jayadratha and me, only one will live to see the dawn day after tomorrow."

"Oh my god, no," says Draupadi, covering her face with her hands. "What is it

with you men and your stupid machismo? Couldn't he just have said he'd kill Jayadratha at some point? Why did he have to set a deadline to do it?"

She turns to me, her eyes moist with tears. "You will make sure he gets back unharmed, won't you? I know he can be a total idiot at times, but I can't bear the thought of losing him."

I gently stroke her hair. I have lost count of the number of times that I have worried about her well-being while she worries about Arjun. And I repeat the promise that I had made to her before Arjun, Krishna and I had set out to kill Jarasandha – an episode that now seems like it took place centuries ago. "I will die before I let anything happen to him. You have my word on that."

CHAPTER 37

My page straps the bandage tight around my arm, then helps me into my armour. I stride out to my chariot. Arjun is already outside, pacing by his chariot, waiting for the sun to rise.

“Are you sure you’re fit to fight?” he asks me.

“Do you seriously think I’m going to sit in my tent while you embark on this mission?” I ask.

“It’ll be good to have the son of Vayu with us,” says Krishna. “Because today, we will need to ride like the wind. Apparently, word of Arjun’s pledge has reached Duryodhana. The whole Kaurava army will be standing between us and Jayadratha today.”

“I don’t care if all the demons out of hell stand in our way today,” says Arjun. “Jayadratha will die before sunset.”

Krishna nods. “Well said, my friend. But we need to prepare a strategy.”

He turns to me and Satyaki, his kinsman who hero-worships Arjun. “I suggest that the two of you stay just behind our chariot and flank us on either wing, so that we create an arrow-like formation. Remember, Arjun cannot afford to get bogged down in any long-drawn-out fights today. The Kaurava warriors don’t even need to kill him. Simply slowing him down will serve their purpose. So if you see anybody in the Kaurava army engaging him in battle, attack that person so that Arjun and I can keep dashing forward. Other chariots can follow behind you. Speed is of the essence.”

He turns to Dhrishtadyumna. “Use the infantry to engage with the enemy that we leave behind, and also keep open the route back to our camp, so that our chariots aren’t completely cut off from the rest of the army. But at all costs, we must not let Arjun’s momentum stall. Is that clear?”

We all nod, and hurriedly embrace each other. The sun rises, its light inching along the battlefield bit by bit. I remember Arjun telling us about some bard from a distant land whom he’d met during his adventures, who sang about the ‘rosy-fingered dawn’. I’d always found that a pretty line. But today, there is no time to admire the beauty of the sunrise.

Arjun and Krishna get into their chariot immediately and race off. We follow close behind. We crash into the Kaurava army at full tilt and scythe through them as if they are chaff. Within minutes, we run into Acharya Drona.

Whenever they have met in battle so far, Arjun has made it a point to first shoot an arrow a little ahead of Drona's chariot, as a sort of symbolic seeking of his blessings. But today, he has no time for such niceties. Also, the fact that Drona had colluded in Abhimanyu's murder is probably playing on Arjun's mind. He fires five arrows in quick succession, faster than the eye can see. Suddenly, Drona finds that the reins of his chariot's horses have been cut and they have bolted, leaving him immobile. Drona's bow too has been broken in half. Arjun rushes past Drona. Our teacher snatches up his reserve bow but hesitates, unwilling to shoot Arjun in the back.

"Get close to him," I whisper to my charioteer.

Drona is so fixated on Arjun that he doesn't even notice me till I'm almost upon him. He starts to turn around to defend himself but he's too slow. I swing the mace and it crashes into his forehead, knocking him unconscious. I smile with satisfaction. That should take him out of the equation for a while.

The three of us have by now pulled far ahead of the Pandava army. Just then, I see a chariot racing in to intercept Arjun. The flag on its post bears the symbol of the sun.

"Karna," I hiss. "My son's killer."

I feel blind, maddening fury rise within me. I tap my charioteer on the shoulder. "Get us between him and Arjun," I say.

"My Lord, are you sure you want to take on Karna in archery?" he asks.

As a charioteer, Visoka isn't quite in the same class as Krishna, but he is indisputably adept at handling horses. I've also found that he tends to give sensible advice, which I'm usually happy to accept. No point being uppity when it's a matter of life and death. Today, though, I'm in no mood to listen.

"Just do what I'm telling you," I growl.

He shakes his head disapprovingly and mutters something under his breath but obediently spurs the horses forward so that my chariot now blocks Karna's path. Krishna sees my manoeuvre and immediately veers away. But he keeps his horses running flat out. The last thing he wants at this stage is a prolonged duel between Arjun and Karna.

As for me, I'm just looking for some payback. I shoot arrow after arrow at Karna. He manages to cut down some in mid-air. But others get through. A couple hit him, but fail to pierce his armour. One thuds into his flag-pole and lies there quivering.

"Not bad, Bhima," says Karna, eyebrows raised. "Not bad at all. But let me show you how it's done."

He shatters my bow. I pick up a spare one. He shatters that too. I pick up a spear and hurl it. He cuts it down in mid-flight. I grab my mace, vault off the chariot and charge at him. He's too far away. I'll never make it. I hurl my mace at him in desperation. He shoots three arrows in rapid succession. The mace is smashed to smithereens. I'm still several yards away from him, and he already has an arrow on his bow, pointing straight at me. I'm a dead man, and we both know it.

"Fight me like a man, you coward," I yell.

"You mean, abandon the bow, in which I have a clear advantage over you, and fight with a weapon that will suit you? Or perhaps even hand-to-hand, where I wouldn't stand a chance against you? Really Bhima, what sort of moron do you think I am?" he asks.

"Forgive me, Draupadi," I think in despair. "I guess I won't be killing all the Kauravas after all. Or getting you Dushshana's blood, or smashing Duryodhana's thigh."

The thought that I have failed her bothers me more than my impending death. Then I switch my attention back to Karna. I glare at him, refusing to give him the satisfaction of averting my gaze or shutting my eyes as he kills me. He takes his own sweet time, drawing back the bowstring excruciatingly slowly. He's toying with me, I think, and feel a fresh upsurge of anger.

"Get it over with, you bastard son of some unknown whore," I yell at him.

To my astonishment, Karna actually laughs. "You have no idea what you're saying or whom you're insulting, do you, Bhima?" he says. "I always did find you the only one who was slightly bearable among the five Pandavas. Oh, you're a simple-minded idiot, but there's something charming about your naiveté. So unlike Yudhishtira, who's insufferably pompous. Or Arjun, who's such an arrogant snob. As for the twins, well, what are they? Just a pair of mediocre twits riding on the coat-tails of their famous half-brothers. I'll be sad to see you dead."

"Were you sad to see my son dead too?" I rage.

He amazes me again. "As a matter of fact, I was. Don't tell me you hold it against me that I killed him? Warriors die in battle, Bhima. It's an occupational hazard. But I'll say this for him. He was a brave boy and he cost me the weapon that Indra had gifted me, which I had fully intended to use on your beloved brother. You can be proud of your son."

"I am proud of him, Karna," I reply. "But are you proud of the role you played in Abhimanyu's death? Was that fair on your part?"

Finally, I succeed in getting under his skin. "Don't lecture me of all people

about fairness, Bhima,” he yells, face flushing with rage. “Was it fair to judge me all these years on the basis of my birth rather than my prowess? Was it fair of Draupadi to humiliate me at her *swayamvara*? Was it fair of Arjun to sneak up on Lord Bhishma and cut him down the way he did? Life’s not fair, you jumped-up little piece of shit. Get used to it.”

I stare at him, stunned. It’s the first time I’ve ever seen things from his point of view and I have to admit I don’t like what I see.

“Get it over with, Karna,” I say, feeling a wave of exhaustion wash over me.

He nods and releases the arrow. Despite my resolve, I flinch. And then I realise, with a sense of utter disbelief, that I am still alive. The arrow is embedded in the ground, inches away from my foot. There’s no way Karna could have missed. He has deliberately let me live. But why?

Karna bursts out laughing at my confused expression. “You are meant to be the prey of a nobler hunter than me, Bhima. I’m not going to deprive my friend Duryodhana of the pleasure of killing you himself. Now run back to your mother and tell her all about our little exchange.”

I shake my head. “I’m going to help Arjun, Karna. And the only way you can stop me is by killing me.”

He wrinkles his nose. “Hmm, that is... inconvenient. But wait, I don’t actually have to kill you to send you back to your camp. A serious enough injury will do just as well.”

He thoughtfully draws another arrow, probably trying to figure out how to how inflict maximum damage without actually killing me.

Just then, there is a shower of arrows. The Pandava army has finally caught up. Nakul comes charging in to attack Karna. He turns to face him, distracted. Visoka immediately gets the horses racing. I leap on to the chariot as he passes by. “That was close,” I admit.

“Well, at least you kept him occupied long enough to give Lord Arjun a clear run,” he says wryly.

I bite back the urge to snap at him. He had warned me against trying to take on a vastly superior archer, and I’m lucky to still be alive.

Later, I learned that Karna had also defeated Nakul and wounded him, but spurned the opportunity to kill him and told him as well to go back and tell Mother about what had transpired. This strange behaviour of his puzzles me to no end. But at that moment, I was more intent on catching up with Arjun.

CHAPTER 38

“Why on earth are you stopping, man?” I yell at Visoka as he slows down.

“You might want to pick up some weapons,” he says. “Unless you’re planning to fight your way through to Jayadratha bare-handed?”

Oh hell! I’m really not thinking straight today. It’s true, my weapons have been destroyed by Karna. Luckily for me – if not for them – there’s no shortage of dead soldiers strewn around who won’t be needing their weapons any more. I sheepishly dismount, snatch up some arms and get back into the chariot. “Let’s go,” I say.

Visoka nods and we’re off. A squadron of chariots from our army is right behind me as we crash into the Kaurava ranks again. In a bit, we catch up with Arjun. He’s single-handedly fighting several chariot-borne warriors, while Satyaki is locked in battle with Bhurishrava, a Kaurava warrior with whom he has a long-standing family feud.

I wave my hand to get the attention of the squadron accompanying me, then jab my forefinger repeatedly in Arjun’s direction.

“Free him up,” I yell. “Go, go, go!”

As we charge towards them, I notice that one of the warriors battling Arjun is Susarma. “Good god, the man turns up everywhere like a bad penny,” I groan to myself. I recall it was Susarma who had led Arjun so far from the battlefield that he could not return in time to save Abhimanyu. If I had killed him when his army had attacked Matsya, maybe we could have averted yesterday’s tragedy.

“We left too many jobs half-done,” I mutter to myself. “Well, we’ll complete this one today.”

I tap Visoka gently on the shoulder. “Get me close to Susarma,” I say. “But stay parallel to his chariot.”

He nods. I grab a shield, place one foot on the protective wall of the chariot and tense, poised to spring. Susarma is so engrossed in battling Arjun that he never even sees me coming. As my chariot starts to pass by his, I leap at him.

To his credit, he’s incredibly quick. Some instinct warns him and he whips around, loosing off an arrow. It thuds into my shield and then I crash into him, sending both of us sprawling to the ground.

He looks at me and smiles. “Well, well! A familiar face. Vallala, did you say the name was?”

On some other day, his nonchalant banter might have made me warm up to him. Not today. “My name is Bhima,” I reply curtly. “But you can call me Death.” Then I grab his neck and snap it. There is a startled expression on his face as he dies, as if he is struggling to register what has just happened to him.

I leap back into my chariot and we race into the Kaurava ranks yet again. From a distance, I notice that Bhurishrava has knocked down Satyaki and is about to lop his head off. Suddenly, an arrow shot by Arjun severs his arm.

“Arjun,” screams Bhurishrava, agony and outrage blending in his voice. “You shot me from behind, without warning. This is gross *adharma*.”

Arjun doesn’t even deign to reply. He simply makes an obscene gesture at Bhurishrava as his chariot whizzes by. Satyaki leaps up and in a flash, beheads Bhurishrava. There are howls of protest from the Kaurava ranks. Satyaki ignores them, gets into his chariot and races off after Arjun.

As my horses struggle to catch up with them, it occurs to me that the era of chivalry is coming to an end, making way for a more pragmatic, brutal way of war. When exactly was the mortal blow struck to that old era, I wonder. Did it go down under the hail of arrows that felled grandsire Bhishma? Or did it suffer a fatal wound when Abhimanyu was murdered in cold blood? As I ponder that question, a spear comes hurtling towards me. I hurriedly fend it off with my shield and snap back into the present.

We kill and kill and kill. I lose count of the number of men I slaughter. I can safely say that I have never before – or since – killed so many opponents in one day as I did during that frenzied dash. Three more Kaurava brothers are among those who perish at my hands. But this once, I barely notice their deaths. Today, my personal mission is secondary to the larger goal of helping Arjun get to Jayadratha.

But the enemy soldiers keep on coming. The more we kill, the more pour in to fill the gap. Suddenly, I notice that the shadows are lengthening. That startles me. It doesn’t seem like more than a couple of hours have elapsed. I look up at the sky and notice that it has turned an ominous shade of orange. We redouble our efforts, but so do the men seeking to block us. Some dying soldiers hurl themselves in front of our chariots to force us to detour, wasting precious seconds. After a while, we simply drive over them. Others clutch at us in their death throes, trying desperately to slow us down.

And then, it suddenly turns dark. The day is over. I look around me in utter shock. “No,” I mumble to myself in disbelief. “It can’t end like this. Not for Arjun.” And of all the thoughts to occur at a time like this, the one that comes to

my mind is, “Bloody hell, what am I going to tell Draupadi?”

“Yessssss,” exults Duryodhana. He pumps his fists, arches his back and roars with delight. “Yes, yes, yes!”

Then I hear that horrible grating laugh that sets my teeth on edge. Jayadratha prances to the front amidst much back-slapping and hugging as the Kaurava ranks cheer lustily. Somehow, I muster up the courage to look at Arjun. He gently sets down his bow with an air of resignation, and bows to it. There is no fear of death on his face, only regret that he could not fulfil his vow. I have never felt prouder of him than I do at that moment.

“That’s a shame,” says Karna as his chariot pulls up next to mine.

“Don’t be a fucking hypocrite,” I snarl. “You’ve always hated Arjun’s guts. I suspect you are just as delighted as your friends, if not more.”

“You don’t know me at all, Bhima, so don’t presume to tell me how I must be feeling,” retorts Karna. “Yes, I wanted to see Arjun dead, but at my hands. The world’s second-greatest archer deserved a better end than having to commit suicide because he failed in his vainglorious pursuit of a piece of carrion. Speaking of Jayadratha, you do realise that your cause is now doomed, don’t you? Arjun was the only one who could have killed Jayadratha, and with him out of the way, there is nothing to stop Duryodhana’s beloved brother-in-law from routing all the warriors in your army.”

I turn away from him miserably, knowing that he is speaking the bitter truth and hating him for it. Then my eyes fall upon Krishna’s face. Not only is he looking remarkably unperturbed, he seems to be whispering something, to nobody in particular. I strain to read his lips. I can’t be certain, but it seems to me that he is saying something like, “Almost there... hold on a bit, get ready... now!”

As Krishna utters the last word, the sun suddenly starts shining again. Everybody looks up at the sky and then at each other, completely stunned. Nobody knows what to do.

Krishna breaks the silence. “It was just a solar eclipse,” he yells. “The day is not over yet. Kill Jayadratha, Arjun. Do it quickly. Now!”

Arjun needs no second invitation. The Kauravas scramble to form a protective cordon around Jayadratha, but it is too late. Arjun picks up his bow, notches an arrow on it and shoots, all in one smooth motion. There is a fizzing sound and a burst of energy as the arrow hits the force field surrounding Jayadratha. Then it pierces his invisible shield and severs his head.

Duryodhana screams in agonised despair and sinks to his knees next to

Jayadratha's headless body. I'm not sure whether to laugh in delight or cry with relief, so I end up doing a bit of both. Then I rush to Arjun and embrace him. We thump each other on the back. Satyaki comes rushing up too. We form a huddle and leap around like little children.

"Kill them all," howls Duryodhana. But Dhrishtadyumna comes hurtling in at just that point with the rest of our army. I sprint back to my chariot, exhilarated by the sudden turn of events, ready to kill some more opponents.

Then I notice Karna. He gives Arjun an ironic salute. "So you live to fight another day," he says. "Enjoy the rest of your life, it won't last too long."

After the sun sets, for real this time, we return to camp. I walk across to Krishna as he tells Draupadi and the other women about the 'fortuitous eclipse'.

"It just goes to show that even nature favours the righteous," he says as I tap him on the shoulder.

"A word with you," I say, leading him away from there.

Krishna raises an eyebrow. "Should I be scared? Are you going to try to strangle me again?"

"I saw what you did back there, Krishna," I say. "Don't bother denying it. So just tell me, who or what are you? Are you a *deva* in human guise?"

Krishna smiles his gentle, enigmatic smile. "There are some things that are still beyond the comprehension of even the *devas*, with all their science and technology, Bhima," he says. "But all you need to know is that as long as I am guiding Arjun's chariot – literally and metaphorically – no harm will come to him on the battlefield."

CHAPTER 39

I sit astride Chaaruchitran's chest, strangling him. His hands grab weakly, ineffectually at mine, and then try to claw at my face. I persist grimly with my task. Gradually, his efforts slow down, then cease. His eyes bulge, his tongue protrudes and he lies still. I keep pressing his neck for a while longer, just to make certain, and then I get off him with a grunt of satisfaction. "Number ninety-eight," I count. Just then, a soldier comes running up to me and bows.

"Sire, Lord Krishna requests the pleasure of your company," he says.

"I'm not too sure how pleasant my company is, but I'll go talk to him anyway," I say. "Take me to him."

He leads me to Arjun's chariot, which is stationed near the tent set up to provide medical aid. There is no sign of Arjun. Krishna is looking worried.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"Acharya Drona is unstoppable today," says Krishna. "Apparently, after Jayadratha's death, Duryodhana ranted and raved and accused him of not trying his best against us. The *acharya* is furious, and out to prove him wrong. He even wounded Arjun, forcing me to bring him here to get his wounds attended to."

"So what do you want me to do?" I ask. "Launch an attack on Drona?"

"No," says Krishna calmly. He points to an elephant in the distance. "I want you to go kill that elephant."

"Eh?" I say. "What does that poor beast have to do with any of this?"

"Bhima," says Krishna patiently. "Have you ever known me to do something without very good reason?"

"No," I concede grudgingly. "Though I may not always agree with your reasoning."

"Well, don't ask me inconvenient questions and I won't give you answers that you won't like hearing," says Krishna. "Just do it for me, please?"

"Fine," I mutter. "I'll go kill your damn elephant. But someone has to kill the archer seated in the *howdah*."

Krishna nods at Satyaki. "Take care of it, will you?"

"Sure," says Satyaki. He and I drive up in our chariots till we're some distance away from the elephant. I grab a spear and get off mine. Satyaki takes out the archer in the *howdah* with a clean shot. Then he turns to me. "Your turn now."

I nod grimly, wave my hands and yell loudly. The elephant charges at me.

No matter how brave and strong you are, watching a mountain of muscle and mass charging at you, trumpeting wildly, is an unsettling experience. I feel a great big pit open up in my stomach. My knees are threatening to turn to jelly.

“Steady,” I whisper to myself. “Steady.”

I will have to time this just right. The elephant is almost upon me when I suddenly lunge forward with the spear, right where his heart is. Even as the spear sinks into the relatively thin skin of his chest, I hurl myself to one side. He keeps running, and for a few seconds, I fear that I have failed. Then, he suddenly crumples to his knees, before toppling to one side.

I heave a sigh of relief, and see Krishna riding up, with Arjun now standing in the back of the chariot.

“Ashwatthama is dead,” Krishna yells loudly. “Bhima has killed Ashwatthama.”

“What the hell,” I mutter. I grab hold of a Kaurava soldier. He drops his weapons and folds his hands. “Please don’t kill me, My Lord,” he pleads. I smell the urine running down his legs.

“Get a grip on yourself, man,” I growl, disgusted. “Tell me this, do you know what that elephant I just killed was called?”

“Ashwatthama,” he replies promptly.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I say and release him. He sprints away – straight onto the spear of one of our soldiers.

Acharya Drona hears Krishna’s shout. I wait for him to ask me if it’s true. But instead, he turns to Yudhishtira. “I know you won’t lie, Yudhishtira,” he says. “Is Krishna telling the truth? Is my son dead? Has Bhima really killed Ashwatthama?”

“Well, that’s the end of Krishna’s little game,” I think.

And then, incredulously, I hear my brother – the epitome of truthfulness – reply, “Yes, Bhima has killed Ashwatthama.” He also adds something in an undertone. But I can’t hear what he’s saying. Nor, I suspect, can Drona.

Drona’s face sags. His eyes well up with tears. The bow falls from his hands. His knees give way, and he slumps to the floor of his chariot. He sits there, unarmed, a dazed expression on his face. And just then, Dhrishtadyumna comes charging up and beheads him.

“Good lord,” I exclaim. I start sprinting towards Drona’s chariot, in which his body now lies prone. “Dhrishtadyumna, what have you done?”

I’ve almost reached there when I hear a cry of pure animal grief.

“Bhima, you coward. You said you had killed me. Now fight me for real.” I

turn around. It's Ashwatthama, his face contorted in fury.

"I didn't know," I stammer. "I had no idea."

"Liar," he screams and hurls a spear at me. I stand there, rooted to the spot. The spear would probably have run through me but Krishna dives forward and shoves me out of the way. I sprawl on the ground, still stunned by what has happened in the last few minutes.

Dimly, I realise that Arjun is shooting at Ashwatthama in a bid to protect me. "Arjun," yells Ashwatthama. "My father loved you like a son; in fact, more than he loved me, his only son. I would get sick of the way he went on and on about you. And you're protecting the man who conspired in his murder? It's true, blood is thicker than water. I wish he'd realised it too. But I will have my revenge on all of you, one way or the other. I swear it."

Arjun doesn't reply, but Ashwatthama's words obviously cut deep. When we return to camp, he rounds on Dhrishtadyumna. "Why did you murder Acharya Drona like that?" he asks.

Dhrishtadyumna is unrepentant. "From the moment I was born, I was told that it was my purpose in life to kill Drona. He humiliated my father. He was supposed to be a humble priest but he hankered for wealth and power."

"That was only because he wanted to give his son a better life," shouts Arjun. "And he returned half your father's kingdom to him after we had conquered it. He just wanted to teach him a lesson not to forget old friends and taunt them when they came to him in need."

Dhrishtadyumna shrugs. "My mission is accomplished, Arjun. Drona is not coming back. That was the only way to kill him, and I took it, just like you resorted to the only option available to you to mortally wound Lord Bhishma. If you have such a problem, take it up with Krishna."

Krishna steps in. "I think all of us are feeling the stress of constant warfare," he says. "The fact is, the Kauravas have just lost another of their most feared warriors and veteran commanders. The circumstances were regrettable, but then, so was the manner in which Abhimanyu was killed. Let us not fight amongst ourselves. My friends, reserve your aggression for the enemy."

Neither Arjun nor Dhrishtadyumna are completely placated, but nod grudgingly and turn away from each other.

Frankly, I'm still a little miffed myself at the way I was used in the whole episode but decide not to aggravate matters by venting my own feelings.

"At least Krishna managed to settle that argument," I think. I have no way of knowing that a much worse one is going to erupt in our camp the very next day.

CHAPTER 40

It starts innocuously enough. I'm at the front, hunting for the last two surviving Kaurava brothers, when I hear a rumour that Yudhishtira and Sahadeva have both been wounded by Karna and forced to rush back to the field hospital. I hesitate, not sure whether to return to check on them or not.

"If you're worried, you should go and set your mind at ease," says Dhrishtadyumna. "Don't worry, I will ensure that panic doesn't spread here."

I nod gratefully and race back. I enter the surgery to find that Yudhishtira was struck by an arrow in his right leg while battling Karna. Sahadeva rushed in to save him, but in turn got hit in the left arm and was forced to retreat. Both have had the arrows extracted and their wounds cauterized by the time I reach them.

"The thing that surprises me," says Yudhishtira contemplatively, "is that Karna could just as easily have severed my head. So why shoot to wound rather than to kill? By now, he has done this with four of us."

Arjun rushes in just then. "Thank goodness," he says. "Are both of you fine?"

"Yes," says Yudhishtira. "No thanks to you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asks Arjun.

"Why is it, Arjun, that you are yet to engage Karna in combat?" asks Yudhishtira. "Could it be that you are avoiding him?"

Arjun turns bright red. "Are you calling me a coward, brother?" he asks, deceptively softly.

"It's hard to avoid the feeling that you aren't exactly looking forward to taking on Karna," says Yudhishtira, equally softly.

Suddenly, and spectacularly, Arjun explodes. "How many great warriors have you killed in your whole life, Yudhishtira?" he snarls. "The empire that we are fighting to regain was built for you by Bhima and me, with our blood and sweat, and you threw it away in your stupidity. Abhimanyu died saving you, after you were almost captured. God, how I wish Bhima had been the eldest. Now, that's one brother I would have proudly followed into battle. At least I wouldn't have had to constantly worry about him getting killed or captured. And you, you of all people, have the nerve to accuse me of cowardice? Well, go fight your own damned battles instead of having others do it for you."

"How dare you!" says Yudhishtira, springing to his feet and drawing his hand back to slap Arjun.

I leap in just in time and grab Yudhishtira's hand. "Brother, stop right now or you will regret it for the rest of your life," I plead. Yudhishtira takes a deep breath, jerks his hand away and sinks down on the couch, shutting his eyes.

I turn to Arjun, who is breathing equally rapidly. He spins around and starts to walk away. "Arjun," I grab him. "Don't go. Not like this."

"Every word I said was true. You know it," he says sotto voce.

I shake my head. "Arjun, for better or for worse, Yudhishtira is the eldest, and I have sworn allegiance to him. The simple fact is, four of us have taken on Karna, and have been defeated. The only person who has any chance of beating him is you. If you don't fight him, all our terrible sacrifices will have been in vain. Abhimanyu and Ghatotkacha will have died for nothing. I know all of us have lived under tremendous stress these last few days, but Karna is the last great hope of the Kaurava army. Take him out, and the war is all but over. We've come this far. Don't throw it all away now, brother."

Arjun sighs deeply. Yudhishtira rises from the couch. "Forgive me, Arjun," he says. "Nobody could ever possibly question your courage. I guess the pain of my wounds and the incessant tension since the war began has addled my brain, such as it is."

Arjun takes Yudhishtira's hand in his. "No, I should be the one to apologise," he says. "I had no business talking to you like that. The fact is, so far Karna and I have just not happened to converge on the same spot. The one time that we did, I was in a hurry to get to Jayadratha and allowed Bhima to intervene. But I will now actively seek out Karna. Our rivalry will come to an end today, one way or the other."

Yudhishtira embraces Arjun. "It will end in victory for you and death for him, brother," he says. "I know it."

Arjun bows to him and exits the tent. I follow.

"Where do you think you are going?" he asks.

"I wouldn't miss watching this battle for anything," I reply.

"If I am killed, take care of Draupadi," he says.

"Hush," I respond. "No negative thinking. And besides, you have Krishna with you, remember?"

I know that nothing gives him as much confidence as that fact, and I want him to be in a positive frame of mind when he goes into battle against Karna.

His face brightens and he gets onto his chariot. I follow.

It would take a bard to do justice to the duel that ensues between Arjun and Karna, but all I will say is that in all the numerous battles I have fought over

umpteenth years, I have never seen anything that comes close to it for ferocity or sheer skill. Here are two supreme archers at their very peak, neither willing to cede an inch to the other. They match each other arrow for arrow. As the duel wears on, everyone else stops fighting to watch. The two armies turn into one large audience as the two struggle to gain the upper hand.

Arjun manages to cut one of Karna's bows, but he quickly responds with an arrow that pins Arjun's bow to his chariot's flagpole. As Arjun tries to pull it out, Karna fires another arrow. Luckily for Arjun, Krishna grabs him by the leg and yanks him down, so the arrow simply knocks the helmet off his head. This time, Karna is fighting to kill, I realise. There is no question of his simply defeating Arjun and letting him off, as he had done with the four of us.

A visibly shaken Arjun abandons his trapped bow and grabs a spare one. Krishna whispers something to him. Arjun nods and fires an odd-shaped arrow. It must be one of the weapons given by the *devas*, I think.

The arrow hits the ground just ahead of the right rear wheel of Karna's chariot. There is an explosion, and the chariot rocks to one side. For a moment, it seems as if it will topple over. It doesn't, but the wheel gets trapped in a crater that has developed following the explosion. Karna's chariot is stuck in one place.

Krishna immediately sends his horses galloping in a circle around Karna's chariot, enabling Arjun to shoot at him from different angles. Karna swivels round and round and tries to keep out Arjun's arrows, but he is now clearly struggling.

Hit by about half-a-dozen arrows, Karna holds up his hand. "Arjun," he says, "You have an unfair advantage. If you have even a shred of honour within you, let me pull out the wheel and then we will resume our battle."

Arjun stays silent. Taking that as a positive response, Karna leaps out of his chariot and begins tugging at the wheel. I see Krishna whispering something to Arjun. What's going on now, I wonder. And then, with mounting horror, I see Arjun picking up his bow and taking aim at Karna.

"Arjun, no. Don't do it," I yell. But my voice is drowned out by Arjun shouting, "For Abhimanyu!" as he releases his arrow.

Karna looks up, startled. I will never forget the expression of despair, mixed with utter contempt, that flashes in his eyes just before the arrow beheads him. As he dies, so does the last slender Kaurava hope.

I should be happy. But somehow, all I feel is a terrible sense of regret. Life had treated Karna unfairly, and now so has death.

CHAPTER 41

“Come on out, Duryodhana,” I yell. “Come out of hiding, you coward, and face the consequences of your actions. Your army has been decimated. I’ve killed all your brothers. But one last act remains. This war began because of you, so it is only fitting that it should end with your death.”

We’re standing near a lake, which has a thick forest next to it. Duryodhana is believed to be hiding in that forest. We need to find him to wipe out the last possible pocket of resistance.

After Karna’s death, the demoralised Kaurava army seemed to simply implode. I killed Dusshasana, and went off to celebrate with Draupadi. By the time I returned to the battlefield, Sahadeva had killed Shakuni, Duryodhana’s maternal uncle and the evil mastermind who had egged on Yudhishtira to play those games in which the dice was loaded against us. A game which cost us so dearly.

Yudhishtira, clearly still stung by Arjun’s words, himself fought and killed Shalya, the last commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army. I suspected Shalya’s heart wasn’t really in the fight, because he knew full well that he was leading an army that simply had no hope of winning the war now. But Yudhishtira was so ecstatic at his victory that I couldn’t bring myself to point this out to him. So I simply grinned and congratulated him.

After Shalya’s death, the last tattered remnants of the once-mighty Kaurava army either surrendered on the spot or broke ranks and fled, Duryodhana among them. As we searched for him, our spies came and informed us that he was probably hiding in the forest near the lake. So, we set off to hunt him down.

As we race towards the forest, Krishna pulls me aside. “I have had some intelligence agents living within the palace of Hastinapura all these years. I have two pieces of information that might be of interest to you. The first is that Duryodhana has apparently been working out extensively with warrior-monks brought in from the Far East to develop new techniques of mace fighting. Apparently, he also had an iron statue of yours set up, on which he practised every day.”

I shrug. “A live person who can hit back is very different from a statue, as Duryodhana will find out soon enough. What’s the other?”

“Ever since you embarked on your killing spree against her sons, Queen Gandhari has had the greatest scientists and technologists of Hastinapura

working overtime on developing a special armour for Duryodhana. Apparently, it's extremely light but almost unbreakable. The one saving grace is that they were in such a race against time that they only managed to make enough of it to cover the upper half of his body," says Krishna.

"How does that help me? According to the rules of a mace duel, you can't hit below the belt anyway. So, for all practical purposes, Duryodhana is fully covered," I reply.

Krishna raises an eyebrow. "Tell me again, how exactly do you intend to fulfil your oath to smash the thigh on which he had invited Draupadi to sit on if you won't hit him below the waist?" he asks. "Or are you planning to break it after he is already dead?"

I scratch my head. I hadn't really thought about it. "I'll figure something out," I say finally.

"I'm sure you will," says Krishna encouragingly, patting my back. "Well now, what a pleasant surprise. Balaram's here."

I look up, surprised. Balaram, who had sworn strict neutrality, has finally shown up at the fag end of the war.

"I heard that the war was over," he says. "So I thought I would come and congratulate the victors."

"The war isn't over," I reply grimly. "It won't be as long as Duryodhana lives."

Balaram's face clouds over. "I know your feelings for him, Bhima," he says. "Much as it may grieve me, I won't try to stop you from fulfilling your vow. But I have one request. Keep the fight clean. From what I gather, there have been too many violations of rules by the side that is ostensibly fighting for *dharma*."

I try hard to come up with a befitting retort. But before I can think of one, we reach the lake. I let Balaram's remark go unanswered, and set about trying to taunt Duryodhana out of hiding.

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So far, my remarks have had little effect. Then Yudhishtira speaks up. "Duryodhana, if you fight Bhima and survive, I will let you go into exile alive," he shouts.

"Yudhishtira, no," hisses Krishna. "As long as Duryodhana is alive, he will be a perennial threat. Your claim to the throne will never be secure."

But it's too late. Yudhishtira has already spoken.

And we see Duryodhana striding out of the forest. "My life matters little to me

now that my brothers, brother-in-law and Karna are dead,” he says. “But at least I will have the consolation of avenging my brothers. Get ready to die, Bhima.”

I give Duryodhana a long, hard look. Through the war, I have caught glimpses of him every now and then, but I haven’t really seen him up close up till now. My recollection of him is that while he was considerably shorter than me, he was almost as broad. But he seems to have slimmed down considerably.

“You’ve lost weight, Duryodhana,” I observe. “Did the tension of the war get to you?”

He shakes his head. “I realised there was no way I would ever outmuscle you in a direct duel,” he replies. “So I traded in bulk for speed and agility. You should feel flattered, Bhima. I’ve spent years modifying my fighting style just to have the pleasure of killing you.”

“I am flattered,” I reply. “Not that it’s going to help you. But before we start fighting, I have one question I want to ask, Duryodhana. Why did you hate us so much? Balaram is extremely fond of you. He obviously sees something in you. Nobody could ever have been a more generous or loyal friend than you were to Karna. I know you adored your brothers and Dushala, and doted on your son. So why is it that in that seemingly vast heart of yours, you couldn’t find place for just five cousins?”

Duryodhana seems startled by the question. Then he shrugs. “Try spending your life in someone’s shadow and you might begin to understand what I feel.”

I almost laugh out loud at the sheer absurdity of his statement. I have spent my life both loving and resenting my charismatic younger brother, and here is Duryodhana telling me that I don’t know what it feels like to live in someone’s shadow.

“None of us is immune from jealousy, Duryodhana,” I tell him. “But the best way to handle it is to channel it positively, to improve yourself, rather than try to bring down the object of your envy. What did all your plotting and scheming against us achieve, except to sow the seeds of your own downfall?”

Duryodhana affects a huge yawn. “Spare me the lecture, Bhima,” he says. “You’re starting to sound like Yudhishtira. Are we going to fight, or are you planning to bore me to death?”

I nod grimly. “Let’s fight,” I say, and raise my mace in the classical stance.

Duryodhana takes two quick steps to my left, and then suddenly leaps high, almost to the level of my shoulder, before swinging his mace. Startled, I block his attack. Sparks fly as our maces clash. The impact drives me back a couple of steps.

“I’ve been learning a few tricks while you’ve been away in the jungles,” he says. “Neat, huh?”

I stay silent because I suddenly have a feeling that this is not going to be quite the cakewalk I was anticipating. Duryodhana moves his supple wrists left to right, then right to left, and then back again. He moves slowly at first, then faster and faster till his mace is a blur that I can barely see. Then, he suddenly flicks his mace upwards and I find my own mace flying out of my hands.

Duryodhana laughs in triumph and swings at my head. I duck under his blow, grab him by both legs, lift him up and bring him crashing down to the ground. I lunge for him, eager to finish him off, but he pokes his fingers at my eyes. I instinctively shut them and rear back. He puts both his hands against my chest and shoves me away. I land sprawling on my back. I quickly scramble up, snatching my mace.

“Trying to turn this into a wrestling match, Bhima?” sneers Duryodhana. “Tut, tut, let’s stick with the mace, shall we?”

He suddenly stabs with the mace, as if it is a spear. I block his move. The moment I do, he lets go of his mace with one hand and reaches across and punches me hard on the nose. I feel the blood begin to trickle down.

“First blood to me,” he croons. “Come Bhima, this is no fun at all. You’re so leaden-footed. Let’s dance, big boy.”

He skips nimbly on his feet, and then comes in again, his mace a blur of motion. This time, I manage to block his flick. Duryodhana rotates his mace – and mine along with it – twice in a clockwise direction, and then twirls it upwards. Once again, I find my mace flying out of my hands. As he draws his mace back to strike, I grab it with one hand, his arm with the other, and shove him back. That buys me just enough time to retrieve my mace.

“You know your problem, Bhima?” says Duryodhana. “You’ve stagnated as a fighter. You’ve gotten so used to simply overpowering hopelessly outmatched opponents that you’ve forgotten the importance of innovation and new tactics.”

“It’s too bad you didn’t showcase your innovations earlier,” I sneer. “Some of your poor wretched brothers might still be alive if you had. Boy, how they shrieked like gutted pigs as I killed them. I can still hear their cries.”

His eyes flash with anger and hatred. Exactly as I had hoped, he abandons his fancy moves and comes in with a straight blow to the head. I block with my mace. We both strain against each other. I let him slowly force my mace down, and then suddenly, I remove it so that he lurches forward.

His guard is down, and I smash my mace with all the force I can muster into

his chest. That blow should have pulverised his torso and left it a bloody mess. Instead, he simply staggers back a step, hardly showing any ill-effects. The armour seems to have absorbed most of the impact.

“Amazing,” he says. “After I kill you, I really must thank the genius who designed this armour.”

I struggle to keep my face expressionless, but a voice inside my head whispers that I’ve had it. I try my best to ignore it, and resume the fight.

Pretty soon, though, it becomes painfully obvious that the voice is right. It is like fighting Jayadratha all over again. I struggle to hit Duryodhana and on the few occasions that I manage to, it has hardly any impact. He, on the other hand, strikes me almost at will and each blow seems to land harder and hurt ever more. I sense, with growing desperation, that it’s only a matter of time before he will land the killer blow.

He raises his mace high and swings downwards at my head once again. I raise my mace horizontally and block his strike. As I do so, he kicks me hard on the chest, right between the pectorals. The breath whooshes out of me in an explosive grunt and I tumble to the ground. He leaps high, ready to end the fight with one last swing.

I know, instinctively, that I am about to die. I also know that I don’t want to – not right then, anyway.

And so, in almost a reflex action, I swing my mace with all the strength left in me into Duryodhana’s left thigh. His yell of triumph turns into a howl of pain as he crumples to the ground. For good measure, I also send my mace crashing into his testicles. He screams in agony and doubles up on the ground, retching and clutching at his private parts.

I fill some air into my tortured lungs and look down at him. Strange, all these years I’d waited for this moment. And now that it has finally arrived, I feel nothing. No joy, or exhilaration, or even relief. Just a strange emptiness.

Dimly, I become aware of Balaram shouting. He is straining to get at me, even as Krishna and Satyaki try to hold him back.

“You cheated, Bhima,” he shouts. “Duryodhana was beating you easily, and you used unfair means to defeat him. I am ashamed to have taught you how to use the mace.”

I walk up to Balaram, throw my mace down and kneel at his feet. “Then kill me and get it over with, Balaram,” I say. “My life’s mission is accomplished anyway; it’s going to be all downhill from here.”

I don’t look up but I can feel Balaram’s eyes boring into my downturned face.

Then, he heaves a great sigh. When he speaks, it is in a measured tone. “Much as I am tempted to, I will not stoop to your level and commit murder,” he says. “Live with your shame, Bhima. You are not worthy of dying at my hands.”

He stalks away. I stay there, kneeling for a long, long time. Finally, Krishna comes up and puts his arm around me. And I start to weep silently.

“Why are you crying?” he asks gently.

“I don’t know,” I reply.

Actually, I’m not experiencing any emotions. I feel like a hollow shell. But somehow, I just can’t stop my tears.

“Rise, O destroyer of the Kauravas,” says Krishna.

Yes, that’s going to be my title, I reflect as I wipe my eyes. But it really belongs to Draupadi, not me. I have performed bestial, unimaginably brutal acts. I have not only committed the sin of being a kin slayer, I have singlehandedly wiped out a generation of my brethren.

I have done it all for the love of a woman. And the irony is, she does not even love me back.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Mahabharata is, quite simply, the greatest story ever told, which is why it has been retold endlessly, across generations. Any number of versions exist, and it is difficult to travel to any part of India – or indeed, several parts of South-East Asia – without encountering some local myth associated with the epic.

Like many Indian children, I was first introduced to the Mahabharata through the oral tradition, thanks to a grandmother who possessed both an encyclopaedic knowledge of the saga and a gift for storytelling. Before too long, I was devouring the various Amar Chitra Katha comics that have covered almost every aspect of the epic.

The Mahabharata has a rich array of diverse, fascinating characters. But I soon settled upon my favourite – Bhima. For one thing, there was his superhuman strength – and like many nerdy kids, I too fantasised about growing up to become the strongest man in the world. Also, it probably helped that my paternal grandfather was himself named Bhima. But mostly, I liked the fact that the Mahabharata's Bhima was a dependable, no-fuss hero who actually got things done – killing Jarasandha and Keechaka, getting Draupadi the Saugandhika flowers, wiping out the Kauravas, fetching Draupadi the blood of Dusshasana to wash her hair and smashing the thigh on which Duryodhana had invited her to sit.

My fascination with Bhima deepened after I read 'Second Turn', the English translation of the great Malayalam writer M T Vasudevan Nair's classic 'Randamoozham'. 'Bhimsen', Prem Panicker's transcreation of 'Randamoozham', too made for riveting reading.

But much as I loved Nair's rationalist perspective, I felt that I had some (hopefully) interesting interpretations of my own to offer about the epic.

And so, I set out to write this book. As part of my research, I read several works on the Mahabharata. These included, naturally, the immortal classics like C Rajagopalachari's 'Mahabharata', Pratibha Ray's 'Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi', Irawati Karwe's 'Yuganta' and S L Bhyrappa's 'Parva'. But I also found more recent works like Devdutt Pattanaik's 'Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata'; Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'The Palace of Illusions', Krishna Udayasankar's 'Govinda' and 'Kaurava', Anand Neelakantan's 'Ajaya' and Saraswati Nagpal's graphic novel, 'Draupadi: The Fire-Born Princess' to be

extremely illuminating and insightful.

Purists will say that I have messed around with the chronology of the original epic, skipped many important events, mashed up multiple stories into single episodes and completely changed yet others beyond recognition. They will be absolutely right. I have indeed done all of the above. My humble defence is that I was primarily focused on narrating the tale of Bhima's passion for Draupadi and his deeply conflicted emotions about Arjun, and I happily took liberties with the original storyline whenever I felt the need to do so. I am quite positive that I am neither the first, nor will I be the last narrator to do so.

The sheer timelessness of the Mahabharata will ensure that it will continue to be endlessly re-interpreted, and it will only become more fascinating with each retelling. Reading the numerous versions of the Mahabharata has given me immense joy over the years. With this book, I hope to share a fraction of that joy with you, my reader.

EPILOGUE

The icy wind bites into our barely covered bodies as the Himalayas loom up ahead. I shiver and my teeth chatter, but I force myself to plod on, one step at a time. We are on our way to a cave on the peak of Mount Mandara, within which there is apparently a portal that humans can use to directly enter Swargalok – heaven – the abode of the *devas*. We will either get there, or die trying.

As we grimly march towards our destination, I think of all the years that have gone by since the end of the war. It was such a long time ago, but it feels just like yesterday.

I had thought that killing Duryodhana would be the last violent act of the war, but I was wrong. After we returned to our camp, we decided that each of us five brothers would adopt one boy whose father had died fighting for us in the war. We duly selected five lads who had been orphaned and went through the appropriate ceremonies. We didn't know it then, but we had just condemned those poor unfortunate boys to death.

Later that night, Ashwatthama, accompanied by Kripacharya and Kritavarma, a Yadava who had fought on the Kaurava side, sneaked into our camp. He first killed Dhrishtadyumna and Shikandi and then, mistaking the five boys sleeping in our tent for us, beheaded each one. As luck would have it, that night we had slept in the Kaurava camp, as per an old custom that decreed that the victorious generals must spend the last night of the war in the camp of the defeated army, which was what saved us.

The next day, when we discovered the murders, we set off in hot pursuit of Ashwatthama. When we finally caught up with him, he and Arjun engaged in a pitched battle that almost ended with them unleashing a holocaust upon the world. Fortunately, Krishna stepped in and persuaded them to end the spiral of violence and vengeance before it completely devastated the earth.

But Ashwatthama could not be allowed to go unpunished. And so, Krishna mutilated his handsome face and ordered him to go into exile.

Later that day, as we offered prayers for our friends and relatives, Mother stunned us by asking us to pray for Karna as well. She then revealed that he was her first child, abandoned by her at birth, fathered by the *deva*, Surya, whom she had met when she was still unmarried.

"I murdered my brother?" wailed Arjun. "Why didn't you tell us before?"

“He swore me to secrecy,” she replied. “I met him before the war and asked him to defect to the Pandava camp. He said he would never betray his friend, but promised that he would not kill any of my sons, except Arjun.”

“He could have been the emperor if he had wanted,” whispered Yudhishtira.

By now, I know my brother well enough to understand what was going through his mind. Karna had casually rejected the throne of Hastinapura while Yudhishtira – who is supposed to embody virtue and compassion – had caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people in his bid to regain it.

So it came as no surprise to me when Yudhishtira suddenly announced his desire to abdicate the throne and go into the forest to do penance like our father, Pandu, had. In fact, I had my argument ready.

“Brother,” I said. “Each person has some special skill and aptitude. You are a courageous man, but the truth is, you are not a natural warrior. And yet, you survived the Great War even as far greater warriors than you perished on the field. Now, we face an equally great challenge – rebuilding a shattered kingdom and restoring prosperity to it. You are the best man for the job. Indeed, you are the only one amongst us who can do it. Abandoning this responsibility would not be a demonstration of morality, it would be an act of cowardice as reprehensible as fleeing the battlefield.”

He protested a little, but not too much and – after a decent length of time had elapsed – announced that he had changed his mind. Again, I wasn’t surprised. I knew him too well.

While Yudhishtira got on with rebuilding Hastinapura, the rest of us focused on Parikshit, Abhimanyu’s son and sole heir of the Kuru clan. I had never been there for Ghatotkacha when he was a boy, so I probably overcompensated in his case. Arjun, Nakul and Sahadeva too heavily indulged him, often causing Draupadi to scold us.

“He will become a spoilt brat,” she would warn. But by some miracle, he didn’t. He grew up into a level-headed, courageous young man, the spitting image of his father.

For perhaps the first time in my life, I experienced contentment. But inevitably, it was too good to last.

One day, a tearful messenger came rushing to court with terrible news. The Yadavas had wiped each other out in a drunken brawl, he wailed. It began as an argument between Satyaki and Kritavarma, still nursing old grudges over the war. Before too long, the entire clan was arrayed on either side. When it was all over, not one of them was left alive.

“What about Krishna?” asked Arjun anxiously.

The messenger smote himself on the breast. “He was not there when it happened. When he returned and witnessed the destruction, he wandered off into the forest. As he sat there, grieving under a tree, he was hit in his left foot by a poisoned arrow shot by a hunter who, seeing the foot through a thicket, mistook it for the ear of a deer.”

Arjun fell to the floor in a swoon. He was rushed to his room, where he stayed locked up for two days, refusing all food and water. When he finally emerged, he had aged overnight. His hair had turned completely gray and his shoulders stooped. He never again picked up his bow or fought another battle.

Draupadi too, was hit hard by Krishna’s death. Even though she had five husbands, Krishna was her friend and confidant in a way that none of us could ever be. She lost all joy in life, and her health began to deteriorate alarmingly.

One day, Yudhishtira summoned all of us. “We have lived full lives. We participated in the greatest war ever fought for the sake of *dharma*, and we won. We have served our subjects well, and provided them with years of peace and prosperity. Parikshit is a fine young man now, fully deserving of ascending the throne of Hastinapura. I propose that we undertake the *mahaprasthan*. There is a cave on the peak of Mount Mandara, which apparently acts as a direct gateway to Swargalok. It is said that only those who have led virtuous, blameless lives can reach that cave alive. But the rules of the *mahaprasthan* are very clear. Once you embark on it, you cannot retrace your steps under any circumstances, or you lose any chance you might have of reaching Swargalok. What do you say? Shall we proceed?”

Draupadi and Arjun enthusiastically assent. Nakul and Sahadeva too agree. Then Yudhishtira turns to me.

“Well, it will be one final, grand adventure,” I think, and nod.

~

And so, we trudge on towards the snowy mountain, our eyes straining to catch a glimpse of the peak that is almost perpetually covered by clouds. Then I hear Draupadi say, “This is as far as I’m going. There’s no way I can make the climb.”

I turn and see her sunk to the ground, back propped against a rock. She looks utterly spent. The woman, who was married to five husbands and desired by countless men, is going to die a lonely death. The thought goes through me like a knife in the heart, and I know exactly what I am going to do.

I turn back, and feel Yudhishtira's hand on my shoulder. "Bhima, what do you think you are doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I reply. "I'm abandoning the journey to heaven. I intend to spend my last moments with Draupadi and die by her side."

"What?" asks Yudhishtira, appalled. "Bhima, don't be foolish."

I look at the brother I have spent my life following. Now that I have made my decision, I no longer feel any anger or resentment towards him, or for that matter towards anyone else. Only a sense of enormous love and compassion.

"Heaven is meaningless to me if Draupadi is not there beside me, Yudhishtira," I say. "In any case, the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that heaven and hell aren't places, they're states of mind. Hell is having to live with the knowledge that you abandoned loved ones in pursuit of a selfish objective, no matter how noble it might ostensibly seem. Heaven is loving someone so much that any sacrifice you have to make for them seems trivial."

"But Bhima, the rules of the *mahaprasthan*a clearly state that you cannot retrace your steps," says Yudhishtira.

I sigh. Yudhishtira, always so dogmatic about following rules, down to the last letter. "Brother," I say gently, "When we were children, I promised Mother that I would never disobey you. I've faithfully kept my promise and I don't want to break it on my dying day. So give me your blessings and let me go."

He's still conflicted but he reluctantly nods his assent. I embrace him and start walking back.

Arjun looms in front of me. I gaze at him. My brother, the greatest hero of our times. The man to whom I spent my life playing second fiddle. The one true love of my one true love. Well, what does it matter now?

"It has been an honour to have called you my brother and fought by your side," I tell him, and I mean every word I say.

He shakes his head. There are tears in his eyes. "You were always the best amongst us. And your true greatness was that you never even realised it. I wish I had the selfless courage to do what you're doing right now."

I embrace him and walk ahead. The twins rush up to me, weeping unabashedly. I engulf them in a bear hug. They're wizened old men now, but for me they'll always be those precocious, mischievous youngsters, constantly up to no good.

"Be good, children," I mock-admonish them and we all laugh through our tears. I kiss them on their foreheads. They move on. I watch them till they are out of sight, and then I seat myself next to Draupadi.

As I caress her face, her eyes open, then widen in amazement. “Bhima, what are you doing here? The rules of the *mahaprasthana*...”

I smile. “I think there’s one rule that supersedes all others. ‘Follow your heart’.”

Her face lights up as she laughs, and I once again see the beautiful girl I fell in love with so many years ago – and never stopped loving through all the turmoil and turbulence that we underwent thereafter.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she says, finally.

“Truly?” I tease her. “You don’t wish it was someone else?”

She smiles. “I won’t deny that it would have been nice if it had been him, but then, you were the one who was always there for me. So it is only fitting that it should be you, I suppose.”

As the wind picks up in ferocity and rips into our old, cold bones, she shivers and huddles next to me. “I’m starting to feel drowsy. Won’t be long now, I guess. We’ll just fall asleep and never wake up,” she says.

“Are you scared?” I ask her.

She shakes her head. “I’m looking forward to getting some rest. I haven’t slept well for a long, long time.” Then she adds, “Well, now that we’ve given up any prospect of getting into Swargalok, do you think we’re going to be reborn?”

“If we are, then this time I want you all to myself,” I say vehemently. “Do you realise that in all the years we’ve been married, this is the first time that we’ve ever been together, all by ourselves?”

She laughs and snuggles closer. I hug her as I feel the sleep settle upon my eyelids. I may or may not be coming back, but I couldn’t have asked for more from the final moments of this life.



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