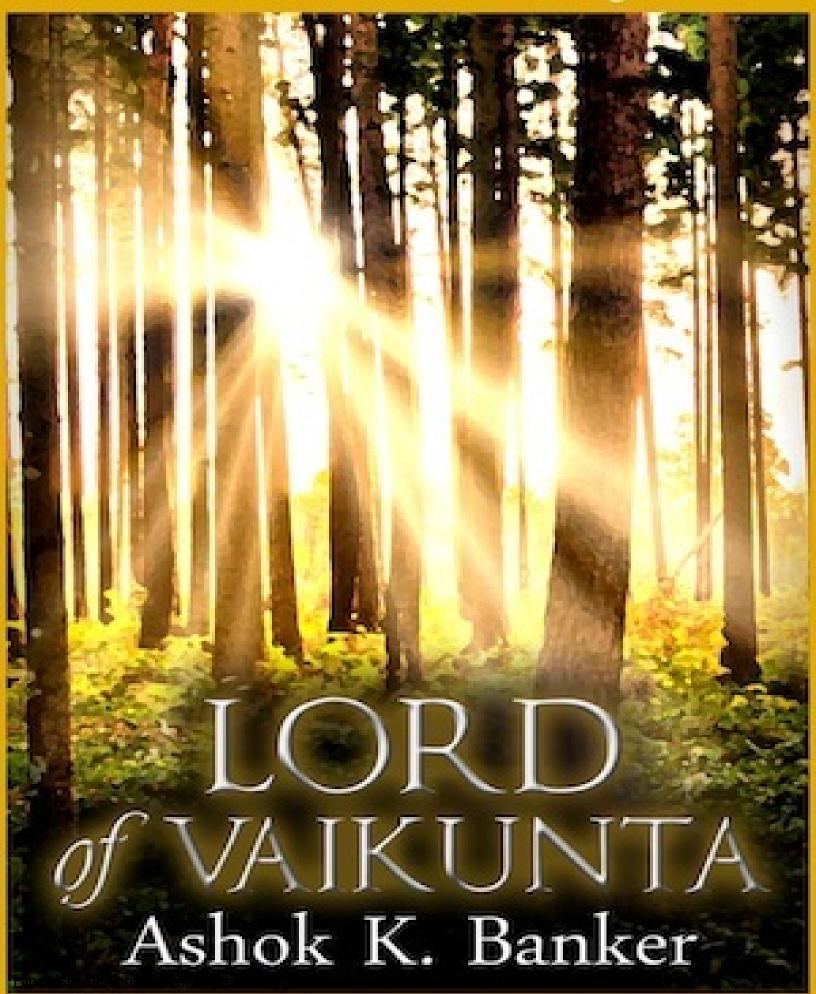
## Krishna Coriolis Book Eight





## PRARAMBHA

Hastinapura was as quiet as a battlefield before the war. The royal guard patrolled the city streets, even stopping the Vasudeva brothers once with a harshly called-out challenge. The captain who had stopped them realized his mistake the minute they turned their heads to look at him. His dark face blanched as he recognized the most renowned champions of the Yadava nation, direct relatives of the House of Kuru itself and he immediately dismounted and bowed. He apologized profusely, keeping his helmeted and feathered head bent low till they had passed by, occasioning Balarama to make a caustic remark about how some men were better off without their heads. A mounted escort went ahead to ensure they met with no further interference. They rode the rest of the way through the city to the towering palace complex without further ado. But there were eyes watching them from every window and door-crack and the air was thick with the promise of impending violence. Curfew was in effect and the population seemed ripe for a riot.

Even in this sullen state, the city was magnificent. Its sprawling architectural grandeur, much of it inspired by the city's twin patrons - Hastina the Elephant and Naga the Snake, from which it got its two names, Hastinapura, City of Elephants, and Nagapura, City of Snakes. Enormous mansions squatted high above the ground, mounted on four elephantine pillars around which serpents intertwined. Guards manned each pillar, for they provided the only access to the main structure high above ground: there were elevators within each massive piling, worked by an underground pulley system which required several dozens of servants whose only task was to work the ropes and pulleys all day. From the gargantuan mansions above, beautiful young women in diaphanous garments stood by railings, gazing down indifferently. Whatever happened in the city below, riots or civil strife, mattered not at all to those lovely concubines. Their task was not unlike the that of the servants working the ropes and pulleys all day, except that they worked with softer, scented hands and limbs and were

mostly employed by night. The city's night entertainments were legendary for their skill and decadence.

More of that same decadence was on display as they left the common quarters behind and made their way through the noble's district. Here the opulence and richness of the houses and people was astonishing to behold, even after Dwarka's paradisal comfort. The Yadavas remained hardworking people, choosing to ply their trades and crafts and skills even though they could live comfortably off the state for the rest of their lives. Here in Hastinapura, the Kurus seemed to abhor work, preferring to spend their days in idle pursuits and nights in scented escape. Balarama did not need to remark on the change in the capitol city: Krishna knew better than he that the degeneration had begun when their cousin Duryodhana had assumed control. But he could not help thinking back to the glory days when Pandu the White had sat upon the Elephant throne and governed the nation. Then, this had been a very different city. A glorious one. He sighed and ducked as they passed beneath the partially-raised gate. They had arrived. The gatewatch was alerted to their arrival and saluted them deferentially. A familiar face waited by the gate to the royal enclave, dressed in simple unassuming garb that belied his status as the chief advisor to the King and one of the most respected men in the city.

'Lord Sanjaya,' Krishna said warmly. 'Bhraatr, well met in an ill time.'

'Well said, Lord Krishna,' Sanjay replied as he paid his respects to both brothers. 'It is an ill time indeed. But now that you are both here, perhaps some resolution may be found to this irresoluble dispute. Everyone is assembled in the sabha hall and the debate proceeds much as it has before, with the same arguments brought out for display and turned over a dozen ways all over again. It seems even the great Kuru nation has finally found a challenge it finds impossible to resolve.'

Krishna smiled at the diplomat's choice of words but it was a hard smile, full of his awareness of the magnitude of the conflict and the issues at stake. 'We shall try to do the impossible then. Lead the way, old friend.'

Sanjay led them toward the guarded entrance that led to the sabha hall of Hastinapura, attached to but separate from the main palace itself. But as he approached the heavily manned barrier, he stopped and turned back. Glancing this way and that, he lowered his head and his tone as he spoke. Both Krishna and Balarama drew closer to prevent other ears from overhearing. In Hastinapura, there were always other ears listening.

'Someone is waiting to meet you,' he said, looking at Krishna. 'She was very insistent that I let no other person know of her presence here, not even the guards or serving staff.'

Krishna and Balarama glanced at each other, frowning.

'She?' Balarama repeated, his brow knotting. They both knew it could not be their father's sister Kunti-devi for they had left her and her sons, the five Pandavas, back in the forest where they were hiding. It was because Kunti and her sons could not be here to argue their point of view that her nephews, the Yadava brothers, had come in their stead. He shook his head. 'I cannot think who that might be.'

Krishna ventured no guess but just then a shadow passed overhead. It was a very large shadow, like that of a bird, but the shadow was far too large and moved much too slowly to be any bird flight, and there was no bird sound

from above nor any sound of wings. Yet Balarama saw the distinct outline of a feathered tail as the shadow completed its passing over Krishna's face. There was an expression on Krishna's face that told Balarama that there was something vital he was missing here. He stared intently at his brother until Krishna glanced at him briefly, their eyes meeting.

Then Krishna looked at Sanjay and nodded. 'Take us to her at once.'

Sanjay led them away from the entrance to the sabha hall building, and toward an older, less well-maintained tower. There was a old but stout wooden door set into the base of the tower and he rapped on the door with the base of the heavy wooden scroll he was carrying. He rapped in a certain rhythm, like a code, leaving no doubt that he was signaling someone inside. There were no sentries or guards here and because of the many pillars in the way, this entrance to this old crumbling tower was barely visible except to those who knew it was here.

After a moment, the old stout door creaked ajar. The interior was pitch dark. But Balarama's keen eyes and keener senses made out a pair of eyes gleaming in the darkness. Krishna saw much more keenly than he because Krishna hardly needed eyes to see. His brother turned to Sanjay with a grim face and put a hand on the statesman's shoulder. 'Good Sanjaya, I fear we shall not be able to meet with your King and present our case today after all. Another pressing matter demands our attention. Thank you for your discreteness in this matter and we hope to return soon to your beautiful city.'

Sanjay nodded, clearly disappointed but understanding. 'So long as we still have a beautiful city. Travel safely and swiftly, Lords Krishna and Balarama.'

They nodded to him and he turned, walking away briskly without once glancing back. Balarama watched him go and turned to see Krishna disappearing into the darkness behind the doorway. He followed his brother.

'Satyabhama?' Balarama said, unable to hide his surprise.

The slender young woman waiting behind in the alcove glanced sharply at him as he entered. Her unblemished forehead was criss-crossed with converging lines as she glared at him. With an effort that belied her slender petite form, she heaved the heavy oak door shut. It groaned and fell into place with a puff of dust that indicated how rarely this tower was used. She bolted and latched the door before turning to the two brothers. She crossed her arms across her chest and cocked an eyebrow at Balarama. Before she could say anything, Krishna slapped his brother across the back of his head, winking at her as he did so.

'Speaking a name aloud in Hastinapura is like sending a rider to every house in the city,' Krishna said. 'Next time think before you speak, bhraatr.'

Balarama realized his mistake and nodded. 'Apologies, bhabhi.' He joined his palms in pranaam to his sister-in-law. 'I was just surprised that it was you.'

This made the pretty young lady frown even more fiercely. 'Who were you expecting then? One of Krishna's other wives? Or one of your's?'

'Nobody,' Balarama added quickly. 'I thought it must be just some noblewoman or the other wanting to see him. You know how they are.'

She leaned closer, looking sharply at Krishna then at Balarama. 'No, I don't know. How are they, all these noblewomen who keep wanting to see my husband? Does he see them often? How many of them has he seen before?'

Balarama opened and closed his mouth like a fish gasping for air.

He turned to Krishna for help but Krishna raised his own eyebrows in mock-surprise. 'What noblewomen are you talking about, bhai? I don't know any noblewomen in this city. Do you?'

Both husband and wife looked at Balarama together with matching stern expressions. Balarama looked from one to the other as he tried to find words to express what he wished to say.

Suddenly, both burst out laughing. The laughter echoed up the length of the empty tower, sounding very loud. Satyabhama cringed then covered her mouth, stifling her laughter. Krishna muted his own merriment but wagged a finger at his brother's expression.

'You should know better than to cross swords with a Mithila swordsmen or to cross words with a Dwarka lady,' Krishna said.

Balarama heaved a sigh of relief then shook his head. 'You two are too much,' he said. 'Really.'

Satyabhama patted her brother-in-law's massive bicep. Her entire hand seemed less than one-fifth the width of his massive arm. 'And you're too easy to fool.'

He shrugged. 'What can I say, I'm a well-behaved Dwarka boy. Not like you two rapscallions!'

Krishna grinned at him. 'I was a well-behaved Dwarka boy too. Then she came into my life.' His eyes twinkled as he looked at his second wife.

That warmed Balarama's heart. In the past years, it had become increasingly rare to see Krishna's old smile, hear his wise-cracks, or see that familiar twinkle in his eyes. It had saddened Balarama to see his sister-in-law Rukmini and his brother drift apart after the kidnapping of their newly first born Pradyumana. Satyabhama's unexpected entrance into Krishna's life had altered him. She saved him in a way, Balarama thought as he saw Satyabhama look at her husband with a proud adoring look. He had never seen Rukmini look at her husband that way since the abduction.

Now, Balarama nodded and smiled affectionately at his sister-in-law. 'So what's all the cloak and dagger about, bhabhi? Why are we sneaking about Hastinapura like spies? And why did you come here and wait for us? You could have waited till we came back home to Dwarka.'

Satyabhama's laughing face composed itself into its smooth perfect form again. 'I could have. But this crisis couldn't.'

'What crisis?' Balarama asked, staring at her.

She turned to Krishna, who was standing at the center of the tower, looking up. 'The one Krishna was expecting.'

When Krishna turned back to them, his face lost all traces of the humor he had displayed only moments ago, reverting to the map of deepening lines that had begun to reveal itself of late. 'So then it has begun.'

'Yes,' she said. 'He came to Dwarka early this morning. You had said that would be the sign and if I saw the sign, I was to summon you at once by coming myself personally, without resorting to messengers or other means.'

'Aye, I did,' Krishna said. 'And you did well to come so quickly, and to conceal your presence here so well. Sanjaya is one of the few we can trust in this city of distrust.'

Balarama frowned. 'Who came to Dwarka this morning? And how did you travel all the way from Dwarka to Hastinapura in a few short hours? It's weeks away by chariot or horseback. The only way you could have gotten here so quickly is by Pushpak, but both Pushpaks are with us, hovering above the clouds, waiting for our command.' He thought of something. 'Unless Krishna sent his back to fetch you?'

Satyabhama shook her head, her curling locks swinging around her shapely neck. 'No, Balarama-bhaiya. I did not come by chariot, horse or Pushpak.'

Balarama's eyes widened. 'Then how—'

Krishna raised his hand. 'One moment, bhai. We can discuss modes of transportation later. Right now, I need to speak further with bhabhi. Time is short and we have much to do before the battle.'

'Battle?' Balarama said. Then saw the tense expression on Krishna's profile. 'Of course, bhraatr. Please speak.'

'Satyabhama, my beloved,' Krishna said, 'what is the situation at home?'

Her attractive face turned sad. 'It is worse than ever. Lord Uddhav was speaking with King Ugrasena and your father Vasudeva along with others of the War Council and the consensus is that there will be civil war, the only question is how widely it will extend and when it will begin.'

Krishna raised two fingers to his forehead, as if aiming a projectile at his own skull. He rubbed the tips of the fingers on a worry line, massaging it. 'If only we could be there to find your father's murderer Satadhanva and his accomplices, we might yet be able to prevent a complete outbreak. Once all the Vrishni join, there will be no turning back.'

'Bhraatr,' Balarama said, 'since we speaking of preventing an outbreak of violence, may I point out that here in Hastinapura too we came to try to talk sense to Bhishma Pitama, Maharaja Dhritarashtra and the other elders. Dwarka's civil war might still be prevented by retrieving the stolen jewel again and bringing the murderer of Satyabhama's father to book, but the Kaurava-Pandava conflict could involve not just the Kuru nation but all its allied nations as well, of which the Yadava nation is only one small part! This civil dispute threatens all civilization on the mortal realm. We came here to do a given task. It is our dharma to complete that task before returning home.'

Krishna looked at him with a sad expression. 'The age of Dharma wanes, my brother. The age of Kali looms large before us. Soon the darkness will roll in from all sides, and we will be engulfed. We have to pick our battles and fight the ones we can when we must.' He looked at Satyabhama. 'He awaits?'

She glanced upwards, pointing with her eyes. 'As alert as a Pushpak. He is a great and beautiful wonder.'

Balarama frowned, puzzled at whom they were referring to, but still perturbed by Krishna's earlier words. 'But, Krishna, we cannot simply leave without even speaking to the elders? How will it look if we come and go without even presenting ourselves and paying our respects? Might it not seem disrespectful?'

Krishna shook his head. 'This dispute among our cousins is long past the stage of simple formalities and protocol. It is heading towards a conclusion

as inevitable as a river's passage toward the ocean. But the other problem, our domestic problem back in Dwarka, has now grown to become a threat that can no longer be ignored. To delay a confrontation could lead to a crisis that would dwarf both the impending civil wars in Hastinapura and Dwarka combined. This is not a matter of internecine conflict, brother. It is a matter of our greatest enemy yet posing the greatest threat we have ever faced.'

Balarama stared at him. 'What and of whom are you speaking, bhraatr? You sound as if you are talking riddles. I am lost.'

Krishna nodded. 'All will be made known to you as we ride to our destination. Come now. Let us summon our Pushpaks and we will speak of the details on our way. Time is short and the crisis looms large on the horizon. Before this day is ended, we must reach the country of the mountain lords. There, our greatest enemy and challenge await us.'

Krishna looked at Satyabhama. 'Ask him to follow us there. We will make the Pushpaks fly just fast enough that he can follow.'

Satyabhama smiled enigmatically at her husband. 'Perhaps you forget, my love. He does not follow. He only leads. It is we who must follow him.'

As if to underline her words, a shadow passed across all three of them and a great tremulous bird cry filled the sky above Hastinapura. Balarama felt the reverberations of that cry in his bones.

## KAAND 1

Dwarka lay beneath a stormy sky. The island-kingdom was besieged by an ocean gone insane. Waves crashed on the fortress pilings, rising scores of yards high to splash the wall sentries with salty spray. The tower beacons blazed all night, using a phosphorescent fuel brought up from the bottom of the ocean by the sons of Vasudeva. The white light beams swept the storm-swept stone walls and ramparts, dispelling the darkness for a brief moment but the darkness overwhelmed all. The storm was supreme. This was nature in her element and no creation or artifice of mortalkind could challenge her might and power. She rampaged. The city huddled and waited for it to end.

The sentries and gatewatch guards were alert but troubled: they belonged to disparate clans yet all were Dwarkans to the core. The talk of the imminent riots and civil strife between their clans cast a shadow over their future, testing their loyalties. If Dwarka went to war with itself, whom was a man to defend and whom to attack? His city or his people? His clan or his varna? The Vasudeva brothers or the rebels? What was the fight about anyway? Like all clan feuds, there was no single point of origin, no solitary dispute that set off the conflagration. The causes and reasons were many, dating back generations, with each party having its own reasons and grudges, causes and curses, their disparate motivations often splitting their loyalties thinner, or putting them on opposite sides on one issue and the same side on another issue. With a people as passionate and intense and given to physical expressions of emotion, everything was complicated; this was more so.

Even though it was an island, Dwarka was far more than just a metropolis. It was a kingdom, vast and sprawling, and nobody who resided there could claim to have mapped its farthest extent or covered every hill and dale, valley and region. Outside the city and suburbs, the land continued in all directions for an unknown distance until one came to the vaulting boundary

walls and fortifications that earned the city its title of Fortress. Somewhere in that unmapped countryside, on a dirt road that could have been anywhere in Vrajbhoomi back on the mainland, a man with his face covered scurried as if the hounds of hell were after him. He kept glancing back from time to time to make sure he was not being followed. He was neither on horseback nor in a chariot, which was unusual considering that the only business here in this desolate district was possibly a bit of livestock trading, rearing, breeding, and related activities. Even the Dwarkans who occupied themselves with these activities had their farms and stables within easier reach of their city houses. For miles around, there was not a soul to be seen or a sign of human habitation. There were no mansions here, only the occasional farm surrounded by hundreds of sprawling acres of land, pastures, hills, valleys, lakes, and even open grassy plains. The population of horses outnumbered humans here by at least a hundredfold which was why the sight of a man on foot was even stranger. For any man to be walking—or running as this man was doing—was unusual in itself. To be doing so in the dark, finding his way only by the periodic flashing of lightning, was even more unusual.

He reached his destination and turned up a final cart track leading to a farm house with rows of stables and pens filled with cows and sheep and other livestock. This was a very rich man's property, but one who lived unostentatiously. Every citizen of Dwarka worked only because he or she wished to work, not to earn a living. Many worked because they took pride in their profession or occupation. This was a man who had been rich and powerful long before Dwarka was built and every member of the Yadava nation was given personal wealth and housing sufficient to last them a lifetime. He worked because work defined him. This was the house of Krtavarma.

The stranger went around to the rear door, the one that led directly to the stables, and knocked on it. After a moment, the flickering light of a lantern could be seen through the closed windows as it approached. Then the door was flung open and an ancient man with a cowherd's simple garb and long

white hair, white eyebrows and mustache and a flowing long white beard stood there, filling the doorway with his height and presence. Even at this age, the old Vrishni was still a formidable man to confront. Thin yet tightly muscled with long angular limbs and a broad frame and hands, the woodaxe gripped in his right hand hung discretely by his side. Yet the visitor knew that if he made the wrong move or said the wrong words, that axe would swing like a bolt of lightning from the sky above, parting him from his life in an instant. Age had not slowed the old revolutionary's fighting skills. Farm life had only toughened him further. The retired life of a rich Dwarkan had not mellowed or softened him at all. He looked ready to take on any threat—and seemed capable of surviving it as well.

He stared down at the visitor for a moment, saying nothing. Finally, he turned and went into the house without a word. The visitor paused, glanced back, his sweating face revealing his anxiety in a flash of lightning, then followed the older man inside. He was slow to shut the door and a gust of wind rushed through the house, slamming it to with a loud bang. He cringed and shuffled through the dark farm house until he found the only lighted room. The old Vrishni stood in the center of the room, the lantern placed on a hook hanging from the ceiling. The old man had his back to the door through which the visitor came, and even his posture seemed discouraging. He remained standing with his back to the visitor, making no attempt to be hospitable or even polite.

After waiting several moments, the visitor finally summoned the courage to speak. 'Lord Krtavarma, I need your help.'

Krtavarma turned and glared at him. In the yellow light of the lantern, his dark features and white hair made an odd contrast. The light caught the whites of his eyes, flickering in his pupils. He looked formidable, every inch the man who had once led his tribe in revolt against the dreaded Kamsa the Usurper and his demon army. His was a face that had seen a

great many things, both done by others to him and his people, as well as those things he had done to other people.

'My help?' he said. 'So you need it now? You didn't need my help when you murdered Satrajit in cold blood, did you? What makes you come scampering to my door in the dead of night like a criminal at large?'

Satadhanva looked down, making no attempt to conceal his shame. 'I did a terrible thing. I do not deny it. But I had my reasons.'

'Yes,' Krtavarma said. 'You wanted everything of value that your clansman possessed and were willing to kill him for it. His daughter. His wealth, power, position. And above all, his magical jewel. Those were your reasons, were they not?'

Satadhanva did not raise his eyes. 'He had promised both to me. He said once he was prosperous enough, he would have no need of the jewel. He would give it to me as dowry with Satyabhama.'

'He did, did he?' Krtavarma asked. 'And you expect me to believe that because you say it?'

Satadhanva raised his eyes to the older, much taller man. Though not short of stature himself, he was a good head below the towering tribal chief. Even with a thinning head of white hair and a body eroded by age and war injuries, Krtavarma was still a formidable specimen of a man. Satadhanva

sounded almost as if he was pleading when he said, 'It is the truth. I give you my word.'

'The word of a murderer?' Krtavarma turned his head to spit but held back the urge. It would not do to spit inside his own domicile. 'Phuagh! Even if he said so, he was a merchant, a trader and negotiator. He made deals and broke deals every day. It was his shrewd knack for promising more than he could deliver yet making people believe he would indeed deliver that earned him that extra margin of profit. And he did that day after day even though he possessed a gem that was capable of generating more wealth in a month than he could earn through his craftiness in years. That was Satrajit, for better or worse. A trader in words as well as goods. Just because he let you down and did not deliver on his promise did not give you cause to murder him in cold blood.'

Satadhanva seemed to grow sullen. 'It is done,' he said, the shrug audible in his words rather than any movement of his shoulders.

'So it is,' Krtavarma said, quieting down. 'And now, you are on the run from King Ugrasena and Vasudeva's soldiers. Fortunately for you, the brothers Krishna Balarama are still in Hastinapura, intervening on behalf of their cousins the Pandavas in their time of need. You are fortunate they are not in Dwarka or else you would have been in their custody by now. Once they return, you will stand no chance. They cannot be eluded as easily as soldiers.'

'But if they catch me...' Satadhanva said, then waited as a crash of thunder overwhelmed his words. 'They will find out everything,' he finished when the last peals had died away.

'Yes,' Krtavarma said, 'That would not do. It would not do at all.'

He turned and looked squarely at the fugitive, eyeing him as if sizing up a prize head of cattle for an auction. Satadhanva squirmed under his scrutiny. The old man had his hand on the hilt of what appeared to be a shepherds short crook, tucked into the waistband of his garment, but Satadhanva knew that the tip of the "crook" came off to reveal a blade long enough and sharp enough to use in a fight. All the conspirators and rebels carried one, showing each other the blade in private to prove their loyalty to the cause. He carried one as well but had left it at the entrance of the house out of respect to his host as was the tribal custom. He knew that if that large hand with the white hairs sprouting from the knuckles were to grasp that wooden end and draw out the weapon, he would be dead within an instant. Krtavarma had probably killed more men in his lifetime than Satadhanva possessed kine in his cattle shed back home.

Satadhanva waited, bracing himself for the death-dealing blow he expected from Krtavarma.

The moment passed.

Krtavarma took his hand off the hilt of the weapon. He seemed to have made a decision. Satadhanva was relieved it had not involved drawing his weapon.

'I cannot assist you,' said the old war chief. 'My loyalty to Krishna Balarama dates back to the days of Kamsa the Usurper and the rebellion of the cowherds against the tyrant. I owe an oath of fealty to their father and step father Vasudeva and Nanda Maharaja. They are the only reason we are all here today, alive and well. They are the reason Dwarka itself exists. It is folly to attempt to stand against them.'

Satadhanva's heart sank as he heard Krtavarma's words. 'But you must help me, lord! Without your assistance, they will surely apprehend me.'

Krtavarma nodded. 'Surely. But when you commit a crime and flee, being apprehended is the price you risk. You knew the odds against you and yet you murdered Satrajit.'

Satadhanva was desperate. He reached inside the folds of his garments. Krtavarma's eyes sharpened with alertness and the aging warrior instantly grasped the hilt of his crook again. But his attitude changed when he saw

that the object that emerged in Satadhanva's hand was no weapon but something else entirely.

The jewel filled the night with its brilliance, emitting an eerie glamor that washed both men's faces from below, giving them the appearance of ghouls in a palace entertainment.

'Give me shelter and protection,' Satadhanva begged, 'and I will share the wealth of the jewel with you. It's resources are unlimited. We can have any luxury we desire. We will be masters of the earth and all upon it.'

Krtavarma's eyes gleamed as they viewed the object of power. More than a little of his resolve melted under its supernatural influence. Slowly, by degrees, he became visibly less resistant, more amenable to suggestion, more lustful and greedy. Such was the power of the jewel, no mortal could gaze upon it without succumbing to its luster. Satadhanva's anxiety was relieved as he watched craftily the effect of the jewel upon the old cowherd. He knew well how the jewel affected a man. He himself was addicted to its power. In moments, Krtavarma would be lost to its power and would do anything within his abilities to ensure it stayed within his reach.

Just then a sound rang out in the night

The sound was like nothing else anyone in Dwarka had ever heard before. It sounded like a cowbell echoing in a temple but it was so much louder and more powerful than any cowbell, or even the largest temple bell, and its single tone was so pervasive, it seemed to reverberate within Satadhanva's heart. It came from nowhere and from everywhere at once. It was

deafeningly loud, drowning out all other sounds, thoughts, feelings, sensations, forcing one to be instantly alert and pay complete attention to its pealing echoes. By the time those echoes had died away, Satadhanva found himself devoid of all that he had been thinking, feeling, experiencing only a moment ago. It was as if his entire being had been cleansed as effectively as a slate board wiped clean of limestone markings.

He saw from Krtavarma's face that the older man had experienced a similar break with consciousness.

The two men stared at one another for a long moment, trying to remember why they were here and what they had been talking about.

Then both became aware of the jewel, still pulsing and throbbing with light in Satadhanva's hand. Both flinched at exactly the same moment, Satadhanva overcome by the urge to fling the wretched thing as far away from himself as possible, Krtavarma recoiling as if from a hissing cobra.

'That object is evil in the wrong hands,' Krtavarma said, backing away, shielding his view of the jewel with one raised hand, the other hand's fist resting tightly on the hilt of his crook. 'Begone and take it with you. I want no part of your crimes or your escape.'

'But the jewel, the power, think of the power,' Satadhanva cried. The words choked in his throat even as he spoke them.

Krtavarma shook his head. 'When the brothers Krishna Balarama catch you, as they surely will, no power will or riches will be worth facing their wrath.'

And with a shout of dismissal, he drew his crook and flailed it at Satadhanva. If Satadhanva had not dodged the blow, it would have cracked his skull open. As it was, Satadhanva barely managed to leap back in time, the crook passing within a fraction of his head and shoulder. Krtavarma raised it again to strike, his speed and vigor belying his ancient appearance, and Satadhanva turned and ran, clasping the jewel to his belly. He stopped when he was out of Krtavarma's dwelling and heard the sound of a door slamming shut. He turned to see that the veteran had shut his door and from the sound, was bolting it securely, shutting Satadhanva out.

Aware he was exposed and vulnerable to apprehension, Satadhanva wrapped the cursed jewel in his garments again and began running once again. His garments, partially dry from the long respite in Krtavarma's house and the warmth of the oil lanterns within, were soaked through in moments. Mud squelched underfoot as the fugitive ran in misery through the stormy night.

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Akrura blanched when he saw the figure at his doorstep. All Dwarka was afire with the news of Satrajit's violent demise and the theft of the magical Syamantaka gem. Looking at the harried face of the fugitive accused of the murder and the knotted bundle held tightly in his hands, he had no doubt that to even permit the man to pass over his threshold could be misconstrued. Despite the stormy weather, he knew that the royal troops were scouring Dwarka for the murderer and it was only a matter of time

before someone reported having seen a figure running at this ungodly hour in this downpour up the long muddy marg that led to Akrura's home.

More importantly, he had been to the palace earlier and learned from Uddhava that Satyabhama had left for Hastinapura to personally inform her husband and brother-in-law of her loss. That meant that Krishna-Balarama would be journeying homewards—spanning the long distance in mere hours in their Pushpaks—and once they came home...There would be hell to pay.

Akrura shook his head and started to shut the door in the fugitive's face. He restrained himself from even speaking, not wishing any word he might say to be misinterpreted. Akrura had acted as an emissary for both the late Prince Kamsa and his enemies, the rebel Vrishni nation led by King Vasudeva at that time, and he had learned the hard way that words can be misinterpreted but actions are uncompromising in their honesty. He was about to heave the heavy door to with a resounding slam.

But then Satadhanva did something unexpected.

He had opened the knotted bundle in his arms as Akrura had stood looking at him, debating the risks and odds of even speaking to him, and now he held up the contents of the bundle.

A single glittering object.

Syamantaka.

Akrura stared at the gem for a long silent moment.

The voice in his head, the one that was telling him in no uncertain terms, why he could not, should not, must not, under no circumstances entertain even the notion of assisting this murderer and fugitive...the voice was suddenly silenced, like the cry of a dying man cut off by a final cut.

Something stirred deep within his soul that he could not name.

Against his will, against all his desires and logic and dharmic reasoning, his hands began to draw the heavy door back, back, back.

Until it was fully open again, allowing ample room for the man outside to enter Akrura's abode.

As if from a great distance, Akrura watched as he permitted Satadhanva to enter his house, dripping and trailing muddy tracks—watched the man enter, but in fact, Akrura had eyes only for the object in Satadhanva's hand, that precious glittering beauty that silenced all voices of reason and made dharma itself seem irrelevant.

Akrura shut the door—and sealed his fate.

The sun was high in the sky when Dwarka came into view. Despite his load of worries, Krishna felt his spirits lift at the sight of the island fortress. Even though just a speck on the western horizon, it warmed his heart to return home. The past weeks—nay, the past years—had rushed by in a neverending queue of crises and conflicts, leaving him with no time to simply stop and revel in the beauty of his new homeland.

"Daruka," he said, choosing to speak aloud instead of through the mindspeak he now favoured when addressing his charioteer. The sound of his own voice seemed more apt for the request he was about to make.

The sarathi turned back, a pleasant questioning look on his face. "My Lord?" He too preferred to be spoken to and to speak using normal human means of communication. Despite being the charioteer of a flying horseless vehicle and serving One he knew well to be no ordinary Yadava lord or king, Daruka still remained at heart a simple sarathi. He loved the sound of his master's voice actually speaking aloud. Krishna knew this and spoke as much to please his friend and driver as for his own satisfaction.

"Bring us in slowly and stop within view of Dwarka."

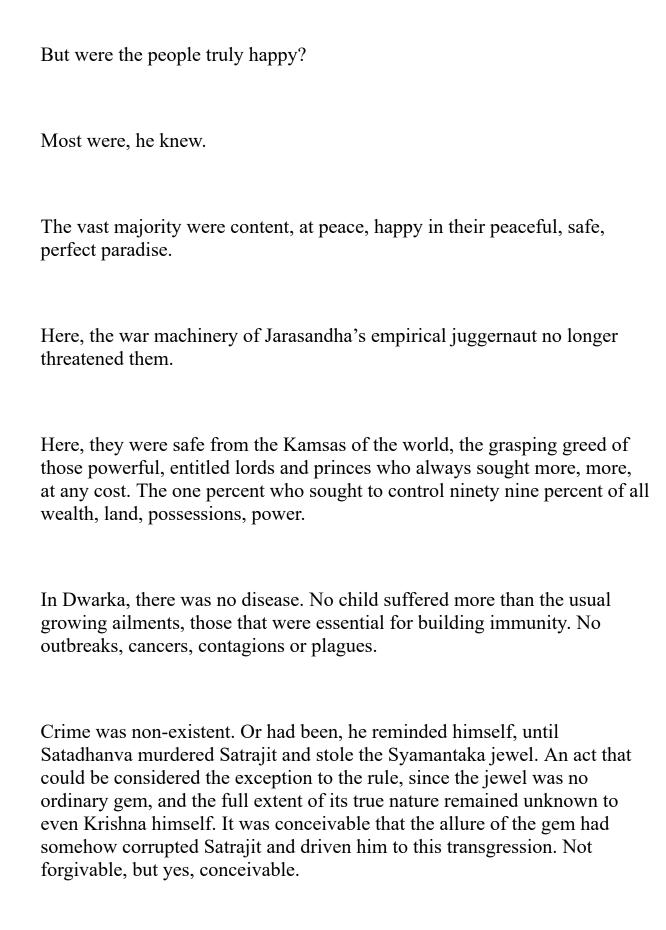
Daruka smiled and turned back. Even though Pushpak was controlled by will and not by reins or physical means, he still preferred to face the way he was flying rather than look one direction and fly another—as Krishna often did. Then again, not everyone could split their attention and consciousness into multiple infinite parts and apply each part to a radically different task,

all at once, as Krishna could. Daruka took his job seriously and regarded the control of Pushpak as nothing less than a fine art. Being human, he took pride in giving his all to the task, even though Pushpak was capable of flying precisely to a specific place even if the driver simply thought of said place. To watch Daruka at work, one might think he was manipulating a half dozen sets of reins all at once, controlling an entire sixteen horse team! Krishna smiled at the intentness and sincerity with which the charioteer performed his duty, no less than an artist at work.

The artfulness showed in the immaculate slowing of the sky chariot as it approached within viewing distance of the island kingdom. Krishna noted that Daruka did not slavishly follow his instructions but used his own judgement to adjust the vaahan's approach, bringing them to a genial halt in mid air at the perfect height, distance and angle to provide the most panoramic view.

The view was breathtaking.

Krishna stood for a long moment, revelling in the sheer beauty of the great island kingdom. Dwarka lay like a paradise before him, a jewel-perfect world where everything seemed more beautiful than anywhere else on Prithviloka. The sky seemed bluest here, the lakes and ponds bluer, the trees and foliage greener, the crops richer, the grass more lush, the waterfalls crystal clear, the birds more colourful...The houses were resplendent, each one a palace in its own right. There was no poverty in Dwarka, each resident had as much land and possessions as any person could desire for one lifetime, the soil was always fertile, the land untouched by drought, famine, excessive storms or natural calamities. Nature was in perfect balance here, her bounty infinite.



People wanted for nothing, had everything, craved nothing.

Everything was as perfect as could be, while still remaining human. While still remaining Yadava, he thought with a smile. For the boisterous, larger than life, louder than life, big-hearted character of the nation remained alive, vibrant, in no way diminished. Every festival was celebrated with even greater pomp and joy than in Mathura during King Ugrasena's heyday. Every occasion a reason to celebrate, every day a reward for merely being alive.

And yet.

And yet, there was something amiss.

Something that was not quite right.

It was not merely Satadhanva's crime—that could be regarded as an exception. It was something more. Something he could smell even now, in the gentle perfumed breeze that wafted from his beautiful kingdom, a hint of something to come, something foreboding, something with the faintest hint of rottenness: that sense of a fruit fully ripened and on the verge of going overripe.

He had already received reports of the unrest in many families, clans, even entire tribes making noises of discontent against others.

Some of these were mere disturbances dating back centuries, old family disputes or feuds that always flared up from time to time but could be easily quelled once everyone realised that there was no reason to fight anymore—everything worth fighting over could be gained merely by appealing to King Vasudeva.

But some were far more than disturbances—they were deeply disturbing.

These were the ones that troubled him.

Seemingly originating from pointless causes, they spiralled shockingly quickly into major outbreaks of violence, abuse, property damage, even riot-like situations which had to be quelled by sending in soldiers.

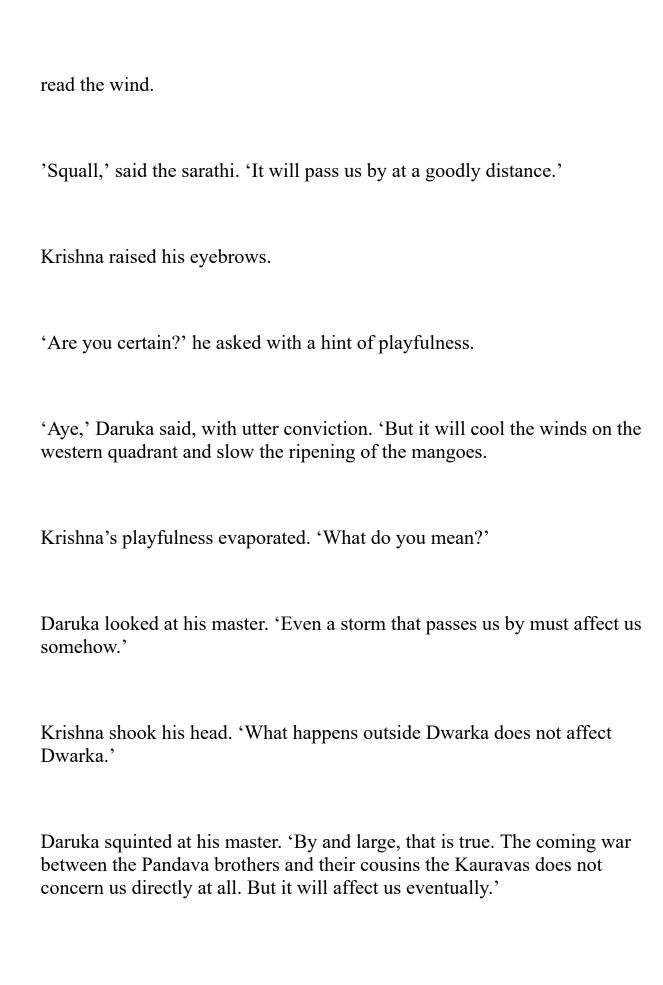
There were casualties. Many fatal.

And these incidents were growing more frequent and closer together.

There was no denying it anymore.

Something was rotten in the state of Dwarka.

But what was it?
What had tipped the balance of this perfect world?
What snake had crept into paradise and poisoned the apple?
As he stood at the railing of Pushpak, buffeted by the aromatic breezes from Dwarka, even scenting the delicate fragrance of the flowering Parijata tree, Krishna sensed another colder wind touch his skin.
He glanced out to sea and glimpsed a faint speckle of grey on the far south-eastern horizon.
A storm was brewing there.
He sent his consciousness up into the ether and saw in a moment that the storm would not even pass within a thousand miles of his beloved Dwarka.
As all storms did, for Dwarka remained untouched by the vagaries of Nature in the world at large.
Back in the Pushpak, looking out of his own eyes again, he glimpsed the middle-aged charioteer looking in the same direction, sniffing as if trying to



Krishna was about to reply but stopped himself. 'Perhaps. But how could you know that for a certainty?' He gestured at the faint speck of grey on the horizon. 'Or that a storm so far distant would affect the ripening of fruit in Dwarka? Are you not drawing too great a conclusion from too little information?'

Daruka shook his head. 'Nay, my Lord Krishna. Dwarka may be isolated, segregated, protected, hidden, secreted in this corner of existence, safe from all danger and enemies. But it is still affected by everything that happens in the rest of the world.'

Krishna frowned. 'It is not so. We have no famine, no drought, no disease, no war, no enemies, no crime. We are an island unto ourselves. What happens in the world does not concern us.'

Daruka looked down, avoiding challenging Krishna with a direct look, his tone respectful, calm, assured. 'My old grandmother used to say, "As long as we are in the world, we are of the world. All its problems are our problems. Everything that happens affects everyone. That is the simple fact of existence."'

Krishna stared at him for a long moment, lost in contemplation.

Finally, Daruka raised his eyes and asked gently, 'Shall we go home, my Lord?'

Krishna nodded	l silently, still ab	osorbed in tho	ught.	
	•		C	
Daruka flew the	em home.			

Balarama pounded on the door one more time then decided to kick it down. He raised his foot and was about to apply it to the stout wood when a shout gave him pause.

He turned to see Krtavarma riding up from the fields. Even at the ripe old age of a hundred and twenty seven years, the Vrishni cow-lord still sat a horse as if he was off to war. His fierce eyes blazed from his white-moustached face and even his grey hair, knotted at the back, did not diminish his warrior aspect. Balarama lowered his foot and waited. Krtavarma leaped off the horse and strode forward in a single motion, raising his hand belligerently, 'Lord Balarama, is this how Dwarka treats me now? By breaking down my door without so much as a by-your-leave?'

Balarama held out his hands in a mollifying gesture. 'Lord Krtavarma, I have no quarrel with you personally. But this is a serious matter. I have information that the fugitive Satadhanva took refuge in your house last night. When you did not answer your door—'

'I did not answer because I was not home,' Krtavarma thundered. 'I was out doing an honest day's work as any working Vrishni should be doing. Instead of hounding fugitives who should not have been permitted to commit their crimes to begin with.'

Balarama blinked, taken aback by that riposte. 'Are you suggesting that we should have apprehended Satadhanva before he committed murder and theft?'

Krtavarma unstrapped his walking staff from his horse's saddle, reminding Balarama of the many whispered tales of violence committed by that equally legendary staff. 'No, boy. I am questioning the wisdom of allowing such an object to be left in an ordinary citizen's possession. There is such a thing as too much temptation. A little can be overcome through resolve. But leave an object of such power unguarded and even the strongest will will yield eventually.'

Balarama's eyes narrowed—the sudden demotion from "Lord" to "boy" was only part of the reason. 'Are you saying you yielded to it, Lord Krtavarma?'

He said this in a deadly quiet tone, leaving no doubt that he was not merely making conversation but asking a question in his official capacity.

Krtavarma was no fool. An old angry man, certainly. But no fool. He looked up at Balarama shrewdly, his eyes calm now, but the anger only banked, not depleted. 'I came close, I will admit,' he said, then dropped his gaze in a manner that suggested embarrassment. 'Closer than I thought possible.'

Krtavarma looked out into the distance, at nothing in particular.

Balarama realised he had never seen the old man embarrassed before.

He waited, knowing when to hold his tongue. Old and curmudgeonly Krtavarma might be, but he was Balarama's elder, a legend among the Vrishni and a champion of the nation. He deserved the right to state this side of the story in his own time and manner.

Finally, Krtavarma looked at Balarama again. 'Satadhanva came to me last night, it is true. I admitted him into my house for a brief talk, that too I admit. He asked me for sanctuary. Begged me. Offered me the use of the jewel as a reward. And for a moment there, I...I felt it. I felt its power, its attraction.'

The old man bared his teeth and grimaced in disgust. 'Never in my life was I so tempted by anything. Not by wine. Sensual pleasures. Power. The treasures of a kingdom.' He looked at Balarama with a different expression. 'Did you know that Prince Kamsa once offered me great rewards if I were to betray my people and give up the location of Vasudeva?'

Balarama shook his head. He did not know that.

Krtavarma nodded. 'It was during the time we were rebels against Mathura, in hiding, foraging and foraying against King Kamsa's forces. He sent me the offer through an emissary. It was not offered as seduction, it was a veiled threat: an armored hand offered in mock friendship. Had I taken it, I would have been as much a slave to the Usurper as Bana or any of those other misguided fools. I was not tempted for so much as an instant. I laughed at the offer, and intensified the fight. I did not succumb then and would never have succumbed. But this, this evil thing...it has such power! Last night, I experienced a moment of weakness such as nothing I have ever felt before. It turned my head if only for a moment! I did not know such a thing was possible.'

Balarama was moved by the old veteran's confession. Krtavarma was legendary as a man of iron, the warrior and leader who had never shown weakness or doubt at any time during the bitter struggle for survival under the Usurper's yoke, and even before, during earlier battles. He was a rock that his people rallied to in times of distress. To admit to such a moment of weakness was a profound show of respect to Balarama. The "boy" notwithstanding, Balarama knew when he was being treated with grace.

'You honor me with your confidence, Lord Krtavarma,' he said now, forcing himself to choose his words carefully. Diplomacy was Krishna's forte, not his, but he had been a statesmen long enough by now to know when to use a sweet tongue rather than a bitter rod. 'But if there is one man in Dwarka who I would expect to withstand the lure of power, it is thyself.' He used the formal tone deliberately, knowing that the veteran, of a bygone era, appreciated such niceties. 'However potent the jewel's seductive powers, it would never have swayed thee. Of this I have no doubt.'

To his surprise, Krtavarma reacted by grasping hold of Balarama's vastra and leaning in close to his face, close enough that Balarama could smell the ripe odor of soma on the old warrior's breath. 'Young un, heed me now,' said the man who had once famously beaten down a score of Mathura's finest soldiers with nothing but a cowherd's crook, leaving every last one maimed for life or dead. 'I did not withstand the gem because I am strong. It was the gem what rejected me! You hear me, boy? That jewel is evil in the form of a precious gem. It pulses with life within, and possesses a mind wicked and cunning as any sorcerer wielding asura maya. It tried to seduce me and I was seduced! But it did not find me a fit match for its purpose, and so it released its hold on me. That was the only reason why you are standing here bandying words with me and not lying dead and brainless on my floor. Do you ken my meaning, son?'

Balarama was taken aback by the sudden intensity and violence in the old man's expression. Lying dead and brainless? Does he think he could face me and live, the old fool? But he saw the veteran meant every word he spoke. Krtavarma was not exaggerating his own prowess as a fighter – the old man had witnessed Balarama's special abilities, if superhuman strength and near-invulnerability could be called that, in numerous battles beginning with the siege of Mathura by Jarasandha's forces over a decade earlier. Since then, Balarama had only grown stronger and fiercer in battle. He means the jewel would have given him the strength to confront me—and win! That was the old cowherd's true meaning: whatever he had experienced when he encountered the thief Satadhanva the night before had convinced him that the enchanted gem could gift its possessor enough strength to face even Balarama himself. He saw in Krtavarma's bleary eyes that the old man genuinely believed this to be true.

'I do,' Balarama said slowly, 'and my brother and I are well aware—'

'You are aware of dung!' said Krtavarma. 'The jewel is pure evil. Its presence in our kingdom has poisoned all Dwarka, all Vrishni, all the Yadava nation. We are better off without it! Satadhanva has taken it and fled Dwarka? So be it. Let it go with him. Do not chase it down. For if you go and regain possession and bring it back here, it will resume its poisonous work again. Leave it be! Do you hear my words, son of Vasudeva?'

Balarama looked at him cautiously, not sure whether to be irritated by the old man's agitated manner and tone, or grateful for his well-meant advice. 'I hear you and ken you well, Lord Krtavarma. But my brother has charged me with the task of reclaiming the jewel and bringing the thief and murderer Satadhanva to justice along with any others who may have aided and abetted his flight. It is my dharma to fulfil that task.'

Krtavarma cursed and turned away, striking his crook against the wall hard enough to shatter a splinter loose. The stone clattered to the floor. Krtavarma kept his head averted, as if trying to restrain himself from launching a full-out attack at his visitor. With his grizzled face turned away, he spat out one final angry torrent:

'Leave my home, then. Leave and go in search of your wretched treasure. But heed my words before you go, brother of Krishna—Dwarka is facing a great crisis. What is happening in Hastinapura is only one part of a greater evil creeping across the world. That gem is a part of that evil. Bringing it back here will only hasten the inevitable. If you consider chasing it down to be your dharma then consider this: Is not protecting the Yadava nation your dharma too?'

'Of course,' said Balarama, moving towards the door as he spoke. The old man's mind has finally slipped the pasture, he is babbling now. 'With my life.'

Krtavarma turned as Balarama was at the door. Despite the intensity of his voice and manner, his rheumy eyes were brimming not with rage but with tears, Balarama saw. He was shocked by the sight. 'Then know this: the end is coming for our people. That evil gem will hasten that end.'

Before Balarama could respond to that extraordinary statement, Krtavarma turned and went inside his inner chambers, leaving Balarama alone.

After standing a moment undecided, Balarama exited the old man's home. But even as he ascended to the sky in his Pushpak, his thoughts remained with Krtavarma for a long while, turning over what the veteran had said.

Perhaps the old man was not babbling after all.

Perhaps he had spoken a grim truth that even Balarama himself had glimpsed but had not wanted to examine too closely: Dwarka could not stay in excelsior forever. Entropy would take its toll eventually. All good things, even great things, must come to an end. The same held true for this island-fortress in the sea.

The gem will hasten that end.

They finally found the thief and murderer in Vaidehi, less than a yojana out of the capital city Mithila. Krishna's face was grim as he instructed Daruka to hover as he contemplated their next move.

The chase had taken far longer and been much more arduous than either of them had expected. The troubles in Dwarka had worsened during the time they had spent in Hastinapura, and the rift in the Kuru dynasty had begun to affect the Yadava nation as well. Once back in Dwarka, they had been forced to stay for far longer than they anticipated, dealing with one crisis after another.

Krishna had repeatedly ordered Balarama to leave and track down Satadhanva on his own. Balarama was after all, the constable of the city and in direct charge of the man-hunt. But the nature of the crises in Dwarka had necessitated his staying. More than once, the bickering and feuding between the clans had to be resolved by a vote of the King's Council and Balarama's vote was precious there, especially with Akrura absent, Satyajit dead, Uddhav gone to Vraj, and Krtavarma turning against them in almost every show of hands.

Even with Balarama there, things had not gone too well.

They had managed to stem the fermentation but the rot was in the core. Dwarka was a basket of fruit waiting to spoil. A few bad mangoes had used the frequent absences of the brothers to spread their rebellious seeds and the discontent had taken root now. The theft of the Syamantaka jewel had

somehow given impetus to the civil unrest, providing a trigger point and rallying cause around which many of the naysayers built their edifices of outrage. To hear some of these angry-eyed young men and women speak, one would think that Krishna and Balarama, and their father Vasudeva, had done more harm than good to the Yadava people. Balarama found his fists clenching and jaw tightening hard enough to crack betel nut to bits more than once during these sessions, and it was only the long years of statesmanship and the mellowness of age that gave him the endurance to tolerate such talk.

'You would think we're worse than Jarasandha, Kamsa and all the rest of their demons put together,' he sputtered in barely controlled rage after one day-long series of rants by the most vocal of their political opponents. 'Why is it we have to listen to this offal being spewed in our own Sabha hall, bhraatr? Why do we not simply smash their heads or show them the bottom of the ocean?'

Krishna looked as livid as Balarama. He even nodded slowly. 'I feel your rage, bhai. But it's not our Sabha hall. It is the court of the people of Dwarka. Any citizen of the Yadava nation has the right to stand there and speak their mind freely. This freedom is one of the very things that makes this a great nation. You know this already.'

Balarama hawked and spat a mouthful of blood red betel juice. He had taken to chewing the nut regularly of late; it did not help mitigate the experience of having to listen to outspoken young people who were not even born at the time of the siege of Mathura set fire to every good thing Krishna and he and all the other veterans had done to save the city-state and its people from certain annihilation, but it kept him from biting his own tongue at least.

'That's a disgusting habit,' Krishna said.

In response, Balarama held out his silver case to him.

Krishna sighed, glanced away guiltily, but took one himself. 'Men must have their vices.'

'And fools their moment of glory in the Sabha!' Balarama said, resisting the urge to thump the side of his fist into the nearest wall – he had broken too many walls and pillars that way over the years, and right now, they were passing the houses of one of the very upstarts they were speaking of; the last thing he wanted was to be perceived as being petty and vindictive. If I have to do something vindictive, it will bloody well be epic! Like smashing the whole house down, followed by the heads of every last one of the rabble rousers.

He sighed. 'I miss the good old days. Things were simpler then.'

'Which ones would those be, bhai?' Krishna asked. 'Back when we were battling demons every day in Vraj? Or resisting Jarasandha's 18 sieges?'

Balarama looked at him and shrugged. Point taken.

They had reached the Parijata Gardens. Krishna often walked here after a long day in the Sabha. Balarama knew the sights and sounds of children

playing, young lovers wandering hand in hand, old'uns sitting and enjoying the magical healing airs of the sacred tree eased his tension. He had to admit it did the same for him too. Though there's nothing like a good hammering to relieve stress far more effectively. Merely letting go of his anger might work for Krishna; Balarama needed more concrete action to achieve his relaxation.

Still, he had to admit it was pleasant, with the setting sun setting the gigantic overreaching branches of the mile wide tree on fire, as children and their parents floated and danced in the air beneath its magical canopy. Watching two young boys toss a bladder-ball to and fro in mid air made him think wistfully back to the years in Vrindavan where Krishna and he had been young boys with what seemed like all the time in the world and all the mischief imaginable to fill in the time. Then he saw the young boys' parents rising up through the air towards their sons and recognized them as two of the more rabid activists on the opposition. His smile snapped off and his mood soured instantly.

'I will have to go back to Hastinapura,' Krishna announced.

Balarama looked at him silently. He could say a great deal but what was the point? He knew the gravity of the situation in Hastinapura as well as Krishna did and he knew that the crisis there was far greater than the civil unrest here in Dwarka. Their cousins the Pandavas were suffering and enduring far too much for far too long. There was no doubt that war was coming to the Kuru nation, and when it did, it would sweep the Yadavas and all the other Bharata nations up with it, in a tidal wave of bloodletting. There were a hundred reasons why he should have said, "No, you can't go now," but he spoke not one of them aloud. If Krishna said he had to go, then he had to go.

'It is almost time, isn't it?' Balarama asked instead.

Krishna nodded slowly. 'The wave is coming. It will sweep our world away in a rush of blood and madness. The greatest war ever waged in human history.'

Balarama stopped chewing his betel nut. He turned and loosed a stream of juice as discretely as possible, trying to ignore the dirty looks a trio of old ladies gave him as they passed by. He wiped his mouth on the back of his upper garment. 'We will be ready.'

Krishna clapped a hand on Balarama's tree-trunk of an arm. 'Nobody can be ready for this, bhai. The Mother of all wars. We will fight nevertheless.'

A few weeks later, Krishna was gone and Balarama was spending even more of his energy resisting the urge to pound skulls and smash pillars as he endured the constant hectoring and Sabha-hall maneuvers of their opponents. Given a choice, he would have traded this passive-aggressive politicking for the Mother, Father, Grandfather and Grandmother of all wars put together.

When he received the message from a rider bringing back a reply from Mithila that a 'foreigner' matching Satadhanva's description had been sighted in an ashram near the city, he had almost hugged and kissed the courier on his cheeks to thank him. Finally! A reason to leave the Sabha and go do something real for once!

Krishna had joined him en route, coming directly from Indraprastha, the new city-kingdom built by the Pandavas in Kurujangala after the last settlement with their cousins the Kauravas. Balarama was careful not to comment on the weariness on his younger brother's face but it had shocked him more than a little. It was not just that Krishna had aged a little more visibly in the past several months that he had been with their cousins, it was the darkening of his spirits that was shocking. He had wanted to embrace Krishna and ask him everything, but there was not enough time. They had to reach the fugitive before he went on the run again.

Now they hovered over a dense forest. There was a little clearing in the middle of the vast expanse of green. A place where a few trees had been cut down and a small complex of huts raised in the manner of rishis and sadhus of the region. That was the ashram in question.

'Down,' Krishna said to his charioteer. The flying chariot fell from the sky like a stone, plunging vertically straight down in a controlled descent that startled a flock of kraunchya flying south.

Balarama instructed his pushpak to descend as well.

Time to catch a murderer and thief.

'There's nothing there except a tiny hovel,' Balarama said as they approached the glen.

He sniffed the air again, rubbing the back of his hand against his bulbous nose. 'A stinking tiny hovel.'

Krishna ignored him, striding forward through the trees.

'Bhraatr, wait, it could be a trap. Let me—'

But Krishna was already into the woods and showed no signs of slowing or stopping.

Balarama followed him, cursing softly.

Krishna had murder in his eyes, he saw as he caught up with his brother's determined strides.

Balarama saw that look more often than he liked these days. It had been a difficult few years and the long gaps between the times they could spare to hunt down the errant jewel-thief did nothing to alleviate his brother's growing impatience. Satadhanva would find no mercy in those eyes, nor any pity in those arms.

The fabled patience that he had once depended upon to hold himself, Balarama, back, during impetuous moments, had been burned away by the roasting flames of Yadava politics, and the injustice meted out to their cousins in Hastinapura had scorched Krishna's good humor and gentleness. With those softer qualities removed, what emerged was the purity of the born warrior, a single-minded dedication to accomplishing a given task by the shortest, quickest means possible – if those means involved resorting to violence, so be it.

Well, the man is a murderer—of his own brother, no less—and a thief. He deserves what's coming to him. More than the original crime of murdering his brother Satrajit and stealing the Syamantaka jewel, Satadhanva's act had proved a tipping point in Dwarka politics. It had provided their opposition a handy tool with which to bash them, and bash them they had, merrily and with great gusto over the years. Difficult as it was to believe, the balance of Yadava power now weighed against the brothers and their family. Though Krishna continued to be steward of the Yadava nation and its most honored son, yet there were more and more voices joining the cacophony of complaints against him.

The biggest complaints concerned Krishna's increasing involvement in Kuru politics. The injustices being served upon their Pandava cousins did not find as much sympathy among the Yadavas as with the Vasudeva brothers. Many argued that the Kauravas had a legitimate claim and the Pandavas should accept their lot. All agreed that Yadava concerns outweighed Kuru concerns and the biggest bone of contention was

Krishna's long absences. Of late, with the rumors of imminent war growing to something more than mere gossip, the mood had begun to turn ugly. Why was Krishna dragging the Yadava people into a war that did not directly concern them? Perhaps Krishna's loyalties lay with his cousins more than with his own people? The last few sessions in Sabha had degenerated into ugly shouting spats. Krishna, of course, had not even been present to defend his actions or his absences. As usual.

Now, Balarama watched as his brother pushed aside an overhanging branch to step into a tiny clearing. A thatched hut leaned against a boulder there, just large enough for a tall man to lie down and stretch out. There were no signs of a cook-fire nearby. Barely any indication that a human being was in habitation here. A prickle of unease worried the back of his neck.

'Krishna,' he said—but Krishna was already at the hut and inside. Balarama cursed again and followed him.

The stench was overpowering, making him gag. He took a step back, retracing the step he had taken to enter the hut. Hut? It was not fit to call a hut. Or even a hovel. It was the length of a man lying down and its breadth was about as much as a child lying across. The filthy darkness within couldn't possibly harbor a living man, it was impossible. Balarama had seen dungeons smaller than this in Mathura when they had liberated the city from the Usurper's tyranny.

Even Krishna seemed taken aback.

The savior of Mathura stood uncertainly before the entrance of the tiny dungeon-like space, as if he had been expecting something else, anything but this. Balarama knew how he felt. How could the man who had stolen a gem powerful enough to produce mountains of gold out of thin air end up in...this? It beggared the imagination.

From the darkness that stank like offal came a voice, hoarse and weak with starvation and sickness. The reek of the man's illness wafted in waves on the spoiled air, betraying how close he was to putrefaction. He's dying, Balarama thought; he had smelled that sweet rotting stench often enough to know.

Krishna brought a light to flame with a snap of his fingers. It glowed luminescent blue in his fist, the light leaking out even though his closed fist, illuminated what little there was to see in that tiny dungeon of a hut.

At once, Balarama wished Krishna had not summoned the light. What he saw lying there on the ground at their feet, was not the man they had been chasing for years, not a murderer and thief. He was a wasted rotting living corpse.

Balarama backed away, gagging and retching as he went.

He leaned against the trunk of a sala tree, the contents of his belly emptying violently.

He straightened up, relishing the natural woody odors of tree and leaf and earth. It was perfume after the stench from the hut.

He had no stomach to go back there. He waited where he was till Krishna came out. It did not take long.

Krishna's face, illuminated by the light he still clenched in his fist, had lost its hardness. Replacing it was a look of mixed emotions. There was pain there, Balarama saw. Regret too. Some frustration. It was the face of a hunter who had been seeking an elusive prey for too long, and had finally tracked it down only to see it already trapped.

'It destroyed him,' Krishna said.

The guilt? Or the jewel itself? Balarama asked in mindspeak.

Both, Krishna replied.

Somehow, words spoken aloud felt inappropriate in such a place and time. That hovel behind them was not a hut, it was a funeral pyre waiting to be set alight. The man inside had died a long time ago; only the last vestige of his body remained.

Then he does not have the jewel, Balarama asked.

No, Krishna replied. He gave it away a long time ago, realizing too late its true goal. The corrupting power it wielded over him had infected him deeply already. It was the jewel's power that had made him commit his own brother's murder and steal it away from Dwarka in the first place. Once he realized how it had damaged him, he wanted nothing more to do with it. After it was gone, the full understanding of his actions came to him. He never forgave himself. He loved his brother dearly.

Balarama nodded. Which great guru had once said, "Guilt is the greatest punishment of all." So he came here to punish himself and eke out the last of his days?

Krishna gestured at the hovel. It is no less than a dungeon.

Balarama sighed, looking up at the twilight sky visible above the tree tops. He could see the faint specks of their Pushpaks hovering several hundred yards overhead. Why not simply return to Dwarka? We would have punished him just as harshly.

Because he did not want to be close to the wretched thing again, Krishna said grimly. And he had told the one he gave it to to return it to us safely. That was the last decent thing that poor soul did before he came here to die in misery.

Which that person obviously did not do, Balarama said. No surprise in that. Did he tell you to whom he entrusted the damned thing?

Krishna looked at him with the same familiar look of murder in his eyes. 'He did.'

Balarama sighed. Satadhanva, murderer of his own brother Satrajit, was dead. The thief and murderer had punished himself by eking out his last years in abject misery, a punishment worse than being incarcerated in a Yadava prison. But their task was not yet done. There was still another person to find and bring to justice. 'Who is it, bhai? Who would take the Syamantaka from a thief and murderer, knowing how much grief it had already caused Dwarka? Surely it must be a sworn enemy of our people?'

Krishna shook his head grimly. 'It was not. If anything, he is a hero and friend of our people. A former champion of Yadava independence. A friend of both our fathers and a great man. At least he was once.'

'Akrura,' Balarama said. 'So the rumors were right from the very outset and we set out on a fool's quest.'

'Not a fool's quest. We followed the trail of the jewel.'

'Which we have not yet found.' Balarama gestured at the hovel. 'Was it in there, bhraatr?'

'Nay,' Krishna admitted sadly. 'Would that it was here. All would have been much simpler.'

'But it is not here. And that means Akrura has had it all along. Perhaps it was he who murdered Satrajit in the first place. We should have been pursuing him, not Satadhanva all this while.'

'No, bhai. Akrura was indeed part of the conspiracy but this was all Satadhanva's doing. He confessed all his crimes to me in his last moments and I believe him. He only gave the jewel to Akrura when he came to realise its evil nature. That act of giving away the jewel condemned Satadhanva to certain death, because by then he had become dependent on the jewel's addictive energies to sustain himself. But once it was away from his person, he began to see sense again. He died fully aware of the terrible crimes he had committed and begged my forgiveness.'

Balarama's jaw worked. 'You may have forgiven him, bhraatr. But Akrura's crime is unforgivable. To be our own ally, one closest to our house, our clan, and then to commit such an act of betrayal. It is beyond acceptance.'

'The power of the gem is irresistible, Balarama. Do not underestimate its ability to manipulate those who are only human in nature. Akrura too may have come under its spell.'

'Perhaps. But I am not under any spell and I will not forgive him for this trespass. This exceeds all bounds of tolerance.'

Krishna put a strong hand on Balarama's powerfully muscled shoulder, seeking to calm him. 'Shantam, bhai. There is more at stake here than simple betrayal and justice. This could well be the conflict that pits Dwarka

into the civil war we have been struggling to prevent. Indeed, I fear that there is a larger conspiracy behind the repeated thefts of this Jewel, a conspiracy aimed directly at the heart of our peaceful democracy.'

Balarama did not say anything but the tension in those coiled muscles was palpable.

'Come now,' Krishna said, 'let us go end this long and frustrating quest. We still have the troubles of our nephews the Pandavas to deal with as well. That is a much larger issue than all the worries of Dwarka, for if Hastinapura goes to war then all of Jambu-dwipa will go to war. It is will be the mother of all conflicts. Once we find Akrura and secure the jewel again, we can move on to more pressing matters. I fear that civil war in Dwarka might well turn out to be the least of our worries.'

Long before they approached the city, Krishna and Balarama saw the light from the fires. It lit up the horizon and cast a glow on the ocean for yojanas around. From a distance, it made for a pretty picture: the island in the middle of the ocean lit up with festive lights. Except, it was the wrong season for festivities and those were not ritual lamps that were lit, they were the houses of Dwarka's citizens, burning.

Even Daruka had no comment to offer. He slowed the Pushpak as Dwarka came within view, circling the island-kingdom in a wide arc, allowing his lords a clear view of the entire city.

Krishna and Balarama both looked down at the rooftops and houses on fire. Several places were gutted already, others were smouldering where people had managed to put out a fire here or there. One entire section was blazing like a forest fire.

Even the gardens were burning in patches. And the fire was not too distant from the Parijata Tree itself.

The sounds of people rioting was faintly audible even at the height at which the Pushpak flew. Yadavas, killing, fighting, destroying... What was this madness? How had it come to this? After all the years of struggle, of overcoming superhuman odds, of fighting the tyranny of Kamsa, then the sieges of Jarasandha and a dozen other calamities and challenges that had threatened their people, was it all to be for naught? Was the fate of the

Yadava nation to end in bloody civil riot? Yadava killing Yadava? Brother murdering brother?

Or was this the way of all the Arya nations? Even in Hastinapura, what else was the conflict but brother against brother? Families, clans, fighting within themselves.

In the absence of an enemy without, we seek the enemy within.

Krishna felt his eyes watering, not from the billowing smoke or the heat of the fires, but from emotion.

I will not let it end this way. I will not.

And yet a voice within him said: And yet it will. No matter what you do. No matter how hard you fight it. This is the way your race ends, bathed in their own brothers' blood.

Perhaps, he thought back defiantly, but not today. Not if I can help it.

'Come, my brother,' he said to Balarama. 'Let us end this madness now.'

And without waiting even the moment it would take for Daruka to land the Pushpak, Krishna leaped over the side of the sky chariot from a half mile above the city.

Without a second's hesitation, Balarama jumped with him.

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Satyabhama was on the terrace of her palace apartment, watching with rising dismay as Dwarka burned. She sensed the approach of the Pushpaks long before they were within sight of Dwarka. Her awareness of her Lord Krishna's presence was so acute, she knew of his imminent approach the way a swallow senses the sun's imminence long before that majestic orb appears over the eastern horizon.

She saw the Pushpaks hover and the two figures leap from the sky chariots.

They fell like stones through the billowing smoke and flames, landing on the streets far below. She glimpsed the places where they landed but could not see their individual selves at this distance, obscured as her view was by the smoke and flames, and the streets filled with rioting Yadavas.

I must go to my Lord, she thought. I will aid him as best as I can. My clan is fighting in that mindless melee as well. They may assault my Lord without regard. My presence may help calm their fevered tempers.

But when she turned, there was a figure blocking her way.

'Sister?' she said, startled. 'Are you well? You do not look well.'

Rukmini's wan face, aged before its time, lined with the creases not of age but of worry, stared back at her with a peculiar sadness. Satyabhama was impatient to go but did not wish to seem rude to her sister queen. She was well aware of the tension between herself and Krishna's first wife, and was ever cautious to treat her elder with the utmost respect and humility at all times.

'Dwarka burns and you are the torch that set it ablaze,' Rukmini said.

The words were inflammatory but the tone in which they were delivered were devoid of any fire; they were spoken with a desultory wistfulness, like the comment of an elderly widow reflecting on the sad greyness of her life. The comparison to a widow was not just in Satyabhama's mind: Rukmini had taken to wearing garments with more white in their weave than any other colour. If one looked carefully, one could see that she did wear some colour in her garb, but the overall impression was that of a widow's stark attire. The impression was compound by Rukmini's perpetually mournful aspect and dull eyes.

Satyabhama wondered what was going through the mind of her sister queen that she had chosen to dress and act as if their husband was dead, when in fact he was very much alive and vigorous, but she dared not ask such a question. She feared the answer would be very similar to what Rukmini had just uttered: The day he married you, he left my life. I am no less than a widow. Or words to that effect. She shuddered.

Rukmini noted the shudder and looked over Satyabhama with that curious mixture of contempt and disaffection. 'Yes, you shudder at the sight of what you have wrought. A peaceful people at war with themselves. A nation torn apart by civil strife. It is good that you acknowledge your part. But what are you going to do about it?'

Satyabhama did not take provocation from Rukmini's accusation, nor did she attempt to acknowledge or debate the accusation itself. She knew that was what Rukmini wanted, to engage her in a fruitless argument which would justify heaping abuses on her. She had no desire to give her sister queen the opportunity for a fight.

'Permit me to pass, sister,' Satyabhama said gently, 'I must go to our Lord at once. He has need of my presence.'

Rukmini did not move. 'Our Lord has need of you, you say. What of those who have need of him? Do you ever think about their need?'

Satyabhama shook her head sadly. 'Sister, I have never meant to hurt you. If I have caused you offence in any way, please forgive me.'

'So at least you admit that you did wrong.'

- 'I did no wrong, sister,' Satyabhama said gently, 'but I can see you are greatly troubled, and it grieves me to see you suffer thus.'
- 'What do you know about my suffering? What do you care?' Rukmini's mood flared into open anger. 'You come into our lives, insinuate yourself between husband and wife—'
- 'I am his wife too,' she pointed out.
- '—And act as if you belong here. As if Dwarka is your own home.'
- 'My husband's home is my home.'
- 'You stir up rebellion in our peaceful metropolis. Stoke the flames of war. Foment unrest. All to serve your own ends.'
- 'I am not the cause of this rebellion, or this violence, as you well know.'
- 'You are the cause!' Rukmini cried out. 'Everything wrong is your fault! We were happy here before you came. We were content. And now everything is ruined, nothing is as it used to be.'
- 'Sister, Dwarka's problems were not my creation. The civil unrest—'

'I am not your sister! You are nothing to me. I would have you evicted from this house, exiled from Dwarka. You do not deserve to live in this paradise.'

Satyabhama saw that Rukmini was beyond reason now. The elder woman's beautiful features were twisted into a mask of anger and hatred. It was no use arguing with her further. She tried to walk away, but Rukmini blocked her path once more.

'Go now,' Rukmini said to her, 'go before you destroy everything! Go and never show your face here again.'

Satyabhama sensed that even the slightest contact might incense the woman further. She could not get past Rukmini without touching her. Forced to remain still, she tried one last time to appeal to her sister queen.

'What is happening here,' she said, 'in Dwarka, in the world beyond, is bigger than you or me, or any of us. It is a larger calamity befalling mortal kind. Our Lord knows this, and in your heart, so do you.' She gestured at the window nearest to them. 'Those unfortunates battling in the streets are caught up in the cycle of hatred and violence now, unable to see the truth. But you are better than they, Rukmini. You are a wise and knowledgeable woman. You know what I say is true. This is a time for all of us to work together, not fight one another. Only through unity can we overcome this crisis.'

Rukmini stared at her for so long, and so intensely, Satyabhama thought she was finally going to give in to her anger and raise a hand to assault Satyabhama.

Rukmini raised a hand—and pointed a finger at her. 'You are the only crisis. The moment you are gone, everything will be as before. I pray to Devi that day comes soon.'

Rukmini turned and walked away, her angry footfalls echoing down the marbled corridors. In another moment, she turned a corner and was gone.

Satyabhama sighed and shook her head, trying to clear it of the emotions surging through. She knew that Rukmini was too angry to see sense, but her words and her anger still hurt. There had been a time she had hoped they could both be friends and live together in peace and harmony. She had even fantasised that Rukmini could be a Kausalya to her Sumitra.

But this was not Ayodhya in the time of Rama.

It was Dwarka in the time of Krishna.

And peace and harmony were nowhere to be seen.

She sighed again and resumed her interrupted route, heading straight for the stairs that led to the stables. She hoped she could still reach soon enough to

be of service to Krishna and Balarama.

But even as she exited the palace, the familiar golden form of Krishna's Pushpak descended from the sky, suddenly enough to raise a small cloud of dust.

Through this cloud of dust, the form of her husband stepped towards her, his face as dark as his garments were stained.

'It is time,' he said. 'We must summon Garuda and go to war. It is the only way to end this.'

Dwarka lay in chaos.

Satyabhama looked down in dismay at the fires still smouldering, the crowds still rioting, the ranks of soldiers marching through every neighbourhood, clashing with citizens. The sounds of rioting and civil clashes travelled all the way up here to the Pushpak, hovering a thousand yards high.

'My Lord,' she said, turning to Krishna. 'Surely we cannot leave the people in such a state.'

Krishna turned sorrowful eyes to her. 'It is the people who wish us to leave.'

Balarama in his own Pushpak hovering next to Krishna's vehicle, hung his head sadly. 'Would that we had never lived to see such a day.'

Satyabhama could not reconcile herself to the fact. 'Is there nothing we can do to end the violence then?'

Krishna and Balarama looked at each other.

Krishna replied, 'There is only one thing that might appease them.'
Balarama said bitterly, 'It is their primary demand.'
Satyabhama looked at each of them in turn, unable to understand. 'What is it?'
Neither answered.
'Surely if there is a way to resolve this, we must take it, my Lord? Anything that ends this madness!'
Krishna sighed. 'Indeed. Both your brother-in-law and I agree whole-heartedly. Anything that ends this madness is worth undertaking.'
Satyabhama frowned. 'Then why are we not attempting to give them what they desire?'
Balarama said in a strange tone. 'We are, dear sister.'

'We are giving them exactly what they desire,' Krishna said, his voice sounding strange too. Satyabhama looked from one to the other again. 'I don't understand. What is their demand? Why do you both speak of it in such an odd manner? Is it something too terrible to acquiesce to?' 'No, dear wife. It is something quite easy to concede. For now at least. In the long run...' Krishna shrugged. 'In the long run, it will hardly matter anyway.' 'And you are already arranging to fulfil this demand?' 'We are doing so even as we speak,' Krishna said. 'Then why do you both look so sad? Should you not be happy that you are ending the civil violence that plagues Dwarka?' Krishna looked at her sadly, saying nothing for a moment. 'We are happy for Dwarka. But we are not happy.' 'What does that mean?'

'It means that the condition the warring factions of Dwarka demanded is nothing more than our exile.'

'Both of us,' Balarama added, 'The ouster of Krishna and myself from all political and administrative positions in the kingdom. We are to have no say in any decisions concerning the governance or welfare of Dwarka, now or in the future.'

Satyabhama pressed a hand to her chest, shocked. 'My Lord! But you are the ones who built Dwarka. You saved the Yadava nation by bringing them here, rescuing them from the seige of Jarasandha. If not for you, there would be no Dwarka.'

Balarama shrugged. 'We know that. You know that. They know that. Yet that is their demand. You asked us. We told you.'

Satyabhama's head reeled. 'And if...if you acquiesce to this absurd demand, for the sake of peace.'

'For the sake of peace,' Krishna agreed, 'we have already agreed.'

Satyabhama absorbed this new shock. 'If Balarama and you leave Dwarka and go into exile, will it end the differences between the warring factions?'

Krishna shook his head. 'That is impossible. Too many has happened, too many things have been said and done by all parties. Too many lives lost, property damaged or destroyed, too many loved ones caught up in the spiral of violence and retribution... The debris of this destructive conflict will continue to fall upon the shoulders of generations to come.'

'Then what is the point? Why should you and Balarama go into exile when even that will not end the violence?'

'Because we hope it will be the beginning of the end,' Krishna said.

'Even if it does not end the violence today, or anytime in the near future,' Balarama added, 'at least it will silence the loudest complaint voiced by our detractors.'

'Detractors?' Satyabhama cried. 'Call them what they are. They are your enemies, no less! Worse than our worst enemies because you have done everything for them and yet they treat you in this way!'

Balarama spread his arms, looking at Krishna as if to say Didn't I say the same thing?

Krishna said, 'They are still Yadavas. They are citizens of Dwarka. I am responsible for them, no matter what.'

'Even after they turn against you, invoke violence and abuse against you, demand your removal from your own father's and family's government, ask for you to go into permanent exile from your own home?' Satyabhama shook her head. 'They are responsible for their own destruction.'

'Perhaps,' Krishna said. 'And if that is the case, then I am responsible for them until they destroy themselves to the last man, woman and child. Until their death, or my own. That is what it means to love one's people.'

'Even if your people do not love you anymore?'

'Love is not dependent on reciprocity, Satyabhama. Love exists in its own right.'

Satyabhama shook her head. 'I do not agree. If they turn against you, you have every right to turn your face away from them. They are not your responsibility anymore. If they want you gone, then very well, we shall go. Never return to Dwarka. Let us be done with the Yadava nation then. Turn our backs on Dwarka forever. Give them what they want. Let them survive as best as they can without you.'

'They are as children of my flesh. I cannot turn my back on them no matter what they say or do. A father does not abandon his child because he has a tantrum.'

'This is no tantrum, Krishna. This is civil war! They have taken up arms against you. I saw you and Balarama-bhaiya fighting them in the streets.'

'We were restraining them from fighting each other,' Balarama interjected.

'At no time did we use force to assault or attack any of them.'

Satyabhama pointed to the cuts and bruises and marks on Krishna's face and body—then to Balarama. 'They assaulted you! They would kill you if they could. You showed great restraint in not waging war on them and destroying them all. With your powers you could have crushed them and their petty civil uprising like an elephant crushes a nest of ants, with a single stamp of a foot. Instead you acquiesced to their most unreasonable demand. You agreed to remove yourself from Dwarka. Now forget about them. Leave them be.'

'I cannot,' Krishna said sadly. 'I am a Yadava, they are my people to the end.'

'But how will you be of us to them if you do not return to Dwarka, if you do not continue to look after the kingdom's affairs and security?'

'I will watch and protect from afar.'

Satyabhama saw that there was no reasoning with Krishna. 'Very well then. If that is your final word on the matter, what else can I say?'

'You need say nothing, Satyabhama. You speak only the truth, your words are wise, and your heart is honest. But the Yadava nation is set upon the

path of self-destruction. Balarama and I have known it for a long time. We have tried to do everything within our power to prevent it, delay it, stop it. Nothing has succeeded. Now, we must endure it.'

Satyabhama looked away for a moment, unable to suppress the tears brimming in her eyes. 'It is unendurable.'

Krishna took her in his arms, touching the wetness leaking from the corners of her eyes with the tips of his fingers, gently. 'And yet we must endure it anyway. It is what we do. That is who we are.'

Satyabhama had no more words left to express her sorrow.

She leaned her head against her husband's chest.

'It is time, bhai,' Balarama said, 'we should be on our way.'

'Yes,' Krishna said. 'We could not win the battle within, let us at least win the battle without. Daruka, take us to our destination. Take us to the capital of the Mountain Kingdoms, Pragjyotisha.'

Both Pushpaks shot away like arrows from a God's bow.

Pragjyotisha rose like an alien city. The black-red fortress walls ascended in layers upon layers, walls within walls, fortifications within fortifications. Beneath a purple sky, the nest seethed with refracted reflections of lightning. Dark figures moved everywhere yet evaded the eye when one looked directly. Straddling a hundred yojanas, rising a mile above the plains, towering yards above even the tallest peaks of the lower Himalayas, the mountain kingdom dominated the landscape.

Narakasura stood in the Place of Reckoning, his tusked snout raised to contemplate the stormy sky. There was lightning deep within the belly of the cloud bank, but there had been no thunder for days. Narakasura's sensitive snout sniffed the air. His crimson eyes glimmered in the darkness. He smelled a storm brewing. A big one. It had been weeks in the growing, and it promised great fury. He liked that. It would match the rage in his breast.

Narakasura had mounted hundreds of mountain queens, fought and slain as many mountain warriors for sport, had roved the ranges hunting and killing any predators he had found. Yet he still craved more. He craved much more than fornicating, fighting and hunting. He craved the death of Krishna. When would the Yadava come to him? Jarasandha had promised to lure him here but so much time had passed and there was still no sign of Krishna.

Worse, there was no sign of Jarasandha either - the God Emperor of Magadha had departed some time back, saying he was required in Kurujangala urgently. Kurujangala! Narakasura cared nothing about the Kurus and their empire. He was here, risen from the depths of hell, for one

reason and one reason alone: to exact vengeance upon the being that had seeded his birth. Krishna, Lord of Mathura. Every day that his father still lived was a day squandered.

A scuffling sound and the familiar sweet-salty odor of a mortal body alerted him.

Narakasura turned to see two of his Suscrofa pushing a reluctant mortal. The man was bleeding from several places, looking like he had resisted accompanying the Suscrofa. From his attire, he appeared to be one of the Mountain Men, but Narakasura smelled Jarasandha's scent on him. He couldn't tell from the man's face if he was one of the many who served the Magadhan God Emperor. All mortals looked alike. But that scent was unmistakable. Yes, this man had been in contact with Jarasandha not long ago.

'Lord, this one served Jarasandha and was in his presence the day he left,' one of the Suscrofa said.

The other one cuffed the mortal. 'Bow your head before our Lord! How dare you stand up straight in the presence of the Great One!'

The mortal crouched and raised his hands in supplication. 'I know nothing! I am a citizen of Pragjyotisha. I am no Magadhan!'

Narakasura sniffed the man. 'Your scent says otherwise.'

One Suscrofa sniffed the man's armpit, the other his crotch. 'Aye, my Lord. Even his companions say he is a traitor to the Mountain Kingdoms.'

'A spy working for Jarasandha then.' Narakasura glanced over the man. He was nothing to look at, like most mortals. Almost hairless, soft-bodied, no hooves, claws, snout, tusks or carapace. How did these mortals survive an entire lifetime? It was a mystery to him. 'His scent upon you is no more than three moonrises old. Speak! Do you serve the Magadhan?'

The man hesitated, looking up fearfully at Narakasura. Something crumbled within him. He said, 'I do. He pays me to keep a watch upon my people.'

'A spy,' Narakasura repeated. 'It is an honourable profession. Spies are necessary for gathering intelligence.'

A crafty look appeared on the mortal's face. 'I live to serve. In his absence, I am yours to command.'

Narakasura honked. The two Suscrofa honked as well, echoing their Lord. 'Fool, I need no mortal spies. I wish to know where is your master, Jarasandha? And his generals, and his army. One day they are all here camped at the foot hills, Jarasandha himself residing in luxury in Pragjyotisha. Suddenly, they vanish, like curs when a boar turns on them with razor horns.'

The mortal's eyes cut left and then right, as if seeking a way out; there was none. 'Jarasandha had to leave unexpectedly to attend to a pressing matter.'

'More pressing than the imminent battle against our common foe? Where did this unexpected matter take him?'

'Somewhere in the vicinity of Hastinapura. That is all I know.'

Narakasura sniffed. From the scent of fear emanating from the man's body, it appeared he was telling the truth. Or the truth as he knew it. 'When does he return?'

The man began to sweat and ooze fear. 'I do not know, Great One. He does not confide his plans to me.'

'Yet you are a spy. Knowing confidential matters is your profession.' Narakasura grunted. 'Leave it be.' To the Suscrofa he said: 'He is of no further use. Do with him as you will. Now, remove him from my presence. His scent offends me.'

The Suscrofa complied, dragging the man away. The spy realized the meaning of the demonlord's words and began to scream in protest. 'Great One, I beg you. Do not give me to these brutes. They mean to slaughter me and eat my insides for treats! Show mercy!'

'That is mercy,' Narakasura grunted.

The Suscrofa descended with the mortal still screaming.

Narakasura mulled over the news he had learned: Jarasandha gone, abandoning him at the last moment, taking his army and his generals with him. Yet Narakasura could not call it betrayal. It was true that the God Emperor of Magadha had many enemies, many conflicts open on many fronts, his ongoing campaign of conquest extending far and wide. It was possible that he had genuinely pressing business that required his presence urgently.

In any case, it did not matter. He was not here and would not be here for the coming battle. He had left without even a word to Narakasura. If not a betrayal, it was certainly a cowardly mortal tactic. Now, Narakasura would have to finish this alone. So be it.

The demonlord raised his snout and howled his desolation to the skies. The lightning flashed deep purple within the cloud bank but no thunder replied. Deep within the labyrinthine passages of Pragjyotisha, he heard the Suscrofa respond, bleating and snorting with indignation. They felt their new master's rage and echoed it. They were as eager as he was to tear mortal flesh, eat it, and drink their fill of manblood. With little to occupy them, their numbers had grown prodigiously. They teemed like ants, awaiting the day of battle. Their only pastime was fighting and eating each other's young, a favourite occupation among their kind and one that resulted in vicious feuds that lasted generations and often led to the Suscrofa turning against their own in the midst of battle.

'Lord?'

The hesitant voice was accompanied by the clicking of claws on stone.

Narakasura turned from the waist. His physiognomy prevented him from turning his neck; there was no neck to speak of between his hirsute torso and boar's head.

'Mura,' he grunted.

Mura coughed in response, lowering its tridents to acknowledge its subservience to Narakasura. Mura's three top heads lowered their chins, while the head in its belly and back were not visible to Narakasura. Its multiple limbs clutched tridents of different lengths and thicknesses. Some had two tines, some five, some the usual three. All glistened with the ichor, blood and other bodily fluids of the various combatants it had encountered en route here. Narakasura, like his mentor and ally Jarasandha, encouraged fighting amongst his warriors: how else was a soldier to prepare for battle?

'Lord,' it said, raising itself up as much as possible, which was not much. 'My sons have something to report. I thought it best to bring them here to report to you first-hand.'

'Wisely thought. Present the report at once.'

Mura turned several of his heads and uttered a chitinous clicking sound. At once, a half dozen forms as misshapen and bent over as Mura scurried up to join their father. 'Lord!' they coughed in unison. Narakasura grunted, acknowledging. He noted the presence of Sravana, Vibhavasu, Vasu, Nabhasvan, and Aruna. 'Where are your eldest sons, Tamra and Antariksa?' he asked. 'With Pitha,' Mura said. 'Marshalling our forces.' Narakasura's nostrils flared. He smelled violence. 'Explain!' he barked. Mura's chittered and scuttled a yard or two away from Narakasura, their multiple heads eyeing him cautiously. Mira chittered and snapped his claws at them, shoving them towards Narakasura again.

Hastily, in a round-robin flow, they chittered:
'Garudas!'
'Sighted!'
'Approaching!'
'Rapidly!'
'Westwardly!'
'Southwardly!'
'Northwardly!'
'Eastwardly!'
·!,

This last was incomprehensible to Narakasura who snorted and turned his red gaze on Mura.

Mura chittered, bowing his heads and waving fronds in apology.

'———— means a very large number.' He paused, cocking his three top heads at different angles. 'In mortal numbers, perhaps a dozen?' He chittered and turned completely around, twice. 'No, no. A thousand? No, no. A hundred. Yes. One hundred.'

Narakasura waited, expecting more. Fronds waved in the strong Himalayan wind, heads remained bowed and tilted, eyes gazing up anxiously, excitedly, but no further chittering.

'Is that all?'

Mura chittered. 'Garuda serve only one master, the Lord of Vaikunta. Their presence means—'

'That Krishna is coming. Yes. But with only a hundred Garudas?'

Mira dipped his heads and fronds several times. 'Yes, yes. They are not very large Garudas. Wingspans perhaps...' He chittered to his sons who chittered back excitedly. Limbs and fronds were outstretched to indicate wingspans.

'Ten yards? Is that all? They are small Garuda then?' Narakasura was almost disappointed. He had hoped for more, much more. What, he did not know. But certainly something more than a hundred eagles with a ten yard wingspan. Why, he alone could dispose of that many!

Mura dipped his heads and fronds again. 'Orders, Lord!'

Narakasura grunted. 'Orders? Inform all hellspawn that our nemesis approaches. Show him what we are, remind him where we came from, and make him feel that a thousand years there in the depths of hell would be better than faint our fury.'

Mura and his sons chittered happily, joining fronds together in a gesture reminiscent of mortals applauding.

'And prepare the Sataghni but remember, it is to be deployed only when I command, no sooner or later, do you understand?'

Mura bowed his heads eagerly.

'Now go!' Narakasura barked. 'Prepare!'

As one they turned and scurried away, their claws clicking on the stone.

Narakasura raised his snout, examining the skies. The cloud bank appeared to be denser, the lightning buried somewhere deep within, flickering faintly. Like a purple boil festering, close to bursting point.

He raised his snout and barked to the skies. 'Come! Come, Father! Come to me and learn how to die!'

Garuda hung motionless high in the sky, above the cloud bank which concealed him from all below, but did not hinder his own ability to view anything he desired.

Far below, on the fortifications of the Mountain Kingdom, Narakasura prowled. His insectile servants scurried to and fro, carrying his orders and bringing him news. They had already brought him word of Garuda's children approaching from all directions, and Garuda had heard the pleasure in Narakasura's gruff voice when he learned that there were only a hundred of the winged warriors.

A mere hundred? It hardly seemed possible to Narakasura whose own army of Mura and Suscrofa comprised many hundreds of thousands, possibly millions. Garuda could see them scurrying around in the labyrinthine caverns and passageways of the Mountain City. They fought amongst each other, even killed and ate their own kin. These were hellspawn, the worst creatures ever to roam Prithviloka, so despicable that they had been banished permanently to the lowermost level of existence, Naraka.

Some of their number had fought with Ravana, the rakshasa demonlord of Lanka, when he had mounted his invasion of Swargaloka, the heavenly realms. Ravana had led them in a campaign of undisputed victories until finally, he had met his match against the prince of Ayodhya, Rama Chandra, and his powerful allies, brother Lakshmana and guru, Vishwamitra, at the holy city of Mithila. That confrontation had led to the elimination of almost all asuras, the demon races, from Prithviloka. Those who survived were the

ones trapped in Naraka, where they served the lord of the realm, Narakasura.

Now, Narakasura and his demoniac hordes were here on the mortal realm, in Pragjyotisha. And they were ripe for battle. Rama Chandra had been the avatar of Garuda's Lord Vishnu in that era. In this age, it was Krishna who was his Lord's amsa, more than an avatar, a clone of Vishnu himself. For Narakasura and his hordes, that was a golden opportunity for vengeance and retribution. By destroying Krishna and defeating his forces, they would thwart his purpose here on Earth, and also exact revenge for their defeat at the hands of his earlier avatar Rama Chandra.

Garuda wheeled slowly, turning in place, controlling the wind itself to enable him to stand still in mid air, while he extended his vision yojanas wide and far. The Mura report had been accurate: his children were approaching from all sides, converging upon Pragjyotisha. Eleven times ten talons and fourth fifths of a twelfth talon. One hundred and eight in mortal numbers. Garuda observed their flight patterns, approaching at a steady pace. They would be here within a few minutes. All was as planned. They knew what to do, how to initiate the first attack.

The Muras, the Suscrofa, and their master were in for a surprise.

A hundred and eight garudas seemed pitiable to them? Inconsequential?

Very well.

Soon, they would have a chance to see for themselves what a hundred garudas were worth. And they would also get a chance to show what a million Suscrofa and Mura were worth. May the better force prevail. Garuda moved a single one of the million feathers in his left wing. Enabling himself to turn around slowly while remaining in the same place. One final survey of the region. There was no sign of any other force apart from the Mura and Suscrofa. The mountain dwellers themselves he did not count. They were captives of Narakasura and his forces. The widow queens of the former mountain kings were confined in their underground palaces, dreading the return of Narakasura or the other lords of the invasion who treated them as chattel for

their use and abuse.

The surviving warriors, kin, citizens and other mountain folk were at work in the underground city, serving their new masters. Much of their time and effort was spent procuring, transporting and preparing the victuals that their captors demanded. A million hellspawn consumed an epic amount, and their demands were incessant. None of them would be able to take either side in the coming battle. These proud, strong, arrogant warriors were imprisoned in their own homeland against their will; given an opportunity, they would throw over their hellish captors, regardless of the cost.

But they would not be given this opportunity today.

Krishna did not wish the mortal denizens of Pragjyotisha to become collateral damage in the brutal conflict that was about to unfold. His instructions were clear: Let them be as they are. After the battle was done, there would be time enough to free them.

Garuda thought that wise.

Mere mortals had no place in a battle between beings of power.

They were vulnerable, weak creatures, possessed of no special abilities or protections.

In an ordinary mortal battle, they could hold their own - what they lacked in powers and protections, they made up for with spirit and determination.

But this was no ordinary mortal battle.

This was a battle that would shake the mortal realm to its very core.

The hellspawn were bustling and clicking and chittering and hooting as if they had already won: Garuda could see them in their multitudes, teeming through the bowels and arteries of the mountain kingdom, as if in celebration of the victory they presumed to be theirs already. Even Narakasura was grunting and huffing with pleasure, salivating over his grimy tusks in anticipation of the godflesh he thought he would soon be eating. He too was taking victory for granted. That was as Krishna had desired it to be. It was all part of the plan.

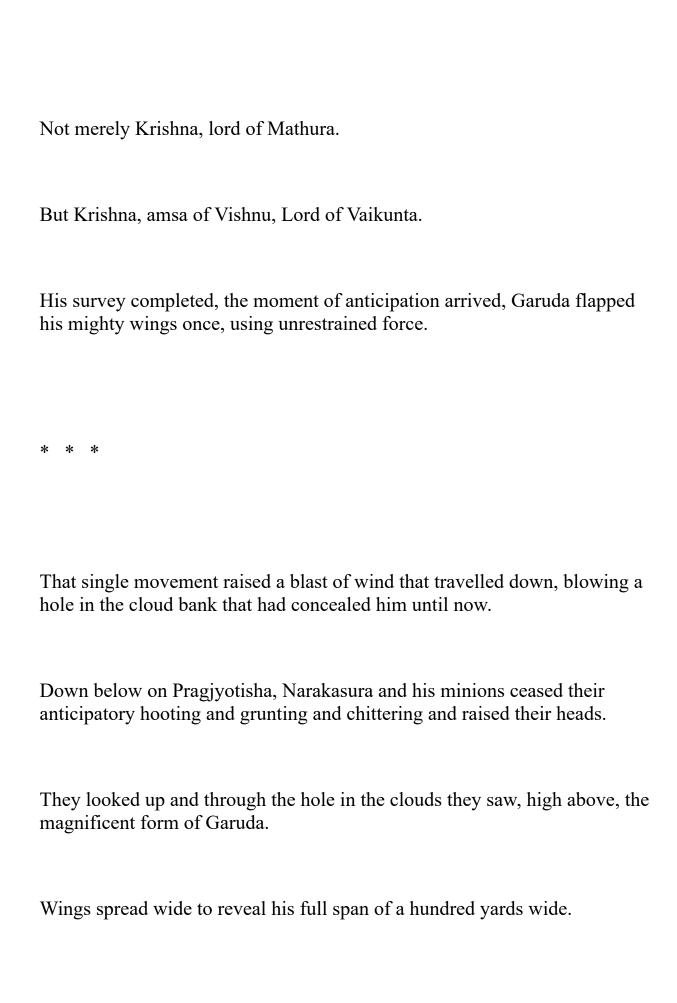
The battle itself would be another matter.

The hellspawn were expecting vengeance and reparation for the defeat their kin had suffered at Mithila against Rama and his allies.

Instead, they would get hellfire and defeat that would make them forget Mithila and mark this day as the new nadir of asura military history.

Today, here at Pragjyotisha, they would feel the true wrath of his lord.

Not Rama Chandra, a mortal avatar.



Then the force of his single flapping reached them, sending them reeling. Even Narakasura had to plant his cloven feet and crouch his hairy body to avoid being blown off his feet.

Before they had time to recover, Garuda opened his beak, issuing a single piercing cry that travelled yojanas, audible to every one of his children, even those who were still miles away.

To the Muras and Suscrofa of Pragjyotisha, the cry was as piercing as an eagle's shriek, if the eagle were as large as a thousand eagles together, and as loud.

Garuda had just declared the official start of the Battle of Pragjyotisha.

## KAAND 2

Krishna watched in his mind's eye as the garudas converged upon Pragjyotisha. There were so few of them, and so many of the Suscrofa and Muras. The inequality was troubling but he knew what the garudas could do. And what Garuda could do.

Have no fear, Lord, they are no match for my children.

The voice of Garuda in his head was a familiar comfort. Like hearing the sound of a favourite pet yelping when you returned home.

You know better than to under-estimate asuras, old friend.

True. But they should know better than to under-estimate me as well.

Krishna smiled at that.

'What is it?'

He turned to see Satyabhama staring at him curiously.

'Garuda is looking forward to clashing with the enemy.'

She looked upwards at the sky. The cloud bank was still too dense to penetrate. But she knew Garuda was up there. As she stared upwards, a dot appeared in the sky, above the mountain ranges but below the cloud bank. It was joined by another and then several others, each several hundred yards apart, all flying directly toward Pragjyotisha. She pointed.

Krishna nodded. 'The first assault is about to begin.'

She turned to gaze at the place where the garudas were headed. From way down here, the mountain city was barely visible as a mere silhouette of man-made structures atop the craggy ranges.

'It was a brilliant tactic to come in low,' she said. 'Keeping Pushpak barely at treetop height. They will be expecting us to come from the sky, like the garudas, but instead, here we are, in the valley below, all but invisible to them.'

She turned to look at Krishna, smiling in that adoring way that pleased him so much. He adored her just as much. She brought sunshine into the stormy darkness of his troubled life, lit up the nighttime of his soul. She was very precious to him.

'I must speak with you,' she said. 'After the battle. About—'

'I know what it is about,' he said gently. 'I am aware of what transpired between yourself and Rukmini.'

She looked at him. 'The madness that has swept Dwarka like a forest fire \_\_\_'

'—has consumed her as well. Yes. I know this. But you must also know: there is nothing you or I or anyone else can do. This is karma. The fruits of our actions ripen on the bough.'

'Still—' she began.

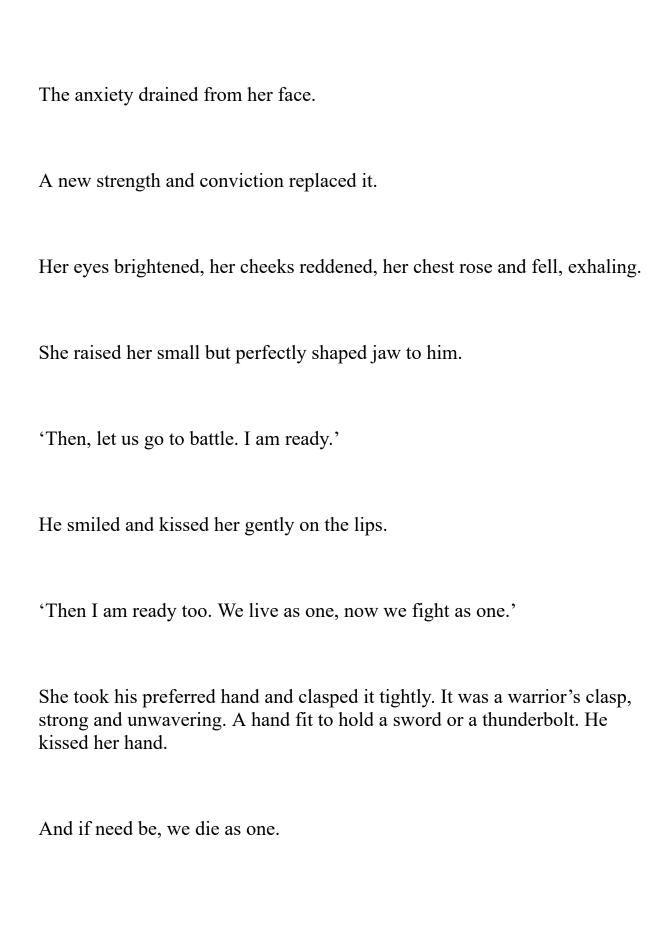
He stilled her with a raised hand, pointing to the mountain fortress high above. 'We are about to commence battle against the most feared enemy any of us have ever fought. Perhaps we can discuss this at another time?'

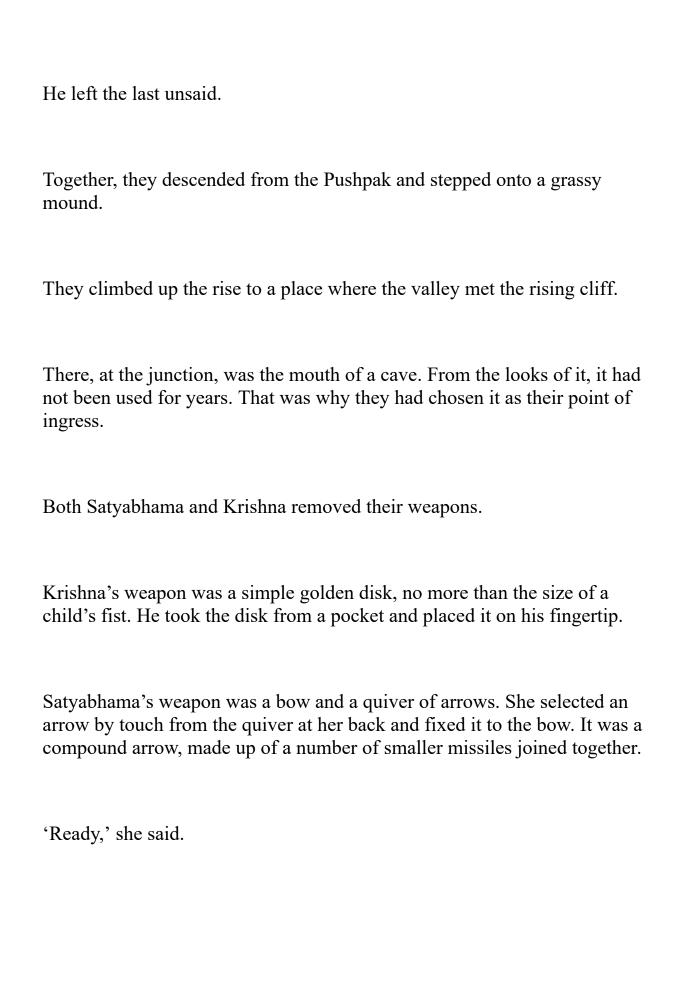
She nodded. 'Of course, my love. It's just that I feel as if everything, all of this, is somehow interlinked.'

'Your instinct is right. It is all interconnected. Everything affects everything.'

She looked at him then sighed. 'Then the end approaches?'

'The end of this phase, yes. Not The End.'
'What comes next?'
'We shall find out when the time comes.'
'You know all, see all.'
'Knowing is not understanding. Seeing is not believing. There is the matter of free will. We cannot wish the river out of existence, but we can change its course.'
She gestured at the mountain city, the descending garudas, the cloud bank. 'And we are attempting to change events here today?'
'Here, there, everywhere, everyday. It is what we do. It is why we came.'
She nodded slowly.
He watched as a change came over her.





Krishna's eyes glowed deep blue, the blue of brahman, and the golden disk on his fingertip began to spin, gathering speed.
Balarama, Garuda, he said in his mindvoice.
<ready, bhraatr=""> Balarama replied.</ready,>
Ready, my Lord, Garuda replied.
Begin, Krishna said, his eyes glowing brighter as the disk began to spin at an unearthly speed.
Krishna went into battle.

Narakasura roared with joy, saliva dripping from his tusks as he watched the garudas approach Pragjyotisha. The ramparts of the mountain fortress were teeming with Muras and Suscrofa now. More poured out constantly, rising up like boiling oil. Hundreds upon hundreds scurried across the battlements, chittering, clicking, grunting, honking, screeching, and expressing their pleasure at being at war again. Asuras lived for battle. It had been a while since they had faced such a challenging, interesting enemy. The assault and taking of the mountain kingdoms, in contrast, had been a tepid affair: Fun while it lasted, but not deeply satisfying.

He turned around ponderously, scanning the skies. The garuda were in the last stages of their descent, wings held back, plunging from the skies with beaks aimed directly at the mountain city. Their dark feathered bodies bristled, their razor sharp talons gleamed, their eagle eyes shone, their beaks curved cruelly. Each garuda was perhaps ten yards wide in wingspan, equivalent to about a score of Suscrofa or a dozen Muras. He had no doubt their strength and killing skills would be formidable too. All the better!

The Muras had swarmed a watchtower, their mandibles opening and closing wetly, claws clicking, as they chittered and screeched in excitement. More swarmed over their colleagues, struggling to find a spot on the tower so they could be close enough to get first crack at the approaching enemy. Several of them, too excited to wait, leaped in mid air, eager to do battle. They misjudged the distance and speed of the approaching garudas and fell screeching and fighting each other in mid air, all the way to the valley far below. Narakasura honked with delight. Stupid Muras!

A garuda ended its run by sweeping the guard tower, screeching its shrill piercing eagle cry. Narakasura watched as the humanoid torso of the garuda worked his powerful arm and back muscles, using his wings to sweep Muras off the tower. Dozens of Muras fell screeching helplessly. More took their place instantly. The garuda swept over the tower and beyond, turning back sharply to come back for a second attack. Muras leaped off the tower to grab at him. He drew up sharply in mid air, performing a halt no mere bird could ever achieve; hovering with a blinding flicker of his wings, he used both talons and beak to savage the Muras leaping at him. Narakasura watched in admiration as the single garuda killed a handful of Muras at once, moving with deadly accuracy and speed.

Narakasura turned to see garudas fighting Muras and Suscrofa all along the battlements. Swooping, hovering, plunging, spinning, even fighting upside down, wings beneath, body turned skywards. Some garudas used weapons —shortswords and spears mainly—to pierce the Muras and Suscrofa. Muras screeched as they were impaled on the spears, Suscrofa honked and died, losing limbs and heads to the swords. Others were despatched by the deadly talons, some by the furious beaks.

Narakasura admired the enemy's fierceness and power. Barely a hundred garudas and already they were slaughtering his Suscrofa and Muras by the hundredfold, within minutes of the battle's commencement. The air reeked with the stench of Mura ichor and the sweet scent of Suscrofa blood. The garudas had yet to be blooded. Though the Muras and Suscrofa worked their own claws and tusks and daggers and curved axes vigorously, the garudas either evaded their attempts or bore the brunt of them on their wings. The weapons, claws and tusks sliced and severed feathers, sending them flying in a flurry, but somehow always missed the muscle and flesh of the wings themselves.

Narakasura watched with keen interest, grunting as he saw a garuda all but denuded of feathers by a savage assault from all sides by over a dozen Muras and twice as may Suscrofa. He distinctly saw the garuda's naked wing become visible as her feathers flew like down from a severed pillow. But a moment later, the garuda's wings were thickly feathered again! How did she do that?

He understood as he watched more such skirmishes.

The garudas possessed the ability to grow back their feathers instantly! Within moments of cutting off a garuda's feathers, they were replaced by new feathers every bit as strong and thick as the old ones. How extraordinary! He grunted happily. Such wonderful beautiful creatures—and great warriors too. In contrast, how ugly and undisciplined were his Suscrofa. Don't even speak of the Muras. Horrible and detestable in appearance, and ill smelling to boot.

But it would take more than beauty, power and regeneration to win this battle.

Narakasura grunted and spread his arms, raising both his battle-axes.

He picked the nearest garuda—that same female one battling over the South side of the rampart. Yes, she would do.

He ran towards her, clumsily at first, then picking up speed, then grunting with effort as his short boar legs carried his heavy muscled torso. He shoved

Suscrofa and Muras out of his way as he ran, chopping the heads or limbs of more than a few that did not move in time. Then he acquired his full wind and roared, startling his soldiers into scattering quickly.

He leaped over their heads, launching himself at the garuda with all the force of a boar assaulting a stag in a forest. The garuda heard and saw him coming and spun around in mid air, hurling a half dozen Suscrofa and Muras away, smashing them into each other, impaled on friendly knifes, or tusks, or claws. She shrieked her eagle cry and sprang forward to meet him, beak and talons working furiously.

They fought in mid air for a moment, his axes swinging vigorously, her wings taking the brunt of their force, feathers flying by the hundreds, turning the air around them red ochre, a private cloud in which just the two of them duelled. His soldiers had yielded ground to him, keeping their distance to allow their Lord and leader to duel. Narakasura used the space, spinning in mid air, landing on a toe, springing up again at once, spinning again, twisting his bulky torso to bring his axes round with force enough to sever an elephant's head from its body.

They fought like a single spinning dervish, both turning and twisting, dancing the dance of death which could leave only one partner alive, neither yielding or giving quarter, both battling furiously, her sword and talons and beak slashing and darting and jabbing, his axes slicing and cutting and chopping. He cut off a hundred of her feathers, they grew back before he had completed his swing. She cut and nicked and poked him a dozen times, he grunted and honked but kept fighting. He did not have her capacity to regenerated instantly, but even the severest of wounds could not kill him. Nothing could kill him: no enemy, mortal, demigod or god. That was his gift, his power.

Their dance reached the pitch of frenzy. So dense was the cloud of feathers, so dizzying their turning and spinning, so rapid the slashing blades, that the world was a blur of steel and red ochre.

At the peak of their frenzy, Narakasura dropped his axes.

He saw the garuda's eagle eyes flash, reflecting the two weapons as they went twirling off into the crowd of watching Muras and Suscrofa.

He saw her freeze, her wings reducing to a hover mode, vibrating at hummingbird pitch to keep her in place.

He saw her confusion: his entire attack had been axe-based. Therefore her entire defence had been to avoid the axes. Her dance was predicated on trying to get past his axes to cut his bare body. Now that the axes were gone, she did not know what he would do next, or even whether or not to attack anyway.

That was his intention: this was his chance. He took it.

He attacked first.

Feinting within his hands, making her turn to defend herself against his limbs, he dove forward, lowering his snout and head and barreling under her wings.

She shrieked and rose to avoid him.
He slipped beneath the blurring powerful wings.
The blast from their vibrating could have thrown him yards away if they struck him right.
He tucked his head onto his chest, burrowing, then jerking upwards with a diagonal zigzag angle.
She saw the danger at the last instant.
She shrieked, loud and piercing even above the cacophony of his hordes and the battle.
She threw herself backwards, seeking to fly back.
But he had his moment: her belly was exposed.
Her humanoid belly, soft and lightly furred at that point.

His tusks found that softest part of her anatomy, the soft triangle above her bowels, and pierced her flesh, ripping it open then twisting back in a single deadly action.

He disembowelled her.

The garuda's blood and offal spilled out, caught by the flurry of their dance and flung into the air. It was thrown every which way, spattering the watching Susrofa and Muras.

He hit the ground of the rampart with his shoulder and somersaulted, diving head first at the bleeding garuda's chest.

She was still reeling from the shock of having her innards ripped out and thrown away at such blinding speed.

His tusks took her in the midriff the second time. Had she been a mortal he would have gone for her throat. But he had no desire to get within an inch of that deadly beak.

He stabbed her in the chest, feeling his tusks punch through her breastbone and pierce her powerful bellow-like lungs. He yanked his tusks out forcefully, turning his head as he did it, to rip her furry chest from side to side.

Bright rich red heart's blood spilled from her body, drenching him. The open wound in her torso gaped large and dark.

She shrieked one final time, blood spurting from her beak and nostrils as she fell back.

In moments, the Suscrofa and Mura were upon her.

Tearing her to shreds in a flurry of feathers and skin and muscle and flesh and bone.

She was dead before she hit the ground of the rampart.

Narakasura, coated with the glistening blood of his first victim, raised his head, waving his blood-washed tusks for all to see, and roared loudly enough to make his soldiers pause in their fighting across the mountain kingdom.

'That is how you kill them!' he howled. 'Now let me see you do it!'

They roared back in response, his ugly beautiful hordes, and did as he bade them.

The cavern was pitch dark. Satyabhama couldn't see a thing at first.

Then Krishna came up behind her. The blue glow of brahman from his eyes spilled over her and lit the cave beyond. The blue light intensified, as the sound of the spinning chakra on his finger grew more intense, and she knew that her husband was gathering power to himself from within, drawing on the limitless galaxies of energy that he controlled.

Living with Krishna the man it was easy to forget he was also Krishna the god, not a god or any god; the god. God incarnate Himself. Right now, it was impossible to forget it. She dared not look directly at his face: his fighting form was unbearable to look at for more than the merest fraction of a kshana. His true form? Impossible to view for any length of time.

Viewed in the illumination from Krishna's eyes, she saw that the cavern was deserted. Nothing but a black passage tunnelling into the heart of the mountain. Somewhere in the silent emptiness, water dripped. There were two passages ahead, one leading left, the other right.

'Which way?' she asked.

Krishna whispered.

The chakra spinning on the tip of his finger rose and flew into the left cavern, its edges catching the light from his eyes and glinting silver as it disappeared into the darkness. She heard its spinning song echoing off the walls of the cavern.

They waited.

Only moments later, it returned, its singing reaching her ears before the disk itself appeared, gleaming like mercury as it returned to Krishna's fingertip.

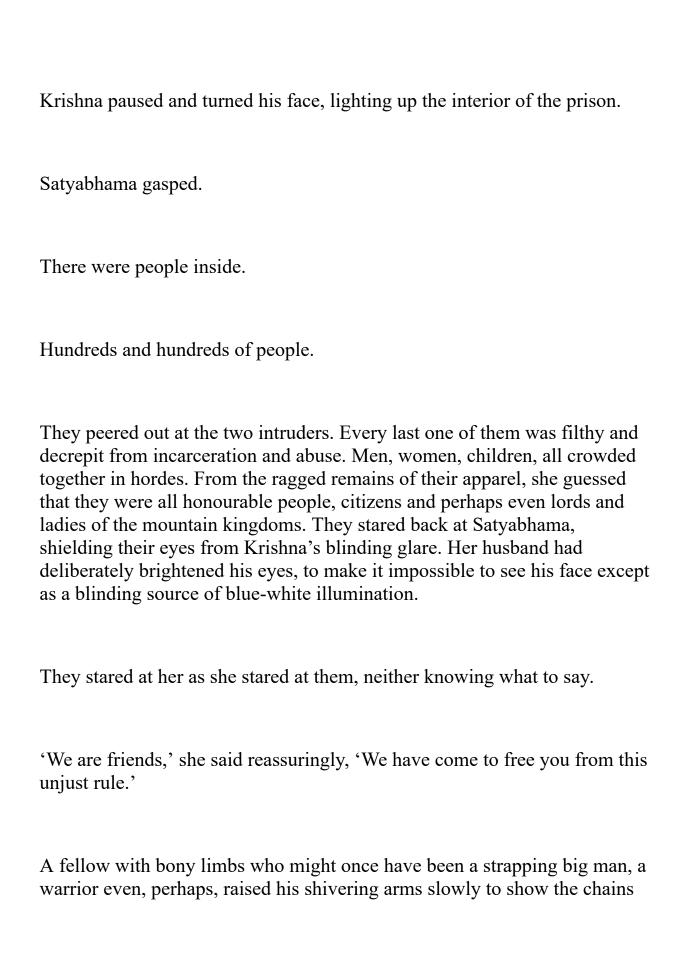
'This way,' he said in a voice that was no longer the one she knew so well.

She led the way. After a few yards, she felt the ground rise. It rose steadily upwards for two or three hundred yards before she felt the vibrations.

It felt like the mountain itself were alive, breathing, stirring, vibrating.

As they continued upwards, they found evidence of others who had been in these passages before: mortal as well as non-mortals. Old discarded tools, riggings, places where men had dug at the walls to extract some mineral or other. Higher up, they encountered the first trappings of civilization: places to sit, eat, sleep. Newer tools. Stores of items.

Abruptly, they turned a corner and confronted barred cages on either side of the corridor, prisons carved out of the rock of the mountain itself.



that bound them together. His eyes stared back from a hollow, skeletal face. 'Free us,' he said weakly.

'Soon,' she promised. 'For now it is best that you remain here until the battle is over. We shall return to release you once we have won back Pragjyotisha.'

Krishna had already moved on. She hurried to catch up.

She did not need to comment on how inhumane the invaders had been, to have treated their prisoners so. Krishna knew that already. They had done far worse with the ones they had killed: these were only the survivors. She felt her outrage grow.

They passed dozens of such cages filled with thousands of mountain citizens.

As they rose higher in the mountain, she heard the sounds grow louder: she recognized them now as the sounds of battle. The prisoners were all but silent; they lay quietly, half-dead, in their underground prisons. All the sound and fury she was hearing came from above, from the battle being waged.

She felt a great urgency to join that battle, to confront the enemy that had done this to these proud mountain dwellers. Perhaps the mountain kingdoms were not the most gentle or kind of cultures, but to have invaded them, massacred their people, and taken them prisoner was intolerable. And

then there were the queens. The wives of the 16,000 mountain kings whose tribes made up the united mountain kingdoms. She had heard of the terrible treatment they had received from their captors, reduced to chattel and slaves serving the hideous appetites of Narakasura and anyone he chose to favor. They must be somewhere in the bowels of these mountains too. They must find them and free them as well. But first, they had to win this battle.

She began to hurry forward, eager to join the fight. A moment later, she realized Krishna had stopped. She stopped as well. 'We must hurry,' she said.

'No need. They are coming to us.'

No sooner had he said it than she heard the vibration underfoot increase. The ground was thrumming now. The sounds from the mountain were louder, like a whispering from every corner. She heard distant noises that were sometimes insectile, other times animalistic.

Her heart beat faster. She took up a position, her bow still lowered but ready.

The chakra on Krishna's finger continued to spin steadily, but in its keening song she heard a different pitch. A higher, greedier pitch. As if it too was eager to join the battle.

She could hear them now, running down the tunnels. Their footfalls and noises were more easily distinguishable. There must be thousands of them,

she thought. And with that, her heart thudded louder in her chest, louder even than the sounds of the approaching enemy. She could hear their strange clicking and chittering sounds, their grunting and screeching and squealing, their cloven footfalls and chitinous clattering. What manner of creatures were these?

'Asuras. Hundreds of thousands. And many more than that on call.'

The hand holding the bow quivered. 'How will we fight so many?' she asked.

'One or one million, it is the same. We fight to win, we fight with strength, honor and pride.'

He was right, she knew. Besides, she had Krishna on her side. God himself. How foolish of her to fret. But still, her heart hammered nervously.

There is something different about this enemy, even Balarama bhaiya said so.

Then she heard the rush of footfalls and there was no more time to think or fret.

The battle she was eager to join was here in front of her. Was swarming straight at her, rushing headlong in a horde of clicking, clattering, clomping,

monstrosities that were part insect, part unnameable thing, part-boar part-human part-unknown.

Catching sight of her and Krishna, the torrent slowed, then stopped altogether. The enemy paused to view their enemy. She sensed their eagerness, far greater than hers, but that eagerness was tempered by the sight of Krishna, eyes blazing blue light, Sudarshana spinning on his fingertip. They did not want to stop for even a moment: but the sight of Krishna compelled them.

Krishna's light illuminated the cavern from top to bottom. Satyabhama resisted the urge to gasp aloud.

Had she thought thousands? There were claws and snouts and tusks and gaping maws as far as she could see up the corridor. She estimated there must be at least another mile of corridor above here, winding its way slowly through the body of the mountain. How many more of these abominations were crowding that long cavern? Tens of thousands surely. Hundreds of thousands even. A million would not seem impossible.

She felt a shiver pass through her from head to toe. There are too many for us to fight. She felt her bow hand drop slowly, as her resolve faded.

Then she thought of the skeletal figures in the cages, thought of the atrocities that had been committed upon the mountain people, their queens, of the injustice and outrage, of the fact that no other kingdom or leader even cared about what happened here in this remote corner of the world, about the fact that she, Krishna and their forces were the only hope of Pragjyotisha.

And with these thoughts, strength, honor and pride grew within her.
Her arms grew steady.
Her eyes sharpened their gaze.
Her mind steeled itself.
Satyabhama raised her bow and loosed the first shot.

Satyabhama's first arrow was a volley. Designed to be fired up into the sky and then split into multiple arrows when it reached its apogee, she used skill to force it to split the instant it left her bow. What had looked like a single fat arrow to the asura throng suddenly became a hundred slender but deadly missiles. As closely packed as the horde was, they pierced the enemy with deadly effect. Half a hundred of the Muras and Suscrofa fell on impact; as many reeled, grunting or screeching as they were wounded.

But there were hundreds more behind them to take their place. The horde surged forward, coming down the rocky corridor like a flood racing downhill. Satyabhama's second arrow loosed immediately, bringing down even more than the first time. Sixty seven dead, some thirty wounded. Still the horde surged down towards her. Twenty yards, then fifteen, then ten. In another kshana they would be too close to shoot. She prepared to loose a third and final volley before drawing her sword.

But even as the third volley left her bow, she heard the sharp song of Sudarshana as it passed over her head. The song penetrated her brain, leaving her ears with a ringing after-sound that dulled her hearing and numbed her senses for a moment.

Her third volley struck the horde and was even more effective than the first two: at least eight dead on impact, another score badly wounded.

But then Sudarshana struck the horde: and it made all her three volleys combined seem as ineffectual as raw rice thrown at a wedding party.

Sudarshana passed through the necks of the oncoming asuras with blinding speed, passing through flesh, bone, carapace, armor, without any pause, slicing them by the hundreds. It zigzagged through the hordes, traveling this way and that way up the corridor, leaving nothing but death and devastation in its wake. She watched incredulously as it disappeared up the corridor, around the curve, and continued its work out of sight.

Krishna was striding past her already, stepping over the bodies of the fallen Muras and Suscrofa.

'Come. Sudarshana will clear a way.'

She navigated the corpse-strewn corridor, trying to avert her eyes from some of the more gruesome decapitations and severances, and not succeeding. She almost slipped and fell once or twice, then learned how to walk on the corpses, rather than try to find the gaps between them - there were no gaps - and in another moment she was running, sprinting up the corridor after Krishna. The toll was horrific: they ran for hundreds of yards up the mountain, through the winding corridors cut out of solid rock, and the ground was littered with dead asura corpses all the way. Thousands, tens of thousands lay dead. Not a single wounded left moaning or groaning: Sudarshana did its job with ruthless efficiency.

The corridor broadened, then suddenly widened considerably into a large open area. An enormous open cavern, the rough-hewn ceiling at least a hundred feet above, the walls on either side two hundred feet apart, the end a good two hundred yards away. There were a thousand torches blazing on

the walls on all four sides, providing sufficient light to illuminate the carnage.

This enormous hall was packed with asuras of both kinds. Or had been packed.

Sudarshana was still working here when Krishna and she arrived. She could see it spinning at the far end of the chamber, blood spurting freely as it sliced its way neatly through the hapless horde. She almost felt sorry for the enemy now: what chance had they against such a weapon? What chance had they against Krishna himself? She wondered how she could have ever fretted, or doubted. This battle's outcome was a foregone conclusion. They had as good as won already.

'Don't begin celebrating just yet,' Krishna said. 'The battle ends when it ends, not a moment before. And this is only the first clash.'

She nodded. 'But if this is all they have to throw at us—'

'We have yet to face the real enemy. Narakasura and his champions, the eight Muras. They will not be as easy to kill.'

Even for Sudarshana? But before she could voice the question, a sound rang out.

A clanging echo that filled the entire vast chamber and deafened her hearing.

She saw a blurring shape flying towards her at great speed and ducked her head, even though she knew Sudarshana would never harm her.

She spun around to see Sudarshana fly at Krishna, aimed directly at his neck—then stop abruptly and land, spinning, on his upright fingertip.

It remained there briefly, its song sounding very different now: plaintive and regretful.

Krishna said something to it.

Sudarshana ceased its spinning and dropped onto Krishna's open palm. He put the disk away—which was to say, to mortal eyes, it disappeared from sight.

Krishna's eyes had reduced their glow when they reached this large chamber. She looked at him anxiously as he stared across the vast chamber to the far side.

'Alert, Satyabhama!' he warned.

She turned her attention back towards the enemy.
Something was coming at them from across the chamber.
Several somethings.
They were racing under the bodies of the slain asuras. She could see their progress by the way the corpses heaved and fell, like a swell racing across the surface of a lake.
She counted seven, no eight, such swells.
Eight enemies then.
She tightened her grip on her bow, already reaching for the appropriate missile.
How hard could it be to down eight enemies when she had been able to drop almost a hundred with a single volley?
Then again, what kind of enemy could withstand the power of Sudarshana, and send the disk speeding back to its master?

She braced herself, as alert as she could possibly be. The swells reached the corpses about thirty yards away, then burst free of the pile of bodies and revealed themselves. They were asuras, of course. Similar to the insectile ones, with the mandibles, claws and chitinous bodies that left a trail of slime. But each of them was much larger than their soldiers, each with a distinct appearance and a personality of its own. The Eight Muras.

Garuda watched in fury. His children were being torn to shreds before his eyes. After Narakasura had demonstrated the weakness of the garudas—their vulnerable humanoid torsos rather than their invincible wings—the Suscrufa and Muras were using their newfound knowledge to deadly effect. Over a score of his children were already dead, ripped to pieces and eaten alive, and as many more were under attack, fighting to survive. The remaining wheeled and shrieked, trying to aid their fallen brothers and sisters, while evading attack themselves.

As he watched, a crowd of Suscrofa literally leaped off the edge of the fortress, falling onto a coasting garuda. Several of them missed their mark and fell, screeching, into the abyss. But at least a dozen latched onto some part of the unfortunate garuda and began hacking and cutting and using their tusks to lethal effect. His son shrieked pitifully as she struggled to fight the swarming boar-like asuras and remain in flight. It was impossible. Even more Suscrofa and some Muras leaped to grab her claws, and the weight of them all was more than she could bear.

She fell into a tailspin, deliberately aiming herself away from the fortress ramparts so the asuras could not leap back to safety. She fell, taking over a dozen with her. Garuda watched her spiral to her death, the asuras eating her body even while they fell to certain death.

This was intolerable. He had know it would not be easy but he had not expected such resistance. His expectation that his children alone would be

able to face the enemy and clear the ramparts now seemed ill-founded. Even with each garuda slaying a hundred enemy, there were still thousands more teeming over the fortress, and more still pouring up from within.

How many of these damn things were there anyway? He knew that Krishna and Satyabhama were already battling the majority of them down below, while Balarama's attack was intended to split the enemy on a third, separate front. Even if there were a million split in three hordes, that still left over three hundred thousand hellspawn for each group to battle. Those were formidable odds.

But he was Garuda.

And he would not stand by and watch as his children were slaughtered.

He raised his wings and issued a single shrill piercing call that rang out over the mountain fortress, drowning out the noises and calls of the hellspawn and his children battling. Both sides paused in their fighting and looked up, compelled by his war cry. Only Krishna's own conch trumpet, Panchajanya, was louder and more compelling.

Garuda began flapping his enormous wings, moving them slowly and with great force, to raise as much wind and pressure as possible.

Below him, the cloud bank began to move, the force of the wind from his wings buffeting the laden clouds and causing them to boil and seethe. They were thrown into turmoil, thunder booming and lightning crackling. Garuda

shrieked again, and again, working his powerful wings to stir the storm clouds into a frenzy.

\* \* \*

Narakasura raised his snout, dripping blood. A chunk of meat was impaled on one of his tusks: it was the heart of the garuda he had just killed. He jerked his head, tossing off the heart and catching it in his mouth. He snapped it up, relishing the taste. First time he had tasted a garuda heart. It was good!

The sky above was boiling with storm clouds. The sound of Garuda's shrieking was louder than the thunder gnashing its invisible jaws. He could see the great Lord of Birds high above, barely a speck. The wind from the bird god's flapping wings reached him, buffeting him hard enough to send him staggering back a step or two. He planted his hooves firmly, spreading his legs to centre himself. Around him, the Suscrofa and Muras were reeling from the wind blast. Those close to the edge lost their balance and were swept over. Fools!

Narakasura gazed up at the stormy sky. The clouds were threatening to burst any moment. Garuda had stirred up a rainstorm into something much more epic. That did not worry him. A little rain and wind wouldn't kill his forces. That Garuda, on the other hand... He licked the last morsel of heart flesh from his tusk, his thick raspy tongue scouring his hairy snout to clean it of every last drop of blood. What would Garuda's heart taste like? Even better than his children's hearts, he wagered. Let him come then. It was time to kick this battle upto the next level.

He sniffed the air, cocking his head. Down below, a good two thirds of the way down the mountain, he could smell the eight Muras as they launched their assault on Krishna and his mate. About time too. The Vishnu avatar had slaughtered a good number of his forces - only a fraction of the overall number but still, enough was enough. It was time to balance the toll.

He continued sniffing, searching for more enemies. Surely there had to be more than just this handful? A hundred Garudas and their father, attacking from the sky. Krishna and his mate sneaking in from an untended cave passage.

Was that all? No, there was one more. Balarama, brother of Krishna. Which made him Narakasura's uncle, in a manner of speaking. Where was Balarama? Ah, there he was, skulking about in the upper chambers. He had climbed the side of the mountain and gotten in through a window, like a common burglar. How disappointing! One of the greatest champions of the age, and he was avoiding a direct challenge. Narakasura would have to do something about that.

He concentrated his powers, focussing on the residents within the upper chambers. His asura powers coalesced, entering the minds and bodies of those residents of Pragjyotisha, taking control of them, and transforming them into the fighting demons he needed them to be for the task. There! Balarama was in for a very big surprise!

A sound loud enough to rend the heart of the world brought his attention back to the sky again. The storm was breaking. What fell from those purple-black-and-red clouds was not rain as much as a dam burst! The equivalent of a lake's worth of water fell from the clouds, directly upon the ramparts of Pragjyotisha.

He watched as hundreds of his soldiers were stuck by the water with enough force to crush, mangle and dismember their bodies. Those who survived the impact of the water were washed off the face of the mountain fortress and over the sides, like sheep in a flash flood. His armies roared in fury as they saw the same fate approaching them: more clouds were shedding their contents.

Narakasura grunted. Impressive as the life losses were, this was still not honourable fighting. 'Face me, face me and fight me limb to limb, breath to breath!'

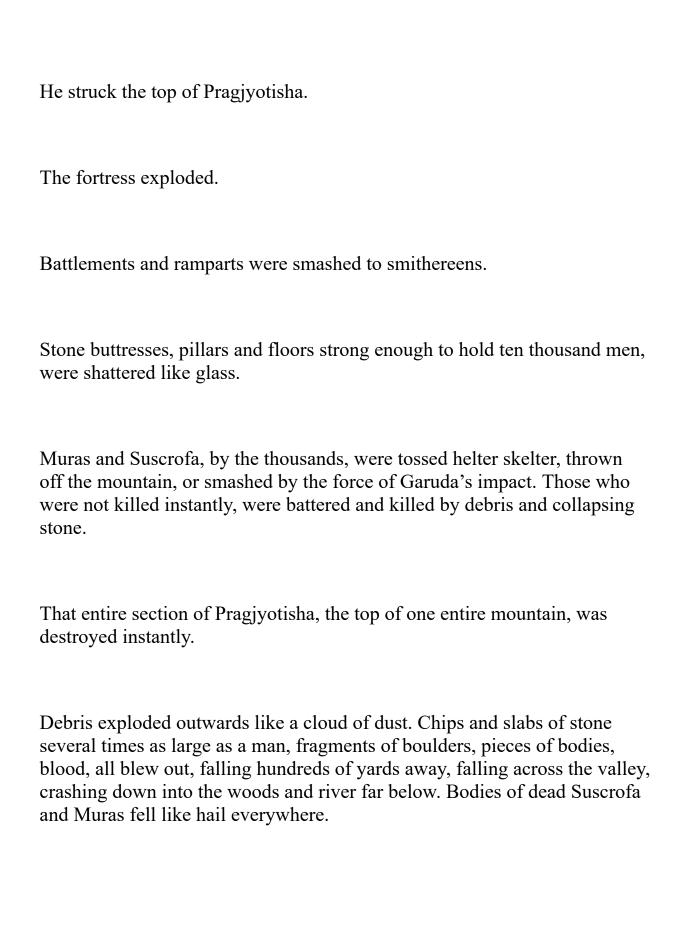
Garuda's answering shriek drowned out the crashing of the cloudburst and thunder.

Through the clouds, the thunder, the torrential rain, the God of Birds was descending, flying at arrow speed straight at the top of the mountain fortress, headed directly for Narakasura. His shriek left no doubt that he was about to give Narakasura what he was demanding.

Narakasura raised his axes and roared at his approaching enemy, a wordless cry of fury, an invitation to death.

\* \* \*

Garuda fell from the sky with the force of a landslide and the speed of an arrow.



The impact was akin to a meteorite striking the mountain.

The top one third of the mountain was destroyed completely.

Even before the dust cloud could rise, it was suppressed by the torrential rain. The rain dampened the dust and turned it into mud. Rivers of mud mingled with blood and body parts flowed down through channels in the demolish mountain top.

The fortress of Pragjyotisha was little more than a pile of debris.

Balarama had reached the upper apartments only a short while before Garuda's attack demolished the mountaintop.

He had climbed up the side of the mountain as planned, then entered through a window cut out of the stone of the mountain.

The chamber within was an eating hall. A fancy one, from the looks of it, no doubt meant for the use of Kings and Queens.

Long tables with seating for hundreds, enormous tapestries depicting scenes of battle and adventure from the history of the Mountain Kingdoms, large chambers with fireplaces and hundreds of deep-pile furs, but not a soul in sight.

He found his goal without much difficulty: the scent alone was sufficient to guide him. This could be no other place but the Queens' Palace.

He turned a corner and came upon a long, seemingly endless corridor, lined with apartments on either side. The colors, the scents, the feminine apparel and items lying everywhere confirmed it.

This was the Palace of the 16,000 Queens of the Mountain Kingdoms.

As per mountain custom, the Queens resided independently here. From time to time they visited with their husbands, the 16,000 Mountain Kings, for conjugal reasons or otherwise. The Queens themselves lived here by themselves, with only their children permitted to stay with them until they were of hunting age. No man was permitted to set foot here. Not even their own husbands, the Kings.

These customs had been forgotten when Jarasandha invaded Pragjyotisha.

The Queens had been subjected to the worst, most inhumane treatment at the hands of their captors. After the slaughter of their husbands, the Queens had to endure the horror of watching their own children torn from their arms and dragged away to captivity. They were only permitted to view them from time to time, at the pleasure of their sailors.

Narakasura and his generals had enjoyed the company of the Queens whenever they pleased, using the threat of harm to the royal children as a means of controlling their behavior. The unfortunate Queens had no choice. They could either do as commanded, or watch their children tortured and killed. Naturally, every last one had agreed to do whatever was demanded of her, in exchange for sparing her children.

Balarama's mission was simple: free the Queens and their children, and keep them from harms' way until the battle was over.

Now, as he paused inside the Queens' palace entranceway, he steeled himself. There had been no sentries or soldiers anywhere yet that he had

encountered. It had been all too easy. Surely Narakasura was not going to let him just take his hostages away without a fight?
He entered the corridor and stopped short.
People were emerging from the many, many doors lining the long corridor
Hundreds upon hundreds of them.
He had expected soldiers, sentries, assassins, asuras.
But these were women.
The Queens themselves.
'Do not fear me,' he called out. 'I am Balarama, prince of Dwarka. I am here to free you from your bondage.'
The Queens stood silently in the doorways to their apartments, saying nothing.

Their silence and stillness was unnerving. He had expected them to be in a bad way, but surely they were not so far gone that they could not understand they were about to be set free? Their ordeal was over. There would be no more abuse. Soon, he would reunite them with their children. He started to tell them these things, to reassure them, when they began moving towards him. All with the same glassy eyed stare, strange gait, and unusual stance. As they stepped into the centre of the corridor where there was more light from the torches, he saw their faces clearly for the first time. Distorted faces, bulging eyes, lolling tongues, mouths opening and closing wetly, hands bent into claws, bodies bent forward. He took a step back. What was wrong with them? The next instant, he knew.

'Welcome, bhraatr of Krishna.'

The same words came from the mouths of every single Queen, all 16,000 of them, lined up in the miles long corridor.

'Welcome to the fortress of Pragjyotisha. You and your brother are most welcome here. I must insist that you do not leave!'

Balarama clutched his sword tighter, then realized it was useless to him.

He could not use it on these women: they were the ones he had come here to rescue. He could not afford to orphan their children!

He sheathed the sword.

'Why do you put away your weapon, son of Rohini? Do you not wish to fight us? Or perhaps you have other urges you wish to satiate?'

'Quiet,' Balarama snapped, allowing himself to be baited. He shut his mouth. Why was he wasting his breath? He knew better than to react. These women were only bodies controlled by the enemy. The words being spoken by their mouths were being sent by the mind of Narakasura himself.

The women continued to emerge from their apartments, hundreds upon hundreds of them as far as he could see, and more of them beyond, these chambers extending across mountains for miles. 16,000 of them! Sweet Krishna!

'I have come to free you,' he said aloud, pitching his voice as far as he was able. 'I have no desire to harm any of you.'

'Do you expect them to heed your words? They are past hearing now. They belong to me. Whatever I ask of them, they will do. They are like puppets on an invisible string.'

'Release them from your spell!' Balarama demanded. 'They have no part in this battle. Release them and face me yourself. I will fight you or any of your champions - or all of them if you wish! Fight me instead of playing these asura games!'

'I will fight you, son of Vasudeva. I am most eager to fight you. But why should I waste my Muras and Suscrofa by pitting them against you? You are the wielder of the ploughshare, you can lay waste to entire armies single-handedly in a single day. I would rather give you a challenge you have never faced before. Fight these soldiers of mine, Rama of the Bala. Fight my Queens and let us see the true extent of your strength.'

Balarama watched in horror as the Queens began to climb the walls and ceiling, some crawling upside down in spider like stances, sidling towards him at astonishing speed. Some dropped to all fours and began bounding down the corridor, leaping over one another, eager to attack him. Saliva dripped from their drooling mouths, their teeth bared and snarling. Eyes filled with madness. Hands bent into claws reaching out to scratch out his eyes and gouge his flesh.

It was obvious they were not in their senses. Each and every one of the Mountain Queens were out of their minds, their bodies possessed by the demoniac power of Narakasura. Under his control they had acquired demonic strength and abilities. These were no longer merely mortal women; they were no less than asuras in mortal form.

Yet how could he fight them? They were not truly asuras or even soldiers. If he hurt them he would be hurting the very people he came here to save.

Yet here they were, attacking him by the thousands! What was he to do? He must defend himself, but how to do so without hurting them?

He still had no answer when, a moment later, the first of the possessed reached him with a blood curling scream and launched herself across the intervening distance, flying at him with the fury of a hellspawn newly released from Naraka.

They attacked from all sides - the ground, the walls, the ceiling. The Eight Muras were astonishingly fast, their multiple legs and centralised head and circular eyes enabling them to move in any direction at great speed. Like spinning spiders they leaped up to the ceiling, to the walls, crawled under the pile of corpses, and launched themselves at Krishna and Satyabhama.

Satyabhama had switched to her swords. Now, she swung them in a looping circular action, wielding them like fighting sticks. Each swinging in its own repeating arc, the arcs intersecting at front and rear, forming a protecting steel bubble that encased her body. The swords were a blur, moving so rapidly that even she could not see their shapes, just a blurred silver flash. She moved her feet, turning constantly, spinning the swords and changing their arcs to prevent the enemy from finding an easy gap to slip through.

The Muras came at her — and met the circle other defence. She felt the swords bite through the carapace of a Mura, glimpsed the spurt of thick white ichor. Another came at her from above, dropping down directly on her head. She spun the swords, twirling around on her feet like a dancing dervish, and the Mura was struck by a blade and went flying, bleeding and squealing. It left a limb behind, oozing white ichor like pus. She spun around and around again—fending off another and another attack.

To her side, she heard Krishna fighting them too, using his sword too but in his own inimitable fashion. Krishna swept the sword in a pantomime dance, moving it this way and that way in an elaborate arabesque, as if fighting an invisible dancing enemy. She sensed the Muras attacking him too, but they were thwarted just as effectively—cut, bleeding, flung aside. She loved to

watch Krishna's sword dance, it was a sight to behold. But she had her own dance to mind. And this was a dance of death. One slip and the Muras would be on her person, ripping her flesh to shreds. All that kept them from her was her skill with the swords and her footwork. She danced on.

She did not know how much time passed, but in some immeasurable span she realized that something had changed.

The Muras were no longer attacking. She was still swinging her swords, turning and stepping and turning again. Krishna was still performing his exquisite dance. But there were no more spidery asura flashing through the air, no squeals, no ichor spurting, no severed limbs.

She slowed her arcs until her swords fell still. Beside her, Krishna did the same.

They looked at each other.

He nodded at her. 'Good.'

She raised her chin, fiercely proud at the single word of praise. A word from Krishna was a torrent of applause from the world.

She scanned the chamber. There was no sign of the Muras.

Where had they gone?
Suddenly, she felt a cut on her shoulder, at the point where her muscle ended and her shoulder bone began. It spurted blood and she cried out, unable to help herself, so unexpected was the pain.
She turned, swords spinning.
There was nobody there.
A sharp burning slash across her back, diagonally. Wetness.
She turned, swords ready, moving like lightning.
Nothing. Nobody.
Another cut from the other side, across the meaty part of her left ankle. She winced. Turned again.
Again, nothing.

Krishna was bleeding from three places too, she saw.

'What—,' she began.

'Spin. Spin now as fast as you can, Satya. Do it!'

She obeyed with question. Spun and spun again, dancing the dance of death again, but this time putting everything she had into it. Not spinning to build a bubble of steel defence but to test her own abilities, to spin as fast as it was possible to spin.

She felt a push from an unseen hand. Krishna's mind voice: 'I am boosting your speed. Maintain your balance.'

And then she was spinning like an actual dervish. Literally. Not merely a mortal one, but like a tornado itself, whirling at an impossible speed, turning fast enough that the world disappeared in a wash of white and grey, and no details remained. She could see nothing, hear nothing, was enveloped within a cylinder of white noise.

She kept her swords moving. Kept her balance too. She did not know how. It was partly muscle memory and training, partly her acceptance and faith that Krishna knew what he was doing and all would be well.

'Faster now. You will see them soon. Be ready.'

And she spun faster. Faster than she had ever believed it was possible for any human being to move. Because she was not moving at human speed anymore. This was the speed of a God, of the lightning and the whirlwind.

She felt a prickling in her chest and inside her head. Then, suddenly a roar of noise from nowhere. A popping of some sort, as if some enormous cork had burst free from a jug. A rushing of air inside her head. A cessation of time, a sense of free falling, as if time itself had ceased to function, and her body possessed no weight, as if light and time and the sky itself had bent and folded to form another shape and form.

'We are between worlds, in a different dimension to the one in which Prithviloka exists. That is what the Muras have done. They are inter dimensional beings, and they can move between dimensions, attacking us first from one dimension then retreating into another before we can see or hear them. The only way to fight them successfully is to chase them through the dimensions and kill them as they are crossing over from one world to another.'

Satyabhama's breath caught in her throat. The speed of her spinning had changed to a different rhythm, not quite faster, merely... altered. As if she were still spinning at an impossible speed, the speed of light itself, yet at a slightly tilted angle. It was disorienting but also very thrilling—and it looked beautiful.

There were colors here, and shapes and forms, and perspectives. A horizon, and along its line, beautiful hues and extrusions. She saw worlds and the beings that lived upon that world. She saw cities and civilisations and history unfold. She felt the movement of time like a sun passing hurriedly across the sky in the course of a single day, except that day was a hundred billion years and the sun began as a bright yellow star and slowly grew darker, more orange, then deep red.

She glimpsed the Muras, leaping from the world of the red sun to the next.

She leaped after them, chasing them now, racing to catch up.

She heard them chittering. She was amazed that she could understand their speech now. They were afraid. They had thought that by moving between dimensions they could kill her and Krishna. They had not expected Krishna and she to come chasing after them. Now, they wanted only to escape.

But there was no escaping now. She was on their trail and she would catch up with them.

Satyabhama raced through dimensions, chasing the Muras.

Narakasura threw off the slab of stone that lay on his back. It was thirty yards wide and a yard thick and weighed many tons. He threw it off like a duck shaking off water. It struck the side of the ruined fortress battlements and cracked into pieces, falling over the edge along with the rest of the debris. He leaped up on the broken remains of the fortress, climbing higher and higher, seeking out only one thing, one being.

'Garuda!' he roared.

The entire top of the mountain had been smashed by Garuda's attack. The giant eagle-god had crashed into Pragjyotisha with the force of a giant missile. Every last one of the Muras and Suscrofa that had been swarming the top of the fortress city had been killed by the impact. A few crawled through the debris now, wounded and stunned. Several tens of thousands more had died on the upper levels that lay below the ramparts. Garuda's attack had sheared off at least a fifth of the mountain's top, leaving the Mountain Kingdom a broken ruin.

Only the solid rock of the mountain itself and the labyrinthine structure of the inner fortress had kept the rest of the underground city from being destroyed. Several hundreds of levels still survived intact and there were still several hundred thousand more Mura and Suscrofa to serve Narakasura. But Garuda had proved a point. All the bird god had to do was strike them again and again till they were all wiped out to the last one or until the entire mountain range itself was demolished and razed to the ground.

Narakasura had no intention of letting that happen.

'Garuda!' he bellowed again.

One of his tusks had chipped off. Only the very tip, but that was enough to infuriate him. The tip now jutted out unnaturally, rasping against the hairy palm of his paw. He grunted in fury. A boar-asura's tusks were his pride. To lose even a part of one was to be crippled, dishonored. It was proof that an enemy had bested you at one time. He would have to sharpen it again, to restore it to its former state but that was not enough. He would be avenged for the insult. He would cut out Garuda's heart and eat it as he had eaten the heart of the Lord of Bird's child not long ago.

'Garuda!' he shouted a third time.

The pile of rubble stirred and shifted.

Suddenly, Garuda burst free, emerging from the rubble to rise, mighty wings flapping. He was covered with dust and fragments from the crash. But the torrential rain pouring down washed it away in a trice. Rain sluiced down the great bird's feathers, beak, torso, wishing it clean.

His eagle eyes spotted Narakasura. 'Asura!' he shrieked.

Narakasura roared again and leaped, flying three hundred yards up in the air, throwing himself at Garuda.
Garuda shrieked and flew straight at him, launching himself through the air.
They met in mid air, colliding like two avalanches smashing into each other.
The impact shook the ruins, resounding like a clap of thunder.
Narakasura swung his axes, attacking Garuda the same way he had attacked and killed his children, seeking out his softer torso.
Garuda let Narakasura's axes find his torso.
Narakasura swung the axes with all his force, hacking at Garuda's midriff.
The axes struck Garuda's midriff and snapped, the blades breaking off from the shafts of the axes.
They left not even a mark on Garuda's bare midriff.

Narakasura stared at his ruined axes and swore in his tongue.

Garuda cocked his bird's head, tilting his beak. 'What did you think, asura? That you could kill me as easily as you killed my children? I. Am. Garuda.'

And then Garuda attacked Narakasura with his beak, cutting him across his snout, then his chest, then his arm.

But his attacks left not even a mark on Narakasura's body.

Garuda gaped, his beak open wide, as he stared at the unmarked spots on Narakasura's body where he had just pecked. His powerful beak should have torn the asura's body to ribbons. Instead, Narakasura was as unmarked as the day he was born.

'How?' Garuda asked, incredulous. 'I. Am. Garuda. I can slay elephants with a single peck. Cut through a mountain with my beak. How can you be unharmed?'

Narakasura laughed. 'Because I am he who was given the boon of invulnerability by my mother at birth. My mother, Bhoodevi. Mother Earth herself!'

Garuda squawked like a crow, hopping away from the asura.

'Does that surprise you? You did not know this, did you? Know it now. I am the son of Bhoodevi and your own master, Krishna, Lord of Vaikunta himself! I can not be killed by any god or asura, by any being of power, nor by mortal man or woman. I am invulnerable to all attacks, all power, all weapons.'

Narakasura looked around, found a large shard of jagged metal from some contraption that had been smashed by Garuda's attack. A metal trapdoor perhaps? It mattered not what it had been. What mattered was what it had become now, in Narakasura's hands. A weapon.

He raised the jagged metal, pointing it at Garuda's chest.

'And now I shall cut out your heart and eat it as a treat, Lord of Birds. After that, I shall find and kill your master as well. For even the mighty Krishna has no power over me.'

Narakasura roared and leaped again, lunging at Garuda with the jagged metal shard held like a giant dagger.

\* \* \*

Balarama pushed away the last of the Queens and staggered to his feet.

The corridor lay at an unnatural angle, bent and contorted. The attack of Garuda above had not destroyed these levels, but it had impacted them. Balarama had felt the impact like an elephant ram to his chest, and it had knocked him and everyone else off their feet.

It could not have come a moment too soon.

Balarama looked down at his body. He was cut, lacerated, gouged, scratched, bitten and bruised in a hundred places.

The possessed Queens had attacked him like demons, which they were in a manner of speaking. They had attacked him and all he could do was fend them off and push them away and otherwise defend himself passively, without actually hitting back. He knew that even a single blow from his powerful fists could shatter a jaw or an arm or even cripple or kill any one of them. He could not afford to harm them. So he had endured their abuse and tried as best as possible to fend them off without aggressively striking back.

What would he have done had Garuda not crashed into the mountain? Krishna alone knew! But Garuda had crashed. And everyone, including Balarama himself had been knocked off their feet.

And now, as he watched the Queens rise, staring around blankly, disoriented, confused, and all too human again, he knew that the impact had somehow managed to break the hold Narakasura had upon the 16,000. The Queens were free of his supernatural control again, mere mortal woman once more.

Now, it was time to free them literally as well.

'Ladies,' Balarama said, extending one muscled hand, 'Allow me to help you. I am here to release you and your children from your captivity.'

\* \* \*

Satyabhama killed the last of the Muras and watched it dissolve, screaming, into a miasma of color and light. Even as it melted away into the space between worlds, she felt herself slowing down, the spinning return to a more mortal pace.

She swung the swords one last time, coming to a halt, then sheathed them.

Krishna smiled at her. 'Well done.'

She beamed with pleasure. She noted that he was speaking to her in his own voice, not in mindspeak. She took that as an even greater compliment.

'Now you have one final task. Your greatest challenge yet.'

She raised her chin proudly. 'Say the word.'

'You must go the rest of the way, to the top. There you will find Narakasura, the architect of this madness. Face him and destroy him.'

She frowned. 'But, will you not come with me, my love?'

He smiled again. This time, there was a deep sadness in his smile. 'This task is yours alone to accomplish. Balarama and I are needed elsewhere.'

She was stunned. 'What else could be so urgent that it requires you to take your leave at this crucial time?'

'Dwarka is burning,' he said. 'The civil war spiralled out of control and an enemy was lured to the gates. Unable to storm the city because of the protections Balarama and I have placed around it, he set fire to the entire

kingdom. It will burn to the ground before dawn. I must return and save as many people as possible before they are all lost.'

Satyabhama was even more shocked by this news. 'Do they want you to save them?'

'Whether they do or not does not matter. I have to save them, it is my dharma.'

She nodded. 'Very well.'

'Satyabhama.' He came towards her, taking her in his arms. 'You are the love of my heart. No other person has brought me as much pleasure and joy as you have. But you have always known that my time here is approaching an end. That this form I took in this yuga cannot last forever. It serves a purpose and that purpose is now reaching the end of its span. Soon, I shall embark on my final task. I shall be called on to participate in the Mother of All Wars. The Mahabharata.'

'Your cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas,' she said.

'Yes. And after that, my work here will be done. It will never be as it was before. That age is past.'

She bowed her head. 'I understand and I accept. What must be must be.'

'You are wise beyond your years. You accept what you must and fight what you must. You are a true Sword of Dharma. We shall meet again in future eras. At the twilight of time, when worlds end. Now, say goodbye.'

'Goodbye,' she said, and did not brush away the tears in her eyes. They mirrored the tears in his own.

He turned and strode away without a backward glance. She heard his mind voice calling Daruka, asking for Pushpak to be brought to collect him, and then to take him to Dwarka at once.

She knew that within moments he would be a thousand miles from here, back in Dwarka.

She did not know if she would see him again, in this lifetime.

But he had given her one more task to do and she intended to do that, even if it was the last thing she ever did.

She began running across the chamber, leaping over the piled bodies of the asuras, to get to the far end of the chamber and from there to the top of the mountain. To Narakasura.

Balarama heard Krishna's words but could barely believe them. Dwarka in flames, an enemy at the gates, the kingdom lost, people dying by the thousands, the republic in ruins. Of course they must return at once, to salvage what they could, save whom they were able to save. But what then? The Great War? So it was all coming to an end then, this Yuga, this avatar. The Wheel of Time had turned and another epoch was coming to a close. So much work remained undone. So many things yet to be accomplished. So many dreams and hopes and desires unfulfilled.

Such is life, bhai, as long as we live, we hope and want and dream. If we did not, we would be dead before we actually die.

Balarama sighed. <What about the Queens? They are safe now, and so are their Children, but Narakasura is still alive.>

Satyabhama will deal with Narakasura.

<Satyabhama? But, bhraatr—!>

It is time, Balarama. Let us go home.

He sighed again. <Yes, yes, I understand. I hope you know what you are doing.> He shook his head. <What am I saying. Of course you know. You always know. But I still feel...we could do so much more with this world, with these people, with this time.>

There will be other worlds, other people, other times.

Balarama sighed. <Yes, there will be.>

There was no point arguing further. Even Krishna had his limitations. Even a God could only do so much.

He summoned Pushpak and followed Krishna. Back to Dwarka.

\* \* \*

Garuda sensed his master's departure and felt a wave of despair. Lord! Why do you abandon us now in our hour of need?

But he knew the answer. All things served Krishna. And Krishna served all things. What had to be would be, it was all part of Krishna's plan, the

spinning world on his fingertip, the Coriolis of Vishnu incarnate.

He flapped his wings, flying out of the reach of another attack by Narakasura. His invulnerability made it impossible for the hellspawn to wound him or harm him previously. But Narakasura's own invulnerability made it impossible for Garuda also to kill him or hurt him seriously. It was an impasse. Neither could kill the other.

Garuda flapped his wings, hovering several hundred yards above the ruined mountain fortress of Pragjyotisha. He could smash into the mountain again —and again. Until it was nothing but rubble. But what purpose would it serve? He would only end up killing all the mountain citizens trapped inside their own kingdom. No amount of assaults on stone and rock could kill Narakasura, he knew that now. As for killing his minions - more than half the Suscrofa and Muras were already dead, slaughtered by Krishna and Satyabhama, or by Garuda himself. He could slay the rest in a few hours—if not for their leader.

Narakasura leaped up again in an attempt to goad Garuda into fighting him.

'Face me, coward! Come down to ground and fight me!'

Garuda shrieked at him wordlessly. What use was it to fight when neither could best the other? All they would do was expend time and energy.

Suddenly, he spotted a figure climbing up through the rubble. A tiny, mortal figure that stood on two legs, unlike the cloven hooved Suscrofa or the

insectile Muras.

Satyabhama! His master had told him through mindspeak that she would be coming to challenge Narakasura and that Garuda must aid her in completing her mission. But seeing her now, so small, vulnerable and mortal, he had grave doubts. How could a mere mortal face and overcome a hellspawn asura with a boon of invulnerability? Narakasura had been quite clear: Neither God, nor Asura, nor mortal man or woman could kill him. So what hope did Satyabhama have?

He watched as she steadied her footing on a slab of broken flooring and shouted at the top of her voice to attract Narakasura's attention.

\* \* \*

'Narakasura!'

Narakasura turned and looked to see who was daring to call his name.

He saw the puny mortal woman and grunted. A woman? A mortal woman? This would be Krishna's mate then. But where was Krishna himself?

'Where is your husband, woman? Where is the Lord of Dwarka? The Lord of Vaikunta!'

He saw the puny woman smile, baring her teeth at him. 'He had more pressing business to attend to at home. He sent me to deal with you.'

He snorted, spewing snot and fluids out both his nostrils. The Suscrofa and Muras who had emerged from below also snorted in laughter. He was pleased to see that there were still a few hundred thousand left. The enemy had cut his army in half, it was true, but he still had more than enough to hold the Mountain Kingdoms and to invade other mortal kingdoms too. After he finished this battle.

'Is that Krishna's way now? To send his wives to fight his battles?'

Satyabhama shrugged. 'Only when he feels that his wife is more than a match for an enemy. Why should he expend his own resources fighting you when I can deal with you myself?'

Narakasura honked in irritation. So the mortal female was calm enough to jest about fighting him? Well, she would not jest for long.

'Very well then,' he said. 'Let his wife fight me. I will make Krishna a widower in a moment!'

And he leaped through the air at Satyabhama.
* * *
Satyabhama watched as Narakasura leaped at her.
He covered the distance of almost a hundred yards as easily as a child jumping a rain puddle.
She braced herself, reading her body for the impact she knew would come when he landed on the slab she stood on.
He landed on the slab. The impact was bone-jarring. She felt it in every joint of her body.
But she stood her ground.
From a hundred yards away, he had looked hideous.

From ten yards away, he looked ten times more hideous.

She recoiled in disgust.

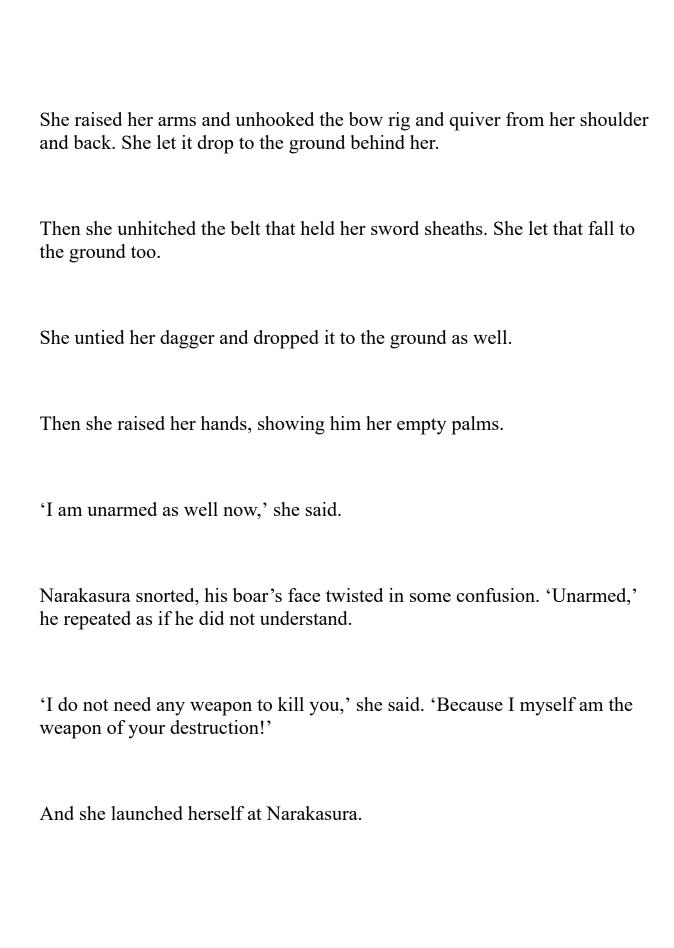
On the broken ledges and cracked battlements above and around them, the Muras and Suscrofa thronged, gathering in the thousands to watch what they knew to be the final clash of the battle. They chittered and grunted and crowded each other on the ruined fortress to see their master defeat the last enemy.

Narakasura raised his tusks, his snout wet and dripping. 'On the other hand, I find you comely and attractive. I have tired of the Mountain Queens. Perhaps instead of killing you, I shall keep you as my new mistress. Until I tire of you. Then I shall give you as a gift to my army to use as they please.'

She shuddered but said nothing.

'A mortal who has nothing to say. That is good. Speak with your weapons then. You have a bow. Use it. Or your swords. Or any other weapon you desire. I am unarmed as you can see. I shall permit you to attempt to draw first blood.'

He raised his arms. 'Attack me with anything you desire!'



Garuda watched from above the mountain as Satyabhama launched herself at the hellspawn. Empty handed and unarmed!

Satyabhama struck Narakasura feet first. She dealt him a blow on his chest with all her strength. Then somersaulted backwards to land on her feet.

Narakasura barely budged an inch.

Satyabhama caught her balance and ran at him, striking out with her fist this time. She dealt him a blow to his snout, then another, and yet another.

The blows did not even turn Narakasura's head.

Satyabhama circled around the asura, hands held in a fighting stance.

Narakasura grunted and honked in amusement.

The watching Suscrofa and Muras also honked and grunted, chittered and screeched in amusement.

Garuda called softly in dismay.

What was the point of this demonstration? Satyabhama could not possibly hope to fell Narakasura merely by a few blows and kicks? Even her weapons could not harm him. All she would do was provide a few moments of amusement for him then he would lose his patience. That would be the end of the battle, and of Satyabhama.

Garuda called to his children. They were wheeling about in the air, watching the fight too. There were perhaps fifty left, less than half the number that had accompanied him this morning at the start of battle. It hurt his heart to think of losing any more of them to these damned hellspawn.

He decided he had no choice. They were all that was left. He would lead them in a final suicidal attack on the hellspawn, killing as many as possible. Narakasura would not be affected but at least they could wipe out more of his army, perhaps reduce his numbers to the point where he—

A sound from below distracted Garuda.

He looked down, his sharp eyes able to spot every detail as clearly as mortal eyes could see across a few inches distance.

Narakasura was bleeding.

The asura was dribbling blood from his snout, from two, no three, places. He was also clutching his chest as if experiencing pain there. Garuda looked into the asura's body and saw that he had two broken ribs. From Satyabhama's kick! And the wounds on his snout are from her blows! Garuda called out in excitement, telling his children what was happening. They answered him, sharing his excitement and asking him what it meant. How was the mortal woman able to cause bodily harm to Narakasura when the asura was supposed to be immune to attack by all beings? I do not know, Children. But it is happening! He is injured from just a few blows already! That means he can be hurt and Satyabhama has a chance! They called back, expressing shrill pleasure.

Satyabhama struck at Narakasura again, hitting him below the ribs, then on the other side, then spun around and struck him from behind, then on the legs. She continued her barrage of blows, striking him at every vulnerable point again and again, inflicting as much damage as possible.

His body felt rock hard to her. It was like striking a boulder. Or a brick wall. She felt as if her bones were bruised and battered.

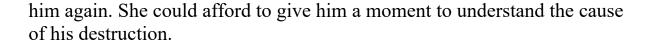
But it was working.

She could see the asura bleeding from a dozen wounds, other bruises clearly hurting him as he clutched and grunted and moaned.

He staggered back from her last blow, badly injured now and barely able to focus on her clearly.

'How...is it possible?' he said, the confusion visible on his face. 'I am invulnerable to all beings! I cannot be killed by anyone, God, asura, man or woman!'

Satyabhama relaxed her stance. He was already mortal injured in a dozen organs. He would not last more than a few moments even if she did not hit



'You forgot one person,' she said quietly.

He looked at her, frowning. 'Who?'

'The one who gave you that boon of invulnerability in the first place. And who gave you life itself.'

He stared at her dully. 'My...Mother? Bhoodevi? The Earth herself?'

She shrugged. 'In that lifetime. In this one, I am Satyabhama. Wife of Krishna.'

The Suscrofa and Muras fell silent.

Narakasura stared at her, half dazed from his injuries and the pain. 'I did not recognise you, Mother.'

She nodded. 'Of course not. I appear to you now in a different body, a different life form. But I am still the wife of your father in this lifetime as well. That should have been enough. You knew Krishna was your father. You forgot that I was your mother. That was your failing. Did you think I would let you get away with trying to kill your own father? With all the



destruction and death you have caused in this lifetime? The pain you have brought here upon this earth? It is intolerable, my son. You do not deserve to enjoy the life I have given you. What I gave you then, in that last lifetime, I take back from you now, in this lifetime.'

Narakasura's eyes were glazing over. He coughed and spat out blood.

He staggered, falling to his knees.

'Mother,' he cried. 'Forgive me. I did not—.'

He fell face forward on the ground, in the rubble and dust and debris. His outflung hand touched the tip of her foot.

Satyabhama looked up at the watching Suscrofa and Muras. They stared down at her, awe struck, silent, stunned.

'And now, it is your turn,' she said. 'I will send each and every last one of you back whence you came. Back to Naraka.'

And she picked up her bow and quiver and loosed a volley as Garuda and his children shrieked in exultation and attacked once again, this time for victory.