**STRATEGIC LESSONS FROM MAHABHARATA**

In the ancient and illustrious lineage of Brahma, there was born a son named **Krushuvu**. From him descended **Krushanabha**, followed in turn by **Gaadhi**, and then the celebrated sage-king **Vishwamitra**. Vishwamitra, renowned both as a monarch and as a seeker of spiritual greatness, once visited the hermitage of the venerable sage **Vasishtha**. There, he encountered a wondrous sight—the divine cow **Sabala**, also known as Nandini. This miraculous being was no ordinary cow; she possessed the extraordinary power to produce any kind of food and bounty in but a few moments.

Amazed and overwhelmed by her abilities, Vishwamitra approached Vasishtha with a request: that he part with Sabala in exchange for immense wealth and riches. Vasishtha, however, firmly refused, declaring that Sabala was not merely a possession but an inseparable part of his spiritual life. Frustrated and deeply moved by this denial, Vishwamitra resolved to surpass Vasishtha’s power. He renounced worldly ease and undertook severe and rigorous penance, determined to gain might and divine authority through tapas.

Observing this intense austerity, **Indra**, king of the gods, grew concerned. Fearing that Vishwamitra’s growing spiritual power might challenge the balance of heaven, Indra devised a plan to disturb his meditation. He sent the celestial nymph **Menaka**, radiant in beauty and charm, to distract the ascetic. Menaka succeeded in her mission, breaking Vishwamitra’s concentration. From their union, a daughter was born. But soon after, Menaka returned to Indra’s court, leaving the helpless infant alone in the wilderness.

Yet nature itself rose in protection. Birds and animals gathered around, sheltering the child and keeping her safe. In time, the sage **Kanva** discovered her amidst the forest. Seeing the birds—Shakuntas—that had shielded her, he named the girl **Shakuntala**.

As years passed, Shakuntala grew into a woman of surpassing beauty and rare virtue. One day, **King Dushyanta** of the mighty **Yayati dynasty** arrived at Kanva’s hermitage. Captivated by her grace and loveliness, Dushyanta fell deeply in love with her. Shakuntala reciprocated his feelings, and together they entered into a **Gandharva marriage**, a sacred union formed purely out of mutual consent and love.

Their time together was brief, for soon Dushyanta was called back to his kingdom. He departed with solemn promises to bring Shakuntala with him and to honor her place at his side. Left behind, Shakuntala bore a son—**Bharata**—who in time would become a ruler of great renown.

With her child, Shakuntala eventually set forth to Dushyanta’s court, accompanied by Sage Kanva. But upon her arrival, Dushyanta, caught in the sway of forgetfulness or doubt, denied knowing her. Shakuntala stood stricken until a **divine voice** echoed from the heavens, revealing the truth and affirming her claim. Awakened to reality, Dushyanta accepted Shakuntala and their son Bharata.

Bharata grew to greatness, and in his name the land itself came to be known as **Bharatavarsha**. His descendants carried his legacy forward. Among them was **Hasti**, who founded the city of **Hastinapura**. Generations later came **Kuru**, a descendant of Hasti. Through his deeds and fame, the dynasty took its enduring name, and the sacred field where the Mahabharata would unfold was remembered as **Kurukshetra**.

From this line descended **Pratipa**, a wise and just ruler. His son, **Shantanu**, destined to play a pivotal role in the destiny of Hastinapura, was none other than a reincarnation of the celestial **Mahabisha**. During his reign, Shantanu beheld the goddess **Ganga**, radiant and divine, and fell profoundly in love with her. Ganga consented to marry him but laid down a solemn condition: he must never question or oppose her actions. Bound by love, Shantanu agreed.

Their marriage at first was filled with happiness, but soon tragedy unfolded. Each time Ganga bore a child, she carried the infant to the river and consigned it to its waters. Though Shantanu’s heart ached with horror, he kept silent, honoring his promise. Seven times this happened, and seven times he endured in anguish. But when the eighth child was born and Ganga sought once more to cast it into the river, Shantanu could bear no more. He intervened and stopped her.

Ganga then revealed the truth. These children were the **Vasus**, celestial beings cursed to take mortal birth. By drowning them, she had released them from the burden of earthly existence. Only the eighth, still bound by destiny, must live out a human life. With these words, Ganga departed, taking the child with her.

That child, **Devavrata**, was raised with utmost care. Ganga entrusted him to the tutelage of great sages and teachers—**Vasishtha, Sukracharya, and other celestial preceptors**—who instructed him in every branch of knowledge, scripture, and warfare. When his training was complete, she returned him to Shantanu, who embraced his son with joy and declared him the crown prince of Hastinapura.

In later years, Shantanu encountered **Satyavati**, the foster daughter of a fisherman. Struck by her beauty, he sought her hand in marriage. Yet her father posed a stern condition: only children born of Satyavati could inherit the throne. Shantanu was plunged into sorrow, for Devavrata was already the heir apparent.

Perceiving his father’s torment, Devavrata made a supreme and terrible sacrifice. He renounced his right to the throne and vowed eternal celibacy, that no descendants of his would ever claim kingship. This oath, known forever as the **Bhishma Pratigya**, was so fearsome and absolute that from that moment he was called **Bhishma**, “the one of the dreadful vow.” Moved beyond measure, Shantanu bestowed upon his son a boon: **Ichha Mrityu**—the power to choose the moment of his own death.

Shantanu and Satyavati were then wed, and from their union were born two sons, **Chitrangada** and **Vichitravirya**. After Shantanu’s death, Chitrangada briefly reigned but fell in battle against a Gandharva king. Bhishma, ever faithful to his vow, installed Vichitravirya on the throne and took upon himself the burden of guardianship.

When the time came to secure brides for Vichitravirya, Bhishma journeyed to the swayamvara of the princesses of Kashi. There he seized the three sisters—**Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika**—and brought them to Hastinapura. But Amba confessed that her heart already belonged to King **Salva**. Respecting her truth, Bhishma released her and sent her to Salva. Yet Salva rejected her, declaring that it would be dishonorable to wed one who had been carried away by another.

Wounded in spirit, Amba returned to Bhishma and demanded that he marry her instead. Bound by his vow of celibacy, Bhishma refused. Consumed by grief and anger, Amba held him responsible for her fate and swore to exact vengeance. She sought out **Parashurama**, Bhishma’s revered teacher, and implored him for aid. Parashurama, moved by her plea, challenged Bhishma to single combat.

The two warriors clashed in a furious battle that raged for twenty-three days. Neither could prevail, for both were masters beyond compare. At last, the struggle ended without resolution. Still burning with fury, Amba turned to penance. She performed austere devotion to Lord **Shiva**, who granted her a boon: in her next birth, she would be the cause of Bhishma’s death.