

# draupadi

INDIA'S FIRST DAUGHTER



VAMSHI KRISHNA

# DRAUPADI

Vamshi Krishna

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*To my family and friends*

*To my alma mater, IIT-BHU*

# Foreword

A helpless and lonely woman is always an evil man's feast; that was what had transpired after Pandavas gambled Draupadi in the game of dice. Not just Draupadi, we come across these kinds of unfortunate incidents very often even in today's world. To protect Draupadi from the evil forces that day in Mahabharata, one Krishna was sufficient. But for the world we are living in now, rescuing Draupadi from the wicked men existing around us, each one of us needs to turn into a Krishna. We, as a country that taught the rest of the world to see god in mother, have failed multiple times as a system to save the life and dignity of women.

Draupadi had five husbands as written in her fate. She was not loved and wed, but a prize for their skill. Being a princess, she could not choose her husband. Her character was extensively misunderstood and limited to just a woman who had an insatiable hunger for sex. But was that all there was about her?

A small story for reference which I read somewhere in the past, would fit perfectly in Draupadi's context.

A family had two sons. One of them believed that he was born out of the two-minute pleasure his mother had had with his father. And the other one believed, he was born out of the unbearable pain his mother had to endure for nine months carrying him in her womb. Technically, both of them were right. But, if one can not see beyond the pleasure, he's an animal. He can become a social animal and a human only if he chooses to understand the pain.

If one chooses to believe that Draupadi's character is limited only and only to her hunger for sex, he can never understand her greatness.

As admired by most Indians, if enduring the agony and suffering, without voicing any opposition, is the essence of an ideal woman, then she can never be an example of that kind of idealism. She was a compassionate and merciful woman but had the mind to revenge against the evil. She was not the character that would bear humiliations on her face; instead, she questioned and tried knocking sense into the opposite person. She fought back against the injustice, meted out to her modesty. She confronted her issues with no self-deception and no soft filters. She pushed her husbands to avenge the humiliation she had to undergo because of Kauravas. She ignited the spark of revenge in the hearts of the Pandavas, and she offered her entire being as fuel to keep the revenge alive in her husbands' bodies and souls. She did not rest until her enemies were beaten to death by Pandavas in the Kurukshetra war. Unfortunately, at the end of the war, blame lied with her while her husbands were remembered for their virtues.

She was portrayed as the cause of the war that happened due to greed for power and game of dice. Misconceptions, misinterpretations, insults, humiliations, grief, miseries - she went through all these to a vast extent all her life. Her strong determination, grit and the way she did not rest till her husbands avenged Kauravas for molesting her in public makes her the strongest female lead not just in Indian epics but also in world history. If we get into history, we might compare Draupadi with Cleopatra from Egypt, whose romantic relationships and military alliances with Caesar and Antony earned her an enduring place in history. Or Helen, whose exotic beauty was believed to be the main cause of Trojan war; but she can be seen more as a victim playing her part from behind the curtains. Draupadi is different in a way for she ran the show on the ground as a determined woman and an inspiring force for Pandavas besides being a victim.

I believe that the readers are of two types - those who show interest in novel stories and those who are curious about how the existing stories are rewritten. And of course, some fall in both the categories. Some stories are fictitious, some stories are real. Some are based on proof, some are based on beliefs. When it comes to our epics, there is always a debate on whether or not they happened for real. And as I expected, a lot of people asked me about my belief in this regard. I have made an earnest attempt in the adaptation of tales from our great epic to the

community we are living in today by trying to show how the lessons learned from the past can help in the betterment of contemporary society. The process of writing about this magnanimous character made me a better man or should I say, a better human! And honestly, that is the only thing that matters to me above the debate of Mahabharata being real or fiction. I only take what I need, without overthinking.

Ever since I have announced my novel on Draupadi, I was asked one question a countless number of times; 'Why do you love Draupadi'? Honestly, I don't see Draupadi just as a character but more of a brand ambassador for all the strong women. There are so many women around us who endorse that brand of fighting spirit in today's world.

There were numerous instances in this journey of mine where I felt proud as a writer for being able to elaborately pen down Draupadi's emotions. But those were also the times I felt myself drowning in shame as a man. That was when I felt that it is high time we tell the younger generation to be fierce instead of being nice.

I understand that meddling with iconic characters from our epics is a risky challenge. I did try my best to explore Draupadi's inspiring life journey as a Kshatriya daughter, wife, sister, mother, Krishna's best friend, empress, homemaker - shouldering all these responsibilities with utmost conviction throughout her life. I did use my liberty as an author in tinkering the storyline a bit, keeping the core plot intact.

A few of us believe in Lord Shiva, a few in Lord Rama, a few in Lord Krishna, a few in some other God and a few don't believe in the existence of God. Almighty himself could not please everyone and I am a mere mortal here. I hope I will live up to the expectation you had while purchasing this novel. I have no intention to hurt the sentiments of any person or class. If by chance, my novel offended anyone, my sincere apologies in advance. I am always open to candid feedback and I am active on my Instagram -vamshi2509. Or you can drop an email to me -vamshi.iitbhu@gmail.com

Thank You!

Vamshi Krishna



# Prologue

The mighty Himalayas stood tall with snow coating all over their surface. They were arising from the ground with pride as if they wanted to reach the skies piercing through dense, fluffy clouds. With greenery at their base and the abundant pale blue above and below, in the sky and the series of lakes surrounding them, Himalayas looked as magnificent as a painting from Rome, where the painter had run out of all colours but blue, green and white.

One might do nothing but wonder how truly good and powerful was the creator who put those mountains in their place. Maybe that was the reason the Himalayas were termed as the staircase to heaven.

The sun was rising with a casual elegance while spreading its glitter in every possible direction. It let her rays cascade onto the thick snow, which enhanced the gleaming reflections with delight.

With the wind rustling through the trees and the water lapping against the stones, it might have looked soothing from afar but it was not a pleasant cold to live in; instead, it was the type that would make warm clothes want to have shelters of their own to safeguard themselves. The air seemed to bite the skin and every single breath, a mighty effort for regular humans. The lighting and temperature deemed unbearable for normal living beings.

In such an utterly alien landscape embodying boredom with deceptive dullness, silently walked five tall men with their eyes roaming freely over the hills. Their faces were mostly obscured by scraggly black beards and their eyes, devoid of any warmth.

The peak of the mountains bent slightly to check these men out, with the lakes also scrutinising those strangers. The wind, with its toothy bite, started flowing with all the might to punish those creatures who were trying to disturb the peace of that beautiful place. Little did it know that the leader of those men was once regarded as an epitome of peace and righteousness.

Those five men had once been warriors who with their might, had instilled fear in their enemies and had survived the most gruesome battle in their past.

And behind them trotted a beautiful lady. Was she walking or just dragging her feet with might? She looked like a woman who once brimmed with charm, strength, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, love, mercy, compassion, grace but then gave it up all, after getting physically exhausted and mentally drained.

With that lady coming in sight, nature witnessed a drastic change but on a pleasant note. Nature that stuffed itself with boundless wisdom and passionately embraces all the creatures but silently witnesses everything happening around it, bowed to the lady with admiration as if it had met her counterpart for the first time ever. It was difficult, even for the towering Himalayas to not stand in awe and enchantment, witnessing her presence.

All the men walking ahead of her had a smile on their face witnessing the sudden change in weather. This was no surprise to them. They were used to such experiences owing to their past.

She was their wife. That lady had five husbands who also happened to be brothers.

Yudhishtira, Bheema, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva. All five brothers were married to the same woman, Draupadi. They had lived together through happiness and sorrows, through thick and thin, through riches and rags, through pleasures and painful times. And now, all of them were on their quest of Swargaloka.

Five husbands.

Five warriors, intellectuals, heroes.

Every journey has to end somewhere and her marital journey with them was about to end there that day.

But she was not in a condition to fret about or embrace the unexpected developments happening around her. She was only alive physically.

All her life, she had seen such unanticipated events and conflicts at whichever place she had stepped in. To a few men, she was the testament of divine purity and devotion while most of the others stared at her with sexual desire. A few were imbued with reverence for her while another few looked at her with disgust.

She had experienced all the physical pleasures and agony a living being could have had. What else was left for her to experience? Except for death!

The moment she acknowledged that she could no way reach the staircase to Swargaloka, she looked at the peak of the mountains with a blissful smile on her face. She felt Lord Shiva showering her with his blessings. The life which had originated with the boon of Lord Shiva ultimately would come to an end at his doorstep in a matter of a few moments.

With her breath coming out in gasps and her bare feet cold from the freezing snow beneath, she dropped to her knees and then fell down to the ground with a thud. All five brothers could sense that she had slipped but none bothered to look back, except Bheema.

She knew that all of them loved her but them not halting to check on her was no surprise to her. She had always known Yudhishtira to be the epitome of dharma and all his brothers would willfully follow him no matter what.

Bheema came running towards her and started crying, “Draupadi Draupadi, are you fine?”

She could not utter a word.

He then quickly ran to Yudhishtira, crossed him and steadied himself with his hands on his knees for a moment, panting heavily. Such was the weather that even the hulk-like Bheema could not breathe properly after running a few yards.

He said, “Dear big brother, she is dying and you do not even bother to look back. This is unfair in all senses. Please do something,” choking back his tears. Though Bheema was physically the toughest and most powerful, he had a naive, childlike heart.

“Bheema, our existence here is only for a brief period. Our attachments and affection towards our dear ones are temporary. Our hostility and hatred towards our enemies are temporary. Only dharma stays forever. There is no end to dharma. The ultimate goal of life is death. Everything has to come to an end one day and it is her turn today. It might be myself tomorrow. Eventually, every one of us will die and land at Swargaloka or Narakaloka as per our Karma. Therefore, grieving for what is inevitable is a futile exercise.”

“Dear brother, you are the embodiment of justice and righteousness. I agree with every bit of your preachings but how can we leave her all alone in this condition? After all, she is our wife, the one who we all married, witnessed by the earth, water, fire, air, and space. Why does she have to die first amongst all of us? What sin did she do to get in this miserable situation?”

“She is dying first because she deserves it,” Yudhishtira replied firmly.

“Deserves? How can you say that?” Bheema questioned his statement in a high-pitched voice.

“Because she loved Arjuna more than any of us, though all five of us are her husbands, which is a sin,” Yudhishtira answered in a blunt manner, which made Bheema numb with shock for a moment. Arjuna also heard him from behind but he chose not to respond.

She could vaguely hear their conversation but was not in a position to respond. In fact, she did not even feel the need to respond.

Misconceptions, misinterpretations, insults, humiliations, grief, miseries - she had been through all these to a vast extent all her life.

‘Husband Yudhishtira, you are scholarly enough to extensively understand each mantra chanted by the priests during our wedding and their significance in merging a husband and his wife as one entity. If only you could have used a bit of that awareness in reading a woman’s heart, I would not have to bear such senseless accusations today,’ she thought to herself. A part of her heart died that moment.

She felt that this misconception created by Yudhishtira was the driving force behind none of her husbands bothering to check on her.

Bheema knew that there was no way he could change Yudhishtira’s mind and started moving helplessly towards her while his brothers

continued walking. He could see her watery eyes as a cold breeze whipped the hair across her face.

She felt an invisible force was blocking all her senses slowly, sucking up all the energy she had in her body and crushing her. All she could see was a magical white layer in front of her eyes getting thicker, gradually blocking her vision. She was experiencing absolutely nothing, feeling as light as a feather.

“Is this what death feels like?” she thought to herself. A flashback of all her life events started playing in her mind. With the snow cracking under her body in sync with her warm heart breaking and all her inner voices leading her to the proximity of Lord Krishna, she closed her eyes.

# Chapter 1

“Whatever you have got, share it amongst all five of you, like usual,” said Kunti to her five sons, not bothering to look around from her work in the kitchen. Little did she know that her statement would turn the world of a princess upside down and ultimately lead to the biggest war in the coming future, resulting in the downfall of the mighty Kauravas.

Pandava brothers were stunned and looked at one other with a puzzled expression on their faces. None of them could utter a word for a few moments. They only wanted to show off the ‘priceless possession’ their brother Arjuna had won in swayamvara and give their mother a pleasant surprise.

“But, mother,” Arjuna mumbled.

Kunti sensed the hesitation in Arjuna’s voice and turned around only to find the beautiful and shy Draupadi with a confused look on her face next to him, in her bridal attire.

A myriad of emotions started flooding Draupadi’s heart in that instant.

Kunti was quick to realise her mistake but could she ever take her words back?

Draupadi touched her mother-in-law’s feet for blessings.

Kunti held her by the shoulders, looked at her face and noticed her innocent eyes trying to speak volumes.

Kunti uttered the words in a low pitched and trembling voice, “What have I done? What blunder have I made! I wish I could take my words back.”

There was remorse in her admittance and yet, she was just as entranced by Draupadi's charm.

For Pandavas, Kunti was the one who stood for tolerance, integrity, grit, and perseverance as a single mother. Though they had lived under the shadow of the bullying Kauravas for most of their life, she had made sure that Pandavas were brought up in a way befitting the Kshatriya dharma. They were always conscious of how painful and enduring the journey as a widow had been for her. There was no way they would not fulfill her words, no matter how irrational or illogical.

But then, she was placed in a strange and difficult predicament. There sprang a feeling of unrest in everyone present at that home.

Not knowing what to do, she looked at his eldest son, Yudhishtira.

Kunti and her other sons knew about his unflinching adherence to truth and immense knowledge of dharma.

"Son Yudhishtira, what do you suggest we do?" she asked in a sorrowful voice. She desperately hoped that he would clear the way out for them.

Meanwhile, Draupadi was looking at each of the Pandavas. She noticed that they were also secretly watching her with desire. Yudhishtira saw this, thought for a while and suggested, "Dear mother, let us rest for this night. All of us are exhausted now. We can talk about this tomorrow morning," as he did not want to make a decision in haste.

As the night passed by, everyone fell asleep except for one, the new face in that home.

She had been a princess all her life and she was not used to sleeping on the floor. Let alone sleeping on a mud floor, she had never seen dust in her life. From sleeping in a cosy room that could accommodate one hundred elephants and air perfumed with aromas to sharing a tiny space with five men at once, the unexpected transition was disturbing for her.

But that seemed trivial compared to the major obstacle in front of her.

She started rewinding the events a few hours earlier, which had led her to that situation.

**A few hours ago:**

It was Draupadi's swayamvara. Magnificently dressed and decorated with splendid ornaments, she looked like beauty personified in the form of a woman. On the contrary, Pandavas were disguised as poor brahmins, covering their bodies in ashes, clothed in deerskin, with their faces sporting heavy and untidy beards, their long unkempt hair matted in a bun.

All the renowned princes from surrounding kingdoms had gone there to try their luck in the swayamvara.

As she walked into the hall, the frenzied crowd fell mute as if she had cast a magic spell on them with her eyes. She could notice those men staring at her as an object put for an exhibition in public. She was mature enough as a woman to understand the intention behind those stares.

She had an aura that attracted most of the men. But little did those men know that she was looking for someone who would fall in love with her soul before her looks claimed the credit.

The only hurdle between the princes and her was the golden fish which was revolving on the top of the pole. The catch was to hit the fish's eye indirectly by seeing its reflection in the water. Even the bow that had to be employed was so heavy that only a handful could lift it.

King Drupada, the father of Draupadi, who had always been fond of Pandavas and especially Arjuna, wanted him to be his son-in-law. But the news that Pandavas along with their mother Kunti being burnt alive in a fire mishap a few days ago had disturbed him. Drupada and Draupadi never believed that those brave souls faced death in such an unfortunate way. Also, the rumour that the Pandavas, along with their mother, had escaped from the fire accident and were living in secrecy, comforted them to an extent.

They expected that Pandava brothers would be present at swayamvara, to at least witness it, if not to participate in it, if they would come to know of it. Hence, Drupada made sure that the news reached every corner of the kingdoms around. But he set the challenge in such a tricky way that only Arjuna could chase it and marry Draupadi.

Looking at such a huge number of kings who were entranced by her beauty and ready to take up arms against each other to stake claim on her body, she wondered if she was in the assembly hall or a battleground. She instantly remembered the lines her father Drupada always used to tell her,



“You are born to destroy the Kaurava clan”. She felt worried if that was the moment she was destined to take part in. She desperately hoped that Arjuna would come out of nowhere to finish the challenge and make her his wife.

In hindsight, that setup can be interpreted as a stage where the foundation stone to Kurukshetra was laid.

But then she felt a pleasant stare at her back. Lord Krishna it was, standing a few feet away from her. His soothing smile relaxed her a bit.

“Why is Krishna not taking part in the contest? Did he voluntarily opt himself out because he is not a Kshatriya? Or is it because he is already married to multiple women?” she thought to herself and smiled back at him.

The challenge was announced to all the princes. Every time an arrow was shot by a contestant, she halted her breath and felt her heart stop. Her hands would tremble as the arrows traveled from the ground to the target in the sky. And with the arrow missing the mark, she would feel alive again. Her eyes looked at every prince who tried to lift the bow, but her heart always sought another face in the crowd.

None of them could tackle the challenge, including the mighty Duryodhana, the eldest of Kauravas. To defend the honour of Hastinapura, the kingdom of Kauravas, Duryodhana had requested his close friend Karna to take part in the contest. Karna had obliged.

When it came to archery prowess, Karna was the only one who could match Arjuna. Draupadi also was aware of his archery skills and she was anxious about Karna entering the stage. Drupada was alarmed, fretting that Karna might succeed and claim Draupadi as his possession. Acknowledging Karna’s magnificent skills in archery, there was jubilation and huge applause in the hall.

Karna smiled at Draupadi, brimming with confidence and aggression on his face saying, “You are going to be mine”. As Karna walked towards the bow, a hush fell over the arena. The crowd wanted to witness him hitting the target, without missing a moment. He then picked up the bow without much difficulty and strung it, getting ready to shoot the arrows.

Draupadi knew that she would be left with no option but to accept him as her wedded husband if he finished the challenge. She started feeling

suffocated and restless. She wanted to scream and flee away from the scene. She quickly had to make a plan to keep him out of the contest. She looked at Lord Krishna, who remained silent and just gave her a wicked smile, understanding her thoughts.

“I cannot marry a man like Karna who hails from an unknown origin and a lower caste,” she stood up from her seat and declared firmly in front of everyone.

There was stunning silence all around the hall and Karna felt numb because of the insult. He gave a bitter smile, which looked more like he was laughing at his fate.

But only Krishna could identify that Karna’s focus was already been shaken by then. He believed Karna could no way hit the target and convinced Draupadi to let him take part in the contest.

The same bow which he had lifted with ease a few moments earlier, started feeling heavy now. His hands were shivering, his posture was displaced, he missed his shots one after other and murmurs hummed in the crowd. But he could hear his heart beating with untold hatred towards Draupadi. He was indignant at being the object of unfair treatment based on his caste but he did not feel the need to expose it then. He had no option but to drag himself to his seat beside Duryodhana. He was consoled by Duryodhana with a hand on his shoulder. Draupadi relaxed as if her life had been spared. Krishna looked happy as everything had gone according to his plan.

“Karna is the best archer on the earth. How can he miss the target? If he can’t shoot the fish, no one else can do that. What type of impossible task Drupada has set here? He means to ridicule all of us with his stupidity,” these were the thoughts running in everyone’s heads but only Karna knew the reason why he had failed.

*Draupadi’s words might have surely humiliated Karna but one should not quickly jump to conclusions about her character just based on this incident. What’s a bigger motive than her love for change in a woman’s nature? What’s a more significant catalyst than ambition for a change in man’s demeanour? A woman’s love for someone might push her to do something which is not a part of her inherent self. As they say, everything is fair in love and war.*

*It was her love for Arjuna that blindfolded her heart and mind at that instant. She was not even sure if Arjuna would come back alive. As a woman, she might have lost the person she loved the most, but her love for him was still intact. She hoped he would come back; after all, hope is a drug. However exciting a man's offerings to a woman maybe, he should be sport enough to handle rejection from her. There is no point in investing time and efforts in resentment.*

With all the valiant princes including Karna failing miserably to tackle the challenge, a gloomy cover had started descending over the court.

Then, to everyone's surprise, came Arjuna in disguise as a brahmin to the centre of the stage to take part in the challenge. All the people witnessing the ceremony had had some hesitation about how this Brahmin could break that challenge. Most of them were ridiculing him for even daring to attempt the challenge, only to be spellbound seeing Arjuna rise to the occasion with great archery skills in a matter of seconds. All the eyes were focused on him with their mouths wide open as he strung the bow with precision and shot five arrows back to back without a pause aimed at the target. The golden fish fell over and crashed onto the ground. A shower of flowers rained on his head. In no time, the court resounded with loud applause from every corner.

Draupadi picked up the ritual garland of white flowers and walked towards Arjuna, who was in disguise. She draped the garland around his neck and caught his hand.

This effort by Arjuna left the Kshatriya princes also stunned. But it did not take much time for the astonishment to take the form of an uproar among some of the humiliated Kshatriya princes, majorly Duryodhana. They started protesting about how a Kshatriya woman could be married to a Brahmin and they lunged forward to harm him.

Duryodhana, with a blazing look on his face, strode towards Arjuna but then Karna warned him against killing a Brahmin. He said, "We cannot harm a Brahmin. It is Drupada and his daughter, who have insulted us. He deliberately set up a task no Kshatriya could tackle. That case, Draupadi should be thrown into the fire. And there is no way this brahmin should marry a Kshatriya woman like Draupadi."

To the dismay of Duryodhana and Karna, one of the kings from the Kaurava clan named Vikarna stood in support of Pandavas.

“What are you saying, Karna? You forgot things so quickly? I did not expect you to say such words,” he questioned Karna.

“What is your point? I did not get you,” Karna snapped at him.

“When you were denied a chance to showcase your skills at the exhibition in Hastinapura based on your caste, I was the one who stood by you. I convinced the Kuru elders to assess you based on your archery skills and not caste. That was when our brother Duryodhana made you the king of Anga kingdom and hence you are present here at the swayamvara today along with the Kshatriya princes. It was your skill and not caste that made you what you are today. How can you forget that? How can you defy your own belief saying that this Brahmin cannot marry Draupadi even after he has successfully finished the challenge?”

Vikarna’s words made Karna take a step back. Duryodhana and other princes rushed forward to attack Drupada and Draupadi.

Arjuna came forward to shield the king and the other Pandavas also joined him. Vikarna was also fighting on the side of Pandavas to control the situation.

While Bheema was handling Duryodhana and other princes, Arjuna and Karna were fiercely fighting each other. Karna was enthusiastic about challenging the brahmin who had won the contest. But there was no malice in his heart. He was loaded with mixed feelings. He wanted to take revenge for Draupadi’s vicious taunt by defeating that Brahmin off the contest. Simultaneously, he felt a strange affection for that poor Brahmin who rose above all the odds to beat down all the Kshatriya princes.

Witnessing the scenes of Karna fighting ferociously with Arjuna made Draupadi think, “I know I made a mockery of Karna and his skills based on his caste, it was my fault. But are my words going to cause such devastation today?”

Looking at the brahmin brothers fighting valiantly with the agitated princes, Duryodhana and Karna felt that those brahmins were no ordinary warriors. A suspicion sprang in Duryodhana’s head. The uncanny familiarity of them and the striking resemblance of their physique to Pandavas, made him wonder if those brahmins were indeed Pandavas in disguise. That thought itself made him anxious. But then he believed that

Pandavas had died in the fire accident conspired by him and there was no way they could have escaped that mishap.

But there was one more person who had the same doubt as Duryodhana, but he was only elated at that thought. It was Drupada.

Failing to confront the brahmins, Duryodhana insisted on finding their origin and where they hailed from.

Krishna had fun for a while watching the chaos around while Draupadi started shedding tears. Before the scenes got any uglier, he interfered and requested everyone to calm down.

He said, “This Brahmin youth has finished the challenge lawfully while none of you could do that. You should accept your defeat gracefully and let them go.”

They listened to his advice and left. All the brahmins rejoiced, singing praises for their young hero.

Drupada was excited but was not sure the young Brahmin was Arjuna. As for Draupadi, though she was very anxious about following the lead of a stranger, she did not have any choice. Whoever he was, from that moment he was the lord of her life. That was the whole motive of organising a swayamvara.

She looked at Krishna, but he kept silent too and Draupadi could not understand his silence this time. The only relief for her amidst the chaos was that she did not have to marry any of the Kauravas. Drupada placed her hands in Arjuna’s hands, indicating that she belonged to him.

Refusing to make use of the conveyance arrangements made by Drupada, Pandava brothers decided to walk to their residence through the woods. All the priests, Drupada, Krishna and other elders blessed the couple with joy and progeny.

Draupadi walked alongside Arjuna with the remaining brothers guarding them on four sides. Thus started this new journey for Draupadi as a wife, a role that was going to change her life altogether.

After walking in the forest for some time, Arjuna deliberately slowed down so that he could walk a couple of steps behind Draupadi. He thanked the fresh breeze for allowing him to savour the glimpses of her chubby midriff beneath the saree, every now and then. The part of her body where

there was no intersection of the blouse and saree, awoke excitement in him.

Because of the chaotic events that unfolded after him winning the swayamvara, Arjuna could not get a chance to admire Draupadi's beauty from a close distance. But now, the flames of desire for her encircled him so mighty that in a moment, he involuntarily moved closer to her and squeezed her hand tight.

'I heard that she is born out of the sacrificial fire. I am sure the god must have taken ample time to manufacture such an enchanting woman; more than the time she must have spent on draping herself in the saree. Can a beauty like this even belong in this world?' he thought to himself.

They reached their hermitage where their mother Kunti was waiting for them and he noticed that it had already started drizzling by then. He felt as if the evening sky had transformed itself in the form of raindrops, to admire her beauty and welcome her to the family of Pandavas.

"Even nature could not resist itself from praising her," he guessed and a smile flashed across his face.

## Chapter 2

After making sure that they were asleep, Draupadi started looking closely at each of the Pandavas. Looking at their sturdy and muscular physique, she was not completely convinced that they were mendicant Brahmins who lived by begging alms. The bows they were carrying, their weapons in the hut, their body language, their conversations about wars and horses before going to sleep, told her they were warriors in disguise. Considering their abilities, it made little sense to her that they were deprived of any wealth.

‘They could conquer every kingdom and be the lord of the earth with their skills if they desired. Why are they leading their lives as forest dwellers? There must be some backstory here,’ she thought to herself.

She then remembered how her father Drupada always used to mention how much he wished to get her married to the third brother of Pandavas. She had a strong gut feeling that these Brahmin brothers in disguise could be Pandavas and the one she was married to could be Arjuna himself.

But she did not want to come to any conclusion on whereabouts of those brothers and especially her husband. Because if she expected her husband to be Arjuna in disguise and in reality if he turned out a poor Brahmin, she would have to blame herself for weaving her own heartbreak through her expectations.

*The human mind is an enthusiastic and fickle object. It's always torn between choices and is busy trying to rationalize and hoping for a positive outcome, no matter how low the probability is. The reality is that there is hardly anything we could do except responding to whatever happens to us. The way an almost weightless and harmless feather can create ripples in a*

*big pool of water, a thought which might seem harmless during its inception might completely rob you of your mental peace in no time. Hence, it is always advised to be spontaneous, live in the moment and believe in the process.*

‘What does fate have in store for me? Do I have to marry these five men? Do I have to spend my entire life in this congested, unkempt, frail hut serving them? Do I have to endure extreme penury for the remainder of my life? Is this what I am destined to?’

While she was battling in her head with multiple questions, she could hear a whisper in the hut.

Yudhishtira it was. “Brother, you won her in swayamvara and she is yours. I think you should marry her. It would be unfair to that stranger woman who trusted you and walked with you till here if you do not marry her. Do not dwell too much on the words our mother said absent-mindedly. I will talk to her in the morning,” he told Arjuna.

“Brother, I don’t think I can do that. Whatever be the case, we cannot disobey mother. Fulfilling her words is our duty of utmost priority as her sons,” Arjuna replied firmly.

Listening to Arjuna’s words, Draupadi had mixed feelings for him.

She was surprised to see such a great warrior who could beat all the Kshatriya princes including Karna, hands down by displaying such miraculous ability in weapon-craft during swayamvara, could be so sensitive and obedient to his mother. If he chooses to be selfish and decides not to follow his mother’s words, his family would fall apart.

Simultaneously, she loathed him a little, thinking, ‘Did he even bother to ask my opinion? Am I a lifeless being for him? Is there no respect for my judgment here? Can I not have any desires? Is a woman’s love always taken for granted by a man?’

*Even for a princess like Draupadi, marriage meant carrying a lot of emotional baggage. As time passes by, like most of the Indian women, she would make her in-laws’ family her own, eventually becoming a guest in her own parents’ house. Draupadi had to leave her parents, friends, siblings, memories from home and everything that belonged to her and walk silently with Arjuna only to get to hear those infamous words from Kunti. I think that God had never had a girl child. Or else he would have*



*never made such a tradition of women leaving everything behind to live with their in-laws.*

She had submitted her soul to the great warrior just a few hours ago only to have it ridiculed by him. She was furious with him. She wanted him to find courage and put curtains to the absurd drama by breaking the prevailing silence saying, “I won her legitimately and she will be mine. She belongs to only me and not anyone else.”

She desperately wanted Kunti to dismiss her statement and let Arjuna alone have her, but she could not see any of it happening. Frustration and anguish were welling up in her heart and tears were brimming in her eyes.

She then remembered the story she had been hearing from her parents about her birth out of the sacrificial fire of Yagna. She grew up with the confidence that she had taken birth to avenge her father Druapada’s insult and destroy the villainous Kauravas. She was brought up as a strong individual with a brave heart, fierce soul and sharp mind by Drupada.

She felt hopeless and all alone in the world, but she tried gathering the courage to make peace with the fact that trusting Arjuna as her husband not just meant accepting him but also his brothers and his mother. It also implied that she might have to obey Kunti’s words, be it irrational or illogical.

With the tears continuing to blur her vision, she could notice that slowly the night’s darkness transitioned from absolute pitch dark to almost nothing with the silvery mist visible all around.

Had it not been for the chorus of the birds surrounding the hermitage, she would have felt that she was dreaming a nightmare. It was the wildlife around that made her conscious of the dreadful reality she was put in. For a moment, she felt pleasant for being so close to nature, which she was not allowed to do while living as a princess in Drupada’s kingdom.

*The thought of getting married to five men might have bothered Draupadi but she knew that she was destined at birth to fulfil a certain purpose. She believed that eventually, things would fall into place and tried her best to deal with the obstacles in her way. Her fearlessness and striking determination to confront anyone for the right cause backed by her belief is something we all could learn from her.*

*The moment one thinks there's no purpose to his existence and dwells in self-pity without establishing any tangible goals, life becomes a crisis for him. Every step he takes is habitually loaded with uncertainty and inferiority.*

*Instead, the belief that there is a page in the world history waiting to be embraced by you, would help you in pushing forward every single day. There might be days or weeks with no measurable output but it's all in the process and self-belief is the key. Just trust the wait, embrace the uncertainty of life and keep hustling. Sooner or later, the efforts will come to fruition.*

## Chapter 3

With the sunlight gently kissing their faces, Pandava brothers and Kunti woke up early in the morning.

Arjuna did not even bother to ask Draupadi how her night had gone and the remaining brothers too got occupied in their daily chores. No one dared to look straight into her eyes, but she could notice them taking little glimpses at her body once in a while.

She was startled that even the sympathetic natured elder brother whose very sight inspired respect and veneration also did not check on her for formality sake.

*However noble a man can be, there are always certain limitations to his understanding of women. He can never cross that borderline however hard he tries.*

Only Kunti, as a woman, could sense that Draupadi was silently weeping all through the night and she was not startled. Only she could understand Draupadi's inner anguish and turmoil.

While Kunti was about to talk to her, she heard footsteps beyond the door. Everyone looked up to witness a form with lotus feet, and pearl anklets appearing at the entrance. An enchanting form that was flawless with no hint of defect or blemish. A bluish-black sapphire complexion that was smooth and aesthetically pleasing on eyes. With legs draped in a piece of golden yellow silk fabric and a flute tucked in a girdle of flowers around his waist, that form epitomised style and elegance. With a garland of fresh flowers covering his chest, it looked like the flowers were taking their fragrance from his breath. The golden ornaments adorning his body borrowed the glitter from the glow on his face.

It was Lord Krishna with an ever-charming smile on his face that captivated the hearts of thousands of Gopikas. Kunti and Pandavas extended a formal invitation to him.

Looking at Krishna, tears trickled involuntarily down Draupadi's cheeks, falling to the ground like raindrops.

Krishna quickly moved close to her, wrapped his arms around her shoulders affectionately and asked her if there was something she wanted to talk about. Her heart started melting as she had been desperately longing for that warmth of a familiar touch throughout the night. She hardly managed to speak as the tears she had been holding on to choked her voice.

*However strong a person might emerge during his hardships, warm touch of familiar hands or mere eye contact with them can break him into tears. It does not make him weak on the emotional front but conveys how much the other person means to him and how hard he has been battling all alone.*

"Sakhi Draupadi! I can sense what you have been going through, but these tears are priceless. Do not waste them like this. You can never be alone as long as I am alive. You trust me, right?" he asked, lifting her chin up. He assured her that everything would be fine.

Draupadi nodded, still looking at the floor. She heaved a sigh of relief to find Krishna there amidst all the chaos caused by the strangers the previous night.

He then turned to the Pandavas who were looking at them and said, "Arjuna!" and gave him a warm embrace.

They stood in an embrace for a few moments, which left everyone surprised.

"We are secretly living in disguise here, Krishna. How did you identify us?" asked Yudhishtira.

"You really thought I would not be able to identify you brothers behind this disguise?" Krishna counter questioned Yudhishtira.

"Also, who else can show such prowess? Who can conquer Karna except for Arjuna? Who other than Bheema can toss Duryodhana down? I am glad that you all are fine," he added.

Pandavas felt there was no point hiding anything from Krishna and they all shared a quick laugh.

“Then why did you not join us yesterday itself?” Arjuna asked curiously.

“There is a hidden purpose behind everything I do,” Krishna winked at him.

More than anyone else, it was Draupadi who felt ecstatic after hearing Krishna’s words because she had married Arjuna as per her wish. But she was also nervous as the confusion about if she would need to marry the remaining brothers too, was not sorted.

Pandavas and Kunti sought Krishna’s assistance to resolve that issue. He suggested that the opinion of Drupada would hold immense value if they were to arrive at a solution. With Krishna leading them, all of them started their journey towards Drupada’s kingdom.

Drupada received them with honour and respect. They were pleased to see Vyasa Maharshi also at Drupada’s place. They felt that his wisdom would be certainly needful to resolve their dilemma.

Drupada sat everyone down and started talking.

“I am sorry for the brawl that had happened yesterday. I feel really ashamed for giving you the trouble,” he apologised to Pandavas.

“No, no. Please do not feel sorry about it. That was not something you could have expected. We were as shocked as you were, seeing the ugly scenes at the venue,” said Yudhishtira. Drupada thanked them for saving him from the outrage of Duryodhana at the swayamvara.

“I was surprised to see you tackle the challenge with such ease. You proved to everyone how wrong it is to judge one’s abilities based on their appearance,” Drupada said with excitement.

Pandavas looked at each other, smiling. Yudhishtira felt that it was the right time to reveal their identity to Drupada. He looked at Krishna and Kunti. They nodded in agreement, understanding his thoughts. Draupadi stood there in silence, her mind completely preoccupied with Kunti’s words the other day.

“We are five sons of Pandu Raja and Kunti Devi, known as Pandavas. That is our mother. We have been living in disguise for a while now as

forest dwellers due to some reasons,” Yudhishtira revealed their identity to Drupada.

Drupada felt so excited hearing Yudhishtira’s words that he got up immediately and hugged Yudhishtira. He then managed to compose himself and asked, “I am sorry to ask this question but we heard that you along with your mother had died in the fire accident at lac house a few days ago?”

“Yes, there was a fire accident at the house we were staying at. It was all Duryodhana’s conspiracy against us, powered by the cunning mind of his maternal uncle Shakuni. They wanted to see us dead so that Duryodhana can be the next heir to the throne,” spoke Yudhishtira, recollecting how Vikarna had saved them.

Pandavas, along with their mother Kunti were travelling from Hastinapura to the lac house after Dhritarashtra had requested them to go on a holiday. Vikarna, one of the Kauravas had followed them in the dark till the outskirts of the city in disguise.

He had then stopped them and revealed his identity to them.

“Vikarna, what are you doing here at this hour of the night? And why are you in disguise?” Yudhishtira had asked him.

“Leave all that aside. I do not have time to explain all of that. There is a big conspiracy behind my father sending you all on this holiday,” he spoke hurriedly.

“Conspiracy? What is it?” asked Yudhishtira.

“You all might have noticed the buzz of restlessness stirring among the common citizens in our kingdom. It is an open secret that the unrest was because of the ruling of our father, Dhritarashtra. People do not want someone with no eyes in his head or no compassion in his heart to be their ruler. Instead, they have been wanting the eldest Pandava, you, wiser beyond your age to rule them,” he added.

“Yes, we could sense the growing anxiety in the kingdom. I know people are expecting me to take over the kingdom. But your father is the king and we respect him,” said Yudhishtira in a casual tone.

“That is your greatness Yudhishtira. But this character of yours has clouded your mind in identifying the dreadful thorn that is sticking in my

father's heart," Vikarna had said.

Vikarna then informed them about the ploy and suggested them to vanish from the lac house. Kunti was devastated knowing that her own family desired the death of her sons just for the sake of power. They contemplated returning to Hastinapura and confront Dhritarashtra but Kunti feared them and decided against it. They managed to escape into the woods and were living in disguise until they heard about the Swayamvara.

Draupadi and Krishna also listened intently to the entire story.

Drupada let out a big sigh and said, "I feel very sorry for everything you had to go through. Never thought that Duryodhana could stoop to such low trickery in his life for the sake of power. His behavior at swayamvara was also very annoying and uncalled for. Thank heavens that you are safe now".

"That is fine. Everything happens for a reason. All of us are bound to our fate," said Yudhishtira.

"My kingdom is all yours and so is my mighty army. Duryodhana or to that fact, anyone can never be a threat to you following our alliance now," Drupada declared without any hesitation.

Pandavas and Kunti thanked him for his support.

"So, tomorrow is a very auspicious day. We can bind Arjuna and Draupadi together in the holy rituals of marriage. I hope you will not have any issue with that," said Drupada in an excited tone.

Yudhishtira did not say anything.

Drupada sensed something was wrong and asked him, "What happened Yudhishtira? Is there anything bothering you?"

Yudhishtira looked at Krishna. Krishna nodded his head, signalling him to reveal the news.

After hesitating for a few moments, Yudhishtira started speaking and clearly explained Drupada what had transpired after they got back from swayamvara.

He finally summarised the happenings and said, "All five of us want to have Draupadi as our wife. We cannot let Arjuna alone marry your daughter."

## Chapter 4

Drupada stood up quickly from his seat, his expression wavering between annoyed as a man and insulted as a father, on hearing those words from Yudhishtira.

“I have always believed that Pandavas would never swerve from righteousness, no matter what happened. Where is your dharma here, Yudhishtira? How can you even think of putting such a proposal to a father?” questioned Drupada.

“What would I say to my close ones and people in my kingdom after such a marriage? That I have one daughter but God has gifted me with five sons-in-law?” Drupada spoke sarcastically, without waiting for Yudhishtira’s answer.

“How do I justify myself when some common man in my kingdom says the law is meant to be adhered only by common people, high-class people just preach it?” he asked.

He told Kunti that for long he had wished to have an alliance with Pandavas but he would not allow his daughter to get married to all five of them.

After making sure that Drupada had spoken his concerns, Yudhishtira spoke, “I respect all your thoughts Drupada raja and I understand all your concerns about the future of Draupadi. I never speak lies nor do I have any evil intentions in my heart regarding her. Our brothers always believed there is no bigger god or a better teacher than a mother. And it is our dharma to make sure our mother’s wishes come true, no matter what,” Yudhishtira bluntly put his thoughts out.



That was when Vyasa Maharshi interfered in between to settle the issue. He tried talking to Drupada but he was interrupted as Drupada was not in a mood to listen to anyone.

“How can a woman have multiple husbands, Maharshi? There is no precedent for that. I can never let my daughter get married to five brothers just because their mother wants it that way. A woman having only one husband is one of the principles devised to ensure a smooth run of our society. How can one go against dharma, the code of conduct sanctioned by our tradition? It will be a sinful act and you are very well aware of that too,” Drupada made his concerns loud and clear to Vyasa Maharshi.

Vyasa Maharshi requested Drupada to follow him to a private space. Drupada obeyed him.

“Drupada, human life is an illusion. In every birth of his, he bases his living on a belief that it would be his last birth. But the fact is that there is always the next birth. But he would not remember any details from his previous birth. If he does remember, he would understand nature’s secrets and then there is no way the world can move forward. That is why the moment he is born, nature pushes all the memories from his previous birth into the darkness which can never be retrieved by him. That is the reason he starts losing his mind when something unexpected happens in his life. You are now in the same mental affliction here but regarding Draupadi’s fate,” said Vyasa Maharshi.

Drupada stood there with a blank look for he could not understand.

“Drupada Raja! I understand your feelings as the father of Draupadi but I need to tell you a story,” he tried comforting Drupada.

“What story Maharshi?” he asked.

“Please close your eyes,” Vyasa Maharshi requested him.

Drupada closed his eyes hesitatingly.

It was the ashram of a sage named Maudgalya. Extremely short-tempered, he was affected with leprosy and his body had big decaying wounds with pus, emanating foul smell. Add to it the incessant coughing, spitting, and his ill-treatment of his remarkably beautiful and loyal wife, Nalayani.

He would spend most of his time performing his prayers while his wife would keep herself occupied in his assistance. Because of his physical disabilities, romance in their married life was non-existent.

Undaunted, she served him with all wifely devotion. But he was never pleased with her offerings, constantly finding fault with her even for small omissions and cursing her.

The greenery and pleasantness all around the ashram were only enhancing Nalayani's thirst for sex instead of pacifying her body and soul. One day, while she was fantasising about the deeds she had always wanted her husband to perform in bed, he shouted, "I am starving for food," getting up from his daily prayer rituals.

"If only you would understand what I am starving for as a woman!" she thought to herself, whining about her lacklustre sex life and started walking towards the kitchen.

A few moments later, she served him the food.

He quickly finished eating his food and got up to wash his hands. It was a usual ritual for her to eat the food leftover after him in the same leaf.

Only while washing his hands, did the sage realise that his right hand's thumb finger was missing, and his hand was bleeding. He immediately knew that his finger had come off while having food.

He rushed inside only to find the utmost devotion of his wife towards him. He noticed that she had just placed his missing finger aside. Looking at her eating food from the same leaf with no disgust on her face melted his heart. He went close to her and said, "Nalayani, please put that leaf aside and eat in a fresh one. Can you not see that bleeding finger filled with pus in the leaf? How can you not feel any aversion towards me?"

He sounded concerned for her, for the first time in their marital relationship.

But by then she had almost finished eating and said, "You are my husband and I am only abiding by my dharma here," with a smile on her face.

A pang of intense guilt hit him instantly for the way he had been treating her till then.

He remembered all the services she had done for him till that day.

“Nalayani,” he called her in a voice filled with guilt.

“Yes!” she responded.

“Why are you still with me?” he asked her.

“I don’t understand?” she exclaimed.

“I mean I could never satisfy your sexual pleasures and you know I can never do that in the future. I have never been a good husband to you. Your youth and beauty are only getting wasted in my service.”

“I never felt that way. I am always pleased to offer you my services. There’s nothing you can do about your physical illness, right?” she asked innocently.

He was so pleased with her devotion and wanted to offer her something that would make her happy.

“No, no! I can change that,” he answered swiftly.

“What can you do, my lord?” she queried, intrigued by his words.

“I want to use my powers and assume the form of a healthy, strong, handsome man and satisfy your physical pleasures. What’s the worth of my powers if I cannot savour those juicy lips of yours as your husband? Which man in his right mind would not want to find tranquillity by resting his head in your bosom?”

At that thought of him, she felt an infusion of strength, so intoxicating and questioned, “Can you do that for real?”

“Just close your eyes and imagine a man who you would want to make love to and I will transform myself to that man,” he granted her a wish.

After hesitating for a few moments, she slowly closed her eyes. There were so many handsome faces running in her mind like flashes. The power of choosing a husband made her thoughts go wild and she could not focus on one man. With a mind completely masked by lust, she could not focus on one and she wished for Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Indra and Kama gods, all at once.

“Nalayani, please open your eyes.”

She heard these words in the voices of multiple persons.

She opened her eyes to a surprise of five handsome men standing opposite to her.

Dumbfounded by her beauty, “You wished for all of us and here we are, as your husbands,” they spoke in unison.

In a clear voice, she said, “Welcome, my lords. I have waited impatiently for this kind of moment all my life. I am all yours now.”

Their eyes were deeply gazing into her, resembling the silence of a lioness just moments before she seizes her prey. They stared at her lips and she stared at theirs silently for a few moments which looked like they were prepping up for a sex marathon.

Slowly, all of them started moving closer to her. She stood there frozen, from both nervousness and excitement. Though she had been desperately waiting for such a moment, her instinct was to take a step back but she found herself moving closer to them, leaning herself into their arms. She then closed her eyes and she felt a hand touching her navel. In a split second, each and every nerve in her body got electrified in response. She had been yearning for such touch all her life. The five pairs of hands groping her various body parts, sent hot shivering along her nerves, inflicting sensations she had never known she was capable of feeling and she moaned in pleasure.

The garden leaves that only used to rustle till that day started moaning as the five men made love to her amidst the bushes.

Years passed by and the powers of saint Maudgalya slowly started fading away. The count of hands running down her slender body eventually dropped from ten to two with the last man reverting to the form of an unhealthy and untidy saint, Maudgalya.

This time she felt nothing but repugnance at his attire.

He gave a wry smile and said, “I understood that your hunger for sex is insatiable and I don’t think I can every satisfy you completely. Not just me, no man on this earth can douse your flames of lust.”

Sex had been her drug. She had become so addicted to making love that she could not let the sexual pleasures elude her so soon. Till that moment, there was not anything else in the world that mattered to her except the burning flames of passionate lust.

“Please do not abandon me sage, my desires are not fulfilled yet. I cannot live without physical intimacy now,” she started crying. An eternal desire and hunger for sex glowed in her eyes at that moment. She begged him to relinquish his old diseased form and regain the form of a handsome man again.

He could not believe her words. It was all in his eyes, cold disgust revealing the anguish.

“I am running out of my powers and there is nothing I can do about it. I want to get back to my prayers now,” he said and pushed her away.

She fell on the ground with a thud. Before she could get up on her feet, he fled away from the scene.

With her sobbing in the background, the saint started walking into the darkness.

Drupada opened his eyes and looked slightly disgusted about what he had seen. He then asked, “Who was that lady? Who was that sage? How is all this related to Draupadi anyway?”

Vyasa Maharshi smiled and signalled him to close his eyes again.

Nalayani was reincarnated as princess Anamika in her next birth. With sexual urges carried forward from the previous birth dominating her head, one day she told the king without any embarrassment, “Dear father, please get me married soon. It is getting difficult for me to resist my urges.”

Her words startled him a bit, but he started hunting for his perfect son-in-law.

Years passed by but unfortunately for Anamika, he could not find a perfect husband for her.

Burning by the carnal desires from inside, she left the kingdom, frustrated. She moved into the woods and started a hard penance to please Lord Shiva.

After years of penance and sustaining on nothing but air, she finally pleased Lord Shiva with her endeavours. Lord Shiva appeared in front of her and offered her a boon.

“Oh, Lord! Greetings to you. I need a husband. Please fulfil my wish,” she requested Lord.

“Sure Anamika. What type of man you need as your husband?” Lord asked her.

“I need a man who is honest, valiant, skillful, handsome and got wisdom,” she answered after thinking seriously for a while.

“It is not possible for a single man to hold all these traits. You will have five husbands in your next birth who would possess all the five qualities individually,” said Lord Shiva and granted his blessings to her.

Those words of Lord Shiva took her by surprise and she quickly questioned, “But Lord, how is that possible? Is not it against dharma for a woman to have five husbands?”

“You do not have to worry about that. I can assure you that no one will question your polyandrous marriage and you will forever be a *kanya*, ” Lord answered.

“You will be blessed with everlasting youth, great beauty and high libido to satisfy your husbands’ physical needs,” he added and disappeared.

Drupada opened his eyes and looked at Vyasa Maharshi. This time he was not annoyed or disgusted at what he saw. He could connect the dots himself and he looked perplexed.

“You mean to say that?” Drupada could not complete the question and took a pause.

“Yes, what you are thinking is right. Anamika is now born as Draupadi and she was predestined to get married to five men. The five qualities that she had sought in men are personified in the form of five Pandavas,” said Vyasa Maharshi, reading his thoughts. He had convinced Drupada about his daughter’s marriage.

Despite being convinced by Vyasa Maharshi’s words, Drupada could not believe that someone like Draupadi, who was born out of sacrificial fire could have had previous births.

While Vyasa Maharshi and Drupada were talking inside private quarters, Kunti also wanted to speak to her sons.

“I never thought the words I uttered absentmindedly would take us to this situation,” said Kunti in a low voice.

“Dear mother, whatever might be the case, fulfilling your words is our utmost priority,” said Yudhishtira. His brothers also supported him. None of those brothers showed any concern for Draupadi.

“But we will have to face so many insults from society starting today. Not everyone would care to understand Pandavas’ love for their mother. Such is the society we are living in. I am saying this out of my experience,” she said.

“If anyone dares to say one foul thing about you, we will see his end,” Arjuna shouted.

“I am not at all worried about myself,” she said.

“Then? No one would dare to say anything about Pandavas,” Bheema flaunted his masculine strength.

Kunti noticed that Krishna smiled a little on hearing Bheema’s words.

She let out a sigh and thought to herself, ‘Do my sons even realise what humiliating words Draupadi will have to hear once she gets into this polyandrous marriage? This society till date never missed a chance to splash mud on my character for giving birth to five sons with the help of five gods. And here, Draupadi would have five husbands. My sons are only bothered about me and themselves, not even sparing a thought for poor Draupadi here. She got stuck in a strange predicament without any involvement of her.’

“It’s a strange world we live in. The moment a woman who has always been loyal to his man, talks to a stranger with a smile on her face, this society assumes a hundred wicked things about her in their minds. They do not miss any opportunity to belittle her character. A woman living with five husbands in such a society, I can only imagine how tough life is going to be for her. How pure her heart might be, how loyal she might be to her husbands, how dignified she might be in handling her family, they will still try to sting her personality with their gross mentality. You can never understand any of these things as men,” she spoke to her sons and started weeping.

Draupadi understood Kunti’s intentions and she intervened saying, “It is a strange thing for a woman to have five husbands. But I do not know how to react to such a thing when it is occurring in my life.”

All of them stayed silent, grasping the sadness in her words. In a few moments, they saw Vyasa Maharshi and Drupada coming towards them. It was evident on Drupada's face that he was convinced about his daughter's marriage.

With Vyasa Maharshi narrating the stories from her previous incarnations leading to her birth, Draupadi also made up her mind that she was destined to marry the Pandavas.

*Sometimes in life, we imagine a few things would happen to us and eventually the same things happen for real. But it takes some time for our minds to accept reality.*

Draupadi was in a similar state of mind. Even before Pandavas had gone to meet Drupada, she sensed that she would be getting married to five of them but now looking at it happening for real, she felt her life stop for a moment.



## Chapter 5

The news about Draupadi's marriage spread like wildfire to each and every corner of the kingdom. There was excitement building in everyone's heads about the wedding and they could not wait to witness it with their own eyes. The wedding was attended by a huge number of people from Drupada's kingdom and surrounding kingdoms too.

"Pandavas were not dead as rumoured! Such good news."

"To what more extent can Pandavas go to make all of Kunti's wishes come true?"

"She must feel honoured to have warriors like Pandavas as her husbands?"

"How can five men accept the same woman as their wife?"

"How fortunate she is to have five husbands to protect her all the time?"

These were the thoughts a few people had in their minds about Draupadi's marriage.

But most of the people tried peeking beyond what was visible to the naked eye.

"What would be her sex life with five husbands?"

"How will the brothers share her physically?"

Such thoughts increased their curiosity levels and made their minds swim in sadistic pleasure even though it was none of their business. Little did they know that Draupadi's dignity and self-respect will be preserved tightly between the four private walls.

“Are you happy now? With these five men as your husbands, no one can ever do any harm to you,” Krishna assured Draupadi after the wedding rituals were completed.

“Draupadi, there are so many human relations in this world like mother-father, brother-sister, friendship. But husband-wife relation is the weakest amongst all of them. And you got five husbands who are brothers. This marriage comes to you with its joys and difficulties. You have a huge responsibility on your head to adjust to the mentalities of these five men and manage your relation effectively. A healthy relationship expects a sense of mutual love and nurture, where there is no space for ego clashes. It demands husband and wife to be ready for compromises and sacrifices, both sticking with each other in the lowest of times, in the worst of times, when the world is against them. There will be fights and arguments but you have to show with your deeds that you are willing to fight for love with noble intent, replacing anger with affection. They have always been closely connected as brothers since their childhood. Please make sure there will not be any conflicts or misunderstandings among them because of you. Take care of mother Kunti,” he advised her.

She did not say anything but just nodded in agreement, bowed to him and took his blessings.

“With them as your life partners, you will forget me very soon!” he tried teasing her to lighten her mood. Draupadi smiled sheepishly.

“Finally, you made your mother’s words come true but your new journey starts now. For any reason, if she sheds tears in the future or if she is subjected to any kind of insults because of anyone, it means all of you have collectively failed as her husbands. A man’s life gains completeness only because of a woman. His wealthy possessions hold no value the day his woman sheds tears. Stay blessed,” Krishna told the Pandavas.

Pandavas collectively nodded. Kunti blessed them all.

After the wedding, Drupada requested them to stay in his palace as he did not want his daughter Draupadi to face any troubles living in the forest.

But Yudhishtira refused to stay there and took leave from Drupada. He thought that Dhritarashtra and Kauravas might already be aware that

they were alive and they would come back very soon to Hastinapura demanding their share in the kingdom.

Pandavas, along with their common wife Draupadi and mother Kunti started walking back towards their hermitage in the forest.

While walking back to their residence in the forest, “Who was that man who supported you and your brothers after the swayamvara? I did not see him anywhere after that day. He was not seen at our wedding also. He saved us a lot of trouble from Duryodhana and Karna by going against all the Kauravas,” Draupadi asked Arjuna curiously.

“He was Vikarna, one of the Kaurava brothers,” Arjuna answered.

“What? No way. You must be joking,” she exclaimed.

“No Draupadi, I am not joking. He is one of the Kauravas. He is very dear to us.”

“Vikarna! The same person who had informed you about Duryodhana’s conspiracy to kill you all in the lac house?” she asked for confirmation.

“Yes, that man himself. The one because of whom we are still alive today,” said Arjuna.

“Oh. Did he know that you were Pandavas in disguise?” she asked him with surprise.

“No, he did not. He might have known it now along with the whole of Kaurava kingdom. I am sure he will be happy for us. He might come to see us.”

“Really? Even without knowing who you were, he extended such big help to a stranger Brahmin. That speaks volumes about his character,” she praised him.

“It is a bit difficult to digest the fact that he is one amongst Kauravas,” she added.

“That’s the greatness of Vikarna. A man of values he is. He is the odd one out of Kauravas. He was born into the wrong brotherhood,” Arjuna smiled and also joined Draupadi to praise Vikarna.

That was the only instant Draupadi had ever had respect for any of the Kauravas. She thanked him in her heart for helping her husbands save themselves from trouble on multiple occasions.

After reaching their residence in the forest, like her first night in that hut, Draupadi could not sleep that night also. But her feelings were completely different this time. She was not bothered about where she would sleep or how she would live in that tiny hut with Pandavas. On one hand, she was excited about the romantic relation she would be having with those five men in the coming days. And on the other hand, she was sceptic about how the society would think about her polyandrous marriage.

But knowing the nature of the world, she believed that such people would eventually get tired of trying to look behind the closed doors of her home.

A few days passed by and Yudhishtira noticed that Draupadi was still not getting along well with him or his brothers. One day, he decided to talk to her in private after dinner.

“Draupadi,” he called her affectionately.

She came and sat in front of him without making eye contact. He could only see respect for him in her eyes with no husband-wife connection. She was treating him like a goddess in the temple would treat her disciples, with no special interest in anyone.

“Draupadi, we brothers acknowledge the fact that you belong to Arjuna. But because of our mother’s words...” he could not continue his words. His unfinished words lingered in the silence between them.

If she had shouted or cried or yelled at him or showed any kind of emotion, it would have been relatively easier for him to understand her thoughts. But she had not shown any response to his words. Her silence made him sit there, clueless.

*Sometimes in life, silence can speak volumes and can be scarier than anger. And nothing can be worse if that silence is coming from a woman.*

He started talking again, “Our mother should not have said those words that day. I have thought of all other possibilities but we felt that marrying you collectively was the best option.”

Still, she would not utter a word.

“You are a goddess, Draupadi. Your beauty can attract any man on this earth. Not just humans, even gods cannot resist themselves from being

drawn to your charm. But today, I would like to make a promise on behalf of all our brothers,” he said.

She curiously raised her eyebrows to look at him in the eyes for the first time.

“A husband can conquer his wife’s body forcibly using his strength but appealing to her soul is what makes him a real man. Any man can become a husband but not every husband can be a man. We are raised as true men by our mother. We will touch you only the day we win your heart,” he said with a soothing smile on his face.

“We are forever indebted to you for the sacrifice you did to save our mother’s honour. That is why none of us would use their rights as a husband on you. We will be treating you as equal and respect your individuality,” he added.

His words eased her nerves. She acknowledged his words with a smile.

“It’s already late in the night. You might be tired of working hard all day. I think you should rest now,” were all the words she spoke that night. He did not want to push her anymore and went off to sleep.

In her previous birth, Draupadi had remained chaste as she could not find a husband suitable for her. This time, she voluntarily chose to be so, even after getting married to five men. She wanted to spend time with Pandavas, understand their interests, check her compatibility with them before sharing any physical intimacy with them.

The next day, Yudhishtira told Kunti about the conversation he had with Draupadi. He wanted to check if there was something she would want to talk to Draupadi as a woman. Even after Yudhishtira’s assurance the other day, Kunti could sense the apprehension in Draupadi’s head about sharing physical intimacy with five men. Knowing about her sons’ personalities and their varied interests, Kunti felt that it was her responsibility to keep Draupadi mentally prepared for five different experiences with her sons. She told Yudhishtira that she would talk to Draupadi.

Finding some alone time with Draupadi, Kunti went close to her and asked with a smile, “Draupadi, how is your life after marriage treating you?”

“It is all good,” Draupadi answered in a low voice, looking down.

After a few moments of silence, Kunti asked with concern, “Is there anything you want to talk about?”

After hesitating for a bit, Draupadi asked, “Mother, you have also had a struggled married life and had to face the wrath of society for the way you conceived your sons. Did you not feel, at any point in time, that you were morally wrong? How did you cope up with jeering from the society?”

“Who judges what is right or what is wrong, Draupadi? Why cannot we women have multiple sex partners? Who decided that? Do you think such a rule was prevalent in ancient times? No. Women formerly were not confined to their husbands for physical intimacy. Women those days used to get intimate with any number of men as they wanted to. They did not have to be faithful to their husbands, and it was not considered to be a sin those days. This practise is followed even today by birds and a few sacred animals like cows, but possessiveness is seldom found among them. This has been the tradition of archaism approved by our sages, and the present practice came into existence lately,” Kunti started talking authoritatively.

Draupadi was shocked at hearing such bold statements from Kunti.

Kunti went on adding, “If it was not for Shwetaketu who had laid down the law of absolute and exclusive fidelity between husband and wife, today’s women would be free to go to any man who they are pleased with, and we would not have to face insults from the society. Not that I am against our traditions, but society will not try to understand the situations we were put in before jumping to any conclusions.”

“Shwetaketu? Who was that?” asked Draupadi.

“My husband told me this story. There was once a sage called Uddalaka. One day, his son, Shwetaketu, saw his mother going away by holding the hand of a brahmin in the very presence of Uddalaka. Furious Shwetaketu went to his father and confronted him for not stopping his mother. Uddalaka tried to calm him down and told that the traditions did give that freedom to women. He said that even a married woman was free to have any man they fancied. He added that the women were as free as cows to choose their sexual partners. Shwetaketu did not like the words his father said,” said Kunti and took a pause.

“What happened then?” curiously asked Draupadi.

“Shwetaketu became furious and said that no woman would go to bed with a man other than her husband. Any woman violating this rule would incur the sin of killing her child in the womb. The same applies to men too. Seducing the loyal wife of any man would be treated a sin,” answered Kunti.

“Oh. That was how the traditions changed! But how could you break this rule?” asked Draupadi hesitantly.

“For any rule that is made on this earth to date, there are people violating it Draupadi. Men are violating the rule for the sake of their heirs. My husband had pushed me to unite with a virtuous brahmin and conceive a son,” she said.

“Okay. Then?” asked Draupadi.

“I told him that, as his lawfully wedded wife, I could not even dream of being touched by another man, let alone having children. But he would not budge. That was when I revealed to him about the boon I had received from sage Durvasa as a reward for my devotion when he was a guest at our home. I told my husband that by virtue of the spell the sage gave me, I should be able to summon any god to have a son by him. That’s how your husbands were born by the grace of gods. But my sons were Kshetrajais, and your sons would be Aurasas, virtuous than their fathers,” said Kunti.

“I do not understand those words, mother. Who are Aurasas and Kshetrajais?” asked Draupadi, with a puzzled expression on her face.

“A biological son born through wife in a traditional marriage is an Aurasa. A son born through wife’s womb but the husband not being the biological father is Kshetrajai,” crisply explained Kunti.

“Okay. I get it now,” nodded Draupadi.

“Draupadi, my sons were looked down on and had to face insults from my own family, but your children will be treated as warriors from the moment of their birth. So, please shove away all the apprehensions from your head and savour every moment of intimacy with your husbands,” said Kunti assuringly.

Draupadi did not say anything but just nodded. She felt fortunate for having a strong yet compassionate woman like Kunti by her side. She was not sure if her own mother could have talked so openly about the life of a woman as a wife.

“You are going to experience different variations of sex life with multiple husbands. While one husband might own you with his authority, one might dominate your body with his strength. You might voluntarily submit your soul to one husband. You might have to pamper one with your actions while you may get pampered by one with his words,” Kunti added.

Draupadi wondered if Kunti was talking about those experiences in the hierarchical order of her sons.

The last few words spoken by Kunti had been playing in Draupadi’s head for the rest of the day. She went to sleep thinking about those experiences stated by Kunti.

The night was riding on a horse of midnight black, summoned by the stars under the glow of a full moon. That was the first time Draupadi would be spending private time with any of the Pandavas. She was feeling anxious, but the warming smile on Yudhishtira’s face calmed her nerves a bit. Though she never had any lengthy conversations with him till that moment, she did not feel like she was spending time with a stranger. He made her feel comfortable in her presence.

“Draupadi, do you like me?” he asked her.

She did not know what to make out of that question.

“What did you do that would make me like you?” were the words in her head, but she did not utter them out. Instead, she nodded out of courtesy.

“Draupadi, till the day, only dice game has been my weakness. But I am addicted to your beauty from this moment. I felt sad when Arjuna won you in swayamvara, but I will be forever grateful to God for making you my wife,” said Yudhishtira, pulling Draupadi closer to his chest, surrounding her in a tight embrace.

He showered kisses all over her body, intending to own her. He was trying to stamp his authority not just on every inch of her body, but also on every ornament that she was wearing. He was boasting about his grip over Kamashastra throughout, but Draupadi was not responding much. But her feelings mattered only a little to him. He was trying hard to be the one from her husbands to give her the best experience in bed.

His behaviour showed how desperately he wanted to exert his authority over everyone around him. That irked her, but she did not resist



his actions as she felt that was the only way she could keep her family away from any troubles. That moment, Draupadi understood how most of the women cheat themselves in their married life.

She felt that he was an insecure self internally who could not handle someone better than him, be it managing a kingdom or satisfying a woman. He did not sleep that night, nor did he let her sleep.

It was the turn of Bheema after Yudhishtira. Looking at Bheema's physique, Draupadi got scared thinking how ruthlessly he would savour her on the bed. But to her surprise, he had been a very soft-natured man.

For a few minutes, he would not speak anything but just looked at her in reverence of her beauty. She laughed to herself, thinking if he would just be looking at her that way all night. Looking at his eyes filled with admiration towards her, melted her heart.

He initiated the conversation saying, "Had you been married only to Arjuna, I would have still spent my days happily just by looking you around in our home. I am glad that you have become my wife. I have always loved my food more than anything else, Draupadi. Starting today, you will also be loved the same way."

For a moment she wondered if her husbands would keep with their words, 'You are my top priority starting today,' once they got what they needed from her on the bed.

He would accidentally brush up against her hands while talking to her. Unlike Yudhishtira, who was all business, he took it very slow so that she could enjoy it, but most of all, he would understand if she is responding to his touches.

After a while, he moved closer to her and brushed his lips on hers. That act of him stirred the flames of lust in her. Involuntarily she hugged him tightly. The minor bruises in the process of making love did not hurt her a bit. Instead, that made her want more of him.

Draupadi heard a lot about Arjuna's razor-sharp focus and his ability to shoot arrows with both the hands. She wondered if he could be as skilful in bed too. That thought itself brought a blush to her cheeks.

"How beautiful!", were the words uttered by her looking at him from such close distance.

“Krishnaa!” Arjuna called her affectionately.

“How does he know that I like being called Krishnaa?” she wondered.

“Finally, the man who won me in swayamvara is here. My Arjuna. My love. I cannot bear this minute distance also between us. Just take me in your arms already,” she thought to herself.

All this while, she had been blushing, and for every passing second of delay in experiencing his touch, she could feel the warmth of the blush as it crawled up her neck.

She wanted to submit herself to him, but she had already been physically absorbed by his elder brothers. “What else can I give to you Arjuna? Except for my soul,” she whispered, looking down.

She could not open her heart to Yuhdishtira or Bheema. But, with Arjuna, she opened herself up completely. He also touched her heart like no man ever did to her.

“Krishnaa, I am fortunate that two people who are close to my heart are named Krishna,” he said. She smiled at him.

“I admire the beauty. That’s what Krishna has taught me,” he said, winking at her.

“Yes, both attracting women like magnets. Which Krishna do you like more?” she asked playfully.

He laughed out loud. He said, “I do not even see you both as different persons. So, there is no question of comparison,” he said and hugged her. She just melted in his form. She wished that moment to halt and the night to take rest for a while. They moved to tender kisses that slowly progressed to furious lovemaking. Looking at their intimacy, even the moon hid behind the clouds.

Nakula was the most handsome one amongst the Pandavas. Draupadi was surprised to see him not even putting an effort to impress her, and that only made her feel attracted to him. He held Draupadi by her hand, took her out to the terrace and showed his skill as a master swordsman. He talked a lot about horses and how he trains them. Barring the topics of swords and horses, he always kept reserved to himself. For a moment, Draupadi wondered if he was her husband for real. She asked him about his relationship with his brothers to make him feel comfortable.

She felt that he was a bit apprehensive about being physically intimate with her. She took the lead, walked him inside and asked, “Nakula, you know that there is no space for apprehensions in husband and wife’s private life?”

She expected that he would speak, but he kept mum.

Just like a horse trainer who would prepare a horse for the race by using different methods to get a horse to respond to his touches, that night, Draupadi made sure that Nakula got rid of his inhibitions to get closer to her. Like a trained horse that would race past obstacles once the race began, Nakula’s aggression knew no bounds that night.

Sahadeva was a poet, and he used to write a lot about women and their beauty. Ever since he had heard about Draupadi, he made her an inspiration for his poetic works. That night, he made sure that she heard all the poems he had written for her. His words penetrated straight into her heart. Looking at Draupadi getting impressed, he moved closer to her and said, “Draupadi, only after I started writing about you, I realized that there is so much to a woman other than her body. I started recognizing that there is a soul attached to her heart. Thank you for being my inspiration and the fuel for my thoughts.”

“That is the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me,” said Draupadi while blushing a little.

“Really? You like my poems?” he asked curiously.

“Absolutely. You have a unique style of writing any woman can get connected to,” she replied, fascinated by his way with words.

“Thank you, Draupadi. This is the first time someone appreciated me,” he said, in a lowered voice. She could sense it was not his usual tone and enquired if he was okay.

“I am the youngest in our family. There is not any value to my opinions. I only get to agree with what my brothers say. I never get a chance to put my thoughts in the foreground, how could I get any appreciation then?” he said.

His words came as a mild shock to her, but she understood that he had developed an inferiority complex that led to his loneliness. It surprised her how quickly a man can open up to a woman if she showed a little bit of appreciation and affection towards him.

“That is very sad to know,” she said, trying to make him feel better.

“I never thought that a goddess like you would become my wife, not even in my dreams. I hope you will not treat me in an inferior way compared to my brothers,” he said, sounding depressed.

She understood that till then, he was finding solace in his poetry. Now, it was her responsibility as a wife to lend a compassionate heart to perceive his thoughts.

“Starting today, never feel that you are alone. I will always be there to share your thoughts,” she spoke affectionately.

While Sahadeva submitted himself to Draupadi, it was her turn to teach him the art of making love.

With the streaks of sunlight penetrating through the window and birds chirping around, she roused from a heavy slumber to realize that she had been dreaming all night.

## Chapter 6

Everyone in the Kuru kingdom finally got the confirmation that the brahmins in disguise who had taken part in swayamvara were Pandavas.

Even though it had been a few days since coming back from swayamvara, Karna could not take Draupadi's seducing appearance off his mind. Such captivating was her beauty. On the other hand, he wanted to avenge her for insulting him in front of hundreds of other kings. If only she had not said those words to him before he shot the arrows, he would have definitely hit the target with ease. And the fact that he was defeated by his archrival Arjuna only added more depth to his humiliation.

Duryodhana too was stung by that insult meted out to his friend but Draupadi had touched his malignant heart in a lustful way like no other woman ever. Every moment, he would dream of her face and her dark body, naked in his mind. He comforted Karna, saying that they would have to wait and watch out for a suitable time.

They were not able to digest the news of Draupadi becoming the wife of Pandavas. Had it not been Arjuna in disguise who had won the swayamvara, they would have planned to abduct her, but their hands were tied now.

*Finding contentment by experiencing humanly pleasures in the boundaries set by fate is the key to leading a happy life. Fretting about not possessing something that was not destined to be yours or seeking something you do not deserve is only going to make your life miserable. Being grateful for what you have is the best gift you can present to yourself.*

“I still cannot understand how Pandavas managed to escape the fire at lac house. I had devised such foolproof conspiracy against them. How did the plan fail?” said furious Duryodhana, slamming his fist on the wall.

Karna would not speak anything as he had already guessed how the plan to destroy the Pandavas failed.

“They will now become comeback heroes and Kauravas are now objects of suspicion having reaped no gains at all,” Duryodhana added, growing in frustration.

“I do not know if I should laugh at your innocence or feel sad Duryodhana,” said Karna, mocking him.

“What do you mean Karna?” he asked impatiently.

“You still think that Pandavas are just suspicious of you for plotting against them?” asked Karna.

“Then?”

“Think over it, Duryodhana,” said Karna, shrugging his shoulders.

“You mean to say someone from us had leaked the plan to them? Because there is no other way they would have survived,” exclaimed Duryodhana.

“Yes,” Karna replied.

“Who could it be?” he asked thinking deeply, more like he was talking to himself.

“You still doubt who did it Duryodhana? You should be watchful of what is happening around you,” said Karna.

Duryodhana looked confused and asked, “Who did it, Karna?”

“Who else? The one who fought against us in swayamvara, your brother, Vikarna. It is pretty obvious. No one else would do that,” spoke Karna.

“Yes, Karna. I think you guessed it right. We should do something about Vikarna. As long as he is around us, none of our plans to kill Pandavas would work,” said Duryodhana.

Karna advised him to talk to his father Dhritarashtra to keep Vikarna away from the rest of Kauravas. Duryodhana did the same and Dhritarashtra also realised that hatred against Vikarna was piling up in the

hearts of Kauravas. Dhritarashtra pacified him by assuring him that he would do something about it.

“I think Vikarna’s righteousness and beliefs sprang much unrest and significant agitation amongst our sons. And we all know that, no matter what, Vikarna is not going to change his ideologies. I feel that it is the right time to divide the kingdom and allot each of our sons their own kingdoms. Any delay will only lead to internal friction and serious consequences. What do you think?” Dhritarashtra put the thoughts running in his mind in front of his wife Gandhari and sought her opinion.

He knew that she would never say no to his decisions but he still wanted to discuss his thoughts with her before making a final decision.

*A husband’s primary duty as the head of a family is to make decisions in the good welfare of his family members and to manage financial resources. But given that marriage constitutes an unwavering trust between husband and wife, a husband presenting his decisions to wife asking for her opinion is the best honour he can provide her. Showing her that he regards her point of view with compassion and sincerity is the best form of respect he can ever give her in their relationship. Instead of functioning like a boss, if a husband could just have some admiration for what a wife brings to the relationship, that would be the best gift he can ever present to her.*

He knew that she admired Vikarna the most for his righteousness and for wearing his honesty on his sleeves since his childhood days. Vikarna had always been her loving son amongst Kauravas.

“I do not mind distributing our sons their kingdoms. They have grown up now and they are all mature enough to handle the kingdom affairs. But I cannot digest the fact that Vikarna’s virtues are the reason behind that decision of yours. It’s not like every word he says or every action of his is causing a dispute,” she said in a sad tone.

Dhritarashtra let out a helpless sigh, “I understand that, Gandhari. But we have to remember one thing here. Every step we take in life might not lead us to our destination. But every destination we reach will have a few steps associated with it. Vikarna’s every action might not irk his brothers. But the way I see it, if at all there is a reason our sons would lose their unity, it will only be because of Vikarna. I think it is the right time to split the kingdom before things become any worse.”

“If you feel this is the right time, please do it. I believe in you and your instincts. Whatever might be the cause, I cannot imagine my sons fighting amongst themselves,” she told him.

“Also, as rumoured, Pandavas are not dead in the fire accident of lac house. I will invite them too for the ceremony and offer them the half part they deserve,” he said. She did not bother to respond to those words.

Pandavas were sent a formal invitation by Dhritarashtra to hand them over their share of the kingdom.



## Chapter 7

Knowing that Pandavas would be coming to Hastinapura, people from the Kuru Kingdom turned out in huge numbers to see them as they were rumoured to be dead. Most of the people were seen talking, “The princes have returned from the ashes to fulfil their destiny. Looks like their father Pandu Raja has taken rebirth in the form of Yudhishtira. He will now take over the kingdom and all we have is good days ahead of us.”

People rejoiced and surged around Pandavas, shouting their names as they got down from their chariots. Never, in its long and glorious history, had the city seen such celebrations. Like a heavy breeze flowing through the streets, there was a collective sigh of delight when people saw Draupadi stepping out from her palanquin. All their lives, they had not seen anything in nature that could remotely match Draupadi’s beauty.

After the pleasantries were exchanged, Dhritarashtra summoned a council in Kuru court. All the kuru leaders like Bheeshma, Drona along with Duryodhana, his brothers and Karna were present at the assembly. Krishna tagged along with Pandavas while Draupadi and Kunti were resting in private quarters along with the wives of Kauravas.

Bheeshma and other Kuru elders had strongly opposed the unusual wedding of Pandavas. They were not pleased with Pandavas collectively marrying Draupadi against the culture and traditions. But Yudhishtira explained in detail about the incidents that led to their wedding and managed to convince them. After that issue was settled and with Kuru elders bestowing their blessings to Pandavas, Dhritarashtra began speaking in an authoritative tone. Yudhishtira could sense the bitterness in Dhritarashtra’s tone after his son Duryodhana had failed to make an ally with the king Drupada.

Yudhishtira remembered Krishna warning him before they left for Hastinapura, “Be careful with Dhritarashtra. His words might sound warm and soothing, but he has a cold heart and malice intentions stuffed in his head. I do not see him as a person who will easily give your family a fair share of the kingdom you deserve. And not to forget the devious Shakuni who can manipulate Dhritarashtra at his will. I am sure Shakuni might have cooked a plan against you and imbibed it in Dhritarashtra’s head already.”

“Son, Yudhishtira, it is a known fact that this kingdom is flourishing only because of your father Pandu Raja’s great deeds. Before retreating to the forest under unfortunate circumstances, he was an outstanding warrior conquering kingdoms and annexing them to his own. The people prospered and the kingdom thrived under his rule. Earning a glorious reputation, he was loved by everyone.”

From the way Dhritarashtra was going on and on about his father’s greatness, Yudhishtira sensed that he was only using those words as a medium to deliver something unfair to the Pandavas. He knew that even while devising something evil in his head, the blind king always wanted to be seen to act with complete rectitude.

He listened patiently to him and said, “It feels nice to hear such words about our father from you. Let us move forward now. We can discuss the plan of action.”

Dhritarashtra faked a smile and said, “But the fact that there are some differences between you and our son Duryodhana is troubling me, Gandhari and our Kuru elders a lot. So, we have decided to clear the things for the benefit of everyone.”

Yudhishtira nodded his head. Dhritarashtra spoke again, “We believe this is the right time to divide the kingdom into two halves. Starting today, all the lands of Khandavaprastha, the old capital of the Kuru Kingdom will be yours. I can assist you in restoring it so that you can rule from there. I will continue to rule from here until Duryodhana takes on my duties as the Kuru clan successor. I hope you and your brothers are fine with this arrangement. You can discuss it with your mother Kunti if you want.”

Yudhishtira and his brothers knew that Khandavaprastha was in desolation for a few years. Bheema from behind wanted to say something at the injustice served to them but Yudhishtira signalled him to calm

down. Yudhishtira looked at Krishna while he gave a smile that said, “Did I not warn you about him?” but Krishna did not say a word.

Yudhishtira walked towards the king’s throne to take blessings of Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and other Kuru leaders. He then said in a dignified manner, “We abide by your decision. We will go gladly to Khandavaprastha and restore it.”

“I am glad to hear that son. We all are eagerly waiting to watch you being crowned as the king of Khandavaprastha. May god bless you and your family. We wish you five brothers and Draupadi a very happy married life,” said Dhritarashtra.

Pandavas set out for Khandavaprastha, along with Kunti, Draupadi and Krishna. People started coming out in huge numbers to Hastinapura exit with their stuff packed so to join Pandavas.

But Yudhishtira told them, “Dear people, we are immensely grateful for the love you are showering on us. But right now, Khandavaprastha is a wildland and unsuitable for living. We will go there first and establish ourselves and then we will send for you. We request you to stay in Hastinapura till then.”

Respecting his words, people stayed back in Hastinapura stating that they would join them in Khandavaprastha the day it is restored to normalcy.

Bheema asked Yudhishtira while they were on their way to Khandavaprastha, “Dear brother, you know that what happened with us here is unfair. Then why did you not put any objections to Dhritarashtra?”

Yudhishtira smiled, looked at Krishna and said, “Bheema, what if they have Hastinapura? We have Krishna on our side. Is that not enough for us to face any difficulties in life?”

Krishna glanced at Pandavas and an assuring smile lit his ever-charming face.

Only Krishna could read Yudhishtira’s thoughts.

Though Yudhishtira was not afraid to fight a battle, he had never yearned for any war in his life. He never craved the feverish rush of combat on the battlefield. He would try his best to avoid any confrontation until he believed that fighting was the only way to arrive at a conclusion.

He knew that staying in Hastinapura would eventually lead to a conflict with the Kauravas. Being a man of peace, Yudhishtira would rather prefer being banished into a desert than facing a war with the Kauravas.

After riding on their chariots for one full day, they reached Khandavaprastha, a wasteland that extended to the horizon and beyond. Whichever direction they saw, their eyes could not find a view other than rocks, trees and hills.

If there was one metric on which Dhritarashtra had been fair to Pandavas, it was the area in which Khandavaprastha was spread over, equal to the rest of the Kuru kingdom. Looking at such monstrous barrenness, they wished the size of Khandavaprastha to be smaller.

Krishna looked at his dejected cousins and said, “Do not worry Pandavas. Dhritarashtra is like a fool who admires the beauty of a tidal wave until it drags him into the ocean. Sooner or later, he will pay for all of his sins.”

As the task ahead seemed formidable, almost impossible, “Forget about that blind king, Krishna. But what can we make of this desolation? It is all mess,” asked Yudhishtira.

“Yudhishtira, do not get disheartened. Treat this as a test being taken by your destiny,” spoke Krishna with a determination on his face.

Yudhishtira’s face was still drowning in despair. Noticing that they were all exhausted, Krishna advised them to sleep. Blissfully unaware of the miracle that would unfold around them in a matter of a few hours, they obliged Krishna’s words. After making sure that everyone was asleep, Krishna cast a spell on them to make sure they do not wake up until he wanted them to.

Standing alone in the middle of Khandavaprastha, he turned his face towards the heavens and summoned Lord Indra.

Indra appeared in front of Krishna and asked, “Krishna, how may I help you?”

“You must bless this land and raise Khandavaprastha to glory than it ever knew in the past,” answered Krishna.

Indra smiled and within no time, in the barren land, rose a large and splendid city. He established an emerald landmark for Pandavas, out of

utterly useless barren land and then vanished.

Pandavas woke up and it took ample time for them to realise that they were not living a dream. Such splendid was the city that stood in front of them. They knew that such a miracle could happen only because of Krishna's uncanny powers and knelt before him showing their gratitude. Yudhishtira requested Krishna to name the city. Krishna named it as 'Indraprastha' after Lord Indra.

In time, the city flourished and the word spread to other places including Hastinapura. Drawn by Indraprastha's prosperity and their loyalty to Yudhishtira, people came from all over the surrounding kingdoms to live there.

Slowly, Pandavas and their people began to settle down in their new homes in Indraprastha. One day, Krishna told Yudhishtira, "I see everything is settled here. The time has come for me to return to my people at Dwaraka."

"I would want you to stay with us forever, Krishna. But that would be very selfish of me. We wish to see you soon," said Yudhishtira moving close to Krishna.

"Yes. I hope there will be a room ready for me at your palace," Krishna said with a laugh.

"There is always a place for you here," Yudhishtira said, pointing his finger towards his heart and embraced Krishna.

Taking leave of Pandava family, Krishna set out for his place, Dwaraka.

## Chapter 8

One fine day, while Pandavas were occupied in managing their kingdom, they got to know that sage Narada, the king of all sages, would be visiting them. He was gifted with the boon of knowledge of the past, present, and future.

“We are pleased to welcome you, sage Narada. Our kingdom has become more sacred now in your presence. Please bless us,” said Yudhishtira along with his brothers and wife, inviting Narada to his palace. Narada affectionately granted them his blessings.

After chatting for a while with them, Narada requested Draupadi to leave him and Pandavas in private for a while. She silently obliged.

“You are all married to one woman. I hope you acknowledge the fact that such a relationship is against the rituals we follow,” said Narada thoughtfully, turning towards Pandavas. They collectively nodded in silence.

But they could not understand Narada’s intention behind saying those words.

He understood their confusion and started speaking again.

“Looks like everything is going well, for now. But in the future, there might arise some issues because of your shared wife, too severe that you might feel like running swords through each other’s hearts. A woman is like nature and a man is bound to respond to nature. A very few men can self-impose discretion on to what extent can they savour that nature. It is a rare quality and even the noblest men can lose their mental awareness in some weak moments when it comes to handling women, which can prove to be catastrophic. There have been instances in the past where closely knit

brothers have killed themselves because of their common love interest. All I am saying is that you brothers are destined to destroy the evil and not fight one another.”

Bheema interrupted him and said, “Please do not mind me saying this sage but I think you are not aware of our bonding well enough. We brothers can never have any conflicts within us.”

Narada smiled, lowered his voice and went on, “Bheema, I am not saying that you brothers are bound to have differences because of Draupadi. I am only mentioning to you what happened in the past in similar situations. As long as you five stand united, no enemy can defeat you. But the day you separate, you will be destroyed. Your enemies are always on a watch, waiting for you to split.”

“A woman like Draupadi is a sacred fire; something to be admired from a distance, not up so close. Anyone trying to mishandle will only be burned down to ashes. She would not have any adverse effects on her because of you five brothers but you might have disputes because of her if you continue to operate without certain guidelines,” he added.

Knowing that Narada’s statements are always inscrutable, “What do you want us to do now sage? What are those guidelines?” asked Yudhishtira with a worried expression on his face.

“I suggest that each of you, beginning with your elder brother Yudhishtira, keep Draupadi as his wife for a year. No one except him would be romantically involved with her for that one year. If anyone intrudes on their privacy during that year, he should go on into exile for twelve years. I know it will be tough to wait for four years for your turn, but I see it as the only way,” said Narada.

“And one more important thing, make sure that no other wife of you will reside in Indraprastha,” added Narada.

The Pandavas glanced at one another and then Yudhishtira said, “We will follow your suggestion sage Narada.”

Rest of the brothers nodded in agreement.

*Independence does not mean violating rules. In contrast, it implies adherence to specific guidelines in the society or family we live in. A man’s freedom is manifested by his willful abiding of the law. Freedom is*

*not worth holding if he's constantly living a life afraid of getting caught for not following the rules of the system.*

Having accomplished his purpose of visiting Indraprastha, Narada went on his way, for the itinerant he was.

Yudhishtira explained their discussion with Narada sage to Draupadi and Kunti.

Draupadi felt relieved at the arrangement suggested by Narada, as that ended her confusion about which husband to spend time with. Kunti also gave her nod.

As per Narada's suggestions, the next day, Draupadi moved into Yudhishtira's private chambers.



## Chapter 9

As time passed by, Draupadi's apprehensions faded away and she slowly started enjoying her post-marriage life. She became so comfortable with Yudhishtira that they both started sharing the same bed. She was spending time having heartfelt conversations with her husbands and taking care of Kunti. It was all joyous in their family and their kingdom too.

On knowing that the dice game was Yudhishtira's favourite game, she spent a lot of time and effort to master that game and reached a level of skill to challenge Yudhishtira himself in his favourite game.

Draupadi's presence was always an offering for him; like the fragrance of roses, or the peace of sunrise or the tranquillity of a new smile. Playing his most loved game with his most loved lady, he immensely enjoyed her company. One day they were playing the game of dice and Draupadi initiated a conversation.

"Dear husband, everyone in the kingdom says that you are an epitome of righteousness. Every action of yours is built on dharma. Questioning your actions would mean disrespecting our dharma. But I have a question for you if you do not mind answering it?" said Draupadi hesitantly.

"What is bothering you so much Draupadi? Please ask," he said, in a casual tone.

"Did you not feel that five men marrying one woman is against your dharma?" she asked him with a straight face.

Yudhishtira laughed aloud but looking at Draupadi still being serious, he composed himself.

He asked, "Why are you asking this question now, Draupadi? Are you not happy in your life?"

“Of course I am happy and you can see that too. But I want to know your thoughts,” she said.

He let out a big sigh and started speaking, “Draupadi, the moment we learned that you were born out of a sacrificial fire and heard about your beauty, our interest in you spiked. Had one of our brothers married a heavenly lady like you, that would have led to a rift amongst us brothers. Hence, we decided that all five of us would be your husbands.”

“But that is your reasoning to keep your family united. You are referred to as Dharamaraja by everyone. Where is dharma here?” she questioned him, not convinced by his answer.

“There is not any bigger dharma than fulfilling your wants by following the rules of conduct. Not just since the day we saw you at swayamvara, but from the very day, we heard about you before swayamvara, our attraction as men towards you began. The seed of having you as our wife was sown in our hearts on that day itself.”

Draupadi interrupted him and shockingly asked, “You heard about me before swayamvara ?”

“Yes, we did,” he answered.

“How? Who told you about me? You never mentioned this to me,” she curiously asked.

“When we were living in the forest, a sage who roamed around various kingdoms visited us one day for his refreshments. He did not know that we were Pandavas living in disguise. Mother Kunti happily served him and after having meals together, she asked him to tell her about the most prosperous kingdom he had seen. That was when he told in detail about Drupada raja’s kingdom and your unusual birth as a charming grownup lady. Before leaving us, he also told us that there would be a swayamvara very soon. For the next few days, we used to discuss what you might look like while Sahadeva used to write poetry describing your beauty until we finally got the news about your swayamvara.”

“Understanding our interest in you and also your father Drupada’s intentions of getting you married into our family, mother Kunti suggested us to take part in swayamvara. I am not justifying that I and my brothers collectively marrying you is dharma. But as Vyasa Maharshi explained, you were destined to marry five men. It was a boon bestowed on you by

Lord Shiva in your previous birth. Are we all not supposed to bound ourselves to fate Draupadi? That is dharma, right? Also, who better than Vyasa Maharshi to dictate dharma?” explained Yudhishtira.

Draupadi was convinced by his explanation but then a few questions started irking her mind. She refrained herself from asking them out though as they would question Kunti’s character.

‘That day, if their mother Kunti knew that her sons went out for swayamvara, how could she ask them to share whatever they had got? Or did she not know that Arjuna would take part in the contest? However absentminded she might have been, did she not have a thought in some corner of the mind that her sons would come back home with a bride? Did she also want their sons to have a common wife?’

While her mind was struggling to find answers, she noticed that Yudhishtira had already gone to sleep.

The new arrangement suggested by Narada was working fine. But, a few days later, fate brought down its hand heavily on Arjuna when he had to save a brahmin’s cattle, which had been stolen. But then he remembered that all his weapons were stored in Yudhishtira’s private chambers where he was spending romantic time with Draupadi. Arjuna was in a dilemma and stood still for a while. Looking at the poor brahmin’s ill fate, he chose to help him at the cost of his own wellbeing. He decided to fetch his weapons and barged through Yudhishtira’s close quarters without even knocking the door, implying that he broke the vow.

This action of Arjuna puzzled Yudhishtira and Draupadi. When Arjuna entered the room, they were just chatting with his head rested in her lap. They quickly stood up from their bed and stared at Arjuna till he left the room. But Arjuna, who was well known to focus nowhere but his aim, did not even glance at them. It seemed to them like he was furious with someone. But in the next moment, they realised it was only hastiness. They also knew that Arjuna did not look at them but they were left in an awkward situation thinking, “Why would Arjuna behave like this? Does he not remember Narada’s words?”

Arjuna rode on his horse a little farther from the palace and did what was needed to save the cattle. On his way back to the palace, he was immersed in deep thought and felt that his fate had tricked him. Now he would have to leave the pleasures of Indraprastha and above all, his chance

to spend intimate time with Draupadi. In all his life, never had he been separated from his family and it would be the first time he would be living away from them for coming long years. But he believed, as a Kshatriya, that he was meant to live a life as a man of action, and in time he would rejoin his family.

By the time he came back to the palace, his brothers and Draupadi were waiting for him. He walked shyly towards his elder brother with smaller steps and stood with his head bent without speaking a word. Yudhishtira lifted his chin up, embraced him and praised him, “I heard that you helped the poor Brahmin. You did a great job.”

“I did break the vow our brothers collectively made and I need to face the consequences,” said downcast Arjuna, apologising to his brothers and Draupadi.

“But you have only abided by your Dharma of protecting a citizen in trouble. It is understandable why you had to disturb our privacy. It was just because of the circumstances, you broke the vow. In fact, we are proud of you for saving the cattle of that poor brahmin. You do not have to impose any kind of punishment on yourself for what happened today,” protested Yudhishtira.

Draupadi and the rest of Pandavas nodded in agreement.

“Come, let us go inside,” said Draupadi.

“Brother Yudhishtira, when a rule is made, there should be no ifs and buts attached to it. Keeping the logical reasoning aside, I made a big mistake by invading into your personal space. I might have broken the rule for a good cause but tomorrow someone else might take this as an example and break the terms for a wicked cause. I violated the rule and thus deserve the punishment of twelve years of exile. A promise warrants honouring. I cannot waver from the truth and request you to let me leave the kingdom,” said Arjuna, with his hands folded.

He left the kingdom much to the distress of his brothers and Draupadi. He did not even bother to look at Draupadi before leaving.

Draupadi sighed, thinking to herself, “How many more twists and turns does my fate have in store?”

## Chapter 10

During his exile period, after travelling the world as he wished, Arjuna chose his final destination as Dwaraka, the birthplace of Krishna. For the thick friendship they had shared over time, they were rejoiced to see each other. Krishna felt more than happy to host him. He also agreed to spend time in Dwaraka as Krishna's guest.

During his stay, he was enamoured by the beauty of Krishna's sister Subhadra and he fell madly in love with her. Subhadra also reciprocated and Krishna gave his consent for their love but he also wanted Draupadi to be aware of their story.

"Arjuna, the final decision will be Draupadi's. That is the least you can do for her considering all the sacrifices she did for your family's sake," said Krishna.

Arjuna agreed and the three of them travelled to Indraprastha.

The news of Krishna and Arjuna's arrival had flown to every corner in the kingdom of Pandavas, mysteriously, as if borne on the wind. The most excited person was none other than Draupadi. Her long wait to get back with Arjuna was finally going to end that day. The whole day, she was blushing with the anticipation of being intimate with him.

*She loved him with the rising sun and long into the night that followed, only to be interrupted by lustful dreams. After all, lust is an integral part of love.*

Upon reaching Indraprastha, Arjuna started feeling a bit anxious about how the queen of Pandavas would receive Subhadra. He stopped the chariot and told Subhadra, "Listen carefully, Draupadi had taken a step which no woman would even think of doing in their wildest dreams. She

agreed to get married to five of us just because our mother Kunti had said so. She is a generous person but she might lose her cool if she gets to know about us. She is a perfect blend of heaven and hell; with an angelic smile shielded by resolute eyes. We brothers also made a promise to her that no other Pandavas' wife will reside in Indraprastha. So, I want you to earn her blessings first."

"I thought that the mighty Arjuna is not afraid of anyone. Looks like there is someone who can frighten you too," winked Subhadra.

"It's not fear but we regard her as a strong woman. All of us acknowledge the sacrifice she did to keep us brothers united after our wedding. I think only five of us understand her true importance in our family. We adore her a lot and more than that, we have great respect rooted down deep inside our hearts for her," said Arjuna, showing his admiration for Draupadi.

Subhadra understood Arjuna's intentions and said, "I know Arjuna. I am just joking. I have heard a lot about her from my brother Krishna. I have been eagerly waiting to meet her. Even if we were not together today, I would have certainly met her. I am completely prepared for how to talk to her. I promise there will not be any kind of trouble because of me. Please trust me on this."

Arjuna smiled and planted a kiss on her forehead. He wanted her to go alone and meet Draupadi first.

She started walking towards Draupadi's private room in a simple attire. Praying silently in her mind, and remembering Krishna in her heart, she knocked on the door. Kunti opened the door and welcomed her. All this while, she had been planning on how to respond to different contexts that would arise as a part of their conversation. But looking at Draupadi walking towards her, she stood frozen, witnessing the mesmerising beauty of Draupadi. She looked like an epitome of all the peace and joy combined in their kingdom. Her eyes were filled with so much purpose and love, moving in a way that she owned the hearts of not just her husbands but everyone in their kingdom and their wellbeing is her utmost priority. Of all the ornaments Draupadi was wearing, Subhadra felt that her smile was the best decoration her face could adorn.

All of Subhadra's preparations to talk to Draupadi evaded her head in a matter of seconds and she was left with a blank mind in front of Draupadi.

She quickly composed herself and introduced herself as Krishna's sister, with an anxious smile on her face. Out of courtesy, she touched the feet of Kunti. While she was about to do the same with Draupadi, she welcomed her with open arms. This action of Draupadi made Subhadra feel relieved to an extent. She did not expect queen Draupadi to be so approachable.

After talking for a while, Subhadra took leave from Draupadi and Kunti.

Draupadi was desperately waiting in her private space, to touch Arjuna, to look into his eyes and fight with him for the heartless punishment he had imposed on her.

*While you're waiting for someone you love, the pace of time becomes slow, excruciatingly slow.*

A few moments passed by and then she sensed someone coming towards her room. That noise of footsteps was enough to send nerves playing up her spine. Seeing Arjuna at the entrance, she quickly ran towards him, with her body consumed in the heat of lust. Even before he could utter a word, she melted into his strong embrace, feeling his heartbeat. He could not resist himself from reciprocating his yearning for her, hugging her tight. The touch of his body against her sent a shiver up her spine, causing her to shake slightly. That action of his soothed her more than expected. She wanted to scream at him but all she could do was a whisper, "Never leave me like this again". She was pissed off with him a few moments earlier, but now she went silent and her anger started to wane.

He hugged her a fraction tighter, just enough to break her dam of restraint. With her romantic heart and raging head constantly at war, all she did was crying inconsolably for the missed time of all those long years. It took a few minutes for Arjuna to calm her down. In his presence, everything around felt so calm and safe like nothing could hurt her.

*There are some moments in life where your tears help convey your feelings, by speaking more eloquently than your tongue could. In such situations, tears are nothing but words written on them.*

But Arjuna was worried about letting Draupadi know about Subhadra and how she would react to it. He was present there physically as a whole

but his mind was wandering over places unlike Draupadi, who had offered her heart and mind entirely to Arjuna. Intimacy with him could get her thoughts racing but time stood still. When she was with him, nothing else in the world mattered to her.

He devoured all of her that evening, inch by inch, with both of them savouring every moment of passionate love. For both of them, that night was a new experience, the one not like any other night.

*After all, distance can only make hearts grow fonder.*



# Chapter 11

A few days passed by and Subhadra became comfortable in Draupadi's presence. One fine day, she told Arjuna that she would reveal their love story to Draupadi. But he stopped her and said, "I think it is my moral responsibility to reveal the news to her. Let me talk to her."

Krishna also supported him quoting, "You said it right, Arjuna. You should go and talk to Draupadi."

Arjuna nodded and started walking towards Draupadi's room. She was sitting near a window with her back towards him, drying her long hair in the sun.

"Draupadi," he called her from behind.

"Yes?" she responded, turning towards him. He stood gazing at her while she walked closer to him.

"I need to say something," he hesitantly started the conversation.

"I am listening," said Draupadi casually tying her hair in a knot.

He did not say anything for a few seconds and coughed softly.

She asked him if everything was fine. He nodded. She then pushed him to talk.

"What if I say I am in love with someone else and I want to marry her?" he asked, struggling to utter those words.

Before initiating the conversation, he had thought in his mind that he will quickly reveal the news to her without beating around the bush. Little did he know that the words which seem so simple in the mind carry a lot of emotions with them in reality.

She laughed aloud and said, "I will ask you to kill me first and then marry her."

Arjuna was startled and worriedly said, "Draupadi, why would you talk like that? Please do not say such things."

"What happened, Arjuna? Relax, it is a hypothetical situation, right? Only if you say such words, then that will be my reaction. I know you would not do such a thing," she said smiling.

A sharp pang of guilt immediately hit him but he knew had to reveal the news to her. He felt there was no point to delay and crisply confessed the matter to Draupadi.

He expected an emotional outburst from her. He decided that he would just stay calm and wait for the storm to abate. But to his surprise, she stayed quiet for a few minutes and he felt scared.

He was not sure if she had heard him and her silence only confused him. He wondered if he should repeat the same words. He took the lead and summarised his feelings by saying loud and clear, "I love her, Draupadi. I want to marry her."

Shock and grief percolated into her veins instantly. But she knew from the weight in his words that he had made up his mind already and letting her know the news was just a formality. She could hear the desperation in his tone and see the love for Subhadra in his eyes. She knew that Arjuna would always speak thoughtfully and his words usually had a breath of finality attached to them. She felt that no matter how hard she railed against him, nothing would change his mind.

"You should have rather killed me instead of giving me this news," she said with a tear in her eyes.

Arjuna moved closer to her to pacify her but she moved away.

"Arjuna, you have always been like an occasional drizzle in my life while I was firm as the ground, waiting for your love. I love you and I am ready to give you what you need at the expense of myself," she spoke emotionally.

"After all, true love knows only giving without expecting anything in return, right?" she added.

She was not altogether sure why such things happened to her always but she trusted in Krishna like she always did. She believed that there must be a strong reason behind him getting Arjuna and Subhadra together. And so, she gave her consent to the wedding.

Arjuna hugged her and said with moist eyes, "I love you, Draupadi. I am lucky to have you in my life."

"Hmm," she said, hopelessly forcing a smile and then Arjuna left the room.

That was when she started experiencing the other side of the coin called love. She gave Arjuna all the love she had and he took it for granted as a possession. She remembered the first night she had spent with the Pandavas in the forest after her swayamvara when he had said, without any bit of hesitation, that he would share her with his brothers following Kunti's words. For a moment, she wondered if she had bet on the wrong horse in the race of life.

After a while, Krishna entered her room. She was worried that nothing would ever be the same again with Arjuna but she welcomed Krishna with a warm smile like she always did. But that's how she had always been; fooling people with her best smile in her worst times.

"Are you not angry with me?" Krishna asked Draupadi. He was the only one who could see the pain beneath her eyes.

Draupadi gave a weak smile and said, "What question is that Krishna? Why would I be angry with you?"

"I am sure you know about my role in getting Subhadra and Arjuna together, though I am the one who understands your attachment with your husbands the most," he answered.

"Yes, I am very well aware of that. But can anything in this world ever happen without your intervention, Krishna? Also, I understand there will be a hidden motive behind everything you do. Arjuna is all Subhadra has got now, I am happy for her," she said.

"Forget about Subhadra or anyone else Draupadi, are you not feeling sad about what is happening around you? For one moment, can you please think about yourself? For once, can you put yourself ahead of your family and be concerned about you? After all, Arjuna was the one who had won you in swayamvara," he was genuinely worried for her.

“When you perceive something as your own, you have a fear of losing it or someone else owning it in the future. That fear can turn to jealousy that can eventually convert into anger at some point, transforming you into evil. Heat in the heart can only burn your mind, eventually stripping you off your awareness and judgment. This vicious transformation leading to the world exploding from inside is the root cause of many human relations falling apart. But when you believe everything is yours or you own nothing in this universe, then you have no fear of losing them or no greed to own them. Then you make choices from a sense of love and purpose for others and the self. That is why I have no hard feelings for you or Arjuna nor do I feel any jealousy towards Subhadra. I do have mixed feelings, but as long as they are happy, I am happy too. If there is one thing my life after marriage taught me, it is the importance of being able to fight a mixture of competing emotions, each of them striving to rush to the foreground constantly. As a daughter-in-law, I believe that I have always done what is best for my family. Even now, I will continue doing the same. I assure there will not be any changes in that regard,” she said heartily.

“I know that my husbands love me and respect me as an individual. What else can a woman expect from her husband? And I have a motherly figure in my mother-in-law who loves me unconditionally. And above all, I have a great friend like you who is always there for me, no matter what. These are the only things that matter most to me,” she added.

Krishna was moved by her generosity and said, “Draupadi, even the men fighting in war take off their armour and rest after the sunset. But you are a warrior without an armour, relentlessly fighting with your valour as a shield. Wearing your selflessness as a badge of honour to safeguard your family, you have a noble heart. Walking through the hurdles with a patient determination to protect your closed ones from falling apart, you are a brave soul. I wish you all the strength in the universe to overcome the obstacles in your life. I am always proud of you. And remember, in case your husbands fail to protect you at any time in the future, just recite my name. I will make sure your prayers are heard,” holding her hands and speaking his heart out.

She acknowledged his concern without saying anything and simply turned her gaze to him, emanating with devotion. Then she quickly recollected his words and said, “But I have a question, Krishna.”

“A husband’s primary duty is to guard his wife against any kind of hurdle. And I am blessed with five loving husbands who can fight any opponent with their might. They made a promise walking around the sacred fire that they will provide welfare for my children and me. How come I might be put in a predicament where five of them would collectively fail to take care of me? Can that situation ever occur? Why would I ever need your help to protect me?” she asked him innocently.

He winked at her without saying anything. She made a big question mark face, raising her eyebrows.

“I asked you a question, Krishna. Do you care to answer?” she asked, faking annoyance.

His face split into the mischievous smile he often wore and started walking towards the exit.

“Krishna,” she called in a louder voice from behind.

“I am talking to you,” she yelled, but he did not turn back and left the room in quick strides.

Draupadi stood there perplexed, thinking, “Who can understand the deeds of this Krishna? How difficult it is to read between his lines!”

A few days later, with the blessings of Kunti and Vyasa Maharshi, Subhadra, the Yadava princess, was married to Arjuna. The people of Yadava clan from Dwaraka were amused to see their princess tie the matrimonial knot with a legendary Kshatriya like Arjuna.

## Chapter 12

There followed happy and peaceful years at Indraprastha. Pandavas went on to defeat many other rulers and annex their kingdoms.

But above all this, the news that brought immense pleasure to Pandavas was Draupadi getting pregnant. Kunti's joy knew no bounds. There were celebrations all around knowing that the heir to their kingdom would be arriving soon.

She gave birth to five baby boys a year apart, one son by each of her husbands. Draupadi expected that these five boys would grow up with deep affection towards one another like their fathers. Pandavas wished to see them excel in Vedic knowledge and the arts of war.

Nothing else mattered in the world to Draupadi except her sons. She spent all her days in the company of her kids. Krishna felt elated looking at the joy of Draupadi whenever he visited Indraprastha. But he could foresee the trials she along with her husbands would have to undergo before too long, which would also mean her separation from those kids.

When everything seemed perfect, with all the joyous scenes around in the kingdom, Yudhishtira wanted to perform the Rajasuya yagna to establish his authority over the entire country. He had taken the advice of Krishna and Vyasa Maharshi regarding the same. They had also agreed that was the time for Yudhishtira to perform the Rajasuya yagna. Before starting the preparations and sending out the invites, "Bless us and our kingdom with all the prosperity Maharshi," Yudhishtira requested Vyasa Maharshi, exuding delight.

"Yudhishtira, just like how the day is followed by night, happiness is followed by sadness. That is the nature of life. Learn to lead every day of

your life with a calm and even mind. One should practice treating success and setbacks equally,” said Maharshi.

“I did not get you Maharshi. You mean to say that our bad times are not over yet?” worriedly asked Yudhishtira. He could only think of honour and glory. Any thought of tragedy was far from his imagination.

“The rational thinkers neither rejoice too much on triumphs nor mourn during the difficulties. They accept what life throws at them with equanimity. Honestly speaking, your hardships have not even begun yet, Yudhishtira. Coming thirteen years are going to be tricky for you and your family. You will have to go through quite some hardships. There will be a mass killing of people from the kingdoms of Kauravas and Pandavas in the final war,” Maharshi said.

“That sounds so terrifying Maharshi. I understand that Kauravas and we have not been in good terms for a long while now. But the terms are not that bad either to wage war leading to the mass killing of innocent people. After all, we are a family and Kauravas are our brothers,” he sounded anxious.

“Put this in your head Yudhishtira. Greatest conflicts always take their origin within the closest relations. A dispute which might seem so trivial in the beginning can spread like wildfire, snowballing itself into a huge battle. A fight between two individuals can transform into a war between two groups. Consequences can be so bad that the war would tear people apart, even the closest connections,” Maharshi passed on his wisdom to Yudhishtira.

“But I can keep the emotions in check from my side to avert war, right?” Yudhishtira asked.

Krishna had a smile playing on his lips. Only he and perhaps Vyasa Maharshi, saw what lay in store, in the future.

“It is not subject just to your intentions Yudhishtira. If one of you gives a handshake and the other one responds with a fist, the war would still become inevitable after a certain resistance. Peace cannot be attained in a system when there are people greedy for power and wealth,” Maharshi answered.

“In case a war happens, who will win it Maharshi?” Yudhishtira asked.

“Your dharma will always be your saviour,” said Maharshi with a smile.

Yudhishtira understood Maharshi’s intentions and stayed calm. After that discussion, Vyasa Maharshi went back to his ashram.

Draupadi noticed that Yudhishtira was very disturbed and was caught in two minds since the time Vyasa Maharshi had left. Maharshi’s words had made his mind abuzz with many distressing thoughts. It was not a usual sight for her or the other Pandavas to witness that troubled image of him.

“Dear husband, regrets of the past or anxiety of the future rob the beauty of the present. Why are you so worried about what Vyasa Maharshi said? I have never seen you like this. Who can understand better than you that fate is unstoppable and everyone is bound to fate? Foreseeing the future is no way going to help anyone. Nature would not allow anyone’s efforts to cease from performing its duty. If a war is bound to happen, it will happen no matter what. Will it be because of the enmity between Kaurava and Pandava brothers or some other external influence, it is not in your hands,” she tried comforting him.

“Also, if you think in the right way, there is a hidden reason why Vyasa Maharshi revealed the future to you. He wanted you to be mentally prepared for the worst, not to fret about the coming thirteen years, destroying the beauty of the current day. So, you should just be yourself and adhere to your dharma come what may, as you have always been,” she added and hugged him.

*A man whenever he is worried or sad about something in his life, he finds some relief in the embrace of his woman, be it his mother or wife. He vents his heart out to her. But for a man, it is almost impossible to understand when a woman is upset. He can never quite know what is troubling her. Hence, she does not share her problems with him very often. She has the patience of mother earth. Forged through the hurdles, she grows mentally and emotionally. That is why, by nature, a woman is always stronger when compared to a man.*

Yudhishtira also agreed with what she had to say and declared, “You said it right, Draupadi. I am overthinking but I will never let my negative emotions take the lead while dealing with Kauravas. I will try my best to be cordial to them and make friends with them, even if it means, taking a



few insults down my throat. My brothers or I will never be the root cause of the war.”

“I believe inviting Duryodhana and his family to our kingdom will help in cultivating healthy relations between both sides. I will do that immediately. Communicating with an open heart can clear any kind of obstacles between our families. I will do what all is in my hands to foster affectionate bonding,” he added.

Draupadi smiled and thought, ‘Love should always be a two-way lane. One should respect and trust himself and extend the same to the opposite person. For friendship is love and it must have its foundation built on unwavering trust. Besides, friendship should blossom from your strength, not from the weakness of someone. Weakness can only foster slavery.’ But somehow she did not say those words out to Yudhishtira.

She felt slightly uncomfortable with the thought of seeing Kauravas again, that too in her home. The memories of the ugly scenes at her Swayamvara were still fresh in her mind. She remembered trying to halt Karna from taking part in the contest based on his caste and birth. She knew that Yudhishtira was the most gentle of souls and an epitome of righteousness, but she wished to see a fighter in him too.

“Though the emotion behind it is infinite, when it comes to love, our ancestors say to give and not expect to receive. Let us see how it goes,” was all she could say to him. He grasped the wisdom in her words and smiled at her.

# Chapter 13

In Indraprastha, the excitement around the Rajasuya yagna was in the air. The historical transformation of Khandavaprastha to Indraprastha was on everyone's lips. Finally, it was the day of the yagna and the royal guests began pouring in Indraprastha. A lively atmosphere was created as hundreds of kings and their brigades arrived in the city, carrying lavish gifts for Yudhishtira and family. But Yudhishtira's focus was on Duryodhana and his brothers. He wanted to please them with his hospitality. He knew that most of the Kauravas were not pleased about the yagna and they had accepted his invitation just because they had to adhere to dharma. While he was waiting for the news of their arrival, the Kuru princes arrived in heavy grandeur in their splendid chariots.

Maybe because Pandavas were born when their parents were living as forest dwellers, Kauravas had always seen them as their poor cousins. However, Pandavas had inherited an equal amount of wealth as the Kauravas. And now with Indraprastha on their side, Pandavas were way ahead of Kauravas in terms of materialistic wealth. But Kauravas still treated them as outliers who had acquired the possessions that were rightfully Dhritarashtra's.

Duryodhana desperately hoped that everything he had heard about the city would turn out to be an exaggeration, but he was also blown away by the grandeur of Indraprastha. Looking at the extent of wealth in Indraprastha, Duryodhana seethed with jealousy.

Observing changing expressions on Duryodhana's face, a pang of panic gripped Krishna for a moment. Amidst the lively scenes around, he could not help but visualise dismembered corpses piled on the battlefield spread

over a vast area with the ground covered in kshatriya blood. He saw every one of the Kauravas princes being slaughtered and their mother Gandhari weeping uncontrollably. He saw all those mighty warriors who visited Indraprastha laid out on that savage field as dead bodies.

Looking at Krishna standing at a corner with a grim face, Draupadi walked to him and enquired if everything was fine. Krishna dismissed her question with a smile. They shared a quick laugh looking at Duryodhana from afar.

Indraprastha started gaining appreciation from all the guests for its splendour. Whichever gathering Duryodhana joined, all he could hear was the infinite praises for Pandavas which swept over him like a wave of venom. Witnessing people marvelling over the opulence of the palace made him feel restless. His face grew darker and darker, with a bitterness he could not expose out in front of other guests but only force deep down into his envious heart.

He began to burn with the fire of envy, looking at the flourish of Indraprastha and Pandavas. He also turned greedy and lustful looking at the beauty of Draupadi. Ever since he had failed to win her in swayamvara, he had been captivated by her beauty and wanted to savour her. He started walking away from the gathering with bigger strides into the palace, carefully examining the whole of that mansion in awe.

The palace was so polished in different places that it was difficult for a first time visitor to distinguish between the concrete floor and the water pool. Walking around, a beautiful sight on the floor caught his eye. From a distance, it looked to be made entirely of white marble, but when he went close enough to step on it, he slipped inside, realising that it was a small pond filled with water and flowers inside it. He got up quickly and found himself waist-deep in the pool, drenched from head to foot.

Looking at his fall, suddenly Draupadi started laughing at his foolishness. Yudhishtira ran towards him and extended his hand to get him out of the pool. He ordered his servants to fetch some dry clothes. He tried to restrain Draupadi from laughing. All this while, Duryodhana looked embarrassed and angry, Draupadi's behaviour piercing his heart like an arrow. Unable to bear that mocking laughter of Draupadi, he snapped at Yudhishtira and agitatedly started walking towards the exit. He was so illusioned by the craftsmanship of the mansion that he again

lifted his clothes to cross over what he thought was water. In reality, it was a rigid floor. He then walked to a door and thinking it was closed, he tried to open it with his outstretched hands. The door was open and he fell in his attempt and everyone including Draupadi laughed again. That insult pricked Duryodhana so much that he left the mansion fuming and vowed to take revenge on Draupadi.

Yudhisthira regretted the incident as it only increased the enmity between Kauravas and Pandavas. His plan of making the atmosphere friendly and pleasant with Kauravas had backfired. He remembered Vyasa Maharshi's words and started feeling anxious.

"You should not have laughed at him Draupadi. After all, he is our guest," he said and left that spot.

Little did she know that that would be her last laugh for the coming few years in her life.

*To what extent is it justifiable to mock or laugh at someone's accident or shortcomings? And how ridiculous it is to offend a guest in your backyard? Is it not better to think twice before we speak and be aware of our actions? Because such insults only lessen both the persons. The sadness or anger of the other person might vanish after a while, but with their hearts becoming a shell for the broken remains of their ego, the bitterness would only last for long. The buzz of pleasure you get by looking at someone suffer fades away in no time, but the seeds of hostility you plant in the other person's mind would only grow mightier with time. You never know when your actions would come back to haunt you in the future. At times, all it takes is a glance, a giggle or a simple word to stir a hurricane of ugly fights.*

Though she did it with no hostile intentions, she could sense that Yudhishtira was very annoyed with her behaviour. She remembered the words her father Drupada used to repeatedly tell her before she got married to Pandavas, "It might be your words or your actions or your beauty, but because of you, Kauravas will get annoyed on multiple occasions, which will eventually lead to their downfall."

She realised that she had already offended Karna and Duryodhana twice on separate occasions, through her words and actions.

“Did I unknowingly become the root cause of conflict because of my actions? My father had once told me that I would become the nemesis of the Kshatriya kin. Are his words going to come true? Should I have not made a mockery of Duryodhana? Did I just sow a seed that would sprout into a horrific war?” she started feeling very disturbed.

Yagna was over and Krishna wanted to leave for Dwaraka. Before leaving Indraprastha, he embraced his cousins, spoke heartfully to Draupadi, Kunti and cast a final look at the city. He had a certain premonition of the ominous twist of events that would force Pandavas to leave Indraprastha in the coming few days. The next time he would meet them would be in the forest and Pandavas would be without a kingdom. Draupadi who had cheerfully given him a sendoff now would be drowning in shame then.

## Chapter 14

Duryodhana did not speak to anyone and hadn't eaten food since he had returned to Hastinapura from the yagna. His behaviour made Dhritarashtra worried and he asked Shakuni to talk to Duryodhana, knowing that Shakuni was very dear to Duryodhana.

Shakuni went and knocked on Duryodhana's room. He was dismayed to see him red-eyed, faded beard and hair as if an infection was gnawing him from within.

"What happened Duryodhana? Is your health fine? You do not seem normal," asked Shakuni.

Duryodhana kept a baleful silence, bowing his head down in shame. Shakuni sensed Duryodhana's determination to destroy the Pandavas.

He then asked, "Is it Pandavas and Draupadi? Is it Indraprastha?"

Duryodhana immediately looked up. "I cannot bear to live! I just feel like setting myself on fire. Only a physical pain of such a degree can make my heart feel better," he said and started sobbing.

Shakuni calmed him down and asked, "What do you want Duryodhana? Let me help you out. Be assured that I share your worries. What is bothering you so much?"

"I thought that Pandavas would be gone into the wilderness to never come back again when the kingdom was divided and they were consigned to a wasteland of rocks in Khandavaprastha. But they were not! They came back stronger, converted setback into triumph by erecting the city of Indraprastha with the help of Krishna. Nourished by the people's love and that godlike Krishna's friendship, they are only establishing deeper and deeper roots now."

He was talking so quickly and animatedly that he had turned red with fury. Whenever he paused for breath, a scary silence ruled the room.

“All I can see is Draupadi laughing at me. I cannot live with this embarrassment. I must take revenge on her and her husbands. I want to tear them down to pieces. I can never stay happy until they are burnt to ashes. The whole world was gathered to honour them in Indraprastha. I feel all alone, with no one to support me in my sorrow,” he added.

*Duryodhana's life is an illustration that demonstrates that no matter how wealthy you may be or how blessed you are with a caring family, if you are not ready to let go of your hatred for someone or your desire for possessing something that was not meant to be yours, you can never be content in your life. To live with gratitude for what you have is the only way to achieve mental peace. It takes a strong heart to spread your arms driven by affectionate heart, remove your grudges, replace hatred with love and extend a warm embrace.*

Shakuni tried to comfort him and said, “Why do you feel you are alone Duryodhana? Do you not see your brothers and your friends like Ashvatthama and Karna? And myself with all my kin to support you?”

“You are right!” exclaimed Duryodhana.

“We all are powerful warriors. Together we can march on Indraprastha and bring them to my feet. Then I will be crowned as emperor,” he said, holding Shakuni's hands.

Shakuni shook his head and said, “Your cousins are invincible warriors. With your army, it is almost impossible to beat them in a direct war. It would be a foolish thing to do. With Krishna on their side, even the gods would hesitate to fight them.”

“So, what do you suggest then? Rejoice in the glory of Pandavas and take pride in the grandeur of Indraprastha that puts Hastinapura to shame?” Duryodhana asked sarcastically.

“Do not lose heart, Duryodhana. I am always there for you. I have a plan that can relieve you of all the pain you are going through. There is one weapon we can use against them, not to be launched by unsubtle force but cleverness,” said Shakuni and took a pause.

“What is it? Can you quickly reveal the plan at once?” Duryodhana asked impatiently, annoyed by Shakuni's pause.

“It is Yudhishtira’s addiction to gambling. I have played once with him and he does not know when to stop. No one can beat me in a dice game. I can easily manipulate him to raise the stakes in the game. I know how much you lust Draupadi. I will make her your slave. Add to it, all the wealth and their kingdom, it will all be yours. You will be the emperor while Pandavas will be rotting in the forest. And all this with no arrows shot, no swords drawn, and no bloodshed. All you have to do is to invite Yudhishtira to a game of dice and I will play for you,” spoke Shakuni, explaining his evil plan to him.

“But I cannot invite them. It should be done by my father, right?” asked Yudhishtira.

“Yes. He loves you so much. He was the one who wanted me to talk to you. It will not be a big task for you to convince him. He will grant you anything you wish for,” said Shakuni and persuaded Yudhishtira to talk to Dhritarashtra.

A glimmer of hope lit up the gloomy heart of Duryodhana. He had already started imagining Draupadi stripped off all her clothes and the Pandavas stripped of everything they owned till date. But he knew that he had a task at his hand. His father must be talked to and persuaded. The invitation to Pandavas must go from the king.

Duryodhana went to Dhritarashtra’s quarters to talk to him. Hearing his son’s voice, the blind king stood up immediately and embraced his son tightly. He sensed that Duryodhana had become lean and wasted. He made him sit, clasped his son in his arms, stroked his hair and asked, “Son, what have you done to yourself? Just let me know what is bothering you and I will sort that out for you.”

When Dhritarashtra was made aware of the proposal of the dice game from Duryodhana, he was sceptical about it. He was hesitant to say anything about it.

“I am being tortured to death here and you cannot do this much for your son? How can I endure the envy devouring me and feeding on my entrails? What kind of a father you are? I know you are also envious but you are too scared to do anything about it. I am not a coward like you. Dice game is the pastime hobby of Kshatriya kings and all I am asking you is to send a formal invitation to Yudhishtira. I will take care of the rest,”



Duryodhana started emotionally blackmailing his father. Dhritarashtra could hear his son's voice cracking with sorrow and his arms trembling.

To appease his son, and as he also liked the prospect of the gaming match, an invitation was sent to Yudhishtira welcoming him and his family to Hastinapura for a game of dice.

## Chapter 15

Before leaving for Hastinapura, Yudhishtira sensed Draupadi's nervousness and assured Draupadi that the dice game would be only a friendly match with his brothers. He told her that the game would only be for the sake of amusement and will not involve any serious stakes.

But the moment she entered the Kaurava kingdom and came across Duryodhana, she sensed an air of hostility and revenge in his false bonhomie. Karna also gave them a cold stare and acknowledged their presence with a condescending sneer. His refusal to show any warmth at all was the subtle and indirect form of his statement, "Revenge will be served hot, Draupadi! Very soon. Just be ready."

She instantly sensed that the invitation from Kauravas was nothing out of affection, but was filled with cold malice.

She was on her periods during that time. She felt it was nature's way of reinforcing the limits on women through the medium of blood.

'When a man bleeds, he is celebrated as a hero by the people around him. But when a woman bleeds, it is treated as a shameful event. A man sheds blood on the battlefield to save his people who were born, tearing out the flesh of the same beings whose blood is considered impure. What fewer battles are women fighting when compared to men? It is just the difference in context and the emotions change drastically. Even nature does not treat women on par with men. No wonder men look down on women as inferior objects,' she thought to herself.

She was not allowed to see or talk to any men, including her husbands. That was why she opted not to witness the dice game and stay in a private room along with her mother-in-law Kunti aided by other servants.

She decided to take a small nap. She had a disturbed sleep only to wake up after a few minutes to notice a peculiar silence around her. It was not the calmness that would ensure mental peace but a type that hinted at a catastrophic storm approaching. That silence was not just the absence of noise but an indication she was going to get hit by a massive obstacle in life. She noticed the sweat droplets accumulating on her forehead and she was getting anxious with every passing moment. Her brain unleashed all worst possible outcomes in the gambling bets and her instincts were telling her heart that something terribly wrong had happened in the gambling court with the Pandavas. Festering panic started to render her mind ineffective and her body numb. She wanted to see Krishna and share her feelings with him.

She managed to compose herself and convinced herself that she was just overthinking. She wanted to relax and came out of the bedroom to talk to Kunti.

Little did they know that Yudhishtira had already started losing bets round by round. Who would show them the sights of the frustrated and despaired Pandavas with dejected looks on their faces from the dice game venue? How could they hear Shakuni's wily voice in the assembly hall after every round declaring, "I won", which was steady with no traces of exultation? Who would make them understand the cunning plan of Shakuni and the Kauravas in disguise of the dice game?

Kunti noticed Draupadi's fatigued face and enquired if she was alright. She nodded and placed her head in Kunti's lap to relax for a while. Kunti was gently stroking her hair while they were having a casual chat. They heard footsteps at the entrance of the room. It was a servant from the Kuru hall. Draupadi felt irked at seeing him. She called him in and asked why he was there.

He went inside the room, folded his hands and hesitantly said, looking down at the floor, "Duryodhana king is calling you immediately to the Kuru court."

She sensed some trouble and began realising that her worst dreams were coming true. The more anxious she grew, the more pronounced became her imagination of an incoming predicament.

But she composed herself and asked in an irritated tone, "What? Why would I come there? I chose not to be there for a reason."

“I beg your apologies queen but it is an order from the king. If I do not perform my duties, he will kill me. I am his slave,” he started shivering a bit. Even that servant could sense how things were going to unfold at the assembly hall.

“Who is he to order me? Did he forget that Yudhishtira, my husband is the ultimate king? Did he not remember that king Dhritarashtra invited us here as guests? And what are my husbands doing? How dare you enter this place and pass me commands from your king?” she was yelling at the servant.

“Yudhishtira king has lost his entire kingdom, his four brothers, himself and eventually his wife in the final bet in the dice game against Shakuni”, the servant explained.

Draupadi was filled with rage while Kunti started weeping in the side.

“Did he lose himself first and then staked me? Or was it the other way around?” Draupadi asked him.

“I don’t know about that queen,” he answered.

“Go and ask your king Duryodhana the same question. Only then I will decide if I should follow his orders or not,” she sent him out. She was fuming with a reddening face. She was cursing Yudhishtira in her mind for his gambling addiction.

The servant went to the Kuru assembly and presented the same question to Duryodhana and Shakuni.

This agitated Duryodhana and he passed a lethal stare at the servant. Scared of Duryodhana’s rage, he ran away from the scene.

“How dare she not obey my commands. She is our slave now, she has no right to question our orders. I don’t care if she’s menstruating or sitting naked there,” Duryodhana shouted in the court.

He then ordered his younger brother Dusshasana to drag her to the assembly.

Dusshasana quickly ran to the private quarters and barged into Draupadi’s room.

She gave him a stare that could make him shiver on a regular day but that day was different. She strongly questioned his foolish act. But he was in no mood to answer her and slapped her hard on the face. It was an open-

handed smack from him that stung her like an electric shock. On her sensitive red cheeks was now a deep cut where his finger rings made of gold had touched her.

He caught her hair and started dragging her. Her clothes were stained with blood, her eyes filled with tears, her entire body drowned in embarrassment. She clutched her face and begged him not to take her like that as she was in a single garment. Without even paying attention to Kunti's requests and screams, he dragged Draupadi out and threw her hard on the floor in the centre of the assembly.

Pandavas could do nothing but be mute spectators with their heads hung in utter shame, witnessing the cruel scenes unfolding around them. Draupadi was looking at her enraged husbands, crying in distress but none of them dared to raise their gaze to match Draupadi's burning stare. They were warriors who could beat down their enemies to a pulp on any given day but they were now made slaves by conspiracy in the dice game played by Shakuni. She was stripped of her unwavering strength, her husbands, who would have given her protection in the most difficult conditions of her life. More than the loss of the kingdom, Pandavas were distressed at the sight of their helpless wife.

Fuming Bheema was gazing at Yudhishtira for what he had done to their family. His deadly stare pierced through Yudhishtira's heart but he was in no situation to respond. Arjuna gestured Bheema to calm down. Duryodhana ordered the Pandavas to remove their crowns and robes that were used to identify them as Kshatriya kings.

"Brother Dusshasana, strip off her saree and present her naked in the hall," said Duryodhana, laughing sadistically. The entire hallway went silent and people started to whisper in each other's ears.

Draupadi was distraught listening to Duryodhana's words. She could not believe what she had heard. The world around her came to a momentary halt and all of a sudden, she felt that all three worlds had come crashing down on her shoulders. Her eyes widened, nostrils flared, limbs trembled, hands shivered, and she wanted to ask something, a question that immediately popped up in her head as soon as she heard those words from Duryodhana. But she was not able to articulate a single sound. Her brain froze, still trying to process those words and refusing to offer any course of action. She could sense a warm stream of sweat running down her

forehead and into her bare toes. She sensed her ears were getting hot and emitting warm vapours. She felt sudden dizziness and ache in her head; it was not just physical but an intense sorrow crushing her from inside.

Dusshasana then sarcastically addressed Yudhisthira, “Your beloved wife wants to know if you lost yourself or her first in the gamble?”

Yudhisthira could not utter a word and he simply hung his head in shame. Draupadi found her answer in his silence. She stood there drowning in the cruel laughter of Kauravas, mortified, frozen to the spot.

A few moments passed by and she finally managed to ask the question that was running in her mind, “How could my husband use me as a wager when he had already lost himself and he stopped being his own master?”

Dusshasana started pulling Draupadi’s saree against mighty resistance from her. She begged Bheeshma, Dhritarashtra and other Kuru elders to stop the Kaurava king. She went on asking the same question repetitively but none of them bothered to answer her. Kuru leaders, Bheeshma and Drona were struggling with their understanding of dharma as no law was being broken there.

Everyone from Duryodhana’s clan started mocking her. Duryodhana gestured her to sit on his lap. Bheema was enraged and took an oath saying, “One day I will break your thigh and kill you.” Panic hit the roof, witnessing Bheema’s anger. Even then the brutality of Kauravas did not stop. They referred to her as a whore for having five husbands.

Dusshasana offended her by saying, “You can have a hundred more husbands now.”

Bheema made another terrible vow that he will rip apart the chest of Dusshasana, cut his hands that touched Draupadi and drink his blood in the battleground. But Kauravas taunted him and dismissed him.

All of a sudden, one man stood up from behind Duryodhana and Karna and screamed, “Stop that cruelty, Dusshasana.” That shout brought the chaotic scenes to a momentary halt.

It was Vikarna, one of the Kaurava brothers. He was one of the most reputed and the noblest amongst the Kaurava brothers. Only a few present in the Kuru court knew that he was a fearsome warrior but very sensitive at heart. And only Gandhari, mother of Kauravas, knew that Vikarna was an ardent follower of dharma and he would never disrespect dharma how

tough spot he might find himself in. Given a choice between his life and doing the right thing that would hold a lasting significance, he would always choose the latter.

He was no saint to be blindfolded to the injustice happening in his presence. He was not a hero either to take complete control of the situation around him. He was an underrated warrior in a pack of wolves but still he protested against something he believed was ethically and morally wrong. He had always been a true warrior who did not hesitate a bit to boldly present his opinions, even if it meant taking a stand against the family heads.

He had been patiently waiting all this while expecting that the dice game would end with the intervention of Kuru leaders. He expected that at least his mother Gandhari would raise her voice as a woman. But he could only see her drowning in shame at her inability, and helplessness to control her son's wicked behaviour. She did not want to go against her husband or Kuru elders. But looking at all the elders sitting tightlipped, he could not take it anymore and jumped onto the side of Draupadi with a sword clenched in his hand.

“Father Dhritarashtra, did you all forget our Vedas? Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; where women are not honoured, there all worship of gods is futile and useless. Dice game might be Kshatriya dharma but there should be a limit on gambling. What is it that you are teaching the next generation by staying mute when a helpless woman is being molested in your presence? Is it because you cannot see what is happening here or are you sad that you do not have eyes to see Draupadi semi-naked?” he spoke fiercely like a man with strong conviction.

Gandhari tried warning Vikarna but he did not listen to anyone as he was not done yet.

“You are not able to answer any of Draupadi's queries? What is your dharma here as Kshatriya king? An elder brother is like a father. And his wife is given an equal status of a mother in our traditions. That way, mother Gandhari, and Draupadi should be treated with the same respect. Do you even realise what you have done here? I feel ashamed to be termed as your brother,” he questioned Duryodhana, looking at his mother Gandhari with teary eyes.

Looking at an enraged Vikarna, Dusshasana moved a few feet away from Draupadi with his eyes widened and heart in his mouth, hoping he would not face a beating from Vikarna.

People got so involved in hearing Vikarna's outburst that it felt every sensory organ of them kept aside its primary job and focused only on hearing.

It would be no exaggeration to say that all the Kaurava brothers and Karna might have felt, at least for one moment in their lives, that they too had a character like Yudhishtira on their side, looking at Vikarna. On a regular day, none of them would pick up a logical argument with him. They knew that he was a man of integrity and honour and he would invariably stand on the side of dharma. But the circumstances were different that day. Duryodhana, Dusshasana and Karna were in no mood to let Draupadi go home without getting their revenge, such was the heat of the moment.

He made his presence felt by echoing Draupadi's questions in a loud, authoritative tone. He presented his voice against the whole idea of Yudhishtira gambling Draupadi. He argued in faithful obedience to the call of duty. His argument sounded legit to most of the people around.

Karna could see the changing expressions on the faces of Kuru leaders in the court. He was enraged by Vikarna's outburst and yelled at him, "Vikarna, this is not the time for you to teach us what dharma is. You think you are more informed about dharma than Bheeshma pitamaha and Dronacharya? Who are you to oppose Duryodhana? Do not get yourself too much involved here. Let us handle this situation. Just take your seat and silently relish what is happening at the centre stage like everyone else is doing. Do you not want to savour the naked beauty of Draupadi?" and winked at him with a wicked smile on his face.

Vikarna's face brimmed with disgust on hearing Karna's comments about his sister-in-law, who was equivalent to his mother.

"Karna! I know your loyalty towards Duryodhana. Do not let your emotional bonding with him cloud your ethics. Your friend is doing a sin here. No kingdom that insulted women made it alive for long in the past," he silenced Karna.



Pandavas thanked him deep inside their hearts. Draupadi was looking at him with a desperate, grateful stare.

Dusshasana intervened in the heated conversation and asked Vikarna to keep quiet.

“I hope you are aware that raising your voice against Kuru king can lead to serious consequences,” Dusshasana tried to threaten him.

“Consequences?” Vikarna raised his eyebrows. “Boycott me from the kingdom? I do not care about anything if I am not fighting for dharma. In fact, I am embarrassed to be a part of this kingdom. What is a king for if he cannot safeguard the respect of a woman? What is a kingdom for if it cannot guarantee the safety of a helpless woman?” he was struggling to speak now as his voice was choking with tears.

*Vikarna is a role model for modern-day men, raising his voice against the ever-soaring atrocities happening against women. He was brave enough to make a choice of not being a mute spectator of the barbarous act happening in front of his eyes. Instead, he tried knocking sense into the heads of evil. He was generous enough to see his mother in a woman who was being subjected to physical abuse and protested against it. He had to let go of his share of wealth and kingdom just because he fought for justice on behalf of a helpless woman but he endured the suffering with a smile on his face. Very few would be gutsy enough like him to emulate the way he supported Draupadi during the vastrapaharan scene.*

With Duryodhana and Dusshasana also encouraging Karna, Vikarna had no choice but to back off. With Vikarna leaving the assembly, the glimmer of hope Draupadi had had that she would be saved from getting molested, was busted.

*A helpless and lonely woman is always an evil man's feast. By nature, a woman is a kind, delicate and sensitive being. She is physically weak when compared to most of the men. But that does not mean she has to silently bear all the insults from evil men. She is protected by her father during her childhood, her husband during her marriage, her children in old age. This should not make her feel any weak on any scale or tamper her self confidence in any manner. Instead, she should consider it as a safety net she voluntarily built around herself to control the animal instincts of evil men. It's completely okay to take support from loved ones to protect yourself/ fight a battle.*

Then Karna prodded Dusshasana to disrobe Draupadi. Dusshasana resumed stripping her and started pulling at one end of her saree. She started screaming and prayed to Lord Krishna for help. Her scream was something that did not belong to the world around her but the one that would let Krishna sense the kind of mortal terror she was in. Her tears were not carrying just the weight of her helplessness but also showing the unendurable pain her soul was in.

To the utter disbelief of Kauravas and Karna, a miracle took place in front of their eyes. Instead of her saree coming off, an unlimited supply of clothes appeared from nowhere to save her dignity and self-respect. Dusshasana also got exhausted by pulling her saree for a few minutes and eventually gave up on it.

*Till the moment Draupadi was trying to save herself by holding onto her saree with all her might, Krishna did not help. But the moment she gave up by letting go of her saree and immersed herself in prayers, raising both her hands and surrendering to Krishna, he made sure her prayers were heard.*

At that moment, with her heart turning ice-cold, Draupadi unleashed the hot rage of her soul without any thought of mercy. Her wrath held all the powers of a sacrificial fire which she was born out of. She reached a tipping point where all the humiliations, instead of breaking her even more, lurked into the shadows as her fury took complete control. Waves of anger made her cheeks dark red with the blood rushing to her face.

She gave Duryodhana a burning hard stare accompanied by raw anger, cursed that she would never forgive the Kauravas. She vowed that her hair would remain loose until Bheema ties it up with the hands of dripping blood of Dusshasana. She reprimanded the Kuru leaders for not standing up for justice despite being aware of dharma.

Dhritarashtra's anxiety was piling up witnessing Draupadi's rage and he was growing restless. He immediately ordered to stop whatever was happening. He felt that he had committed a blunder by letting the crooked game of dice happen. He sensed the fate hitting worst for all those who had witnessed the heinous act.

*Any kingdom that would not respect women can never flourish. Not just the king but its people too will have to face the consequences.*

Dhritarashtra's words which were spoken out of fear fell on deaf ears of Duryodhana. He was intoxicated with pride and was in no mood to obey him but Dhritarashtra warned him against the terrible wrath of the Pandavas. With Gandhari also pleading, Duryodhana relented from his stubborn position and so did Karna.

Dhritarashtra requested Draupadi to calm down and forgive his sons for the sin they had committed. He granted her three boons but she said, "As a Kshatriya lady I can only make two wishes. That is my dharma and anything more than that will be greed."

Dhritarashtra said, "Okay, Draupadi. Please let me know your wishes. I will be more than happy to fulfil them."

She wished for the freedom of Pandavas and their weapons. He stressed her to ask for one more wish but she would not budge.

"Now that my husbands have been liberated from their slavery, they will be able to gain their prosperity back by themselves," she quoted.

But Dhritarashtra also gave back all the wealth taken away from the Pandavas to console them.

Karna taunted the Pandavas saying, "Look at these warriors who could not safeguard themselves. They needed the help of a woman to get back their kingdom," and let out a big laugh. Duryodhana and Dusshasana joined him too.

But the Pandavas ignored them and obediently walked to Dhritarashtra to thank him. Along with Draupadi, they took leave of the Kuru leaders and started walking towards their kingdom with heavy steps.

"Draupadi, I request you to let go of all the negative emotions and memories you had today and forgive my sons," pleaded Dhritarashtra. She did not bother to look back and left without saying a word.

She knew that starting that day, people would remind her and her family of that act repetitively to feed their sadistic pleasures. Her mind could no longer find solace breathing the same air as Kauravas did. She longed for casting off her existence and start off somewhere new.

Pandavas with gloomy faces were relieved to an extent that the humiliation was finally over. Along with Draupadi who was drowning in

utter shame and despair, they mounted their chariots, on their way back to Indraprastha.

Draupadi was not that shocked by what Karna had to say. She had insulted him based on his caste in her swayamvara, thereby hurting his ego. When he got the opportunity, he got his revenge by referring to her as a slut. In fact, that got her wondering if he only blurted out what most of the men thought about her in their minds.

*Was it her fault to have five husbands? Did she even have a choice to select her husband? She had served them with utmost loyalty every minute, through thick and thin. She had been the glue in keeping the Pandava family closely knit. But why could the world not recognise any of these things? All it found interest in was the romantic phase of her life. It could not perceive anything beyond her extravagant private life with five men. Was her character only limited to her sex life? Certainly no! Had anyone tried to read what was in her heart? Just because there was no physical form to her soul that could be seen or felt, could they defy the character that kept it alive? People's attitudes drive their imagination of what happens between a man and a woman behind closed doors. Has anything changed from then to now in this regard? We are living in a society, where we cannot imagine a relationship void of lust between a man and a woman, a society that misunderstands the relationship between a brother and a sister when they walk together on a road.*

After getting back to their kingdom, all was silent in the Pandava camp for the next few hours. Kunti also could do nothing but weep silently. Draupadi's silence only felt scarier to the Pandavas. With those painful memories sealed into her heart permanently and ever ready to pop up to torment her again at any random time, she looked like a volcano that could explode at any moment. She could not vent out her emotions through words.

Pandavas were feeling peculiarly inferior, with an emotional turmoil going on in their heads. If there was any woman other than their mother in the world, they would bow their head down to, it was Draupadi. That was the kind of respect they had had towards her. They were feeling a knot of boiling, digging and crawling feelings of anger and frustration after they had failed to protect their wife. For someone who had offered her entire

existence as a flaming sacrifice so that they could obey their mother Kunti's words, they could not be a shielding force saving her dignity.

Finally, Yudhishtira spoke, "In the past, we got back our kingdom and became kings after you came into our lives. I was tempted to go for the same after I lost everything and was left with only you Draupadi. Else, you know that I would not have let this happened to you and us. Please forgive me."

"Dear husband, how well you are trying to disguise your addiction to gambling! Don't you know the ground rule of gambling is being aware of when to stop? You were conquered by excessive desire, overwhelmed by a rage to triumph over your opponent, got your senses clouded by greed to recoup your losses and eventually staked your family. Your reasoning sounds so silly to me," she was burning with rage.

He tried explaining to her but she yelled at him and asked to be left alone.

None of her husbands could see the pain in her eyes behind that shout. How would they understand that! If only they had dared to look in her eyes after that fateful incident. It looked like her anger was more of a shield for the grief in her heart.

She was also aware that her emotional pain seeping out in her words was hurting her husbands but she felt helpless in their company. She had been a brave fighter and a kind soul all her life but now, she had lost her ability to hold onto her anger and frustration anymore.

*Physically, women have always been beautiful, sensitive and delicate beings.*

*And men are ever intrigued by women's beauty. Period.*

*As a man, appreciating the beauty of a woman, with respect, admiration, love, and affection are always acceptable. Her mind savours each bit of it and her heart jumps in joy in acknowledgement.*

*But if the interest lies only in scanning her physical features, inch by inch, driven by lust, there lies the problem. Those kinds of men driven by such instincts can never see the tender and compassionate side of a woman. Wherever she steps in, the lewd and lecherous stares at her body make her heart swell with hatred and repugnance.*

*That is the reason, she prizes her body even more than her survival. No man, be it her lover, husband or even father, has any right to touch her without her consent.*

*She adores and voluntarily serves herself with pride to the man who sees her beauty through her eyes and finds the way to her heart. She admires that man who respects her ambitions, treats her as an equal human being to him and care for her. She treasures that man who worships her beauty.*

*In contrast, she is averse to those men who demean her, treat her as an inferior being and trash her emotions. She loathes those men who are so full of themselves.*

*But what was she supposed to do, when the men she adored, the men she worshipped, the men she considered as her soulmates, the men who she believed would rescue her from lecherous demons, put her dignity, pride, character, and respect at stake in a hall filled with thousands of men? How was she supposed to react when they failed to shield her from severe humiliation and embarrassment in front of the sinful eyes burning with flames of lust and greed?*

## Chapter 16

In contrast to the Pandava camp, it was all chaotic scenes in the Kuru assembly hall. Duryodhana's rage piqued up when Pandavas walked away with all their wealth intact because of his father. He was fuming with rage looking at Dhritarashtra undoing everything he had achieved.

"Son, when will you understand that anything I do is for the sake of your good? You should not have done such thing," Dhritarashtra spoke in a low voice.

"Enough, father. You are such a coward. You have always been scared of them. I should not have done what? Take revenge on our enemies?" Duryodhana retorted.

"I understand your envious heart but I did not expect that you would humiliate a woman who is a part of our family in public. It was not just a verbal insult son. Did you want to disrobe her? What were you even thinking? A woman's rage is more catastrophic than a natural calamity that can destroy the world. As a Kshatriya warrior, you are expected to never harm women and children. I thought my son is a man who will tackle the Pandavas in direct combat. Whatever happened is past. They are now gone and let us just leave it there," spoke Dhritarashtra, trying to pacify Duryodhana.

"Oh! If you are under an imagination that everything is sorted now just because you gave all their wealth and assets back, please slap yourself to come out of it. How naive of you to think like that my dear father? Pandavas will never forget how Draupadi was insulted. More than their lives, they value Draupadi's dignity and respect. Do not get fooled by Yudhishtira's face assuming an expression of calm dignity. Do

you think Draupadi is such a tender character to not push her husbands for avenging the humiliation she was handed? Her anger can only mean the beginning of our end. The moment they started walking towards the exit of this hall, I am sure they would have started planning revenge on us. How could you not see it? I had planned to destroy them completely by making them bereft of their kingdom and army. And now they are released with flames of revenge only because of you. Who had asked you to interfere in between? Could you hear any other Kuru elders saying a word?

Along with eyesight, did you also lose the power of hearing? The moment they reach Indraprastha, even before the dust raised in the air because of their speeding chariot wheels settles down, Arjuna will be readily flexing his bow and Bhima whirling his mace, gathering their army to march on Hastinapura. They are more dangerous than a wounded tiger now,” he spoke with anger boiled up inside him and spilled over in a froth of rage towards Dhritarashtra. He was so blinded by the hatred for Pandavas that, for a moment, he forgot that he was talking to his father.

Dhritarashtra understood that his son would not listen to anyone. So, instead of extending the argument, he calmly asked, “What do you want me to do now, son? This time, I am only going to be a mute spectator. You can do whatever you want.”

Duryodhana looked at Shakuni, signalling him to speak.

“Summon Yudhishtira to play another game of dice,” quickly said Shakuni.

“But will he come here again after what had transpired today?” he asked.

“Yes, he will come. His honour will not allow him to refuse your invitation. He is bound to lose again playing against Shakuni,” Duryodhana interfered.

“But what will change this time? Promise me you will not plan anything evil against Draupadi,” he said, extending his hand.

“I promise. It will be quick but more interesting this time. We will propose new terms,” said Duryodhana with a sadistic smile.

Dhritarashtra did not even bother to ask what those rules would be and sent an invitation to Yudhishtira.



After Duryodhana and Shakuni walked out of the hall, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra were left alone. The sky had grown unnaturally dark as if the signs of upcoming bad fate were clouding the comforts of their present. For a brief moment, a bolt of lightning broke the utter blackness and the next moment, the clouds turned dark grey resembled their dark fate that once glowed brightly.

It felt like Draupadi was yelling at Gandhari, “You have today seen a helpless woman stained with her blood. In the future, you will witness all the Kaurava women smeared with the blood of their slaughtered husbands and sons.”

Gandhari was horrified by his son’s behaviour and said, “I can only think of the terrible fate of our sons in the future. Through his wickedness, Duryodhana might cause the death of all our sons. You should have opposed him. I am terrified now.”

“As a king, I am always supposed to make decisions in the best interest of people. And here, it is our own son who would not listen to anyone. What else I could have done? I am very well aware of the capabilities of Pandavas and above all, Krishna is on their side. That is the only reason why I never wanted any conflict with them. Wherever Krishna is, there surely will be virtue, wisdom, and triumph. But our son could not grasp that. His senses were clouded by ego. Who can oppose the fate Gandhari!” he said, letting out a big sigh of despair.

The next day, Draupadi got to know that Dhritarashtra had sent an invite to Yudhishtira for one more round of dice game with changed rules this time. There would be just one throw of dice each with the stake being that the loser would relinquish his kingdom to the other. And that was not just it. The loser will also have to go into exile for twelve years followed by another year of incognito life. If he is recognised during this one year, the time spent in exile will reset to zero and then another thirteen years of exile will begin. But if he successfully finishes the incognito period, then his lost kingdom and assets will be returned to him.

But the cunning intention of Duryodhana was to deny Pandavas their kingdom and wage war if they successfully finish thirteen years of exile. By then, he planned to assemble a huge army and defeat them without much difficulty.

“Son, do we have to go again?” asked Kunti worriedly.

“Mother, it is Kshatriya dharma to accept all challenges. And the invitation came from the elderly Dhritarashtra. How can I say no to him? That’s not my dharma,” answered dejected Yudhishtira.

Hearing his words, Draupadi’s fate gave her a wry smile. She sensed that it was just a matter of time before their life would take an ugly turn. She knew Yudhishtira would undoubtedly lose the stakes. In that case, she, along with her other husbands, would have to follow Yudhishtira with all of them leading their lives as forest dwellers. She will have to discard all the joys of her life to uphold the tradition of marriage by leaving for exile following her husbands. She felt heartbroken at the thought of leaving her kids for a minimum of 13 years.

“What bigger punishment for parents to not witness the growing up phase of their kids? What bigger heartbreak for a mother to not feed her children with her hands?” she thought to herself.

For a moment she wondered if the root cause behind Duryodhana doing all this was his hatred against Pandavas or just her.

They all went back to Kuru assembly hall to see Duryodhana, Dushshasana, their brothers, Shakuni and Karna waiting. But Draupadi chose to stay out as she did not want to see or hear any of the evil men present there. Though she knew she would be walloped by the bad news, she was anxiously waiting for her husbands to return.

For the sake of formality, Duryodhana explained the new terms of the game to Yudhishtira. He did not say anything but just nodded and sat at the gambling table with a blank face and head bowed. So did his brothers behind him. Opposite to them was Shakuni with a cunning smile on his face. Within no time, Duryodhana, Dushshasana, and Karna started dancing around Pandavas, taunting them. Draupadi could hear those noises from outside. Her dreadful imagination had now become a glooming reality. Yudhishtira lost the bet. Bheeshma advised Kauravas to stay silent and made them conscious about how worst the fury of a patient man could unfold into!

But Pandavas did not retaliate this time. There was no dissent among them as this loss was nothing compared to the humiliation the other day. Bheeshma offered to Pandavas that their mother Kunti, being fragile with age, should stay in Kuru kingdom and not face the hardships in the forest life. Pandavas obliged and took the blessings of Kunti. They handed over

the responsibility of their kids to her. They finally bid goodbye to the Kuru leaders and joined Draupadi at the entrance of the hall. Yudhishtira kept his face down while walking as he wanted to make sure that his anger-filled gaze does not burn Duryodhana and Karna.

They prepared for their long exile by shedding their royal attire and wrapping themselves in deerskins. Draupadi was still wearing her bloodstained saree from the previous day. They started walking into the woods in utter silence.

## Chapter 17

Nothing had prepared Draupadi for an experience that difficult. All the luxuries she had become accustomed to in Indraprastha had stripped away.

A few hours passed by and the forest became a thick jungle. They were tired of walking when they came across an arching banyan tree and decided to rest under its roots.

Draupadi's untied hair flew every time there was a breeze, revealing the bruises on her cheeks. That sight only pricked Yudhishtira deeper on his already wounded heart. Looking at her wretched state, he only had himself to blame. What he didn't know was how much more they were destined to suffer. He sat quietly for a while, reflecting on their misfortune.

He finally broke the silence and said, "All this is happening because of me, please forgive me. Even after learning that Shakuni had won the first round of dice game with conspiracy, I agreed to go back. I only tried abiding by the dharma of a Kshatriya to accept all challenges and so I had to accept the invitation for another round of dice game.»

Hearing those words, Bheema's heart sank and anger flared.

"Oh dear brother! You do not perceive anything beyond dharma. I am sure you must be thinking that whatever happened to Draupadi was also in the limits of dharma because we lost the bet. After all, Dusshasana only dragged her holding her hair, at least he did not kick her with his foot, right? They only asked us to remove our royal attires and they did not beat us to the pulp, right? How else would dharma suggest the kings treat their slaves?" he was venting his repressed anger out.

Arjuna sensed Yudhishtira was punishing himself on top of their ill fate. He saw Bheema's anger blazing to a state of fury which could break their brothers apart. He quickly interrupted him and requested him to calm down. Seeing the frustration etched on Bheema's face, he swung his arm around his broad, hugely built shoulders and said, "Bheema, where there is love, there is bound to be anger. Our brother has dedicated his life to walking in the path of dharma. Had anyone of us stopped him from staking our kingdom? Did we protest when he staked Draupadi? We rose as a unit and we now fall together. Fighting amongst ourselves is not going to take us anywhere. There is no point in digging deeper and deeper into the blame game. Let us forgive him for whatever happened. That will only make our minds free, souls light and hearts strong. Now, it is time to leave the disappointments behind and focus on arranging a stay for us in this forest," he tried pacifying the situation.

Looking at Bheema, Draupadi realised that the one who loved her hardest was the one who was hurt the most.

Draupadi was left with invisible emotional scars after the humiliation, but slowly she started getting back to her normal life of serving her husbands. She realised that there's no way she could undo the past. But the pain was still hanging at the back of her mind like a pulse. Sometimes, the pain would take centre stage leading her to breakdown emotionally. She knew that she could do nothing but wait till the exile period was over to avenge her insult on Kauravas.

On the banks of the Saraswati river, they arranged for their stay in a forest named Kamyaka. One fine day, the person they all had been waiting for finally visited them at their hermitage, Lord Krishna it was.

The moment she heard Krishna's voice, she broke down in tears. She fell at his feet, recollecting how he had protected her from an embarrassing situation.

"Those vile men in the Kuru court dragged me into their presence and attempted to molest me. None of the Kuru elders would help me, nor would my husbands guard me. I did not understand your words in the past when you assured me of your support in case my husbands fail to protect me. Now I understand that you are omnipresent. If it were not for your mercy, I would have stood naked in that hall before those slaving demons and I would not be alive today. You are the soul of my life and my

entire life is dedicated to you now,” she was sobbing uncontrollably with tears streaming down like rain.

“Do I deserve all this Krishna? Am I born for this? If my humiliation goes unavenged, then I will start believing that I have no husbands,” she continued pouring her heart out to Krishna.

It looked like nature had assumed the form of Draupadi to vent out its grief after witnessing such a heinous act.

The fire that was aroused in her heart by those stinging memories and leapt up to her entire being was extinguished by the moist in Krishna’s eyes.

“Please forgive me, Draupadi. I heard what happened to you and your husbands. I had some other personal commitments and so I could not be present in the Kuru assembly hall that day. Else, I would not have let the dice game happen in the first place. All those evil men who could not win you in your swayamvara got together as a unit. They were burning inside with envy and so you had to endure such humiliation. Whoever behaved wrongfully towards you will be certainly struck with the rod of punishment. You will be the royal queen again. You will witness the Kaurava wives shrieking with sorrow to see their husbands’ dead bodies scattered on the war ground and soaked in blood. The thirst of this holy earth will be quenched by the blood of Duryodhana, Dussahasana, Shakuni, and Karna. They shall perish but I want you to hold patience as you are bound by the cord of the thirteen-year exile,” said Krishna assuringly, consoling her.

He spoke as if the war had already happened in front of his eyes and he was just recollecting the scenes of how Kauravas were slaughtered.

He then turned to Yudhishtira and his brothers.

“What are you, Yudhishtira?” He asked with a straight face.

Krishna’s question puzzled him and his brothers too. Not knowing what to make out of his questions, he kept mum for a few seconds.

Then Krishna spoke again, “You all are Kshatriya warriors, right? Oh, and you just performed Rajasuya yagna also, right?”

They collectively nodded their heads, slowly, drowning in shame.

“You and your brothers have won so many glories on the battleground. But do you not know it is equally important for you to offer protection to your loved ones? After everything she has done to safeguard your family from splitting up, she was subjected to such disgrace in your presence. What could be more terrible for her than her husbands’ silence when she was referred to as a slut in the Kuru hall? What is the point of our manhood if we cannot shield our women from evil? What is the emperor crown for when it could do nothing to save her from Dusshasana who tried to strip her naked?

You don’t lose to someone because you did not use your strengths properly, but because you failed to understand your vulnerabilities,” Krishna reprimanded Pandavas.

The anger in Krishna’s usually black and pleasant eyes was something none of the Pandavas had ever seen before. After talking to them for a while and providing them with the moral support they were yearning for, Krishna made preparations to return to Dwaraka. All of the Pandavas embraced him and then bowed down to him with reverence.

## Chapter 18

Pandavas and Draupadi were slowly getting used to living in the forest. Eventually, Draupadi's bonding with her husbands returned to the usual. One fine morning, Draupadi noticed the trees around dancing in sync choreographed by the winds. She went near the window to breathe in some fresh air and stretched her arms into the early winter morning. Maybe it was the extra pleasantness in the surroundings or the joy in the herds of gentle deer, she sensed Lord Krishna to be around. And she could not be wrong, as Krishna walked there along with his wife Satyabhama. Every bird in the trees of the forests burst into song to welcome him to their home.

Draupadi was eager to know about her children's whereabouts. Satyabhama assured that everything was fine, and they were doing good. They all had a meal together and got busy in casual chatter.

Satyabhama noticed that Draupadi had only become more attractive and appealing during the exile period. Even after such a huge setback in their married life, Draupadi's bonding with her husbands caught Satyabhama by surprise. She desperately wanted to know how Draupadi was managing to do so.

Draupadi and Satyabhama started walking to a spot far away from their men. After casual chitchat for a while, "There is a strong reason why I tagged along with Krishna today," Satyabhama said, moving closer to Draupadi.

"Oh okay. What is that?" Draupadi asked curiously.

"I want to learn the trade secrets behind your successful relationship with five husbands."



Taken aback by her words, Draupadi exclaimed, “Secrets?”

“Yes. I, along with seven other beautiful women, am finding it difficult to manage one husband. And not to count the innumerable Gopikas, we are unable to bind him to our love. But you alone rule the hearts of your husbands endued with strength and beauty. They are all happily submissive to you. What kind of secret spell do you cast on them? Or is it the influence of your heavenly beauty? Or any special skills in bed? How do you manage to keep them bound to you? I am eager to learn tricks from you.”

For a moment, Draupadi felt annoyed at Satyabhama but then she understood the innocence and love for Krishna behind her queries.

She had a hearty laugh and asked her “So, you want to know how to keep your naughty husband Krishna close to you all the time?”

Satyabhama too joined the laughter and replied, “You know the kind of man he is. Like a magnet, attracting women wherever he goes.”

Draupadi could sense the jealousy and possessiveness in Satyabhama’s words.

“Satya, I think you are treating me as a wicked woman with some powers of black magic. Trust me, no woman can ever make her husband compliant through some unnatural ways. That only makes them anxious and averse towards their wives.”

“No no. I did not mean it in that way. I am so sorry if I hurt you with my choice of words,” Satyabhama apologised.

Draupadi let out a big sigh and began speaking. Satyabhama was all ears and started listening intently.

“Satya, however busy a man may be at his work, the main reason for him to come back home at the end of the day should be his wife. After a long day at work, there might be so many servants at their service at your home but it is our soulful presence beside them that can make them feel relaxed. Being with us at home should make his mind swim with the heady excitement of new physical pleasures but not with thoughts of trivial arguments. He should see us as a never depleting repository of love and affection where he can relax from the outside world tensions, at least for that brief period. We should make him sink into the warmth of our embrace, making him feel light and formless when he is tired. Also, your

romantic life should not just be about physical pleasure; efforts should also be put in understanding your own body as well as your husbands' body without falling prey to unrealistic expectations in the bedroom. My husbands pamper me like a cherished possession but grant me the respect of an equal in the bed. And, only a man who values his mother can love his wife. Respecting your in-laws and husband's family constitutes an integral part of respecting your husband. A wife who cannot do this can never gain the trust and admiration from her husband. I have made my husbands' family my own and this earned me huge respect from them," said Draupadi.

"Man and woman constitute two halves of this nature. Marriage is all about two completely different personalities who have grown up in different conditions, with different opinions, in different cultures, with varied experiences merging into one relationship under a single roof. Man cannot exist without a woman and vice versa and hence there is no question of winning or losing, breeding egos, dominations, self-interests in this marital journey. Either you both survive through it or both perish. And this process needs loads of patience, affection, awareness about one another and mutual respect. It demands understanding one's shortcomings and their partner's too," spoke Draupadi, passing on her wisdom to Satyabhama.

"This is my secret Satya, nothing devious. Any other questions you got in your head?" Draupadi concluded with a smile, stressing the word 'secret'.

*Happiness and welfare can be found in abundance in a relationship where there is mutual affection and respect between husband and wife.*

"But you have had bad times in your relationship with them, right? At least after that heinous act of Kauravas and Karna during the dice game? Did that not affect your bonding or bring any cracks in your relationship with them?" Satyabhama asked hesitantly.

Draupadi paused for a while and said, "Satya, life will not be the same every day. It is not that we never had arguments or heated discussions which made us feel separated for a few days, especially after what happened in the Kuru assembly hall. But they understood that my hurtful behaviour in the past towards them was not because I intended to be mean and degrade them but because of the emotional scars I have. They

acknowledge the fact that those scars still hurt me. The wretched recollections are still swirling around in my heart and I know that they will avenge our enemies when the time comes. That is the mutual understanding we have for our emotions. There is nothing more satisfying than being with a partner who loves you for what you are at various stages of life. It is just that you need a new bond every now and then and your relationship will prosper as good as a fresh one,” sharing what had transpired after that fateful day.

“I am so sorry for what happened that day,” said Satyabhama with tearful eyes. Draupadi nodded, indicating she was fine.

After a few moments of silence, Satyabhama asked, “As a woman, I understand that it must have been difficult. How did you manage to come out of that mental trauma?”

“Yes, It was tough. I had never experienced grief that bad before. It felt like a part of me died that instant and never thought I could recover from the trauma. The exhaust I felt that day stayed like a veil over my skin for the coming few days. I could do nothing the whole day other than just locking myself up in a corner and staring into the darkness, unaware of the time that passed. With sorrows creeping up my cells every moment of life, always reaching higher peaks and getting stronger like a huge rock, my insides became too damp with unshed tears. I still recall how my body had become an object of desire for hundreds of lecherous men, how the pain seared through my heart, tearing away each and every inch of the safety net I had built around me. And above all, I was called everything in the book of wrong only because I am married to five men,” Draupadi choked, barely holding back her tears. She was left reminiscing her past in Satyabhama’s presence, with nightmarish memories flooding her heart.

Looking at Draupadi breaking down that way made Satyabhama’s eyes glimmer with tears but she tried consoling her.

Draupadi was quick enough to wipe her tears and said, “I slept through the pain every night with the anaesthesia of false hope, only to wake up to an internal scream, torn from my heart. All my dreams of living happily ever after with my husbands got shattered and melted into a puddle. All I could feel was the scary silence and darkness around me. With the dreadful reality check, a dark feeling crept into me, cold and devoid of

hope. But then, time heals everything Satya. Even if it does not, you have to pretend like you are okay. Else, you cannot take a step forward in life. Like a rubber band stretching till its limits and then all of a sudden, it snaps, the silence disappears and you start to see your life turning around. You realise that there is no way you can undo the past or escape from fate. And we can choose to let go of the pain with the help of our loved ones. The assurance from my family that I am not fighting this battle alone and they will be with me through thick and thin made my recovery quick. But no woman should go through what I had to endure and the evil should be punished brutally.”

*Revenge was not a desire for her; it was a need for her soul. Her pain was like an ulcer in her heart that could only be healed by a deadly weapon attached with a sharp iron point of revenge.*

“Yes, they will pay for their sins, I know it. And wow, that is such learning for life, thank you so much. You are one such strong woman and an inspiration,” praised Satyabhama. Draupadi gave a weak smile.

“But I have one more question. I promise this is the last one,” Satyabhama said shyly.

“Why the delay Satya? Ask,” said Draupadi, with a smile on her face.

“Let us keep your husbands aside for a while, but why does my husband, Krishna, like to spend so much time with you? I do not think there is even a single day when he does not take your name. Sometimes, he utters your name even when he is asleep. I try to keep him to myself but that never happens. He is always roaming around,” asked Satyabhama, showing signs of jealousy on her face.

Draupadi had a little laugh and said, “Why do you not pose this question to Krishna himself?”

“I tried asking him but he told me to get it clarified from you,” she smirked.

“We both acknowledge the fact that there is no physical attraction between us. We share a connection devoid of lust, which is just a platonic, healthy bonding. I see myself as his devotee and a part of my soul, but he treats me as his friend and urges me to do the same. That is his greatness. His friendship is a boon to me that fosters as love in my heart and shines as respect through my eyes. We both do not expect anything from each

other. The love that does not expect anything in return from us is our friendship. I feel fortunate to be blessed by his unconditional support and affection always. Whenever I think of his face and kindness in his smile, there is an assurance and safe harbour around me. Sometimes, when I do not feel good, just the thought of his name lightens my mood. I am glad that my husbands also understand this and they feel blessed that Krishna acknowledges my devotion.”

“Wow! Such a knowledgeable person you are. I feel so relieved now. I think I did a good thing coming here to see you today,” said Satyabhama.

“You believe that you came here by yourself? Or Krishna made you come here?” Draupadi winked at her.

Satyabhama sported a question mark on her face and said, “I did not get you.”

Draupadi shrugged her shoulders and said, “One can never understand his tricks.”

Satyabhama sat there wearing a puzzled expression on her face and then Krishna entered the scene. “The two ladies are having some intense discussion here. Are you planning some conspiracies against me?” he said playfully.

“I wish,” Satyabhama said, curling her lips.

Draupadi chuckled and said, “Krishna, is there anyone in this universe who can plot something against you?”

Three of them shared a laughter and Satyabhama bid goodbye to Draupadi.

# Chapter 19

It did not take much time to see Draupadi's words about her friendship with Krishna, in action.

Duryodhana's obsession with the idea of destroying Pandavas and Draupadi did not tone down a bit even after hearing about their sufferings as forest dwellers. He was always occupied in plotting ways to harass them, though he had never dared to attack them directly in the forest.

Durvasa Maharshi, who was considered as the avatar of Lord Shiva, was infamous for his ill-temper. One day, he along with his thousands of disciples, arrived at Kuru kingdom. Duryodhana as a host managed to please him and Durvasa granted him a boon. After a while, Duryodhana devised a wicked plan to put Pandavas in a spot.

“Maharshi, the entire kingdom of ours feels fortunate to have extended our hospitality. It would be great if you can visit our brothers, Pandavas in the forest and grant them your blessings too. They will be more than happy to welcome you,” he requested Durvasa.

Duryodhana knew that the Pandavas would have nothing to feed Maharshi which would enrage him and ultimately lead him to curse them in anger.

*It is a common trait in a few humans to gain solace from the misfortune of others and feeling good in wicked joy. Such instincts make them feel good for that instant, but it rarely helps in making their own lives any better.*

Durvasa and his disciples visited the Pandavas in their hermitage in the forest just after Pandavas and Draupadi were done with their meals.

During their period of exile, Pandavas obtained their food from a vessel gifted to them by the Sun god, which never got exhausted until Draupadi finished her meal. As Draupadi had already washed the vessel by the time Durvasa arrived that day, there was no food left to serve him.

Pandavas grew anxious thinking they were doomed to death if they failed to feed Durvasa. They duly paid their homage to him and extended him a warm welcome. Yudhishtira requested him and his disciples to have their bath at the riverside and finish their prayers while the meals would be prepared.

Yudhishtira handed the responsibility of cooking for such a huge number of people to Draupadi, in so little time. She was clueless too and was left with no choice but to recite the name of Krishna in her heart. Within no time, Krishna appeared in front of her.

While she was about to explain to him the situation, he interrupted her quickly saying, "Draupadi, I am very hungry. Get me some food, quick."

Draupadi did not respond. Krishna again said, "Make it quick. I am starving."

Draupadi asked with a blank face, "Krishna, you really do not know the reason why I wanted you here today?"

"No! I do not know. Why are you asking so many questions?" he answered, faking an annoyance on his face.

Draupadi grew exasperated and told him that she had prayed to him because there was no food left for the day.

"What? You must be joking. I am exhausted. Show me the vessel," he said.

She did and he noticed a lone grain of rice and a piece of vegetable that was stuck to the vessel. He picked it up, put in his mouth and said, "I am full now. Thank you, Draupadi for the meal."

Draupadi started getting annoyed by his casual behaviour now and was just about to shout at him for not being serious about her problem but Bheema came running towards them.

"I went to the riverside but I could not find Maharshi or any of his disciples there. No traces of them," he said.

She understood that the hunger of Durvasa and his disciples was satiated because of Krishna.

“If Krishna’s hunger is satisfied, no one can ever feel the hunger in their bellies,” Draupadi thought to herself and smiled at Krishna.

‘If only Kaurava’s hunger for revenge too could be satisfied with such deeds, we would never be dwelling here in the woods,’ she wondered for a moment, staring at Krishna.

She quickly composed herself, moved closer to Krishna and said, “You have always been there for me as a support system on so many occasions. If it were not for you, my family and I would have never been able to overcome the hardships in our lives,” holding his hands.



## Chapter 20

One day, while Pandavas were out in the woods on their usual duty of hunting and collecting food items, Draupadi was alone at their hermitage.

She loved to gaze out of the window of the hermitage and get greeted by the fragrance of the flowers around. The fresh aroma wafting through the clean air she breathed in, provided her soul with soothing comfort.

“If these plants can coexist in peace, why is it that we humans cannot live together in harmony? Why does Duryodhana strenuously seek to harm us every moment?” she was lost in deep thoughts, enjoying the solitude.

After a while, she sensed that the silence was getting burst by a rumbling noise from far, slowly increasing in intensity and moving towards her shelter. The dense forest was resounding with the screams of many birds and animals. She saw the birds on the trees getting disturbed and racing away quickly in random directions. This alarmed her a bit and she looked out at the entrance. She saw Jayadratha walking towards the hermitage with his troops behind him.

She could not recognise him instantly but in a few moments, she recollected meeting him in the Kuru kingdom once along with her husbands. Jayadratha had recently married Pandavas’ cousin sister Dushala. She felt a sense of relief after remembering who he was. Weirdly enough, before getting married to Dushala, he was also present at Draupadi’s swayamvara, failing to win the contest.

She walked towards him and extended courteous greetings saying, “Welcome to our simple and peaceful hermitage, Jayadratha.”

“How come you are here?” Draupadi asked casually.

“I got to know that you are living here with your husbands and decided to check on you,” he replied.

“That is so nice of you to check on our wellbeing,” said Draupadi.

Little did she know that he had been waiting for the Pandavas to leave the shelter so that he could abduct her.

“You know what bothers a man like me the most?” he asked her.

“What is it?”

“Seeing such a gorgeous, radiant and sensitive woman like you going through such hardships.”

“Thank you so much for your concern but my husbands take good care of me and we are doing fairly well in our lives,” she replied with a smile.

“You do not deserve to endure this misfortune. Come with me, I will make you my queen,” he said, moving a bit closer to her.

Draupadi was perplexed at his words and noticed his stares were crawling all over her body. She moved away from him, covering herself completely in her saree.

She could now sense his intentions but quickly she composed herself and calmly said, “King Jayadratha, you are married to my husbands’ sister. You are like a brother to me. You originate from a royal family. Besides, I am a married woman and you very much know who my husbands are. I do not want to be your queen and you cannot look at me with such intentions.”

He did not budge and sternly replied, “This is the first time I am seeing you from such a close distance. Even after rotting in this forest for years, your beauty has not toned down a bit. Why do you want to waste your beauty in this utter poverty in the company of those hopeless and wretched Pandavas?”

She stepped away from him as she did not want even his shadow to touch her. His words enraged her but he did not look like he would refrain himself from the cruel intentions. She also realised that, with her husbands not present there, she alone can no way resist him and she tried dissuading him by speaking in a severe tone, “My husbands will be here at any moment. We would be more than happy to extend our hospitality to our guest but it would be good for you if you can observe the royal etiquette in

your behaviour. Else, you will have to reap the consequences for infringing the limits of decency.”

“The day when I saw you at swayamvara, I was mesmerised by your intoxicating beauty. Till today, I cannot take your physique off my mind. I decided that day itself that I will savour your beauty one day. I thought you would willingly come with me today but it looks like that is not the case here,” he said.

“You made a grave mistake here entering as a wolf in a den of lions. If you were even half as smart as you think you are, you would not be standing here, knowing the skills of my husbands,” she retorted with an expression of disgust on her face, as her face reddened with anger.

He caught her by her hair and started forcibly dragging her to his chariot. Nightmarish memories of Kuru assembly swiftly flashed in her mind. She had not completely recovered from the scars after the humiliation by Kauravas and here was another evil creature digging its claws into her heart. The wounded being she had become following that traumatising incident, she now had to endure another evil trying to prey on the same injured soul. She wished she could hide all her beauty somewhere so that she would never have to face any more such humiliations in her life. Her legs refused to move, too shocked at his behaviour. He started dragging her with all his might and now she was pleading him with tears flooding her eyes. All those years, hunger, thirst and bleeding feet which had afflicted her in the forest had not hurt her soul as much as humans like him did.

*He could see her tears but not the heavy emotional trauma those tears carried. She was a wife to five men, a mother to five children and a sisterly figure to him but still, he was lusting her. Could a man like him who dehumanises a woman as a sex object for physical pleasure ever realise her pain? Could he ever understand that her body had a bleeding soul attached to it?*

The Pandavas returned from the woods only to realise that Draupadi was not home. Luckily for them, they could see the trails of Jayadratha’s chariot and followed them to spot the chariot speeding up, followed by Jayadratha’s army. Draupadi raised a big hue and within no time, they were behind Jayadratha’s chariot, fully equipped with weapons.

It did not take much time for Jayadratha to realise that there was no way he could escape the Pandavas. Facing them with might or getting killed were the only options he had. He commanded his army to halt for the confrontation.

The Pandavas massacred Jayadratha's army. Draupadi had never witnessed such a brutal fight in her life. She also felt a thrill of watching her husbands together in action for the first time.

Bheema dragged Jayadratha from his chariot and threw him away. With him lying several feet away injured, Draupadi along with Pandavas walked up to him. Arjuna caught him by his neck and threw him near Draupadi's legs. Her anger flared up, her eyes so fiery that the rage could burn him into ashes. She wished him to be tortured to death at that very moment. She wanted him to pay for his evil intentions.

Jayadratha shrivelled before Yudhishtira and pleaded to be forgiven.

"Draupadi, he is the husband of our sister. I do not want us to be the reason behind her being a widow for the rest of her life. I understand he is wicked but let us spare his life for the sake of our sister," said Yudhishtira.

Bheema grabbed him tight by his throat which made him fight for his breath. But he still held him pressed to the ground and started punching him till he was bleeding profusely. He had shaved Jayadratha's head on one half and screamed at him, "You miserable being, if you want to be alive, promise us that you will go around and let people know that you are the slave of Pandavas."

Looking at him struggling to speak, Bheema let him loose.

"Yes yes. I will do that for the rest of my life," Jayadratha said, trying to catch his breath.

He quickly fled from the scene covering his head. None of the Pandavas could sense that Draupadi's face was still red with suppressed anger.

"For once, why cannot my husbands instantly punish those who humiliated me? Yudhishtira always keeps on wearing the same tape of dharma trying to belittle the intensity of my feelings. Why is it that his dharma always has the last word? Can he ever see how the evil actions of these lustful men prick my heart? Will he ever grasp the peace my heart is yearning for? This wretch had the audacity to touch me in your absence

and you are being compassionate towards him?” Draupadi thought to herself, following their husbands to hermitage with a disappointment.

*Even after knowing that Krishna would safeguard Draupadi and how invincible Pandavas were as warriors, people like Duryodhana, blinded by lust, could not resist themselves from trying to molest Draupadi. If there is anything in this universe that can make a man lose his discretion, it is his hunger for sex followed by his hunger for food. Family and society guide in keeping that kind of instincts in control, excluding a few cases where the men turn out to be animals.*

# Chapter 21

Pandavas, along with Draupadi, managed to successfully complete their twelve long years of exile in the forest. But the real challenge lied ahead for them. As per the bet, during their last year of exile, they had to live in disguise, not to be recognised by anyone. If they were to be identified by anyone, their exile lifecycle would reset to zero days.

Arjuna, who had travelled a lot during his past exile suggested a handful of pleasant kingdoms that were ruled by courteous kings. Little did he know then that his experience of travelling would come to assist them that way. After giving it a lot of thought, they decided to live in the court of King Virata of Matsya kingdom for the next year. They had to decide on what role they would be playing to gain entry to Virata's court.

Yudhishtira said that he would disguise himself as a religious brahmin, a scholar and a dice game expert who would spend his time in the palace with the king Virata. Bheema would join the kitchen department as the head cook. Arjuna would be a dance teacher to the princess of Virata kingdom, while Nakula and Sahadeva would join the horse stables.

There was a confusion in Pandavas on what role would Draupadi assume. They did not want to expose her to any more troubles but they could not leave her alone anywhere. They hated the thought of their beloved wife condemned to physical hardship.

Draupadi said, "Please do not worry about me. As long as you all are near, even without any kind of contact with you, I can stay strong," understanding her husbands' thoughts.

"We will make sure there are no more troubles to you Draupadi," Yudhishtira assured her. Draupadi smiled and nodded.

“But how would you enter Virata’s court?” asked Bheema.

“I do not think it is a great idea to introduce you as the wife of any of us,” Arjuna joined the conversation.

“No no. That cannot happen,” Nakula and Sahadeva also agreed with Arjuna.

“After what I have gone through in the forest life, I think I can assume the role of a servant. I will request the queen to appoint me as her personal servant,” said Draupadi.

Pandavas looked at one another with blank expressions on their faces, remembering that she had never known a life of servitude.

“Trust me, I will be fine. Let us just go now,” she said, ending the conversation.

“But we need a plan to keep a lonely woman like you safe from the eyes of lustful men. There is no respect for a lonely woman in this society. We have witnessed that throughout our childhood,” said Yudhishtira, struggling to utter the last few words.

“It is the sad reality,” Arjuna pitched in.

She noticed that all her husbands’ eyes had become teary instantly. She knew that Yudhishtira was referring to their mother Kunti’s life in Hastinapura while they were growing up. She consoled him and asked, “What do you suggest now?”

Yudhishtira thought for a while and said, “I will explain it to you on the way.”

By the time they entered Virata’s kingdom, a sense of adventure replaced the apprehensions they had first felt when they realised that they had to leave the forest. They were so used to frequent hurdles by now that they were looking forward to a new phase in their lives. They all made sure that they enter the kingdom at different times over one day.

As per the plan, Draupadi requested the queen to employ her as a maid. Yudhishtira’s apprehensions about a single woman were seconded by the queen.

“Though your face is the most attractive one I have ever seen, your eyes tell me that you have suffered deeply. I am so sorry for your

misfortunes but I do not think I can let you stay here,” said queen in a low voice, showing how kindhearted she was.

Draupadi clasped Sudeshna’s hand tightly with teary eyes and worriedly asked her, “What happened queen? Did I say anything wrong that hurt you?”

“No no, nothing like that.”

“Then?”

“You look more like a goddess than a maid. You look like a lady hailing from the upper class of society. You are so beautiful that every woman in the kingdom would envy you. And you are a single woman with no company of a man. The moment my husband catches a glimpse of you, he would instantly fall in love with you and cast me off at this old age! And I am worried, the same can happen to every married woman in this kingdom when their husbands get attracted to your voluptuous physique. I would be a fool sabotaging my martial life if I let you stay here,” queen revealed her apprehensions.

“No woman should go through a life like mine,” she thought to herself, wondering if being born beautiful was her sin.

“Queen, please do not have any such fears in your head. I am not single. I am married to a powerful but invisible gandharva who guards me constantly but secretly. Any man who looks at me with lustful intentions or who disrespects me will be served with due punishment. Trust me!” she told the queen, following Yudhishtira’s plan.

Believing in her story, the queen happily welcomed Draupadi as her maid.

Draupadi put her head down and said, “But, I have a condition.”

“What is it?” asked the queen.

“I will not eat any leftovers, nor will I wash or touch the feet of anyone,” Draupadi said hesitantly.

Queen smiled and assured her, “You will never be asked to perform such duties in this palace.”

Interestingly, when Virata king questioned about their past years, Yudhishtira and Draupadi mentioned that they were once closely related to the king and queen of Indraprastha. Yudhishtira said that he had



learned the tricks of gambling from the eldest of Pandavas. Draupadi said that she was once a handmaid to the queen of Indraprastha. In fact, it was the reverence towards Pandavas that removed any hesitations from the mind of Virata to employ them in his court.

As time passed by, Pandavas and Draupadi got well settled in their different occupations. Though they stayed physically close in disguise, they were utterly cautious to not pitch any doubt to the people that they were related. Except for those sporadic instances when Draupadi felt bad for her husbands, who were once kings, and now leading lives as courtiers and cooks, eleven months passed by peacefully for Pandavas and Draupadi in Virata's court. They had been utmost careful to live unrecognizable during their final year of exile. They were desperately waiting for the last month to pass so that they quickly could go back to meet their sons, whom they had not seen in thirteen years.

## Chapter 22

When it looked like everything was going fine, life threw another obstacle at Draupadi in the form of Keechaka, the lecherous brother of the queen. He was the chief of the army in Virata's kingdom and very powerful at the court. No one dared to oppose his words or actions, including the king.

"Wow! Who is that lady, my dear sister? I am losing my self-control looking at that epitome of beauty," Keechaka asked the queen, intrigued by Draupadi's charm.

She tried avoiding his question and started talking about other topics. But he persisted and the queen understood his intentions. She requested him to stay away from Draupadi quoting the gandharva's story. He paid no heed to her and quickly rushed towards Draupadi who was working a few feet away from them in the quarters.

He went close to her, smelled her hair from behind. She quickly jumped far from him and asked, "Who are you? Why did you enter the queen's chambers?"

He gasped, looking at her from such close distance: she was stunningly attractive. Moving closer to her, he tried putting his hands on her shoulders. He introduced himself as the queen's brother. After knowing his background, she stood trembling before him, trying to shoo him away.

"Who are you, lady? I have never seen you here," he asked as his lustful eyes roved over her face and chest. She answered him. She caught her hand and dragged her saying, "Come with me."

"I cannot come with you. I am a servant only for the queen, not anyone else. I have so much work to do. Please leave," she said in an irritating

tone.

He started moving around her and said, “There are so many women who have fallen head over heels for me. But trust me, you are something special. Marry me, I promise I will abandon all my wives. Be my queen.”

“You better note that I am a married woman and just move out of here,” she warned him.

He laughed at her and asked, “Oh! Is it? Do you think you can live in this kingdom after rejecting me? Where is your husband? Let him come here. I will kill him and then make you mine over his dead body.”

“My husband is a gandharva. If you do not leave me alone, be assured that he will destroy you,” she said confidently.

“You do not know the strength of this Keechaka. Ask anyone in this court, they will explain to you in detail,” he said laughing hysterically.

“Your skin smells so delicious. I wish I could taste you now,” he passed a lewd comment on her.

Those words made her feel instant aversion towards him. At that moment, the Queen entered the scene and realising what her brother was up to, she forcibly took him away from her assuring him that she would talk to her.

*Is sex the only thought that crosses the mind of an evil man when he sees a helpless and lonely woman? Does he perceive her just as a sex object? Can he not see his mother or sister in her? Is he blindfolded by lust for not being able to understand her heart? For how many more years do women have to bear with such animal instincts of the evil? To what extent do women have to tolerate the endless lecherous stares at her body?*

During their stay at Virata’s court, Pandavas and Draupadi met secretly in the nights. But very rarely did they all gather at once as they could not afford any suspicious eyes on their whereabouts.

That night, she met Bheema and she tried talking in a normal tone. He instantly noticed that something was bothering her. He checked on her and she dismissed him saying she was fine. As the exile period was coming to an end, she did not want to create any ruckus as she was well aware of Bheema’s rage.

Draupadi was used to learning to smile through hardships; but she was lying to Bheema. It was her eyes that were speaking the truth and Bheema noticed it. She had a hidden pain in her voice that extended to her eyes and came out as incessant flow of tears, as Bheema urged her to speak.

She explained to him what had happened in the day. As she expected, Bheema was choking with outrage but she made sure that he stays calm till the exile period was over and assured him that he can deal with Keechaka later.

For the next few days, Keechaka's visits to the queen's quarters become more frequent. His lascivious gazes at Draupadi did not stop. The Queen felt that his brother had been lonely for a few months during his campaign and spending time with his wives would make him forget about Draupadi. She ignored his looks at Draupadi in the hope that good sense would dawn on him soon.

But it did not take much time for the queen to be proved wrong about her brother. With fourteen days left in exile, he threatened the queen saying, "If Draupadi is not present in my bed tonight, I will make sure your husband is off the throne," and stormed off the place fuming. The queen also knew that he was very much capable of destroying her kingdom single-handedly.

The Queen was caught in a dilemma. On one side was her husband, her brother, her kingdom, her people and on the other side was a helpless woman who had immensely trusted her.

The Queen explained to Draupadi the precarious situation she was placed in. She had exposed his atrocities on innocent women of the kingdom in the past. Tossed by the furious grievance that was haunting her for years and revealing her helplessness on those matters, she started weeping.

Draupadi consoled her and said that she would go to visit him in the night, showing her bravery.

"But he will not leave you Draupadi. He is more dangerous than an animal desperately waiting for its prey in the jungle," said the queen, bothered about Draupadi's safety.

"Tell me one thing, queen. Can you convince him to stay away from me?" bluntly asked Draupadi.

The Queen went silent.

“Then you do not worry queen. I told you about my gandharva husband, right? I am sure he would not like to see his cherished wife on some other man’s bed. Based on his judgment, he will do what is rightful,” Draupadi confidently spoke for herself, while cooking a plot in her mind.

## CHAPTER 23

“Bheema, I thought of not risking any exposure at this time with our exile period almost coming to an end. Else, I would have asked you to give that lout Keechaka the punishment he deserved on the very first day he touched me inappropriately. But after knowing about his history with women, I do not think that he deserves to live. If not me, he will torture some other woman tomorrow. I had to tolerate when that monstrous Kauravas tried to disrobe me in the assembly hall packed by men. I had to tolerate the molestation attempt by sinful Jayadratha in the forest. I am on the verge of facing one more such insult. Are my husbands cowards to see their wife suffering? I cannot endure any more tortures from such lecherous humans. I want you to beat him to the dust. My rage will only be cooled down after you kill him,” spoke Draupadi venting her frustration out.

She was apprehensive that Yudhishtira would start his lessons of righteousness and peace like usual to manipulate Bheema. Before he could say anything, she gave an ultimatum to her husbands by harshly saying, “If you are not going to kill him today, I will kill myself tomorrow morning. Because I know he will ravish me before these two weeks pass. And I cannot bear the thought of a man other than you five touching me again. I prefer death to molestation. Promise me that you will mutilate the body of that wicked Keechaka.”

Pandavas were not surprised to see the furious words being hurled at them by Draupadi and all of them kept mum. They had the scenes of Kuru assembly flashing in their minds too. Together, they devised a plan that Bheema would go to visit Keechaka dressed as a woman that night, instead of Draupadi.

Before they dispersed, Bheema said, “But send him a message that you would see him at the dance hall and not his quarters.”

Draupadi nodded and left the place with a smug look on her face. She knew that Keechaka’s slaughter will be a grand opening ceremony as a part of her payback plan to Kauravas.

The city turned in for the night with a slim moon brightening the sky, but Pandavas, Draupadi and Keechaka were wide awake. As per the plan, Bheema draped himself in a saree and covering his face, and reached the dance hall. Draupadi also tagged along with him so that it would be easy for them to lure Keechaka. They saw Keechaka with a wide grin on his face desperately waiting to savour Draupadi, in the darkness.

While Draupadi would seduce Keechaka with her words, Bheema walked towards the bed with his back facing towards him. Keechaka was so drunk that he could not sense that the person sitting in front of him was not Draupadi, though Bheema’s physique was much bigger than that of Draupadi. He went and put his hands on Bheema’s shoulders. Bheema turned back and revealed his identity to him.

“Oh! Such a great plot you made against me? So, you are her gandharva husband? I will beat you to pieces and then make your wife mine,” laughed Keechaka.

Thundering at each other and shouting abusive words, they wrestled for more than an hour. After fighting like two bulls in that hall in the middle of the night, Bheema butchered Keechaka. He was burning with such an intense hatred for Keechaka that he crushed his arms, legs, head into his body and reduced him to a ball of flesh. He then left Draupadi and went back to his quarters.

Draupadi walked out of the dancing hall and awakened all the nearby people with her screams. People came out and were petrified to see Keechaka’s mutilated body. They exclaimed, “Where are his arms and where is his head? How did this happen? What are you doing here at this hour of the night?”

Draupadi calmly announced, “Though I had warned him multiple times, he lusted after a married woman. He tried to violate my chastity and my gandharva husband came here and killed him. He got the punishment he deserved.”

Knowing the news of Keechaka's death, the brothers and relatives of Keechaka arrived at the dance hall. Casting their angry eyes upon Draupadi, they were burning with a vengeance. They tied up her hands and legs to a pole and rushed to the king Virata the same night. They made him agree that the woman who caused their leader's death would also be burnt on his funeral pyre. They hoped that way she would satisfy Keechaka's lust in his death. Fearing the internal conflicts in the kingdom and chaotic scenes with his chief of the army dead, Virata could not oppose them. He also felt that was the least he could do to pacify the soul of Keechaka, who had won numerous battles for him.

Draupadi sighed for herself, "A woman being burned to death to satisfy the lustful desires of a lecherous animal! Is this what God made women for? Just to satisfy the sexual needs of a man? Can these men not see the truth keeping aside the fact that they were related to Keechaka? Had anyone questioned Keechaka's deeds here? Does love and affection towards someone make humans blindfolded towards their shortcomings?"

If a man finds her beautiful, it is her fault. If she exudes self-confidence in her life, it is her fault. If she fights for her dignity, it is her fault. If she demands respect based on her worth, it is her fault. If she craves the freedom of expression, it is her fault. What action of a woman is not faulty?

She saw a lifeless flesh on her side. She wished if only this lifeless flesh had used its senses to keep a check on his desires while he was alive! She saw herself as flesh with a bit of life in it, which anyway did not matter to those men. Barring that, she could not feel any difference between her and Keechaka.

She was tired of trying to save herself from lewd men so many times in her life that she was not even offering any resistance to those men carrying her to the cremation land. A dreadful silence invaded her and she wanted to die rather than being subjected to more such humiliations because of her flesh.

She desperately wished for a day when men would start looking beyond what's visible to the naked eye in a woman, the epicentre of that flesh, her heart.

Where are you Krishna? Where are my husbands? Where are my sons? I want to see them one last time."



For a moment, she felt if she was paying for her sins from her previous births. She could not find any other reasoning behind her sufferings every time for no wrongdoing of hers.

Hearing the news, Bheema followed them to the burial ground. His strength had only got enhanced multiple times after witnessing the stupidity of those heartless men. As soon as he reached there and saw Draupadi's pitiable condition, he could not hold his rage anymore and he uprooted a couple of insanely huge trees. Those visuals scared them to death. In the dark, they mistook him to be a Gandharva and fled the scene immediately. But Bheema started running behind them, roaring mightily like a lion in the jungle. He slaughtered more than a hundred of the mourners with his bare hands.

In a few moments, the cremation ground turned into a mini battlefield. Recognising it was Bheema, Draupadi ran towards him sobbing and embraced him. Bheema wiped her tears with his hands tenderly, which a few moments ago were ferociously attacking the demons. Before someone could recognise them, Bheema rushed back to Virata's court. He had asked Draupadi to walk back to the court a little later to make people believe that it was indeed a gandharva who had killed Keechaka and his men.

The whole kingdom woke up to the buzzing news of the overnight massacre at the cremation ground. Virata and his queen were petrified looking at Draupadi's return unharmed. Virata asked his wife to dismiss Draupadi on an immediate basis keeping the protection of men in his kingdom in mind.

"When I saw you for the first time, I felt insecure as a woman. You are unquestionably exceptional in beauty when compared to any other woman on this earth. I knew you would be the object of lustful desire to all men, including the married ones. I was afraid that you might be subjected to some threats because of the same reason. But I did not expect that our men would be slaughtered this way by your vengeful gandharva husband. Your husband is extremely wrathful. I treated you like family and this is how you have repaid me. I want you out of my kingdom right now," the queen said in a firm voice.

"Queen, I understand your emotions. I had already warned your brother about my husband but he did not budge. Do you think I deserve the blame for this?" asked Draupadi.

She saw that the queen was not in any mood to answer her question. Then she started talking again.

“Ok. I admit this is all my fault. But, please let me stay here for thirteen more days. The curse on my husband would come to an end by then and he will come here to take me with him. I assure you there will no more visits from my gandharva husband till then,” humbly requested Draupadi. But her words sounded more like an order for the queen.

The Queen was convinced by her words and said, “Alright. I am not declining your request only because I am afraid of you. Please make sure there will be no harm caused to anyone in the coming days.”

“Trust me, queen. There will not be any more such incidents,” assured Draupadi.

“But I do not want to see you till the day you will be leaving from here,” said the queen.

Draupadi nodded and left the queen’s quarters with a wide grin on her face.

For the next thirteen days, until her exile would come to an end, Draupadi roamed in the kingdom exuding defiance. No man dared to match his eyesight with her or come near her or walk beside her. They were horror-stricken after Keechaka’s incident and fled away in different directions when they came across her. That was when she realised the beauty of freedom and she hoped she would never have to look back to any kind of slavery for the rest of her life. She wished every woman could be blessed with such freedom forever, in a world utterly dominated by men.

## Chapter 24

Thirteen days passed by and Pandavas decided to reveal their identity to Virata king. Virata was overjoyed at the presence of such exalted personalities in his kingdom. He offered them to stay as his guests in his court till they get Indraprastha back from Kauravas. Lord Krishna also joined Pandavas in Virata's kingdom to discuss their plan of action moving forward.

With Pandavas, Draupadi along with their sons and Kunti, Krishna, Virata's aids seated in his court, "I am indifferent to opulence, bodily enjoyments, and materialistic pleasures. But for the sake of our heirs, all I am asking them is to give us Indraprastha back, that we are entitled to claim following the successful completion of exile. We brothers do not seek any kind of revenge and want to spread peace moving forward. We know Duryodhana's nature very well. The slightest display of aggression from our side will flare his anger up. Please be gentle on him and do not threaten him with war. We are only looking forward to harmonious relationships with them," spoke Yudhishtira, in an earnest attempt to avert the war.

Yudhishtira's words hit Draupadi like a shock wave. Looking at none of his brothers opposing his views made her feel hopeless. It was the silence of Bheema, whose strength and courage were beyond question, that hurt her the most. Her memories of Bheema slaying Keechaka's men like a lion savaging a herd of cows a few days back were still afresh. She wondered if she was saved by Bheema or actually a Gandharva that day.

Though Yudhishtira was doing all he could do to foster peace between them and Kauravas, everyone present there had a strong intuition that war would be inevitable, sooner or later. While all the portents were pointing

towards war, they collectively decided to send Lord Krishna as their messenger to Kauravas.

After long discussions with Duryodhana, Dhritarashtra, and other Kuru elders, Krishna went back to Pandavas. They were eagerly waiting for Krishna to speak.

“Pandavas have become cowards after living as forest dwellers. They are not fit to rule now. I will give them nothing, except battle! Why are they begging for the kingdom? I will make them sit on their knees and beg for their lives on the battlefield. Ask Yudhishtira, the man of dharma, to abide by Kshatriya dharma and make arrangements for the war. If they are scared, let them go back to live in forests.”

Krishna summarised the outcome of his discussions with Kauravas loud and clear to Pandavas.

Though that was the expected response from Duryodhana, Yudhishtira grew pale on hearing Krishna’s words and he sat still, caught in two minds. “Oh, Duryodhana does not want peace! How could Dhritarashtra and other Kuru elders not knock any sense into his head?” he spoke slowly. It sounded more like he was talking to himself.

“When it comes to war, one can underestimate his opponent’s forces, but should never overestimate his strengths. Duryodhana’s overconfidence about his troops and immense trust in Karna’s valour made him speak such words. When such overconfidence reaches peaks as ego, passes pride and reaches arrogance, it makes him feel that he is invincible. He is in such a state of mind now and would not listen to anyone. He is bound to be the sole reason for the destruction of the entire Kaurava clan. By the time he realises that it would all be bloodshed around him,” Krishna spoke words of wisdom.

Looking at damp, dull mood taking over the gathering, Draupadi started speaking, driven by revenge.

“Dear husband, I do not understand why you are still hesitant to wage war. We have suffered more, far more than what we deserved. Peace looks like an ornament on you to a certain level only. After that, your tolerance is perceived as your incompetence. Nonviolence looks graceful only when it springs out of power and strength. Else, it only makes you look like a coward. You were present in the gambling hall when Duryodhana jeered

and insulted me. I want to see him beheaded on the battlefield. I want to see Dusshasana's arms that tried to strip me naked by pulling this hair of mine, separated from his body. I want Karna, that scornful man who told me that I should choose another husband, lying down like a corpse. All these long years during our exile, you have never ceased to seethe in fury against the Kauravas. And now, the time is here and you are gripped by anxiety? You are worried that the entire Kaurava clan will be annihilated if the war takes place and that goes in the history against your principles. But what is greater dharma than destroying evil? Those men deserve death and there is no question about it. They say a man reaps as he sows and it is now your chance to completely eradicate the race of demons from this world. You are so much bothered about future generations, right? Now, it is up to you on what kind of message you want to give to them. That the evil can use the loopholes in the system or take the tolerance of people like you for granted and be assured that they will never be punished? Or, they will be brutally punished for an attempt to molestation and meting out inhuman treatment to a woman? Any man in the future should not even dare to pass lewd remarks on a woman or present lecherous stares at her or touch her without her consent. They should be terrified of remembering what had happened to Kauravas. These flames of anger will not cool down until they are slaughtered and destroyed."

She spoke so gravely that no one dared interrupt her. Her words instantly changed the mood in Pandava camp and Yudhishtira finally agreed for the war. Krishna smiled looking at Draupadi, knowing all about why the apocalyptic war must be fought.

She had been fighting battles since she was born; it was just the battlefields that kept changing periodically. That moment she realised that all the previous battles which she had involuntarily been a part of, without her fault, were leading to that huge battle now. She wished that would be the last battle of her life and hoped to emerge victoriously.

## Chapter 25

The war of Kurukshetra began fiercely with the two roaring armies racing at each other. With death dancing in the battlefield every day for eighteen days, horrific and celebrant, the war ended with all the Kauravas and Karna lying dead on the ground in bloodshed.

Keeping his promise, Bheema killed Dusshasana breaking his shoulders and ripping his chest open. He also slew Duryodhana by striking his thigh with his mace and mortally wounding him.

Arjuna killed Karna with the help of Lord Krishna as his charioteer. After Arjuna had shot him with arrows, Karna wanted to talk to Krishna. Even when Karna was dying, Arjuna did not bother to stand close to him. He distanced himself while Krishna was walking closer to Karna. He was relieved that he had accomplished freeing his brothers and Draupadi from the grief they had harboured for long years.

“Krishna, I understand that I have only a few moments left in my life. Can you please do me a favour?” asked Karna, struggling to speak as his bleeding increased.

“What is it Karna?” asked Krishna affectionately, sitting on his knees beside Karna.

“There is one person I wish I could talk to now but I do not have much time left,” said Karna.

“Who is it, Karna?”

“My mother Kunti. I have always been certain of this moment after what I along with Kauravas had done to Draupadi. And, not a day passed for me without regretting those ugly scenes in Kuru assembly hall. Yes, I do repent the way I behaved with a helpless lady in front of her husbands.

Keeping that aside, I have always lived my life with honour. I have always believed that there is nothing more fragile than human life which comes to an end if one stops breathing for a few seconds. I have never been scared of death. But the very thought of dishonour terrifies me to the core. Yes, Arjuna did defeat me today with your assistance and he did take away my life now but there is one thing Arjuna can never have even in his dreams - my honour. I never cared when Indra took away my armour disguising himself as a poor brahmin. I have always valued my honour more than my life. In my opinion, a man is dead not when he breathes last but when his precious honour is compromised. Life without honour is meaningless to me. Else, the day my mother Kunti had revealed the truth of my birth, I would have discarded Duryodhana's friendship and shook hands with Pandavas. Tell my mother how much I yearned for her affection all my life," spoke Karna emotionally, with tears flowing in his eyes.

"Lastly, no woman should ever go through the humiliation Draupadi had to endure all her life. A man sexually touching a woman without her consent deserves to be punished, no matter what. That day you saved Draupadi's dignity even though you were not present there physically. Promise me that no woman or daughter or wife ever will be placed in such mortifying circumstances in the future," said Karna, trying to extend his hand. Before Krishna could catch his hand, Karna breathed his last, closing his eyes forever.

Krishna felt that Karna was a man of values but unfortunately surrounded himself in a bad company.

## Chapter 26

By the end of the war, two mothers had lost all of their children. They were Draupadi and Gandhari.

“What have I achieved by pushing my husbands for the war Krishna? What value does this victory or kingdom hold when I have lost all my children? I was not there when they were growing up and now I can never see them again. Why am I cursed like this? Should I have just let Kauravas go without holding a grudge against them? Was my revenge a futile attempt to regain my self-respect? Did you know beforehand that this day would come in my life?” Draupadi asked Krishna, sobbing.

Krishna consoled her by saying, “Draupadi, never question your judgments. This war marks the end of the world and a new yuga will rise over the earth soon. All this was bound to happen and your sons have only sacrificed their lives as warriors for the good sake of the world.”

Though Yudhishtira himself was drowning in grief, he took Draupadi in his arms and said, “Draupadi, millions of men have died in the war. Millions of wives and children are bereaved. Vyasa Maharshi had foreseen this ages ago and Krishna had also warned the Kauravas about the consequences of war but they did not listen. All of us are bound to fate and no one can change it. Please do not cry for our sons. They have died a Kshatriya’s death and now reached a place where they are happier than we can ever be in our lives. You need to stay strong, you are not alone in your agony.”

In contrast to the fate of Draupadi and Gandhari, all of Kunti’s sons were alive and emerged victorious from the war. But she slumped to her knees, taking in a sight that her brain refused to witness and heart denied



to comprehend. It was the dead body of Karna, pierced all over by arrows, bruised and battered.

Looking at no one taking Karna's name or bothering to perform his last rites, Kunti got choked up. With the grief surging every expelled breath from her fragile body, the emptiness in her heart making her head feel heavy and the numbness pounding her brain, she swallowed down a sob, wiped her tears and said, "Son Yudhishtira, I want you and your brothers to perform the final rites for Karna."

This baffled Pandavas, Draupadi, Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and their relatives present there.

Yudhishtira stared at her, uncomprehending. "What? He was our enemy, mother. Why would you want us to offer such inappropriate deed?" he asked.

Unable to hold it anymore, she let out an exasperated sigh and said, "There is a secret buried down deep inside my heart for so long. If I do not reveal it even now, I would be the most disgraceful soul to have ever embraced motherhood!"

Pandavas were taken aback by her strong words and Yudhishtira moved closer to her to check if she was alright.

"What is it, dear mother? Why are you talking like this?" he asked her. All of them were concerned about her.

After a few moments of silence, she said, "Karna was my first son before Yudhishtira. He was born with the blessings of Suryadev before I got married to your father."

She finally managed to reveal her dark secret to the world. She lifted off the heavy load she had been carrying since ages, from her heart, as the incessant tears made her voice tremble.

Yudhishtira's mind refused to accept the frightful words he had just heard. He felt like all the light around him was enveloped in pitch-black darkness. The sun lost its radiance completely. It seemed like it was grieving for his deceased son who was lying on the ground like a fallen star. With the colour of evening sky turning to orange colour, he was engulfed in the gloomy silence around him. It was almost a similar situation for everyone there.

Kunti sat down, took Karna in her arms and said, “I did not provide you with this endearing tenderness of my hands while you were growing up. I did not provide you with food blended with my affection to you with my hands when you were hungry. I did not use my hands to stroke your hair to comfort you when you were sick. All I did was holding your soul in my stone heart when you most needed the warmth of my embrace as an antidote in this world with a crooked heart. No child should ever go through such a curse.”

Stroking his face and touching his battle-scars with her fingers, she planted a kiss on Karna’s forehead hugging him to her chest. A loud cry tightened her throat, cutting off the words she couldn’t dare herself to speak all those long painful years.

“You had to endure the cruel mockery and derision around you while you were alive. And now, this echoing emptiness around me is looking at me and laughing at my sealed fate. Till today, I used to feel slightly fortunate knowing that you were alive somewhere. Every grief in life is more like a passing cloud but the agony of a mother losing her child is endless and eternal. Your open wounds will be sealed forever under this soil in a matter of a few hours but will my closed wounds ever get healed? If only I had taken a different stance on that day, your fate would have been written in different colours.”

It felt more like she was talking to herself, while Draupadi tried consoling her.

*Karna, who could have been throned as the king, was treated as an orphan and subjected to unjust treatment all his life. He was resentful as he did not know whose child he was. All he wanted until his last breath was an identity, a sense of belongingness. Only after his death, he was bestowed with all he had wished for. Such is the sad reality of life sometimes. We put our blood and sweat to achieve something in life and never get to see the fruits in your lifetime. And by the time your efforts start reaping rewards, your journey on this earth is well finished.*

Yudhishtira felt like a heavyweight was added on his head and his legs atrophied for that moment making him slip down on the floor beside Kunti. His heart was filled with sympathy for Karna who would have been his elder brother and it would have been their duty in life to revere as their

elder, as his four brothers had honoured him. It took a while for the Pandavas to realise that they had killed their own eldest brother.

“If Karna was on our side, this Kurukshetra war would never have happened. It was only Karna’s incredible skill, exemplary courage, unwavering trust, and unquestioning loyalty that had pushed Duryodhana to go for the war,” Yudhishtira said, with tears starting to choke his voice. He was struggling to say anything while his brothers were just calculating how huge the consequences had been because of Kunti hiding such a huge secret. They felt like they had lost a big part of them.

*There are no winners or losers at the end of a war; there are only those who were dead and then the unlucky ones. Those who survived are constantly drowned in tidal waves of guilt, regret, and pain of losing loved ones. Or sometimes, hated ones too, like Karna for Pandavas.*

“We cannot bear a minute of discomfort caused to our dear ones and here we killed our brother! How could you do this mother?” shrieked Yudhishtira. The grief started sneaking up in their hearts, slowly it engulfed and overwhelmed them like the waves of an ocean.

*The saddest part of life is that sometimes we fail to appreciate someone’s worth when they are around. And by the time, life hits us hard with realisation, that person has already moved on. We had been so spiteful and mean to them all the while that we become someone that person did not want to remember anymore.*

With that pain continuing to abuse them, Pandavas felt they were not honoured enough to perform Karna’s last rites. They requested Krishna, their eternal pillar of support, to do the honours.

Krishna then sent for Karna’s wives and accompanied them in performing final rites with solemn incantations, relinquishing to divine mother Ganga.

Draupadi stood there silent and alone with her mind seething in confusion, while Kunti sank, broken and desolate. As time passed by, everyone set out to leave the funeral place with heavy hearts. They were to bear that emotional baggage for the rest of their lives.

At the end of the war, Pandavas returned home a lot richer than what they were at the beginning of the war, but a part of them had died along

with Karna. Not just Indraprastha, but also Hastinapura was acquired by Pandavas.

*Life can be so cruel at times. Grief is something we humans pay for loving someone unconditionally when they were with us. But we pay it back with interest when we lose someone and then realise that we had misunderstood them forever when they were alive.*

## Chapter 27

Pandavas along with Kunti and Draupadi returned from the funeral but Draupadi's mind was still revolving around Karna's fate. With an enormous magnitude of despair in her eyes, she lied down to take a nap but her mind would not let her do that.

“So, Karna could have been the eldest of Pandavas! If he was brother to Pandavas, what would have been my relationship with him?”

That very thought itself made Draupadi's mind circle back to her encounters with Karna in a flash. She remembered that she had seen Karna only two times in her lifetime. Both the instances, all she felt towards him was rejection during her swayamvara and resentment in the Kuru assembly hall. She could visualise Karna's stare on the day of her humiliation, like a knife, with the sharp point digging deeper in her heart. But that moment with her vengeance being achieved and Karna was no more to be seen around her, she somehow felt that all her life had revolved around him. She started filling her mind with countless answerless questions.

“What if mother-in-law Kunti had revealed Karna's identity the day she met me for the first time in their hut? I would have had six husbands then? Or if I had learned the truth about his origin, I would not have rejected him in swayamvara and he would have certainly claimed me as his wife. Would Kunti still have wished their sons to split me? Karna would have fulfilled her wish without a moment of hesitation. After all, he was famous as an extremely generous giver, to an extent that he donated his armour and golden earrings to a poor brahmin, even after knowing that could be fatal to him. If he had been with the Pandavas, I would never have had to go for a 13-year exile along with my husbands or face such

humiliation from Kauravas. Was it because I had always seen him as a sutaputra, I could never feel his affection towards me? He had to bear the brunt of ridicule and scornful remarks throughout his life just because he was brought up by a charioteer. Else he would have donned the throne in place of Yudhishtira. Had my behaviour been unfair to him all this time? But if he loved me so much, why would he insult me to such an extent in the courtroom? Just to please his loyal friend Duryodhana? Could he not help his loyalty clouding his intellect? Or he was blindfolded by the agony of revenge? I don't think so. Who would want to show the woman he loved naked to thousands of eyes filled with flames of lust, just because she rejected him? Or like Kauravas, all he had was intense lust for me and jealousy towards my husbands? He returned the respect Duryodhana bestowed him with, manifold as long he lived, but did he start hating Pandavas merely out of his gratitude towards Kauravas? Or was it his desire for me that bred anger on my husbands?"

With her heart and soul playing mind games, she was dimmed by the tears in her eyes. She was lost in time while tranquillity and comfort refused to reside in her body. She felt isolated, restless and a bit scared too, even if it was just for a little while. She desperately wished she could talk to Karna for once so that some of the bitterness in her heart would ebb.

"But why was he so hellbent on learning about his biological parents? Why did he feel so lonely and abandoned when he had a loving mother in the form of Radha? Why would he nourish so much hostility within himself about his so-called low birth? Though he was brought up as the son of a charioteer, he became the king of Anga because of his skills. Duryodhana held him close for advice all the time and made him his sidekick. Who else born into a lower caste would get to hold all these privileges? Society had not been fair to him but his existence was close to perfectly satisfactory," she thought.

"Very little association with Karna is bugging me so much, what would mother Kunti be going through now?" she thought to herself.

As a woman, she sensed that Kunti would be yearning for a listening heart, the one that would wrap her in a blanket of compassion. Hence, she went to Kunti's room to see her sitting unmoved in her room, paralysed. As Draupadi expected, her eyes were still flowing, with a depressed look

on her face. She looked wracked by remorse and seemed she would do anything to make amends. But as fate would have it, she was quite late.

“Are you okay mother?”, Draupadi asked her gently. She did not say anything.

“Do you want to talk? Maybe you will feel better that way,” Draupadi asked again leaning across to rest her hand on Kunti’s forearm, with a gentle squeeze. That was her way of giving assurance to her mother-in-law.

Draupadi’s gentle touch awakened her memories, buried deep down her heart, that had been irking her by residing under the skin all those years. Echos of those long-gone riverside water splashings jarred her mind. Her mind travelled back to where it had happened.

She started talking about Karna’s tragic life. She told Draupadi how she had invoked Surya Deva and why she had to heartlessly abandon infant Karna, fearing her father and the society. She broke down, telling how not a single day passed for her without remembering his newborn son. Each unfortunate event recollected became a thorn in her heart, made her feel grieved for his ill-fortune. Guilt was consuming and pestering her.

“Before the war, I revealed the story behind his birth and requested him to fight on our side. He respectfully rejected my proposal saying Duryodhana was the first person who had given him an identity and would be loyal to him till his last breath. That was how high he regarded his friendship with Duryodhana. If Krishna was not on our side, for the towering force Karna was, he would have undoubtedly defeated Arjuna in the war. I wish the ground beneath me would open and swallow me for my sins,” she spoke, with grief dissecting her heart.

Kunti recollected looking at Karna’s dead body for one last time before leaving the battlefield.

“Was he defeated today in the war? Is he even dead? Did you look at the pride on his face even after fate snatched his life away? And those proud lips curled in their last smile, mocking death? I do not think even death defeated him today. It must now be repenting for having honoured its duty.”

Draupadi was intently listening to her in silence, her tears involuntarily dripping onto the dejected Kunti’s hands. They had turned

into a pair of sobbing women trying to comfort each other.

“Don’t grieve for him, my dear mother. Everyone agrees that the only thing that led to his death was his fate. I am sure, he must be happy and at peace now, wherever he is. Surely, he must have found the heavens he deserved. He would not like to see you drowning in guilt this way. You need to learn to embrace the thing that makes you feel most guilty. Please stay strong,” Draupadi tried consoling Kunti.

“As ill-fated as I am to have abandoned a son like Karna, I am blessed to have got you as my daughter-in-law. Thank you for listening to me tonight with a little more love and less judgment. I don’t think I would have got the truest love like yours to reflect on my cursed journey till now, not even my five sons.” Kunti heartfully thanked Draupadi, wiping her tears.

Draupadi took her blessings and started walking back towards the entrance. A few steps later, she took a pause and turned around. Kunti walked closer to her, sensing Draupadi’s hesitation to talk.

“I have a question,” said Draupadi. Kunti nodded her head.

“Had you been present at my swayamvara, would you have tried protesting against me humiliating Karna based on his caste? Or you would have stayed mute, fearing the society around us? I am not going to judge you based on your answer nor am I going to ask any follow-up questions. But I want an honest answer from you,” spoke Draupadi.

Kunti stood there in silence with her head bent down. Draupadi waited for a few moments expecting Kunti would speak something. But then she realised that Kunti had already given an answer. She found her answer in Kunti’s ‘silence’.

She gave a weak smile and started walking back with a myriad of disturbances flooding her head. With her emotions flowing like an ocean with continuous waves hitting the shore, she could not find a way to escape or hide from those thoughts. She was trapped in a confusion, her emotions turning jagged making her head spin. She wished she could bury all those thoughts in the burial ground itself along with the dead.

Simultaneously, a question sprang in her mind. She wanted to know in detail how an invincible force like Karna was killed by Arjuna. She thought she would ask Krishna.



## Chapter 28

“Krishna, I need to know something,” said Draupadi in a serious tone.  
“What is it Draupadi? You look so stressed,” replied Krishna.

“I heard that Karna had defeated all of my husbands in direct combat in the war but forgave each one of them after insulting them. Is this true?” she spoke low.

“Yes,” he answered.

“Why did he do that? How could he not kill any of them? When my husbands asked for their share in the kingdom, they were adamant about waging war. I thought that their main motive behind the war was to kill my husbands and claim the whole of the kingdom? Was just insulting my husbands enough for his flames of hatred to cool down?”

“He spared their lives because of his promise to Kunti that he would not kill any of them except Arjuna. This happened a few days before the war began. I am sure she might have revealed it to you by now.”

“Oh! How did such a hero die then?”

“What happened to you Draupadi? War is over now and Yudhishtira will be the emperor. You can get back to being a queen living a lavish life with your husbands. Why do you want to know all these details now?” he asked as he found her questions a bit weird.

“Please answer my questions, Krishna. I really need to know the answers to these questions. Else, I would never find peace in my whole life,” she pleaded him. She sounded so desperate.

“I knew that there would be a moment in the war when Karna would be found with his guard lowered and his weapons out of reach because of the

multiple curses he received in his past. I suggested Arjuna strike him from behind and kill him then,” summarised Krishna.

Draupadi gave a wry smile. Krishna understood that she was being judgemental about their tactics that killed Karna.

“Draupadi, there is nothing wrong with winning a war by playing mind games. Sometimes your best performance may not give you the result you expect. It might not even be the best way to win. I believe in being practical and doing what is necessary to win, which meant targeting the weakness of our opponent in Kurukshetra. All of us knew that Arjuna and Karna were two fierce competitors in the warzone on all fronts. Both were equally capable warriors and there was no way one of them would succumb to the physical attacks. I knew the weak zone of Karna and I only redirected Arjuna to attack Karna when he was most vulnerable,” said Krishna, in an attempt to justify his actions.

Draupadi did not look convinced at all. She kept silent for a few seconds and asked, “I am so naive to understand your words and deeds Krishna. I have one final question. I need a one-word answer. No explanations needed. Will you answer it?”

“Sure, go ahead!”, he said.

“If it were not for you on Arjuna’s side in the war, who would be alive today? Karna or Arjuna?” she asked.

“Draupadi, why are you asking such questions. Everything is fair in love and war. Let us not talk about this,” Krishna tried avoiding her question.

“Krishna, one-word answer please,” she was about to breakdown.

“Karna,” said Krishna.

*That moment, she was left with an emotional scar that would haunt her forever and could never heal no matter how much love was streamed on!*

# Epilogue

After the war, Yudhishtira was crowned as the king of Hastinapura and Indraprastha. A few years passed by and Krishna's birthplace Dwaraka was flooded. Every one of Yadava kin perished by killing each other.

One fine day Pandavas and Draupadi heard the news that Krishna had left the world and had gone back to his original abode. They felt as if their own lives were of no use now when they heard Krishna was no more in their world. That was when they collectively decided to hand over the kingdom to their heirs and embark on their quest to swargaloka.

While the last few pages of their history were rustling, they stepped out of Indraprastha and set out on their final journey. After travelling for a few days, they reached their last destination, the Himalayas, from where they would never return.

# About The Author

Vamshi Krishna spends most of his time writing - code or stories. Currently living in Bengaluru, he says he is a software engineer by chance and a writer by choice.

Apart from writing, he reads a lot about cricket, love, women, and failure stories. He is also a fitness enthusiast and a huge fan of MS Dhoni and Jeff Bezos.

Hailing from a small town in Telangana, he says his four year journey at IIT-BHU is the best time of his life. He strongly believes that every student, for at least a couple of years in his early 20s should experience hostel life.

He says he never had any clue about Mahabharata until he randomly landed on the epic a few months ago. Since then, he has been in complete awe of Draupadi's character which led him to pen down this novel.

Before this, he authored 'Zero Not Out' as his debut fiction novel, a love story inspired by his real-life incidents (and accidents).