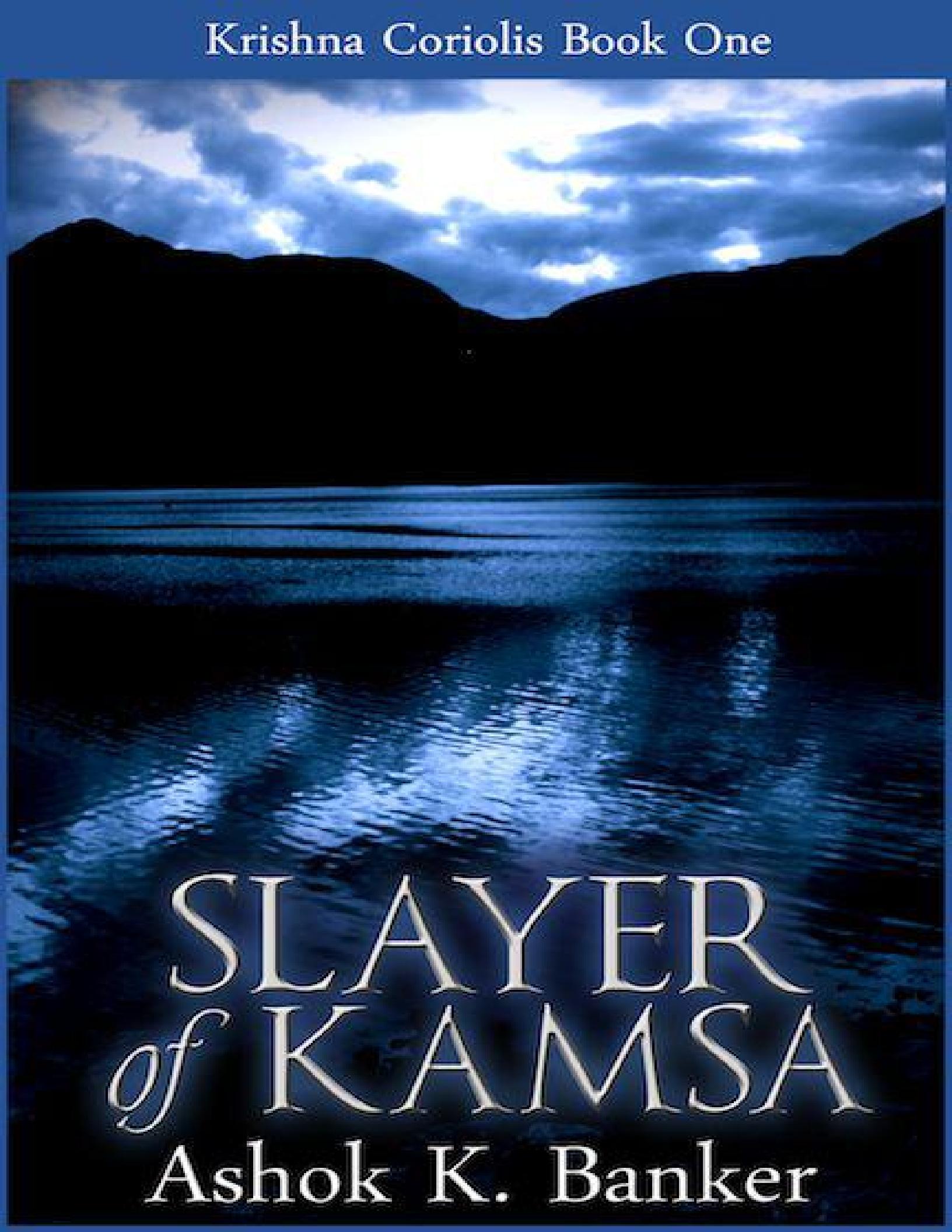


Krishna Coriolis Book One



SLAYER
of KAMSA

Ashok K. Banker

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SLAYER OF KAMSA

Ashok K Banker

KRISHNA CORIOLIS
Book 1



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About Ashok

Ashok Kumar Banker's internationally acclaimed *Ramayana Series®* has been hailed as a 'milestone' (*India Today*) and a 'magnificently rendered labour of love' (*Outlook*). It is arguably the most popular English-language retelling of the ancient Sanskrit epic. His work has been published in 56 countries, a dozen languages, several hundred reprint editions with over 1.2 million copies of his books currently in print.

Born of mixed parentage, Ashok was raised without any caste or religion, giving him a uniquely post-racial and post-religious Indian perspective. Even through successful careers in marketing, advertising, journalism and scriptwriting, Ashok retained his childhood fascination with the ancient literature of India. With the *Ramayana Series®* he embarked on a massively ambitious publishing project he calls the Epic India Library. The EI Library comprises Four Wheels: Mythology, Itihasa, History, and Future History. The *Ramayana Series®* and *Krishna Coriolis* are part of the First Wheel. The *Mahabharata Series* is part of the Second Wheel. *Ten Kings* and the subsequent novels in the Itihasa Series dealing with different periods of recorded Indian history are the Third Wheel. Novels such as *Vertigo*, *Gods of War*, *The Kali Quartet*, *Saffron White Green* are the Fourth Wheel.

He is one of the few living Indian authors whose contribution to Indian literature is acknowledged in The Picador Book of Modern Indian Writing and The Vintage Anthology of Indian Literature. His writing is used as a teaching aid in several management and educational courses worldwide and has been the subject of several dissertations and theses.

Ashok is 48 years old and lives with his family in Mumbai. He is always accessible to his readers at www.ashokbanker.com—over 35,000 have corresponded with him to date. He looks forward to hearing from you.

SLAYER OF KAMSA

Ashok K Banker

KRISHNA CORIOLIS

Book 1



AKB eBOOKS

*For Biki and Bithika:
My Radha and my Rukmini.*

*For Yashka and Ayush Yoda:
My Yashoda.*

*All you faithful readers
who understand
that these tales
are not about being Hindu
or even about being Indian.
They're simply about being.*

*In that spirit,
I dedicate this *gita-govinda*
to the krishnachild in all of us.
For, under these countless
separate skins, there beats
a single eternal heart.*

Author's Preface to the first Indian print edition

2010

If it takes a community to raise a child, then it surely takes a nation to build an epic.

The itihasa of the subcontinent belongs to no single person. The great epics of our culture – of any culture – may be told and retold infinite times by innumerable poets and writers; yet, no single version is the final one.

The wonderful adventures of the great Lord Krishna are greater than what any story, edition or retelling can possibly encompass. The lila of God Incarnate is beyond the complete comprehension of any one person. We may each perceive some aspects of His greatness, but, like the blind men and the elephant, none of us can ever see everything at once.

It matters not whether you are Hindu or non- Hindu, whether you believe Krishna to be God or just a great historical personage, whether you are Indian or not. The richness and wonder of these tales have outlived countless generations and will outlast many more to come.

My humble attempt here – within these pages and in the volumes to follow – is neither the best nor the last retelling of this great story. I have no extraordinary talent or ability, no special skill or knowledge, no inner sight or visionary gift. What I *do* have is a lifelong exposure to an itihasa so vast, a culture so rich, a nation so great, wise and ancient, that its influence – permeating into one like water through peat over millennia, filtering through from mind to mind, memory to memory, mother to child and to mother again – has suffused every cell of my being, every unit of my consciousness.

And when I use the word ‘I’, it is meant in the universal. You are ‘I’. As I am she. And she is all of us. Krishna’s tale lives through each and every one of us. It is yours to tell. His to tell. Hers to tell. Mine as well. For as long as this tale is told, and retold, it lives on.

I have devoted years to the telling, to the crafting of words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters, kaands and volumes. I shall devote more years to come, decades even. Yet all my effort is not mine alone. It is the

fruition of a billion Indians, and the billions who have lived before us. For each person who has known this tale and kept it alive in his heart has been a teller, a reteller, a poet, and an author. I am merely the newest name in a long, endless line of names that has had the honour and distinction of being associated with this great story.

It is my good fortune to be the newest reteller of this ancient saga. It is a distinction I share with all who tell and retell this story: from the grandmother who whispers it as a lullaby to the drowsy child, to the scholar who pores over every syllable of every shloka in an attempt to find an insight that has eluded countless scholars before him.

It is a tale told by me in this version, yet it is not my tale alone to tell. It is your story. Our story. Her story. His story.

Accept it in this spirit and with all humility and hope. Also know that I did not create this flame, nor did I light the torch that blazes. I merely bore the torch this far. Now I give it to you. Take it from my hand. Pass it on. As it has passed from hand to hand, mind to mind, voice to voice, for unknown millennia.

Turn the page. See the spark catch flame. Watch Krishna come alive.

Author's Note to the second Indian print edition 2012

All my books are long in the gestation, some conceived many as thirty-plus years earlier, none less than a decade. It takes me that long to be sure of a story's longevity and worth and to accumulate the details, notes, research, character development and other tools without which I can't put my fingers to the keyboard. This particular story, Krishna Coriolis, originated in the same 'Big Bang' that was responsible for the creation of my entire Epic India universe – a series of interlinked retellings of all the major myths, legends and itihasa of the Indian subcontinent, set against the backdrop of world history. I'm using the term 'BigBang' but in fact it was more of a series of carefully controlled delayed-time explosions over the first fifteen to eighteen years of my life.

At that time, the Krishna story was a part of the *Sword of Dharma* section of the Epic India library, which retold the 'dashavatara' storyline with an unusual twist as well as an integral part of my massively ambitious retelling of the world's greatest epic, the Mahabharata or the Mba. I began work on my Mba immediately after I completed the Ramayana Series in 2004. After about five years of working on my Mba – a period in which most actual MBA students would be firmly established in their careers! – I realized that the series was too massive to be published as it was. I saw that the Krishna storyline, in particular his individual adventures, could stand on their own as a separate series. So I separated them into a parallel series which I titled Krishna Coriolis. Naturally, since the story now had to stand on its own, rather than be a part of the larger Mba story, I had to rewrite each book to make it stand on its own, with a reasonably complete beginning, middle and end. This process took another three years, and resulted finally in the form the series now takes. You're holding the second book of this parallel series in your hands now, titled *Dance of Govinda*.

Dance of Govinda is just the second part of the Krishna Coriolis, which is interlinked with the much larger Mba series, which itself is only one section of my whole Epic India library. Yet, I've laboured to make this book stand on its own and be a satisfying read. Naturally, it's not complete

in the story, since that would require not just the full Krishna storyline but also the larger Mbā story and the larger context behind that as well. In that sense, it's just a part of the big picture; but even the longest journey must start with a single step and if you permit, *Dance of Govinda* will take you on a short but eventful trip, one packed with action and magic, terror and adventure. The reason why the book, like the remaining books in the series, are so short, almost half of the length of my earlier Ramayana Series, is because that's the best way the structure works. By that I mean the individual parts of the story and the way in which they fit together. Sure, I could make it longer – or shorter. But this felt like the perfect length. In an ideal world, the entire series would be packaged together as one massive book and published at once – but that's not only impossible in terms of paper thickness and binding and cover price affordability, it's not the right structure for the story. Stories have been split into sections, or volumes, or, in our culture, into parvas, kaands, suras, mandalas and so on, since literature was first written. You might as well ask the same question of Krishna Dweipayana-Vyasa – 'Sir, why did you split the Mahabharata into so many parvas and each parva into smaller sections and so on?' The fact is, a story needs to be structured and the story itself decides which structure works best. That was the case here and I am very pleased with the way *Dance of Govinda* and the other books in the series turned out.

The *Sword of Dharma* mini-series, as I call it now, is also written in first draft and tells us the experiences and adventures of Lord Vishnu in the heavenly realms. It is a direct sequel to the Ramayana Series as well as a bridge story to the Krishna Coriolis and Mahabharata Series. And since it deals with otherworldly events, it exists outside of 'normal' time as we know it, which means it is also a sequel to the Krishna Coriolis and also a prequel to the Ramayana Series. I won't confuse you further: once you read *Sword of Dharma*, you would understand instantly what I mean because the story itself is an action-packed adventure story where questions like 'when is this taking place?' and 'so is this happening before or after such-and-such?' become less important than seeing the curtain parted and the world beyond the curtain revealed in its full glorious detail. No matter how much I may show you in the Ramayana Series, Krishna Coriolis and Mahabharata Series, all these 'mortal' tales are ultimately being affected and altered by events taking place at the 'immortal' level, and only by seeing that story-beyond-the-story can we fully comprehend

the epic saga of gods and demons that forms the basis of Hindu mythology in our puranas.

But for now, *Dance of Govinda* marks a crucial turning point in the story of swayam Bhagwan (as the Bhagwatham calls him). Not only has he survived every attempt to destroy him at birth, he will grow and thrive. By the close of this book, he will have gained the ability to stand on his own two feet – hence the title. And even though just a babe for most of the story, he is capable of far more than most grown heroes – not just more action, but more masthi as well! For that is the beauty of Krishna, he is not just a warrior but also a lovable mischievous tyke. There are as many stories of his infantile pranks as there are tales of his derring-do in this book, for I have tried to be as thorough as possible in mining the rich vein of Shrimad Bhagwatham, the Vishnu Purana and the Harivamsha sections of the Mahabharata in seeking every known recorded incident of Krishna's infancy.

And that too is only part of the much, much larger tale of Krishna, which itself is part of the larger tale of Lord Vishnu, which is only part of the far greater saga of gods and demons. It's an epic saga but the beauty of it is that each portion is delicious and fulfilling in itself!

Enjoy!

	yadrcchaya copapannah	
	svarga-dvaram apavrtam	
	sukhinah ksatriya partha	
	labhante yuddham idrsam	

*Blessed are the warriors
Who are chosen to fight justly;
For the doors to heaven
Shall be opened unto them.*

Kaand 1

one

Vasudeva raised aloft the ceremonial sceptre of the Sura nation. The rod, shaped to resemble a cowherd's crook, was impressively cast in solid gold and studded with precious gems at the curve of the handle. It caught a bar of morning sunlight streaming in from a slatted window high upon the soaring walls of the Andhaka palace and gleamed. Beside him, King Ugrasena of Andhaka raised his rajtaru too. The Andhaka sceptre was no less impressive than that of the Suras.

Both rajtarus – the Sanskrit word literally meant *kingsrods* – reflected the sunlight, sending shards and slivers flashing to the farthest corners of the great hall. A calico tomcat, lying curled in the south corner, closed his eyes to slits and bared his teeth, peering against the blinding gleam of the

rajtarus. The well-fed palace cat's expression resembled nothing so much as a satiated grin.

The watching assemblage crowding the sabha hall to the limit of its capacity, and the lords and ladies resplendent in their finery, blinked, then caught their breaths. The sight of the two lieges standing on the throne dais, their traditional rajtarus raised and glittering in the sunlight, presented a startling tableau. To some of the older clans chiefs in the great hall, it was a sight they had never thought they would witness as long as they lived: two ancient enemies – sovereigns of two of the wealthiest herding nations in the great land of Aryavarta – standing together with sceptres, not swords, aloft! Could it be true? Surely it was just maya? That sight – nay, that vision – could not be real, could it? After generations of cross-border blood feuds, broken only by intermittent outbreaks of war; after so much bloodshed and bitter enmity; after so many failed peace summits and parleys; after a long and bloody history had stained the pure soil of both nations, polluting the sacred Yamuna with the offal of vengeful violence, could peace finally be at hand?

Most of the assemblage, as well as the enormous throng crowding the palace grounds without, doubted it severely. Suspicious frowns creased the faces of many clanschiefs, ministers and merchant lords. Only a few hopeful souls smiled beatifically and fingered their rudraksh-bead rosaries, silently chanting shlokas to ensure the fruition of this historic pact.

There were few such personages; the golden age of Brahminism had long since ebbed, and the long- dreaded Kali Yuga was imminent – the prophesied dark age of Iron and Death. Most doubted that this historic pact, wrought after months of anxiety and expectation, would last, or that it would be honoured at all. Yet, even the most sceptical of ministers, the most cynical of generals, even the hardened veterans who had somehow survived the first violent decades of this dark age, prayed as fervently as their Brahmin brethren. For a while, few believed, all hoped, all desired. If it could somehow be brought to pass, if the devas truly saw fit to grant them this reprieve, they would accept peace, nay, embrace it, with all the warmth they had in them.

So, when both kings brought their rajtarus together in an inverted V, touching the gem-studded crooks lightly together, every citizen, high and low, watched with bated breath. Even the calico tomcat, stretching himself in preparation for a foray into the royal bhojanalya – he had sniffed the unmistakable, delectable fragrance of sweetwater fish being grilled there – paused and turned his head, smelling the sour sweat of hesitant hopes and anxious prayers in the air. The rhythmic, martial count of the dhol playing in the background underscored the whole scene like a giant unified heartbeat, marking the four-by-four count to which all Arya ceremonies were performed.

King Vasudeva's soft tenor blended with King Ugrasena's ageing gruffness as both kings recited the ceremonial shlokas aloud, each line cued to them by whispering pundits seated behind the dais. The sacred flame, symbol of Agni, the god of fire, flared up brightly as a purohit, one of the many priests who oversaw the arcana of traditional rites and customs, tossed a ladle of ghee onto the chaukhhat. The flames shot up almost to the raised sceptres, licking briefly at the point of their unity. Sunlight above, fire below. It was an impressive and auspicious moment, brilliantly and meticulously conceived and staged by the purohits of the two kingdoms. To the dwindling Brahmins of Aryavarta, such occasions grew more precious with each passing decade since the world was turning away from old ways and traditions.

For the duration of this ceremony, the pomp and grandeur of Aryavarta – literally, the noble and proud – would shine as brightly as a beacon fed by the light of Brahman shakti. The chanting of the kings rose to a peak, ending with a final shloka that seemed to sing out from the very walls of the sabha hall. This last bit of theatrical magic was, again, wrought by the Brahmins, who, strategically positioned at the far walls of the hall, joined in with the kings' chanting at the penultimate quartet and raised their voices – to match the well-rehearsed baritones of the kings – until it seemed that the entire world was chanting the verses.

|| *yadrcchya copapannah svarga-dvaram apavrtam* ||

|| *sukhinah ksatriya partha labhante yuddham idrsam* ||

The chanting died, the doleful drumbeats fading away at precisely that instant. In the silence that ensued, the gathered assemblage could hear the crackling and snapping of the sacred flame as the purohit continued to feed ladlefuls of sanctified ghee to insatiable Agni. The faces of the kings had grown warm from the heat of the flames, a few beads of sweat standing out on the clean-shaven good looks of the young King Vasudeva and the tips of King Ugrasena's grey-shot beard.

Moving in perfect unison, they lowered their rajtarus to form an inverted V. The crooks of the sceptres dipped directly into the flames and the purohit ceased his ghee-tossing to allow the sacred fire to quell itself somewhat, lest the kings lose the skin of their arms. Beads of perspiration swelled and rolled down their faces as both monarchs held the crooks of their rajtarus in the fire just long enough to let the heat travel up to their bare hands.

Finally, the royal purohit uttered the words quietly enough so that only the kings could catch it, and both lieges broke their stance, stepping away from the fire. They exchanged their sceptres, each handing over his proof of kingship at the exact same time as he accepted the other's royal seal. This was executed with surprising ease, considering that both rajtarus were close to blistering hot by now. The watching assemblage could hardly know that both kings had had their hands anointed with a special herbal paste prior to the ceremony, or that the near-invisible paste prevented the transmission of heat quite effectively.

The sight of the red-hot rajtarus being exchanged and then held aloft to allow every individual in the hall a chance to witness this momentous event, seared itself into the minds of all present. The painstakingly staged ceremony had served its purpose. Then, with obvious relief, and great smiles creasing their tense faces, the two kings embraced.

The crowd released its breath. Upon the fortified palace battlements, waiting courtiers blew long and hard on their conch-shell trumpets. The low, deep calling of the conches filled the air for hundreds of yojanas, echoed from end to end of both kingdoms, announcing the most welcome news in over two centuries. Peace. Shanti.

Outside the Andhaka palace, the waiting crowd, which had now swollen to tens of thousands, broke into a ragged roar that almost drowned out the conches. Royal criers rode through the avenues and streets, pausing at corners to shout out the news – in Sanskrit, and then in commonspeak – confirming the details of the peace pact. Stone pillars, carved and ready for weeks, were hastily but ceremoniously erected at strategic spots in the capital city and at junctions along the national kingsroad, setting down the same details for posterity – or at least as long as stone and wind and rain would allow, which would probably be a millennium or two.

Sadly, the peace pact itself was not to last even a fraction of that time.

two

The massive teak doors of the banquet hall flew open as if struck by a battering ram. They swivelled inwards on smoothly oiled tracks and crashed against the stone walls, swatting aside the guards milling about the entrance. Vasudeva glanced up from his meal just in time to see a young soldier's foot caught by the lower bolt of a door, dragged to the wall, and crushed against the relentless stone with a bone-crunching impact that left the poor fellow's face white.

The other guards, drunk on the festive atmosphere and milling about jovially, responded belatedly, joining their lances and challenging the rude entrants. The armoured bull elephant that trundled into the banquet hall paid no heed to their shouted challenges. It was armoured in the fashion of Andhaka hathi-yodhhas – the dreaded war elephants of the Andhaka clan – its head couched in a formidable headpiece bristling with spikes that made it resemble some demon out of a myth, its tusks capped with brass horns

tapering to resemble spears, and rows of ugly spikes protruding out of its sides.

Vasudeva had seen the destruction that these hathi-yodhhas left in their wake during close combat. His heart lurched at the thought of the havoc even a *single* such monster could wreak in a confined, crowded space like this hall. The dried, brownish smears on the elephant's armour left no doubt that the shield was not merely for decoration. This particular hathi-yodhha had seen active combat this very day and had taken lives in that action. Vasudeva prayed silently that they were not Sura lives, then felt mean and small for having thought so. All life was precious, all humanity united in brotherhood. No matter whose blood lay dried upon the armourplate of this hathi-yodhha, it was a death he would not have wished for anyone.

Supremely confident of its strength and tonnage, the elephant trundled forward without heed for the puny sipahis pointing their spears at it. Its flailing trunk, pierced with studs, knocked three sipahis carelessly to the floor; then it proceeded to pound their prostrate forms with its leaden feet. The sipahis convulsed and screamed, the screams cut abruptly short as the massive grey feet smashed their heads with practised ease, spilling their lives onto the polished marble floor. Gasps and exclamations of protest met this callous life-taking.

The hathi-yodhha swung its massive head from side to side, checking for more challengers before covering the last few yards into the centre of the banquet hall. The surviving gate guards, brave though they were, shuffled aside hastily, their faces blanching at the fate of their companions. Even the lot of them combined could hardly expect to face a battle-ready war elephant, and this, as they well knew, was no ordinary war elephant. This was the feared and hated Haddi-Hathi himself, named for the pleasure he was rumoured to take in crushing human bone, haddi. It only made things worse that the elephant, like its rider, was on their side. Theoretically speaking, at least.

In fact, Vasudeva thought grimly, they had more to fear from their kinsman mounted on the elephant's back than from the hathi.

That heavily muscled figure, clad in a blood-spattered brass armour to make himself resemble an outgrowth of the elephant rather than a separate being, was none other than the universally feared and hated master of Haddi-Hathi, Prince Kamsa himself, who had evidently returned from a new campaign of reaving and ravaging. Vasudeva glanced around to see his aides-de-camp, indeed his entire entourage of clansmen, reaching instinctively for their swords and maces. They found no weapons: the party had divested itself of its metal implements at the gates before entering at dawn in accordance with the terms of the treaty. But even so, their faces and clenched fists betrayed their rage at the sight of the man mounted atop the elephant. That man – nay, that *beast*, for he was more truly an animal than the creature astride which he sat – had left his bloody handprint upon the spotless reputation of every last one of the Sura houses represented here.

Over the last few years, none of these proud families had escaped the rapacious raids and ruthless violence of Prince Kamsa and his marauders. Vasudeva raised his hands to quell the muttered noises of provocation rising from his party, sensing the desire for just revenge that swelled in their proud warrior hearts. He himself, as king and chief justice of the Suras, had grown heartsick at hearing the innumerable atrocities committed by the prince of the Andhakas and his white-clad mercenaries. Their exploits far exceeded any conceivable desire for revenge or simple war lust; theirs was a campaign of brute destruction.

The list of war crimes, in utter violation of all Arya warrior codes, streamed past his memory's eye like a herd of sheep impatient to return to the stockade before dusk: women violated, homes and herds put to the torch, entire families wiped out overnight ... yes, the White Prince had much to answer for. But that reckoning would not be here, or now. King Vasudeva kept his hands raised to either side, and his clansmen subsided reluctantly, their faces still dark with angry blood.

Atop the blood-tainted elephant, Prince Kamsa's proud, handsome face turned from side to side, his piercing grey-blue eyes sweeping the length of the banquet hall, briefly and contemptuously scanning the faces of his many enemies assembled here. He lingered briefly on the women, dressed

in colourful and enticing festive garb. The leering grin that twisted his face betrayed his utter lack of respect for any regal protocol.

Even Vasudeva felt his jaw clench as the prince stared with rude intensity at an attractive woman amidst the throng of richly clad nobility only two tables down. That was Pritha, Vasudeva's sister, who had travelled here from her home in Hastinapura. Her husband Pandu had been unable to attend the function due to ill health, but Pritha's presence was meant as an official seal to show the great Kuru nation's solidarity with and approval for the peace pact.

Vasudeva's hands clenched into fists as he struggled to restrain his warring emotions. What manner of beast was a man who would storm thus into a feast hosted by his father in bloody armour, dash down his loyal kin-soldiers and insult a noblewoman who was under the protection of his father's hospitality? Often had he heard the tales whispered along the length of the Yamuna, among the many clans and sub-clans of the Yadava nation. It was said that Kamsa was a rakshasa begot upon his mother Padmavati by a demon who assumed the form of his father Ugrasena. Vasudeva was a rational man, and not given to superstition. Yet, looking at those almost-translucent, greyish-blue eyes that glared at the gathered nobles and chieftains with such unbridled hostility, he could almost believe the gossip. Violence exuded from Kamsa like waves of heat from a boiling kettle.

Then Kamsa's gaze sought out and settled upon Vasudeva. And his entire aspect changed so suddenly, it was almost as if he had seen something quite different from merely the king of the Suras.

As if he's seeing some terrible foe rather than just me standing here, overdressed in my ceremonial robes, Vasudeva thought. Kamsa took a step back, then another, and Vasudeva thought he saw something akin to ... fear? ... cross the prince's otherwise handsome face. Kamsa's magnificently wrought arms rippled with muscle beneath the chainmail armour he wore.

Vasudeva was caught off-guard by the look on Kamsa's face. What had the feared reaver of the great and powerful Andhaka clan to fear from a simple, peace-loving man like him?

The stunned silence in the hall gave way to surprised whispering as the assemblage took note of Kamsa's strange reaction to seeing Vasudeva. At the same moment, the Haddi-Hathi raised his trunk and issued a bleating call that oddly echoed Kamsa's own mixture of awe and terror. The sound served to snap the Andhaka prince out of his daze.

The look on his face changed at once. The fearful, awestruck expression dissipated and was replaced instantly by a mask which was blank and inscrutable but to those who had already seen or worn it themselves – it was the mask a warrior wore when he prepared to launch an attack on the battlefield, severing his normal human self from the battle machine he was about to become.

But it was the glimpse into Kamsa's naked inner self that caught Vasudeva's attention. Yes, *that* look had been unmistakably an expression of fear. He was still pondering the meaning of that expression when Kamsa issued a loud curse, raised a barbed spear, and flung it with a roar of fury – directly at Vasudeva's breast.

three

Devaki shrieked as her brother threw the spear at her betrothed. Her planned union with Vasudeva was yet to be formally solemnized; but she already thought of him as her husband-in-waiting. There was no man she would be happier to unite with in matrimony than the chief-king of the Sura Yadavas. That their joining would help further the cause of peace

between the neighbouring nations was incidental to her. She had always been a woman led by her instinct and spirit, and she knew that she would love Vasudeva deeply, indeed had come to feel great affection and admiration for him already, after only a few meetings; and *that* mattered more to her than politics and statecraft.

She had watched with rising horror as her brother stormed into the sabha hall, then proceeded to slight, dishonour, and variously embarrass her royal dynasty as well as their entire clan by his behaviour. To come thus armed and armoured was bad enough, but to bring a war elephant – especially that brutalized and perverted beast for whom she simultaneously felt pity and disgust – was a terrible act, a flagrant slap on the face of their royal guests. When Kamsa had stared at Vasudeva with that peculiar expression, she had thought that perhaps, for once, sanity and sense had percolated into that dense brain.

When Kamsa had turned, plucked out a barbed spear from the side-saddle of Haddi-Hathi and flung it with vehement force at her husband-to-be, it shocked the life out of her and she could hardly help shrieking her dismay.

To her further amazement, Vasudeva made no move to twist, turn, dodge, or otherwise avoid the trajectory of the missile.

The spears Kamsa favoured were brutal things. Metal heads barbed in an asymmetrical pattern of recurved points, any one of which was sufficient to rip to shreds a person's flesh and organs, and impossible to remove without further damaging the wounded individual. His aim with these inhumane missiles was renowned. She had once seen him fling a spear at a grama chieftain in a dense milling crowd and strike him in the throat without touching anyone else on either side.

This time too, his aim seemed perfect. The spear was flying towards Vasudeva's chest, poised to shatter the Sura chief-king's unprotected breastbone and destroy his heart, and to kill him instantly. Her shriek was echoed by an outburst of screams and shouts of dismay, male as well as female, from across the crowded sabha hall. The distance from Kamsa's hand to Vasudeva's chest was barely twenty yards, and the spear bridged

that distance in a fraction of a second; yet in later years, as the legend grew, it would be said by some that the spear had slowed in mid-air as if travelling through water or against a powerful headwind, rather than simply across empty stillness.

If such a phenomenon truly occurred or if it was merely a product of the active imagination of those watching, she would never know for certain. For no sooner had the spear started on its trajectory than a man rushed forward, blocking Devaki's view. It was Akrur, a close friend and ally of Vasudeva and a chief mediator in the peace alliance between the Sura and Andhaka nations.

She would later learn that he had attempted to fling himself into the path of the onrushing spear, to take the death that was meant for Vasudeva, but at that instant, all she knew was that his body had blocked her view. As if galvanized by Akrur's action and the violence that had abruptly exploded into a peaceful event, everybody else began moving as well, further obstructing her view.

All she saw was bodies and moving heads, none belonging to Vasudeva. But even above the cacophony of shouts and exclamations that had erupted, she heard one sound clearly. The sound of spear striking flesh and bone came to her like a half-remembered nightmare that would plague the deep watches of restless sleep for many moon-months to come. This sound she would remember because, with her vision obscured, she sincerely believed that it was the sound of her brother's ill-intentioned spear shattering the bone and flesh of her beloved betrothed: the sound of widowhood even before her nuptials could be solemnized. It would haunt her until another, far more terrible sound replaced it for sheer nightmarish horror. But that other sound still lay in the future.

For now, the sound of metal flung at great velocity, shattering bone and splintering it like matchwood – flesh and fluid resounding wetly from the impact – was a horror beyond imagining. She shrieked again, and if she could, she would have flung herself directly at her brother. She could see him clearly as he stood in the centre of the hall, like one of the many stone pillars arranged in even rows to either side.

In that instant of panic and terror, she saw him turn his head at the sound of her voice. For it was his name she was shrieking. ‘Kamsa!’

His eyes found her in the melee and locked on her briefly. The malice and glee she saw therein, the sheer lascivious delight at what he had just done, was in such stark contrast to the awestruck expression he had exhibited only moments earlier that she could not help thinking, as she had a thousand times over the years, *My brother is no mortal man, he is a rakshasa born in mortal form.* For even if a mortal man had done such an act, whatever the reason, surely he could not have such an expression on his face: a look more demoniac than anything the most imaginative artists and sculptors could conjure up when recreating scenes from the legendary wars against the rakshasas in the Last Asura Wars or from that even more legendary battle of Lanka waged by the great king Rama Chandra of Ayodhya. Kamsa could have modelled for those artists and sculptors, yet none would have possessed sufficient skill or art to capture the sheer malevolence of the look his face bore at this moment.

Then the moment passed, and he turned back to look in Vasudeva’s direction, no doubt to gloat over the new murder he had just added to his epic tally. Devaki wished at that moment that she had a spear of her own within reach, for she would surely have flung it at this instant. To hell with filial loyalty and feminine propriety. The fact that Andhaka women were no longer permitted to go to battle did not mean they were good only for the bhojanalya and bedchamber. A daughter of Raj-Kshatriyas, she had been trained and schooled in the arts of war as thoroughly as her brother. Better, probably, for she had not been banished from her guru’s ashram as a child as Kamsa had been for incorrigible behaviour. But, of course, there were no weapons here and even at the peak of her rage, Devaki could not simply murder her own brother, however just her motive under dharma.

But in her mind, she flung a barb of retaliation no less deadly and far more portentous: *Some day, my brother, your reign of brutality will end. And mine shall be the hand that flings the spear that ends it. This I swear here and now, by Kali-Maa, avenger of the oppressed.*

Then she pushed her way through the crowd, desperate to reach Vasudeva's side, if only to offer her lap for his head in his last moments. The crowd did not resist her passage, for everyone there knew what she was to the Sura chief-king; and they stepped aside to let her through. She reached the circle that surrounded Vasudeva and looked upon a heart-stopping sight.

four

Blood pounded in Kamsa's head with the ferocity of a kettledrum. His vision blurred for a moment and, once again, he saw the horrendous vision that had met him moments ago – the sabha hall was filled with fierce Kshatriyas and mighty yoddhas, all determined to destroy him and his kin. To wipe out his entire race from the face of the earth. He recognized many of the faces as new aspects of old foes, reborn in this age for the express purpose of decimating and committing genocide upon his blood-kin. He had met them before, in another city, another age. A place named Ayodhya where, twice before, he had bravely attempted to strike a blow for his people's cause, and had tasted the bitter fruit of their deceitful thwarting of his noble efforts. He had been in possession of a different form in that age and place, and been known by another name. It eluded him now, but he knew that his name in this life simply meant 'amsa' of 'Ka', 'Ka' being the first syllable of that ancient name and 'amsa' meaning his partial rebirth, similar to an avatar. This was but the newest round of battle in an age-old conflict with the greatest enemy of his kind.

He glanced in the direction of their leader, the one who sat on the Andhaka throne bearing the raj-mukut, the crown of beaten gold that was placed upon the head of the people's chosen leader, for the Andhaka Yadava nation was a republic in the truest sense of the word.

The being seated there glared down at him with a look of pure fury. He bore the familiar aspect and human garb of Chief-King Ugrasena. He was shouting stern commands that he foolishly expected Kamsa to obey. That old man seated upon the Andhaka throne was not his true sire; that honour fell to a noble being named Drumila, a powerful daitya from the netherworld. Unable to take birth in this age in his true form, he had disguised himself as the chief-king of the Andhakas, Ugrasena, and in this guise, he had deceived Ugrasena's wife Padmavati in younger days, siring a male child upon her. Kamsa was that child, and he felt the rich, noble blood of his true father raging in his veins now, as he did at such times, and ignored the blathering objections and orders of Ugrasena, a feeble old man who possessed neither the will nor the strength to do what had to be done: *Exterminate all enemies. Kill them where you find them, by any means possible.* Yet, somewhere within Ugrasena's incompetent form, there remained a vestige of Drumila and it was to this truth that Kamsa bowed and conceded lordship.

‘Fear not, Father!’ Kamsa said aloud, as the stunned gathering still reeling from the shock of his bold intrusion and even bolder act of recklessness turned to stare at him. ‘I have slain the enemy in our midst. No more will his deception veil our senses from the true nature of his evil mission!’

He saw Ugrasena blink several times as he absorbed this shouted message. Beside him, Kamsa’s mother Padmavati, once known for her beauty, now a wasted shadow of her former self, covered her face and seemed to weep. *Tears of joy, surely, Kamsa told himself. She must be overjoyed at my speed and boldness.* His true father Drumila did not respond as Kamsa had expected either: he did not loudly hail his son’s achievement to the assembly or come to Kamsa and press him to his breast in that fierce embrace that Kamsa had craved for so often during his growing years and received so rarely. But that was only to be expected; in his human disguise as Ugrasena, Drumila must needs conceal his true feelings for his son. No matter. Kamsa knew his parents were proud of him, and that was enough.

He executed a deep bow in the direction of the throne, and raised his head, smiling. The smile faded as he saw the crowd that stood encircling the

spot where Vasudeva – that wretched spy and eternal enemy of his clan – had stood only moments ago, part to reveal something quite extraordinary.

Vasudeva stood as he had before, facing him. The stupid cowherd that he was, he had neither flinched nor taken evasive or defensive action when Kamsa had flung the spear. Not that anyone could deflect or dodge a throw by Kamsa easily; but the man might at least have made an attempt. To simply stand there facing death was an act so contemptible, it made Kamsa want to spit his mouthful of tobacco on the polished floor in disgust. Of course, such steadfastness might be misconstrued as heroism – a yoddha facing certain death without so much as flinching. But Kamsa knew better. The man was a coward and so unexpected and stunning was Kamsa's action that he had no time to react. He simply stood there as Kamsa's spear sped towards him to end his life. Kamsa had flung it with force enough to punch through armour, bone, flesh, gristle, sinew and spine, and emerge out a man's back – he had done precisely that to other men a hundred times before and knew exactly the force, trajectory and impact of his throw.

The spear still stood there.

In mid-air.

Before Vasudeva.

Kamsa stared, blinking several times to make sure his eyes were not still obscured by the blood from his last skirmish with some cowherds who had strayed across the demarcated border into Andhaka territory. Well, technically, they hadn't strayed, but the heads of their cattle were pointed towards Andhaka territory, so it was obvious they intended to cross over. He had slaughtered the cowherds and their cows, down to the last suckling calf and mother of both species. Their blood had spattered on his face, obscuring his vision, and it had taken considerable scrubbing to remove the stubborn spatters. Damned enemy blood. Burnt like acid too.

But no amount of blinking and rubbing his eyes made this particular sight vanish or change.

His spear stayed there, hanging inches from Vasudeva's chest, its deadly barbed tip pointed precisely at the point where the breastbone met the ribcage, that soft yielding spot in the centre where the spear would have punched through with minimal resistance, bursting through the heart and emerging out of the rear of the Sura's body.

It had stalled midway, suspended by no visible means. It wasn't floating exactly, for it did not so much as move an inch, merely hung as if embedded in some solid object.

But I heard it strike! It hit bone and flesh and cartilage with that typical wet crunching sound they always make at this distance and force.

Then again, he was so accustomed to hearing that sound that it was possible that he had simply remembered it from previous occasions. The outburst that exploded from the onlookers the instant he flung the spear had drowned out everything else, after all.

He strode towards the Sura chief-king, people stepping back or moving away, wide-eyed, to give him a wide berth.

He saw a man beside Vasudeva stand his ground staunchly, along with several others he recognized as the Suras' clan-brothers and allied chieftains. They stared fiercely at Kamsa with the look he had seen so often before. He saw fists clench empty air, muscles tighten, jaws lock, and knew that they were prepared to take him on with their bare hands if need be. They did not worry him; he could take them on single-handedly even if Haddi-Hathi was not there to back him up, which he was.

Kamsa stared at the spear. He walked around it; examined it from all angles. He could not fathom how the trick had been pulled off. The spear simply stood there, embedded solidly in ... in thin air!

He grasped the spear to dislodge it from its position. He felt a shock as it refused to budge.

He yanked down upon it, hard.

Nothing.

He pulled it to the left, then to the right, then pushed it upwards. His biceps and powerful shoulder muscles bulged, and he knew that were this a lever he was exerting all this force upon, he could have moved a boulder weighing a ton with this much effort.

Yet the spear just stayed there, as immobile as an iron rod welded into solid rock.

This was impossible!

He looked at Vasudeva. The Sura chief-king's face was hard, ready for anything, yet not cruel and mocking as Kamsa had expected. Not the gloating glee that a triumphant enemy ought to have displayed at such a moment.

'HOW!' Kamsa screamed. 'BY WHAT SORCERY DID YOU DO THIS?'

Vasudeva looked at him for a moment with eyes that seemed almost cow-like to Kamsa's raging senses. The kettledrums played out their mad rhythm, pounding his brain with unending waves of agony.

Then, to the sound of a shocked *Aaah* from the watching assemblage, Vasudeva reached out and took hold of the spear, which came free of its invisible hold as easily as if he had picked it up from a wall-stand. Several spectators clasped their palms together and cried out 'Sadhu! Sadhu!' in reverential tones—for what had happened was no less than a miracle.

And to Kamsa's continued disbelief and amazement, the Sura chief-king held out the spear upon raised palms, the action of a man surrendering rather than opposing.

‘It was no tI,’ Vasudeva said quietly, ‘but the great Lord Vishnu who did this. For it is clear that he desires our people to be at peace. Accept this as proof of his grace and a sign of his protection over all those who work to achieve shanti upon prithviloka.’

five

‘Father?’

Devaki had scoured the palace for Ugrasena. When a sipahi informed her that her father was still in the sabha hall, she was surprised. It was the last place she had expected to find him, so long after the ruckus caused that afternoon by her brother. But when she entered the darkened hall, lit only by the light of a few flickering torches that created as many ominous shadows as they threw light, her heart sank.

Ugrasena sat on his throne in exactly the same position in which he had been seated when she had left the hall hours earlier, after the fracas over Kamsa and his boorishly violent actions had disrupted the celebration. As she walked the several dozen yards to the throne dais, the crackling mashaals sent the shadows of the endless rows of carved pillars fleeing and skittering in every direction. The echoes of her footfalls whispered from the far corners of the large chamber which was acoustically designed to carry the words of every speaker at the public sabha sessions to even the farthest reaches of the great hall.

She shivered, feeling the cold damp stone of the chamber pressing down upon her. Through her childhood and brief youth thus far, she had come to

associate this hall with war: war councils, preparations, emergencies, talks, negotiations, breakdowns in talks ... Until today, her strongest memory was of angry voices raised in heated discussion over some seemingly insignificant matter of territorial water rights or foraging boundaries – those twin bugbears that had plagued the Sura and Andhaka clans since the time of their mutual forebear Yadu himself.

She reached the foot of the dais and instinctively bowed formally, awaiting the liege's permission before approaching closer.

Ugrasena sat like a statue wrought of old wax, his lined and worry-worn features as deeply etched as with a sculptor's chisel. His posture, leaning back and resting sideways, with the side of his head resting on one palm, suggested anxiety too. She waited patiently for him to respond. Finally, he broke out of his reverie and registered her presence. He sighed and frowned down at her, eyes watering either from strain or age.

‘My good daughter, why do you stand there? Come, come to me. Why do you stand on ceremony so? You need no permission to approach.’

‘Father,’ she said, climbing the stone-cut steps to the raised platform that served to elevate the Andhaka seat of governance above the sabha hall’s floor. She knelt on one knee, taking her father’s hands in her own. She was shocked to feel how cold and withered they were. Had they been so weathered this morning when he clasped her hands and uttered the traditional blessings? She didn’t think so. He seemed to have aged years in a single day. Her heart went out to him and she leaned forward and kissed him quickly on the brow. His eyebrows rose in surprise at the unexpected affection, but she knew he was pleased. Her mother was not given to demonstrations of affection, and she had often felt that her father must suffer from its lack.

‘What occasions this generosity?’ he asked, a faint trace of a smile on his puckered mouth. It pleased her to know that she was the one responsible for it.

‘I am rich today,’ she said brightly, determined to elevate his mood. ‘I am rich in family and friends and allies. And soon I shall be rich in matrimony too. This is the happiest day of my life, Father. And I owe it all to you. You promised that I would wed Vasudeva and you kept your promise. You are truly a king among men! ’

He laughed. A brief chuckle, gruff and involuntary. But still a laugh. It gladdened her heart to hear the sound of his amusement as she now felt confident that he could overcome the day’s setbacks and Kamsa’s awful transgression. He was her father: King Ugrasena, lord of the Andhaka Suras, the greatest nation in all Aryavarta – in all prithviloka – and nothing was impossible for him!

But the chuckle turned to a choked cough, then into a bout of violent chest-racking bursts that bent him over double and turned his face red. Alarmed, she patted him on the back and poured him water from the decanter beside his throne. Why had he sent away even his serving boys and girls? When the coughing fit finally ceased, it left him looking stricken, like the time he had taken to his bed with the purging sickness. It pained her to see him so weakened.

Then he did something that alarmed her even more. He bent over, pressed his palms to his face, and wept. ‘Father,’ she said urgently, concerned, ‘why do you weep so? You are lord of the Andhakas. The world lies awaiting your command. Nothing can resist your power.’

His greying head shook with the force of his weeping. She felt her heart sink, all her bonhomie and optimism waning like water dripping out of a leaking pot. She felt the fear that had clutched her mind that morning return, strengthened by the ugly rumours and gossip that was circulating around the palace like a fetid odour carried in the wind.

When he raised his head at last, she was dismayed to see his eyes red-veined and rheumy, streaming tears. ‘I fear ...’ he said in a choked voice, faltered, then continued, ‘I fear that your brother may go out of hand this time.’

A chill swept down her back.‘Control him, Father. He respects you greatly. He will abide by your commands.’

He shook his head, still coughing into his fist. His beard was flecked with saliva and shiny with caught tears. She was frightened and made nervous by his seeming collapse of nerve.‘He has no respect for me or anyone else,’ he said gruffly, almost scornfully – though the scorn was not directed at her but at the subject of their discussion. ‘Not even his own mother! Nay. He only fears me ...’ He paused, musing sadly.‘Feared me. Now, even that may not be enough to keep him in check.’

She clasped his hands. ‘You underestimate your powers, Father. I am sure you can control him even now. He is nothing more than a spoilt child running amok. Too long has he lived as he pleased, done as he willed, without care for dharma or karma. It is time he was checked. And you alone can do it.’

His eyes, gazing out with a lost expression into the dark flickering shadows of the sabha hall, turned back down towards her, finding her face. They softened and a semblance of a smile twitched his careworn features.‘My child. My jewel. You would believe your father capable of crossing swords with almighty Indra himself! And perhaps once, yes, I would have dared to attempt even such a feat. But not now. Not in my current state and age. More importantly ...’ and here his face darkened by degrees, as if the mashaals had begun to snuff out one by one,‘you do not know your brother’s present strength. He has the shakti of a danav, a daitya, a rakshasa, and every other breed of asura all rolled into one now. He is far, far more than just a spoilt boy run amok. He is a force of destruction.’ His head dipped in evident shame.‘Perhaps once he could still have been tamed and checked, put on a leash or trained and commandeered. But now ... now it is past sunset in the deep recesses of his soul. Now he has descended into the pit of madness. And he is well on his way to destroying us all.’

Devaki’s heart was chilled by her father’s lack of hope. What had made him so pessimistic? Where was the proud, bombastic Raja Ugrasena she had grown up watching round-eyed from behind pillars as he held entire

sabhas and congregations in the spell of his oratory? How had this ageing, ailing, white-bearded, weak-kneed old man taken his place?

‘Do not speak so, Father. We have signed a historic treaty. The kingdom is finally at peace. The Sura nations are once again neighbours and equal sharers of the land and the water. You are a great and powerful ruler. I am about to be married to the wise, wonderful and widely loved leader of the Yadavas. Our union will herald a new age. All will be well. I *know* it will,’ she persisted adamantly, displaying the same stubbornness that she had seen *him* display on numerous occasions – after all, she was *his* daughter.

But he only looked away, unable to meet her eyes. ‘I pray it may be so,’ he mumbled half-heartedly.

Six

Vasudeva raised a hand, quelling the clamouring voices that filled the large cattle shed. As he waited for his agitated countrymen to quiet down, his gaze swept across the gathering, noting that his clansmen had travelled from as far away as the southern-most nations to be present. Representatives of all the major tribes and clans of the Yadava nation – the gyati sanghas as they were called – were present, although, of course, the Sura sangha dominated, this being Sura territory. There was an air of tense anticipation for the meeting, and he had seen people talking in groups in every street he passed through the previous day. From the anxious way their eyes darted to him and their voices lowered as he approached, he knew that the one concern they all shared was the same as his own: Would the peace hold?

Now, every pair of eyes settled on him with the same anxious gaze, asking the same implicit question. He knew how hard it had been to hold these disparate sanghas together in order to form a united front for the long, painstaking negotiations. Water rights and access to the river were only one of many pressing concerns that divided even longtime neighbours and turned old allies into bitter foes; he had had to contend with a host of other issues, foremost of which had been the deep rancour over the terrible war crimes committed by the Andhakas.

The Yadavas were an honourable race, ruled by dharma, and that precept extended to their wartime actions as well. However, some of the things the Andhaka Yadavas had done in the past few years did not deserve to even be judged under dharma. And at the forefront of those war crimes was always the same name, the same bloodstained face, the same sigil and banner: Kamsa and the White Marauders.

Much more terrible than Kamsa's adharmic misdeeds were the growing reports – increasing in number with each passing day – of similar atrocities and abuses being perpetrated by other kings in surrounding nations. Vasudeva himself had heard bloodcurdling accounts of eerily similar, Kamsa-like outrages perpetrated by kings such as Pralamba, Baka, Canura, Trnavarta, Agha, Mustika, Arista, Dvivida, Putana, Kesi, Dhenuka, Bana, Bhauma, and above all, Jarasandha, the demoniac king of Magadha.

What was peculiar in the extreme – disturbing, to say the least – was the almost identical nature of these outrages. It was as if all these several monarchs and tribal chieftains – many of whom had aggressively wrested power, rather than rightfully earning or inheriting it – were giving in to the same animalistic impulses. It had provoked nervous babble which consisted of ancient myths and creatures from the annals of the puranas, a compendium of legends and histories of ages past. This only worsened matters. Vasudeva wondered if these rumours of asuras and rakshasas rising and walking the earth were the product of overactive imaginations or propaganda spread by the perpetrators themselves. It certainly suited the purposes of those bloodthirsty despots and usurpers to be regarded as hell-beings and demons rather than as the opportunistic war criminals that

they actually were. Only moments before this very meeting, he had received word of an entire village gathering up its younguns and cattle and fleeing on word of the imminent approach of the terrible Agha, rumoured to be a vetala, a mythic being who sucked the life energy from his victims simply by laying his lips or fingers upon them. How convenient for Agha, who had been able to seize the entire village without losing a single arrow.

‘Bhraatr,’ he said now in a measured, level voice, ‘I urge you all to calm yourselves and cast aside your agitation. Rising tempers and turbulent emotions will only worsen this crisis, rather than resolve it.’

Several murmured their approval of his words, but many more simply glowered and brooded. Vasudeva sensed their hostility and singled out one who had been receptive to dialogue in the past.

‘Bhraatr Satvata, you, above all, know that anger will not resolve our problems.’

Satvata, a man in his middle years, with a darker complexion than even the usually dark Yadavas and a drooping moustache, shook his head sadly as if answering Vasudeva’s unspoken request for support in the negative. ‘Then what will?’

‘Well said, Satvata! What do you expect of us, Vasu?’ said Uddhava from the eastern tribes, an old friend who was accustomed to addressing his king informally, even irreverently at times. ‘We have already tried ahimsa, talks, appeals to mercy ... even signed a peace treaty.’

‘A peacetreatywithasuras!’ exclaimed Chitraketu of the borderland clan, one of those responsible for perpetuating the rumour of ancient demons reborn in human form.

‘... and despite all our efforts, the Andhakas continue to ravage our lands, slaughter our people and our kine without cause, violate and carry away our women ...’ Satvata’s voice caught and he buried his face in his hands

briefly, overcome by emotion. ‘They even butcher our children ... my little Nala—’

‘Satvata speaks the truth! We have played the hand of peace, met our foes with palms joined in respectful namaskar – and each time they respond with drawn swords and stretched bow-strings!’ Uddhava cried in support as he clasped a burly arm around his northern clansbrother.

‘Yes, why should we be the ones to be humble and merciful, at all times?’ cried another chieftain whom Vasudeva didn’t recognize for a moment. He then realized that it was the fourth brother of a southern clan, the fourth to attend Council in as many sessions, his three brothers all having been killed in succession in marauding raids. ‘I am the last of my father’s sons to survive the bloodlust of the Andhakas. If I too am killed, the Kannars will come no more to Council!’

Several voices spoke together in angry incoherence. Vasudeva raised his hand for silence but this time the tide was too fierce to brook. He lowered his hand and let them speak out their anger for a while longer. Finally, they subsided of their own accord, glaring in his direction. He was saddened by the disappointment in the eyes that met his own.

‘Bhraatr, we have all suffered. But we at least have a treaty in place.’

‘What good is a treaty that is honoured only by one side?’ Chitraketu demanded. ‘When Ugrasena’s son shattered the door of Brihadbala’s house and entered with his cohorts to rape and loot at will, Brihadbala reminded him of the treaty. Do you know what Kamsa said to our bhraatr?’

Vasudeva lowered his eyes: he had heard the story from Brihadbala’s son, who was weeping and nursing a broken arm and crushed ribs as he recalled the last moments of his father, followed by the hours-long brutal assault on his mother and sisters by Kamsa and his men.

Chitraketu went on, red-rimmed eyes flashing, ‘He said, “*This is the only treaty I uphold!*” and showed Brihadbala his raised sword before hacking

him down. In his own house!'

This time, the cries of outrage were sadder, mourning Brihadbala as well as the other recent victims of Kamsa's brutality. Even Vasudeva had to take a moment to gather his wits and emotions. Being clan-chief did not free him from feeling the anger, despair and frustration they felt; it merely obliged him to refrain from succumbing to it.

'I know this,' he said softly, earnestly. 'We all mourn the dear ones we have lost. But what choice do we have? If we overturn the treaty, it will just lead to a sure end. Outright war. Is that what you all desire?' He held up his hand even as several moustached and bearded mouths opened to answer him. 'I can assure you, it is what Kamsa desires! We will be playing into his very hands if we take up arms against our Andhaka brothers. That is exactly what he wishes to provoke us into doing.'

'What choice do we have?' demanded Satvata in as earnest and soft a voice. Heads turned to look at him. His eyes were red from crying. Yadava men were passionate and generous with their emotions, and unafraid to cry openly. What good was a man's freedom if he could not show the world how strongly he felt about something or someone?

'How do we go on enduring this abuse? It is beyond endurance now.'

'Yes!' cried many other voices, all with genuine grievances and causes. 'Beyond endurance!'

Kratha – a slender, ageing man who leaned on a shepherd's crook – spoke up; having lost all his sons,

he had been forced to come out of retirement to attend Council once more, almost two decades after retiring to a pastoral life. He said in a halting voice that shook with age as well as emotion: 'What of the Andhaka king? Is Ugrasena blind and deaf to the atrocities of his son? Why does he not leash his mad dog?'

‘Or put him down as a mad dog deserves!’ cried another voice.

Vasudeva sighed. ‘He knows all. And he has tried his utmost to leash him. But it seems that Kamsa is out of *his* control as well. I just returned after a meeting with Ugrasena this morning. He wept as he heard of the fresh blood shed by his son and his fellow rioters.’

At this, the Council fell silent for a moment. In the distance, Vasudeva heard the lowing of the cows asking to be milked again. All the gothans were short-handed, with most of the able-bodied men patrolling the borders to warn of any impending raids; the womenfolk could not keep up with the extra chores they had to do now that all the men were away. There were cows lowing all across Mathura and the Yadava nation today because the gentle cowherds were forced to look to their borders with fear rather than to their herds with care.

‘If even Ugrasena cannot leash his son,’ said old Kratha, ‘then who will stop Kamsa?’

seven

‘I must do it,’ Vasudeva said at last. ‘I must be the one to stop Kamsa.’

Devaki stopped and turned to look at him, aghast.

They were walking in Vrindavan, the idyllic tulsi grove at the heart of the Vraj nation. The cookfires of Gokuldham, the nearest village, were visible in the distance, curling lazily above the treetops. Vrindavan was a place of great importance to the Yadavas, a veritable botanical garden jointly maintained by a concatenation of clans. Apart from providing the Yadava

nations with the countless herbal flowers, roots, seeds, fruits, leaves, stems, and the like which were needed for the making of medicinal preparations and unguents, the vast grove also contained fruit groves, vineyards, honey hives and a variety of similar resources. It was long believed by the Yadavas that anything that took root in Vrindavan grew under the protective gaze of Vishnu himself, the great protector.

Vasudeva and Devaki had taken to meeting here, away from prying eyes and wagging tongues. Sad that it should be so; after all, they were legitimately betrothed. But the rising tensions between their nations and Kamsa's ever-watchful spies had led them to a mutual agreement that it was best to meet in private. These evening walks, once or twice each week, had become the highlight of Devaki's days. She looked forward to them from the moment they parted; and, of late, they were also the setting for her nocturnal dreams in which Vasudeva and she indulged in more sensual activities than merely walking and talking.

Now, she clutched his arm tightly, alarmed by his decision. 'You must not! There is no talking to Kamsa. Not any more.'

He sighed, his forehead creasing in three vertical lines like a ripple as it always did when he was fretful. 'Everyone can be talked to. Besides, if I don't, who will? Your father has thrown up his hands in despair.'

'Yes,' she said, then more urgently, 'Yes! Exactly. Don't you see? If even Father dares not talk to Kamsa, you certainly must not even attempt it.'

Vasudeva put his hand over hers, moving it from his arm to his mouth. He kissed her fingertips. She felt a tingle of sensation ripple down from her fingertips down to her toes, a delicious shudder thrilling the centre of her being. 'Beloved one. He is my brother-in-law-to-be. He shall be present at the wedding. Once we are wed, he shall be free to come and go as he pleases. Whatever his crimes, hideous and heinous as they are, he is still connected to us by family and law. I can hardly ignore him. Besides,' he pressed her hand to his chest where she could feel his heart beating with surprising quietude, 'if I do not speak with him, who will? Someone must, and soon.'

She shook her head insistently. ‘It will do no good.’ He shrugged. ‘Well, then it can do no harm either.’ ‘You do not comprehend, Vasu, my deva. My brother is not ...’ She stopped short, as if reluctant to utter the words.

He frowned, curious. ‘Not ...? What? In his senses? I know that already. He is power maddened, power hungry, and a warrior to whom violence and the suffering of other human beings has become a kind of soma, an intoxicating addiction.’

She looked up at him quietly, then said in barely a whisper: ‘I was about to say... he is no human.’

He stared at her. ‘Come now, my love. You cannot have meant that, surely. He is a terrible man, it is true. But merely a misguided and ill-intentioned one. Not some manner of—’

‘Rakshasa,’ she said flatly. ‘A demon. A monster reborn in human form.’

He sighed and looked away. ‘There are no such things as rakshasas.’ He shrugged, spreading his hands to gesture at the setting sun above the fragrant groves. ‘Perhaps there were such things once, in the days of Rama and Sita. Perhaps not. We shall never know for sure, although I believe even those so-called rakshasas and asuras were merely mortals too. If not, we should surely have found skeletons or carcasses of such extraordinary beings by now! None have ever been found or heard of till now.’

‘That’s because all the rakshasas were destroyed in the age of Rama. That was why Vishnu took an avatar in human form, to cleanse the earth of rakshasas forever, and to end Ravana’s evil reign.’

He put his hands on the tips of her shoulders, turning her towards himself. ‘Maybe it was so. I do not wish to debate itihasa and matters of science with you. But Kamsa is no rakshasa.’

‘He is evil,’ she said without a trace of doubt, ‘the most evil being in the Yadava nation.’

‘No, my love. There is no such thing as Evil. Or Absolute Good either. These are oversimplified concepts used by rabble-rousers to goad warriors into fighting the enemy. If you tell every foot-soldier that his counterpart in the opposite rank is as human as he is, earns the same pittance, eats the same bad food, and takes almost nothing home to his long-suffering wife and children, he will rebel and walk away, rather than fight. By telling him that he is fighting for the forces of Good and that the other man is Evil Personified, you motivate him to fight to the death – the other man’s death. It’s the manipulation tactic used by leaders ... as old as troop warfare itself.’

She did not debate, simply said with utter conviction, ‘You do not know my brother. He is Evil Incarnate.’

He looked at her, about to argue further, then sighed and looked away. Devaki saw her own thoughts reflected in that action: What were they debating? Kamsa’s malevolence? Rakshasa or human, evil or merely badly flawed, he was no paragon of dharma. That was certain; the rest was semantics. Although, of course, she knew. She *knew*.

‘I believe he can still be reasoned with, talked to, his better instincts appealed to.’ Vasudeva spread his hands. ‘There must be a way to get through to him. This madness has to stop.’

She clutched his arm again, feeling herself shivering as if with a sudden chill, despite the balmy weather. He looked at her, concerned.

‘You must not,’ she said, beseeching him now. ‘He is a killing device. Like a sword with a dark hunger that must be fed all the time. Can you reason with a sword? Talk to it? Appeal to it? I beg you, my love, do not risk your life and limb.’

He sighed, putting his arm around her. Vasudeva listened to her, unlike so many men; he actually listened and could be persuaded with reason and good sense. That was one of the many things she loved about him.

‘What would you have me do, then?’ he asked. ‘I am king. I must do something. The barbarism must be stopped. It cannot go on. Just this day, I received word of ...’ He trailed off, then looked down, and she saw the dark grooves beneath his eyes, sensed the deep sadness in his soul. ‘My people are being brutalized. I cannot simply stand by and let it happen.’

‘No, you cannot,’ she agreed. ‘You must not. You must act now. Before it is too late. Before Kamsa’s power and bloodlust grow too great for even him to control.’

He gazed at her, puzzled. ‘So you agree I should speak with him?’

‘Not *speak!* Words are no good. You must *act! Stop him!*’

‘How?’

She laid a hand upon his chest, staring straight into his eyes.

She said quietly: ‘Kill him.’

He balked. ‘He is your brother.’

She shook her head. ‘Not any more. If he ever was

my brother, that man has long been consumed by the rakshasa that now governs his body and mind. He is not human. Not any longer. And if he is not stopped, he will grow more powerful, more terrible.’

‘You cannot truly believe that, my love.’

‘I do not *wish* to believe it. But I *know* it to be true, nevertheless.’ She covered her face, realizing how terrible she must sound. ‘I am ashamed to be his sister.’ She gathered herself together. ‘I mean what I say, Vasu, my most beloved of all devas. He is a rakshasa and the only way to stop a rakshasa gone berserk is to kill him.’

Vasudeva stood silent for a long time. The sun descended below the treetops. Birds sang louder in the grove, filling the air with their music. A pack of monkeys chattered and raced through the trees on some mischievous errand. The sweet aroma of honey wine wafted to them from nearby.

Atlast,hesaidssadly,almostregretfully:‘Icannot. It would be against dharma to kill my brother-in-law. In fact, if I were to break the peace treaty by such an act, it would certainly lead to decades-long warring between our nations. An assassination of a royal heir will render all my peace-making efforts useless.’

‘The people will understand, Vasu. They know Kamsa is not fit to be king. His own citizens would not shed a single tear once he is gone.’

But Vasudeva’s mind was made up. He shook his head firmly.‘It is out of the question. Violence is never a means to lasting peace.’

She looked up at him. She was on the verge of bursting into tears, yet fought them back. She did not want him to see how hopeless she thought his cause was. She tried to make herself feel hopeful, even confident, about his ability. Words had deserted her.

Ever sensitive to her feelings, he put his arm around her and comforted her. ‘We are people of dharma, Devaki. Taking up arms to defend ourselves is something we do only as a last resort. Violence only begets more violence. Ahimsa is the only way to peaceful coexistence.’

She wanted to say, *Kamsa will not let us coexist, he is a monster. He seeks only violence and nothing but violence. Ahimsa is a word unknown to him.* Instead, she looked at him, wiping an errant tear from her cheek.

‘You are truly a deva, my Vasu. I pray that you do not underestimate my brother’s capacity for evil.’

eight

Kamsa rode grinning through the smoke and chaos of a burning village.

His henchmen were busy ransacking the remaining houses for anything of value before setting them ablaze. He would give them time to enjoy themselves and relish the spoils of war. Stopping on a high verge, he watched with satisfaction as the settlement was razed to the ground. It amused him that the Yadavas could be so easy to kill, their villages so vulnerable, their women and children so unprotected ...

A high-pitched scream ripped the air. He turned to see a young boy in a coloured dhoti tied in the Vrajvasi style charging at him with a shepherd's crook, of all things!

Kamsa laughed and deflected the point of the crook with his sword. A twist of the reins drew the bit tightly enough into his horse's mouth to make the beast sidestep, causing the boy to overshoot his aim and fall sprawling to the ground. His turban, the same bright saffron colour as his dhoti, fell into a muddy puddle and was sullied.

Kamsa sheathed his sword and pulled the reins up short, making the horse rear. There were specks of blood on its mouth as he had a habit of whipping his mounts on their mouths if they failed to respond quickly, but he hardly noticed it.

The boy was moaning and struggling to his elbows. As he turned and looked up, he froze at the sight of the massive Bhoja mare rearing up before him. Kamsa brought the forehooves of the horse down with a loud thud. The boy cried aloud and moved his legs out of the way, just in time to avoid them being smashed.

A gust of breeze from the village carried the voice of a woman screaming pitifully for her children to be spared, followed by three short, sharp cries that cut off abruptly as each of her wretched offspring were despatched by Kamsa's efficient soldiers. The boy turned his head to listen; his pain and empathy marking him out as either the woman's son or a close relative. In a moment, the desperate woman's voice rose again, now launching into wailing cries of grief and pity for her own plight as the soldiers turned their attention to her.

The boy glared up at Kamsa with hot brown eyes filled with hatred. 'Rakshasa!' he cried. 'Only a rakshasa would attack unarmed gokulas protected under a peace treaty!'

Kamsa grinned. 'Then why don't you call upon your devas to protect you? What good are they if they can't defend their own bhaktas?'

The boy shook his fist. 'They will come. Our devas always hear the prayers of the righteous. Lord Vishnu himself will come down to earth and make you pay for your crimes!'

Kamsa roared with laughter. 'Lord Vishnu himself? I must be *very* important to attract *his* attention!'

While talking, the boy had managed to get hold of a fist-sized rock. Now, he flung it hard at his aggressor, his aim good enough to hit Kamsa a glancing blow on the temple. Kamsa's right ear rang and warm wetness instantly poured down the side of his head. He stopped laughing and grinned down at the boy who was scrabbling around in search of more missiles to throw.

'It's a helpless deva who arms his devotees with just stones to defend themselves,' he said, blood trickling down his neck.

The grin stayed on his face as he yanked back on the reins and forced the horse to rear, bringing down both forehooves on his intended target with a bone-crunching impact – again, and again, and yet again – until what

remained on the ground was no more than a crumpled bundle of shattered bones and leaking flesh.

‘Lord Vishnu can’t be here today to help you,’ he said to the remains of the child. ‘He has more important things to attend to than saving weak, pathetic cowherds in remote Vraj villages.’

A contingent of riders approached at a brisk canter, slowing as they neared him.

Bana was leading the group, Canura beside him. Both exclaimed as they saw Kamsa’s head streaming with blood.

‘Lord Kamsa, you are injured,’ said Bana, dismounting and jogging to Kamsa’s side to examine the injury more closely. ‘Canura, call for our lord’s vaids at once.’

Canura barked an order, sending two riders back to the Andhaka camp a mile or two upstream. Kamsa and his ravagers tended to ride much ahead of the main force, leaving the sluggish supply caravans trailing in their wake.

‘It’s just a scratch,’ Kamsa said absently, gazing out across the village. The woman’s screams had stopped, although other equally terrible cries could be heard across the ruined settlement as other women and victims suffered at the hands of the Andhakas. To Kamsa, the screams were like sweet music, acknowledging his superiority as a military commander and soldier.

‘Tell me,’ he said to Bana, who knew at once what he wished to know.

Bana began recounting the tally of the dead. The ratio of ‘enemy’ dead to their own dead was ludicrous. They had killed or left for dead some two hundred and lost only three men.

‘Because we take them by surprise and after the treaty many have returned to herding and farming, they rarely have weapons close at hand,’ smirked Bana, licking his lips. ‘And the women and children are almost always alone and defenceless in their homes.’

Bana then proceeded to recount the spoils of private treasures they had appropriated as tax – Kamsa had forbidden the use of the term ‘looted’ – measuring up to a substantial amount.

Bana chuckled as he finished the tally. ‘A good day’s work, My Lord. These herders and farmers make for easy prey. Almost too easy. We roll across the landscape like chariots across millet, crushing them underfoot like crisp grain.’

‘Yes, well, that won’t continue much longer,’ Kamsa said. ‘Word must be spreading already about our campaign. We should expect to meet some resistance soon.’ He raised a clenched fist, adding, ‘I pray we do. I am tired of hacking down feeble herders caught unawares and boys with sheep crooks!’

Canura grinned slyly. ‘It has its advantages.’ He jerked his head in the direction of the village where the screams of dying women rent the air and the crackling of burning straw-and-mud huts filled it with smoke. ‘The men enjoy it too.’

Kamsa didn’t respond. He stared into the distance. Bana and Canura exchanged a glance. Kamsa often had these phases when he would just stare into the horizon, brooding. Such periods almost always preceded some new plan or strategy.

Finally, he said, ‘We shall swing north and east. Towards Vrindavan.’

‘Vrindavan?’ Bana repeated. Even Canura gaped. ‘But My Lord, that is the heart of Sura territory. King Vasudeva will not brook an assault on his heartland silently.’

‘Bhraatr Bana speaks the truth,’ Canura added cautiously. Kamsa did not always appreciate being corrected or having his plans questioned. A scar on Canura’s cheek testified to that fact, as did the rotting corpses of two of Kamsa’s previous advisors. ‘Until now, we have only, uh, *taxed* outlying villages and border territories of the three nations. Our actions could be defended as legitimate policy against border crossings and water or cattle thefts. But if we ride that far into Vraj heartland, it would be a total violation of the peace treaty and a declaration of open war against Vasudeva himself. The Sura nation might respond with an all-out war. And the Bhoja Yadavas might feel outraged enough to get involved as well.’

Bana cleared his throat, also careful to couch his suggestions in cautious terms. ‘Besides which, Vasudeva does happen to be the betrothed of your sister Lady Devaki, My Lord. The wedding is set to take place in—’

Kamsa gestured them both to be silent. They subsided at once. The wind changed, bringing a heavy odour of smoke and the stench of burning corpses along with the fading screams of the last suffering victims.

‘I am sick of this peace treaty,’ Kamsa said. ‘My father did not consult me, the crown prince, before signing it. Why should I be compelled to uphold it?’ At the mention of his father, Kamsa’s eyes glinted – both Bana and Canura noted this with growing nervousness – and a gleam of naked rebellion shone there. ‘It is time to put it to the test. Let us see how long Vasudeva upholds his end of the treaty when I come galloping into his lands and lay waste his townships.’

Being Kamsa’s friends and advisors, the pair glanced at each other, increasingly uneasy. Yet none dared speak a word. It was one thing to offer a suggestion or two, but quite another to defy his gesture ordering them to be silent; if either one spoke now, he would find his own corpse piled upon one of the several dozen burning heaps that were all that remained of the village they had just pillaged.

‘They call me a rakshasa,’ Kamsa said, unmindful of the blood still streaming down the side of his head. ‘They call upon Lord Vishnu to protect them from me. Let me see if Vishnu has the courage to descend to

prithviloka in yet another avatar, this time to confront Kamsa. It will be good to have a worthy opponent to sink my sword into for a change. I am tired of stabbing cowherd flesh and slaughtering hairless boys.'

He raised his head towards the smoke-filled sky and bellowed: 'YOU TOOK AN AVATAR ON EARTH TO BATTLE RAVANA. THEY SAY WHENEVER YOUR PEOPLE ARE UNABLE TO DEFEND THEMSELVES, YOU DESCEND TO PROTECT THEM. NOW DESCEND TO FACE ME, KAMSA OF MATHURA! I CHALLENGE YOU!'

Bana and Canura exchanged startled glances. Even the soldiers accompanying them looked shocked at Kamsa's bold, blasphemous challenge.

As if in response, a deep rumbling roar came from the smoke-stained sky, followed by an angry crash of thunder. Canura winced, his horse neighing. The smell of imminent rain filled the air, along with a damp coldness. Thunder crashed again, far away in the distant horizon.

Kamsa listened, head cocked to one side like a curious hound, then threw his head back and laughed long and hard. The laughter echoed across the razed settlement, silencing the last desperate cries of the hopeless and the dying.

nine

Queen Padmavati listened with mounting horror as her spasa, a personal guard specially deputed to collect intelligence discreetly, recounted the many atrocities and war crimes perpetrated by her son. At last, she shuddered and interrupted him mid-sentence.

‘Enough! *Enough!* I can hear no more.’

She rose from her lavender seat and went to the casement, fanning herself. Summer had come down upon Mathura like a hot brand and even the coolest chambers in the palace were barely endurable. The whiff of wind from the window felt like steam off a boiling kettle.

She turned around to see maids watering down the flagstone floors to cool them. Her spasa waited, head bowed. The sight of him made her stomach churn. If she had not already heard rumours and other snatches of news corroborating parts of his report, she might have ordered her guard to drag him away to be executed instantly. As it was, she was tempted to give the command, if only to prevent him from recounting the same horrific tales to others in the palace. But, she reasoned with herself, what good would that do if these things were already known! In fact, it appeared that she was the last to learn of her son’s misdeeds – at least the extent and severity and sheer volume of those misdeeds. No, it was no fault of the spasa; the poor man had only done his job as she had commanded.

Even the fragrance of the water being sprinkled on the floors, drawn from the deepest well and made fragrant with the scent of roses from the royal gardens, could not calm her nerves. Her son? Doing such terrible things? How had things come to such a pass? Oh, that she should have lived to see such a day!

Suddenly, she lost her patience. Trembling, she shouted at the maids, the spasa, even at her personal guards standing at the doorway.

‘Out! Everyone out! I wish to be alone.’

A moment later, sitting in the privacy of her chamber, she broke down, sobbing her heart out. She thought of little Kamsa, a pudgy, fair boy with curly hair and a fondness for young animals of any breed. He had always had a kitten, a pup, a fawn, a cub, or some other youngling in his chubby arms, cradled close to his chest.

She remembered calling out to him on numerous occasions: 'Kaamu, my son, give the poor thing room to breathe. You'll smother it with your love!' And both Ugrasena and she laughing as Kamsa blushed, his milky-fair face turning red in the same splotched pattern every time as he ran away in that shambling hip-swinging toddler's gait, his latest acquisition clutched close to his little chest.

She smiled, wet-eyed, remembering how adorable he had been, how proud Ugrasena and she had been of their son, their heir. What dreams they had spun, what plans, what ambitions ...

But then she recalled something she had almost forgotten, a seemingly insignificant fact suddenly made significant by the spasa's report.

All those tiny kittens, puppies, fawns, squirrels, calves and other younglings ... where had they gone?

Kamsa had always had a different pet every few days or weeks. At first, they had stayed for longer periods, she thought, with one or two even growing noticeably larger and older. But over time, they seemed to change with increasing rapidity. Until finally, by the time he was old enough to play boys' games and outgrew the toddler phase, he seemed to have a different pet every time she turned around, at least one every day, until it had become a matter of great amusement to his parents. She even recalled Ugrasena's joke about Kamsa being an avatar of Pashupati, the amsa of Shiva who ruled over the animal kingdom.

What had happened to the earlier pets? Where did they go once Kamsa finished playing with them? Where did the new ones go each day?

A cold sword probed her heart, piercing painfully deep, her feverish blood steaming as it washed upon the icy tip.

Where indeed!

And there, with a lurch and a start, her memory threw up the recollection of a day when she had found Kamsa crouching in that peculiar toddlers' way at something in a corner, something wet and furry and broken that had once been a kitten, or perhaps a whelp. Kamsa standing over a pile of burning rags and a tiny, charred carcass in the back corridor, eyes shining in the reflected light of the flames ... Kamsa carrying a stick with a sharpened tip sticky with fresh blood.

There were more memories. Many, many more.

She had dismissed all those incidents as accidents or merely the passing phase of a young boy's normal growth pangs. But now, they sent the tip of that icy sword deep into her bowels, raking up terrible guilt and regret.

There *had* been signs. Kamsa had never been quite like other boys, other princes. Even when older, he had not made friends easily, had gotten into fights that ended with terrible consequences for at least some of the participants – almost always those who defied or refused to side with him – and there had been incidents with servants, serving girls, maids, a cook's daughter ... A minor scandal over a young girl found dead and horribly mutilated in the royal gardens, last seen walking hand in hand with Kamsa the day before, which was his twelfth naming day.

Yes, signs.

Many signs.

But nothing that had prepared her for *this*.

A mass murderer? A leader of marauders, ravagers, rapists, slaughterers of innocent women and children?

Her Kamsa?

Her little boy with the fair, pudgy face and curls grown up to be the Rakshasa of Mathura, as they were calling him now?

It wasn't possible! There had to be some mistake.

She stormed out of the chamber and went striding through the palace, her guards and serving ladies in tow. Curious courtiers and ministers' aides watched her sweep imperiously through the wide corridors with the marbled statuary, brocaded walls and art- adorned walls.

She stopped outside the sabha hall only long enough to ask the startled guards if the king was alone or in session.

A dhoot had just arrived bearing news and the king was in private session, they replied with bowed heads, not daring to meet her agitated eyes.

She cut them off abruptly, ordering the sabha hall doors to be opened to let her in. They obeyed at once, without protest. Like most traditional Arya societies, the Yadava nations had long had a matriarchal culture. Women owned all property, from land to livestock, right down to even the garments on everyone's back. Inheritance was by the matriarchal line, as was lineage. Every stone, brick and beam in Mathura was quite literally the property of Queen Padmavati.

She strode into the sabha hall, past the startled guards and surprised courtiers. There were not very many. Inside, Ugrasena and a few of his closest advisors and ministers sat listening keenly to a road- dusty courier – a dhoot – who broke off and peered fearfully over his shoulder at her unexpected entrance, as if afraid it might be someone else.

Padmavati strode up to the royal dais. Ugrasena frowned down at her, openly surprised.

‘Padma?’ he said, lapsing into informality.

‘My Lord,’ she said, ‘I have urgent *private* business to discuss with thee. Kindly send away these honourable gentlepersons of the court.’

Ugrasena looked at her for a long moment. In the flickering light of the mashaals, she saw how he had appeared to age in the past few weeks. The peace treaty had taken a greater toll on him than the troubles of the preceding years, was what the wags were saying around court.

No, not the peace treaty. Our son's devilry.

'It is about Kamsa, then,' he said, without a trace of uncertainty in his words.

She did not answer, not wishing to say anything impolitic in front of the others.

He nodded as if he understood.

'Come, my queen,' he said kindly, in a weary voice. 'Seat thyself and listen to the latest tales of derring-do of our beloved son.'

ten

Ugrasena and Padmavati sat on the royal dais. Except for the mandatory royal guards at the far end of the hall, by the doors, they were alone. The dhoot had finished his report in Padmavati's presence, recounting further episodes of Kamsa's vileness. From the sighs, head-shakes, shrugs and other gestures and reactions of the others, she had understood that these reports were now commonplace. She shuddered at the realization: innocent lives snuffed out, butchered by her own son, and even Mathura's wisest heads accepted it as commonplace. She did not know which was worse: the fact that he had committed and was still committing such terrible acts, or

the fact that they were tacitly accepted and tolerated by those governing the kingdom.

She turned to Ugrasena now, her mind raging.

‘We must curb him,’ she said. ‘This cannot be allowed to go on.’

He sighed, rubbing his hand across his face, looking terribly weary and old, a pale shadow of the man she had wedded, loved, and shared her life with for over two decades.

She now understood why he had taken ill these past several weeks, why he had not come to her bed at nights, why an endless procession of royal vaids seemed to always be coming from or going into his chambers, why the annual festival had been cancelled, why no entertainers or artists had been invited to the palace of late ...

Her father had once told her that no matter how comfortable and luxurious it may appear, a royal throne was the hardest seat to sit on. And to remain seated on it meant foregoing all comfort forever. ‘All these things,’ he had said, gesturing expansively at the rich brocades, luxurious adornments and gem-studded furniture, ‘exist to pay homage to the seat itself, to the role of king or queen. For the man or woman who sits on that hard spot, there is no luxury, no comfort, no rest.’

She saw now the truth of those words. Truly, Ugrasena, at the peak of his reign, at the helm of the greatest Yadava nation that had ever existed, had no comfort.

‘Yes,’ he agreed at last. ‘This ought not to be permitted to continue.’

She waited, knowing that he was not merely echoing her words but qualifying them.

‘Ought not,’ he repeated, still rubbing his forehead.
‘Yet, what can we do to stop him?’

She felt her throat catch as if she had swallowed a dry, prickly thing and it had stuck in her gullet. ‘We can speak to him.’

He laughed softly. There was no humour in the laughter; it was merely an acknowledgement of the inherent humour in her suggestion. ‘Yes, of course we can. And he will talk back. And then go out and continue doing what he is doing now. And then what shall we do?’

She moistened her lips. ‘We will have him confined to the palace. To his chambers. Prohibit him from leaving Mathura. Strip him of his privileges.’

He shifted in his seat and looked at her. There was no anger or irritation on his face, merely sadness, perhaps even sympathy. ‘And how will we do that? Kamsa is the commander of all our armed forces. It is he who is in charge of even the city’s security, the royal guard. You must recall that I had vested him with those powers when I crowned him heir and king-in-waiting.’

Yes, of course he had. And he had done so precisely because they had felt at that time that once he was given power and responsibility, and began handling all the administrative and other burdens of state, he would cease his adolescent antics and be compelled to settle into a more serious state of mind. Instead, he had simply used the power and leapfrogged to a whole new level of adolescent rebellion.

‘There must be somebody you can depute with the task.’ She glanced around, looking at the empty seats, trying to remember the various courtiers. ‘What about—?’ She named a senior minister, formerly a general in the King’s Akshohini, the most prestigious regiment of all. ‘Or ...’ She named several others.

Ugrasena shook his head. ‘He has grown too strong. He commands the loyalty of the troops now. They would mutiny to support him if we act overtly.’

She was shocked. ‘But surely they know of his brutalities?’

Ugrasena looked away. ‘He gives them freedom to enjoy the spoils of war as they please. He plays cleverly upon the natural rivalries between the Andhaka and the Sura clans. He uses past enmities, petty feuds, tribe conflicts, anything that serves his purpose. Recruitment is at its highest mark ever. Every eligible young boy old enough to hold a weapon is lining up to join Kamsa’s army. That is what they call it now, by the way, *Kamsa’s* army. Not Mathura’s. Or Ugrasena’s. Or even just the army. *Kamsa’s Army.*’

She looked around for water, wishing they had not sent away the serving staff. There was wine everywhere, as always, but no water to be seen. Water was too precious to be kept lying around. It was always brought fresh, untainted, and closely checked on command. And only royals and the wealthiest courtiers could afford to have potable water served at will. The vast majority of their people still had to draw it from wells or drink it from rivers or ponds when they desired to slake their thirst. Water, after all, was the main bone of contention and the reason for most of the troubles of the past decades. Like all causes of war and violence, it was merely the most visible evidence of a deeper social dissatisfaction. If she understood Ugrasena right, it appeared that Kamsa had cleverly tapped into that deep groundwater source of discontent, using it for his own devious purposes.

‘When did he become so savvy?’ she wondered aloud. ‘Where did he learn to manipulate so?’

Despite her horror and disgust at his misdeeds, she was impressed by his ability to command such loyalty and adulation. *Kamsa’s army?* And for years, Ugrasena had always grumbled to her that Yadavas were only fit for fighting in brawls over stolen cows, and utterly useless when it came to disciplined armed combat. Apparently, all that was required to goad them on to ruthless, single-minded pursuit of blood was someone like Kamsa to come along and promise them the pleasures of unlawful spoils and the setting aside of the laws of Kshatriya dharma that forbade a soldier from doing anything other than defending his nation under duress.

‘That is what troubles me most, my queen,’ Ugrasena said, leaning on the armrest of his throne. ‘He must have advisors and they must be very wily to enable him to gain so much power and loyalty so swiftly.’

She frowned. A part of her was loath to accept this view, for it undercut the last vestige of motherly pride she could hope to take in her son’s dubious achievements. But she knew at once that Ugrasena was right in his assessment. However brilliant Kamsa’s political skills might be – and she had seen no great evidence of any such skills during his growing years – this achievement was too great for him to have accomplished entirely on his own. Surely, there was another hand at work.

‘Whom do you suspect?’ she asked with growing dismay, now trying to remember the faces and names of all those who might qualify as opponents of Ugrasena’s rule and who might harbour sufficient ill will to plot against him. She felt so parched that she could almost feel desert sand grating against her throat.

‘Jarashanda, Bhauma, Trnavarta, Baka, Arista, Pralamba, Putana, Agha, Mustika, Dhenuka, Bana, Canura, Dvivida, Kesi,’ he said, reeling off the names as if by rote. ‘But most of all, Jarashanda. There have been reports from all these places about developments that are curiously similar to those in Mathura ...’ he paused thoughtfully. ‘Almost as if some great plan was being executed and Kamsa is only playing out his part in the scheme.’

Padmavati’s mind had frozen cold when Ugrasena had uttered the first name. ‘Jarashanda,’ she repeated fearfully. ‘The king of Magadha.’

‘Yes, and a demon in mortal form, if the tales of his misdeeds are to be believed.’

Suddenly, she felt choked, as if her throat was filled with sand. ‘But he is extremely powerful.’

Ugrasena nodded. ‘Powerful enough to crush us in open war. But also shrewd enough to know that if he declares war against the Andhaka nation,

the Suras and Bhojas will set aside all their differences and stand by us. And that would outmatch even Magadha's considerable resources by two to one.'

'And if all these kings you just named were to align with him?' she asked, agitated.

'That is not what worries me.'

She stared at him intently. 'You mean ...' She swallowed hard, putting into words the thought she could barely bear to think. 'Kamsa might be deluded into allying with him? Our greatest enemy? Surely not!'

Even the thought made her feel sick. But Ugrasena's response made her feel sicker still.

'I fear that he might already have allied with him.'

eleven

Akrur put a hand on Vasudeva's shoulder as they approached the Andhaka camp. 'Bhaiya,' he said, for, to him, Vasudeva was no less than an elder brother. 'I beg you. Reconsider your decision. I fear nothing good will come of this.'

Vasudeva patted his friend's hand affectionately. 'When the mission is for good, the outcome is always good.'

Akrur dropped his hand back to the reins. The track was heavily pitted and full of holes from the passing of large numbers of troops and wagons, and

it required close attention to avoid cracking a wheel or breaking an uks' foot. But that was not the main reason why Akrur stayed silent the rest of the way. He was dead set against Vasudeva's visit to the Andhaka camp and had not hesitated to show his disagreement with his elder's plan. For all their formality and love for ritual and tradition – 'parampara' was the correct term—the Yadavas were fiercely independent people, quick to express their individual opinions, no matter how contrary, unproductive or impractical. That was the reason why the Yadava nations functioned as true republics; no other system would suffice to encompass such an independent-minded individualistic people. And of all the Yadava clans, even among the three largest nations of clans, the Vrishnis were the most independent, idealistic and individualistic. As the old saying went: Easier to draw milk from a bull daily than to convince a Vrishni Yadav.

Vasudeva was as much a Vrishni as Akrur. None of his friends or allies had been able to talk him out of this impossible mission. He was determined to take his petition to Kamsa in the sanctity of the latter's camp and risk his neck.

And he was adamant that he would do it alone and unarmed, with just Akrur to drive the cart. 'One cannot petition for peace with a sword in hand,' he had said, and had then joined both palms together to demonstrate, 'when you join your hands in namaskar, you would cut your own hands with the blade!'

Nobody had smiled at his wit. They were all too anxious that he would lose his life.

'You are putting your head in the lion's jaws,' they said.

And Vasudeva had smiled his good-natured smile and said, 'I shall check for rotten teeth while I am in there!'

Now, the uks-drawn cart trundled around the long, curving marg that led through the thickly wooded area towards the Andhaka camp. After running amok across several border villages and towns, Kamsa and his marauders had set up camp here. Nobody was quite sure why, but the theory was that

the Andhakas had ruffled too many local feathers and realized that were they to continue further into Sura territory, they might have to bear the consequences.

Kamsa was notorious for his lightning raids, often undertaken under the cover of foul weather, at night or during festivals. He preferred these to risking full-frontal confrontations and, in the past, when things got too hot for him to handle, he went scampering back across the river. Vasudeva prayed that this camp was only a temporary show of bravado before Kamsa retired from the current campaign of ‘patrolling the borders’ – which was the official excuse, even though this spot was yojanas within Sura Yadava territory. It was on the verge of Vrishni territory, in fact, and the Council believed that Kamsa lacked the guts to risk facing the wrath of the heartland farmers who were now forewarned and enraged by the reports of his atrocities on their countrymen further south and west.

He frowned as the cart turned around the final curve and the road dipped sharply. As Akrur handled the uksan, Vasudeva stared with consternation at the field ahead. This was not merely a clearing housing Kamsa’s hundred-odd marauders. The Andhakas had obviously cleared a much larger space in the centre of this thickly wooded region, creating a clearing large enough to house a small army.

Indeed, from the rows upon rows of horses, tents, and even large makeshift shacks, and the hustle and bustle everywhere, it was quite apparent that there *was* a small army residing here!

From the far end of the egg-shaped clearing, sounds of timber being felled and axes chopping away furiously meant that they were widening the field even further. Already, the length of it was at least three hundred yards, and almost every inch of it was bustling with Andhakas.

Vasudeva glanced sideways to see Akrur gaping open mouthed at the same sight.

His friend’s eyes met Vasudeva’s with an expression of horror. ‘They’re mobilizing an army! They mean to invade us, Vasu!’

Vasudeva struggled to find an alternative explanation. ‘Perhaps they’re setting up a cantonment to house a border brigade.’

Akrur made a sound of disgust. ‘Look at them! They’re clearing more area. And there, at the south end, that’s a marg they’re making, broad enough to carry a dozen horses abreast. That way lies the pass across the ranges into Vrishni territory. They’re planning to invade the heartland, Vasu.’

Akrur clicked his tongue furiously at the uksan, working the reins frantically. The cart began to turn slowly back to the direction which it had come from.

‘What are you doing?’ Vasudeva asked.

‘What does it look like? I’m getting us out of here so that we can go back and warn the Council. We have to prepare for war.’

Vasudeva stopped him. ‘Akrur, I still mean to speak with Prince Kamsa.’

Akrur stared at him, white faced with shock. Vasudeva recalled that Akrur had family in the hilly tribes on the far side of the ranges, only a few dozen yojanas from here. They would be the first Vrishnis Kamsa’s army would encounter if it indeed meant to invade. *If*, Vasudeva reminded himself, *is a very big word*.

‘But, Bhaiya, see for yourself. What good will talking do? These rakshasas mean to attack us!’

Vasudeva held his gaze firmly. ‘If they do, and mind you, that’s still a big *if*, all the more reason why I should be attempting to talk.’

Akrur stared at Vasudeva as if he were insane.

Vasudeva turned his face towards the camp again, saying calmly: ‘Ride on into the camp. Let’s do what we came here to do.’

Akrur started to say something again, but Vasudeva refused to look at him and showed him only his profile, which was hard and determined. After a moment of silence during which Vasudeva thought he heard the faint tones of several curse words spoken under Akrur's breath, mostly directed at himself for having thrown in his lot with a pacifist, the uksan were turned straight ahead once more and they resumed their trundling progress.

As they reached the main camp and rolled past men at work, sharpening weapons, eating, drinking, chopping wood, and doing various other chores, Vasudeva noted with surprise that nobody seemed to give a damn about them. They may as well have not existed!

The same thought occurred to Akrur as well. The younger man said in a strangled tone that failed to disguise his anger: 'The devils don't even know that two of the enemy are right in their midst. We could run amok here before they realize it.'

Vasudeva replied quietly: 'Oh, they know all right. They just don't care. Even if we run amok, what would we achieve except get ourselves killed in a hurry? The lion doesn't tremble when a rabbit enters its den.'

'Speaking of which, how are we supposed to find this lion? Do you want me to ask somebody where their commander is billeted?'

'Not just yet.' Vasudeva thought that while his mission was most certainly one of peace, there was no harm in learning as much as they could about the Andhaka camp.

As the cart rolled on, Vasudeva's heart sank. Any doubt he might have had about the camp's purpose was made abundantly clear as they took in more and more of the sights. There were people putting up solid wooden cabins and raising thatched mud huts. There were cooks and cleaning people and all manner of craftsmen, all hard at work. This was no temporary camp or even a token 'border' brigade. This was indeed an army being mobilized. He heard the sounds of elephants lowing not far away and realized that there were soldiers in the woods as well, probably clearing more areas to

either side of the main clearing. He realized that it was impossible to tell the full extent of this operation; but one thing was certain – this

was a cantonment for thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands of soldiers.

They had barely reached halfway across the length of the field when the rumbling thunder of hooves announced the arrival of more cavalry and Vasudeva saw a sizeable contingent come down the new road that had been cleared through the south end. Cheers and whistles went up all over the camp as a band of some two hundred riders rolled in with obvious jubilation.

‘I think our lion has just returned home,’ Akrur said with a telltale flash in his eyes.

Vasudeva was glad that he had insisted they bring no weapons along, to demonstrate how serious they were about peace.

‘His jaws still red with the blood of our people.’ Akrur’s tone was steely.

He was right. At the head of the riders came a familiar, arrogant, straight-backed man in full armour.

Kamsa was here.

Twelve

Kamsa could scarcely believe his eyes as he approached the uks cart. He slowed down before it, feeling his mouth twist in a leery grin.

‘Vasudeva? Clan-chief of the Vrishnis, lord of the Sura Yadava nation? Riding only an uks cart?’ He laughed, and his men, tired and satiated from another successful and richly rewarding raid, laughed as well. ‘Does your nation have no chariots for a king? No entourage, royal guard, nothing?’

He turned to his men, grinning and winking. ‘At least they could have sent a few of those Gokuldham milkmaids along to protect you!’

A loud round of guffaws greeted that comment. The camp’s attention was centred on their leader now, and word spread quickly up and down the cantonment of Vasudeva’s presence. Many off-duty soldiers and other workers crowded around to catch a glimpse of the great Sura king whose prowess as a general as well as a ruler was legendary. Kamsa saw their surprised reaction as they took in the rusticity of Vasudeva’s transport and his simple gowala apparel.

He also noted the absence of any visible weaponry.

Vasudeva replied in a disarmingly good-natured tone, ‘We are like this only, Prince Kamsa. Simple cowherds and dairy farmers, we are not sophisticated castle dwellers like you Andhakas. We live close to the soil and love the smell of the earth and cattle around us.’

There was a buzz of amusement at these words. Some of Kamsa’s men even clapped and cheered at the response. Kamsa glared around in sudden fury, losing his good humour instantly.

Conscripted soldiers though they were, even the most hardened Andhaka veteran was at heart a gowala. Cowherds with swords, Kamsa called them

contemptuously during drill rehearsals, working his whip arduously ‘to beat out the traces of milk from your bloodstream’. Never having worked a field or milked a cow, growing up in the lap of luxury in his father’s palace, Kamsa had a deep, enduring resentment against rustic men. The resentment came from envy, from hearing other boys and men talk of crop cycles, soil types, the effect of climate on harvests, bird migrations, cow feed, cattle ailments and such matters. These were things from which he had always been excluded, and his lack of knowledge had often been greeted with laughter and derision in the early years, giving him a powerful sense of inferiority. His first fights had been over this very difference between him and other Yadavas, and he had never truly gotten over being an outsider to such things.

Now, he sneered at Vasudeva: ‘Yes, well, we seem to be stamping your countrymen back into very the soil they love so much, mingling their blood and brains with cow shit. I’m sure they’re very content now.’

At once, the gathering grew grim. His men, knowing Kamsa’s peculiarities and nature, immediately lost whatever good humour they had, and began to drift away to their respective tasks. Curious to a fault though the Yadavas were, they knew better than to incur the wrath of their lord. Kamsa was given to flinging maces randomly at his own men, killing anyone who happened to be unlucky enough to be standing nearby. His sensitivity at being reminded of his lack of rustic skills and knowledge was equally well known.

The sight of Vasudeva’s face – and that of his companion – helped restore much of Kamsa’s good cheer.

‘Then you admit to killing innocent Suras,’ Vasudeva said in a level voice.

‘Suras, certainly. Innocent, no.’ Kamsa made his horse trot a few steps closer to the cart, placing the head of his Kambhoja stallion almost nose-to-nose with the uksan which made unhappy sounds and tried to retreat. Kamsa’s horse snickered and snorted hot breath down on them contemptuously, showing its superiority. ‘They were about to transgress into our territory, some even in the act of crossing the river, others

illegally diverting channels from the river for irrigation. My soldiers and I were merely upholding the terms of the treaty.'

Vasudeva's companion glared at Kamsa with a cold rage that promised blood and mayhem if only he had a sword in his hand. He was clearly controlling himself only under duress. Kamsa tilted his head and smiled cattily at the man, tempted to toss him a sword just to see how well his self-control held.

'And you can prove these transgressions?' Vasudeva asked.

Kamsa shrugged. 'There were several witnesses. Hundreds. Take your pick.'

He gestured vaguely at the mounted contingent behind him, still seated astride their horses until their leader dismounted.

Vasudeva kept his eyes on Kamsa. 'And if I question your word and produce witnesses of my own?' He added sharply: 'Survivors of your "treaty" raids who will counter your claims and give witness that you were the transgressors, entering unlawfully into our lands, giving no notice of your approach, grossly violating all rules of Kshatriya dharma, slaughtering unarmed innocents, including children and the old and infirm, and abusing our women ... If I provide this countermanding evidence, what would you say then?'

Kamsa shrugged, looking away from Vasudeva. For a milk-sodden cowherd, the man had a manner that was unquestionably king-like and commanding. He could see how the Vrishni had developed a reputation for leadership. Vasudeva reminded Kamsa of his father when Kamsa was young and soft and Ugrasena

was one of the toughest military commanders in all Aryavarta, notorious for his campaigns of conquest.

‘You can drag out anyone you want, claim anything,’ Kamsa said. ‘As crown prince and heir of Mathura and military commander of her armies, I am answerable to no one. I pass my judgements based on my observations and conclusions. No so-called witness or survivor can question my actions.’

‘But I can.’

The statement was simply spoken, with no trace of challenge or defiance. Yet, the steel in that statement was undoubted. Vasudeva’s face was like a granite carving, his eyes shining like beacons. ‘I am the king of the Sura Yadava nation, lord of the Vrishnis. It was I who signed the peace treaty with your father, King Ugrasena. I stamped my seal on the terms and conditions of the treaty. I have every right to question your actions and intentions.’

Kamsa raised his eyes to meet Vasudeva’s. The atmosphere on the grounds had suddenly changed. Not a sound could be heard anywhere along the length and breadth of the clearing: every single man was watching and listening.

‘Are you calling me a liar, Lord Vasudeva?’ Kamsa asked softly.

Vasudeva looked at him with an unblinking gaze. He seemed to be considering, weighing, debating. Though his face remained calm and composed, it was evident that a great battle was raging within his soul. Even his companion turned to glance quickly,

searchingly at his lord, as if wondering what his next words might be. Finally, truce was declared as the prudent side won out over the other.

‘I am asking you to uphold the peace,’ Vasudeva said. ‘To return to Mathura at once, with all your forces, and leave the policing of this side of the river to me. This is my territory to control, not yours. You are here without my authorization or permission. I request you kindly ...’ he raised his hands and joined them together in a sincere namaskar, ‘... I beseech

you, as one king to another, to let me control and police my people myself. Go now, at once, and kindly give my eternal love and best wishes to your father and mother as well. The Sura nation and Andhaka nation are now allies and neighbours at peace. I beg you, let us stay in peace.'

There was a long, deafening silence after this pronouncement. Vasudeva remained standing on the cart with his hands joined in namaskar, head bowed.

Kamsa heard the distant calling of birds across the clearing and, out of the corner of his eyes, glimpsed a flight of kraunchyas rising from the forest and taking to the skies in a long-wheeling half circle.

Every man on the field had heard – or been informed about through word of mouth – Vasudeva's unequivocal command couched in humility, and was now waiting with bated breath for Kamsa's response.

thirteen

Kamsa's first instinct was to draw his sword and lunge at Vasudeva. A natural-born warrior with an athletic disposition and the easy, instinctive familiarity with the physics of combat, he knew that by spurring his horse with a quick jab of his bladed heels, he could leap forward, slash at a diagonal upward angle, and cut off Vasudeva's head with one powerful stroke. It would require control of his shoulder to avoid straining the muscle and he would have to stand on the stirrups to extend his reach and force, but it could be done. He had done it before – often. The companion would be no trouble at all. The moment Kamsa acted, the instinct for self-preservation would force his men to follow suit. The man's torso would bristle with arrows in an instant.

But something stayed his hand. Something he had never encountered before in his young experience. For, despite his long history of cruelties, Kamsa was barely more than a boy, hardly eighteen summers of age. Apart from magnificent physical strength and robustness, he was also gifted with an exceptional ability to perceive what others around him were feeling at any given moment.

He had never known such ambivalence in his soldiers.

He could feel, to his astonishment, that the vast majority of them actually desired that he concede to Vasudeva's request. He sensed also their respect and admiration for this simple cowherd who, even though the ruler of a nation no less rich and powerful than his own, could dress and travel and speak with simplicity and utter fearlessness. Had Vasudeva come here with a contingent of heavily armed warriors and all pomp and ceremony, he would not have commanded such respect. But by riding in on a simple uks cart with a solitary companion, unarmed and unshielded, and by daring to address Kamsa and asking him to go back in no uncertain terms, he had won their respect and love. This was courage, Kamsa realized with seething resentment. True courage. To go unarmed before an army and still make one's demands without fear of consequences. In that instant, he hated Vasudeva bitterly enough to want to see him trampled under his horse's hooves until no bone in his body was anything more than gristle in the dirt.

He knew that were he to attack Vasudeva, the hatred his men felt for him, for his ways and actions, would only increase. Yet he felt he had no choice. He could not back down from such a clear pronouncement. Either he did as Vasudeva said and lost face, or they argued and debated like old men at Council until Vasudeva reeled out more arguments and witness accounts and facts and figures to prove

him a liar, or he did what he always did: Prevail. By any means necessary.

He unsheathed his sword and pointed it at Vasudeva. A held breath greeted his action as every man watching and listening prepared for the inevitable violence that must ensue.

But, instead of attacking as he usually did – always did, in fact – he only said, in a tone that was deceptively calm and masked the rage and resentment simmering inside: ‘By threatening me and casting aspersions on my righteous actions, you violate the terms of the treaty, Vasudeva. As of this moment, I declare the peace treaty to be broken by you! The Andhaka nation is now at war once again with the Sura nation! All cooperation extended to you thus far is taken back. You are enemies of our state and your presence here is an affront to our nation’s self-respect. I command you to surrender yourselves as prisoners of war or face the consequences!’

For the first time, Vasudeva seemed to lose his composure. ‘This is preposterous,’ he said, frowning. ‘You do not have authority to cancel the treaty, nor can it be cancelled thus, summarily. It took years to broker this peace accord and no amount of bluster or threats will affect its sanctity. The peace accord stands. If you wish to move against me, then that is your choice. But note first that I carry no weapons, nor come with armed companions. I mean you no harm. I come in peace only to speak with you and request you to leave in peace. Once again, I beg you, do not misinterpret my words. Just leave us in peace and let us live together as neighbours, as allies, as brothers.’

At that moment, something strange happened. As Kamsa stared at Vasudeva, feeling pure hatred surge through him for his glib talk and smooth speeches, he saw a peculiar phenomenon. A circle of white light appeared around Vasudeva’s face, glowing like a garland of white blossoms. The light was tinged with blue at the corona, and he could not discern its origins or nature. He rubbed his eyes, frowning and grimacing as he tried to clear his vision. But the ring of light stayed.

He was about to speak, to demand of Vasudeva whether he was attempting to use sorcery against him, and to remind him that the use of maya was forbidden in Aryavarta, as it had been since the reign of Rama Chandra of Ayodhya, when suddenly the world around him went black as night, and a deafening silence descended on the world.

His horse whinnied, reacting to the phenomenon, and he realized with a shock that whatever it was, could be seen by the steed as well. It was not just *his* imagination.

He looked around.

The night-black darkness that had descended was not an absence of light. It was the presence of some dark force. He could feel its power, singing and thrumming as he looked around, reverberating at the edge of hearing, flickering at the periphery of vision. He could still sense his soldiers on the field around

him, or their presence at least. But the blackness hummed and buzzed like a dense swarm of bees, blocking clear sight.

The only thing he could see was Vasudeva's face, ringed by that bluish-white light, as if disembodied and detached from everything else. It floated before Kamsa, looking down at him, and in Vasudeva's eyes he beheld the same bluish tint, as if the same eerie light glowed *within* Vasudeva!

It took all his effort and skill to hold his horse steady, patting its neck, keeping the reins – pressed low against its mane – in check. Months of harsh treatment and regular whippings had taught the stallion not to risk angering its master, and it subsided reluctantly, still snickering nervously and rolling its eyes as it tried to make sense of the unnatural change that had come across its vision.

Then a voice spoke. Deep, vibrant, booming. It echoed inside Kamsa's head, the sonorous richness of its bass quality hurting his auditory nerves. He could feel it reverberate inside his chest. It spoke a single word that filled his entire being.

Kamsa.

‘Kamsa looked around fearfully. There was nothing to be seen. The voice was coming from everywhere, from nowhere, from beyond the world, from within himself.

Kill him. Kill thine enemy or he will destroy you over time.

The thrumming of the darkness enveloping Kamsa and his horse suddenly grew more frenzied, like a wind whipping itself up to gale proportions.

He? This cowherd? Kamsa thought scornfully. *He couldn't destroy a calf born with three legs.*

Do not underestimate him. He is no simple cowherd.

Kamsa stared at Vasudeva’s floating face, ringed by blue light.

He is the means by which Vishnu incarnate will enter this world to destroy you.

Kamsa swallowed. *Me? Why would the Great Preserver bother with a mere prince of Mathura?*

Because you are no mere prince, either. You have a great destiny. Yours will be the hand that will lead Mathura to supremacy over the whole of Aryavarta.

Kamsa liked the sound of that. *If so, what do I have to fear from a mere cow—?*

Even before he finished, the gale around him increased to the intensity of a storm. The horse began to buck, terrified now. Kamsa held it firmly, forcing it to remain in place with an effort.

Destroy him. Or be destroyed! The choice is yours.

And as suddenly as it had appeared, the phenomenon vanished. One moment, a black wind

raged around him like a storm on a monsoon night. The next, he was sitting on his startled horse in the midst of the clearing, surrounded by a thousand of his best soldiers, facing Vasudeva on his uks cart. He glanced around. Nobody else seemed to have witnessed the extraordinary event, although he saw Vasudeva's companion staring at him curiously, as if wondering if he was mad.

Kamsa's mind felt as clear as a fresh pool in sunlight. He knew now that no amount of talk or wrangling would suffice. All came down to a simple choice: he either gave in to Vasudeva or opposed him.

Since when had he given in to anyone, let alone a mere cowherd?

He grinned, and at the sight of those brilliant white teeth flashing in the afternoon sunshine, his men stirred uneasily, already knowing his mind.

Kamsa unsheathed and raised his sword in one swift action, the steel ringing loud in the silent afternoon. He roared loudly enough to be heard from one end of the clearing to the other, before spurring his horse the few yards to Vasudeva's cart.

‘KILL THEM BOTH!’

fourteen

Initially, Vasudeva saw *something* occur to Kamsa, though he was not sure what it was. For an instant or two, it was as if the world went dark and a black storm surrounded him and the Andhaka prince. He saw Kamsa staring as if in a daze: wild-eyed, struggling to control his panicking horse.

So the horse can sense what Kamsa is sensing as well ... But nobody else can ... not even Akrur, Vasudeva thought. *What does it mean?*

When the booming voice began to speak, even Vasudeva was startled. It was clearly directed at Kamsa, yet he heard it too, quite distinctly. He had never encountered something of this sort before ... or perhaps he had.

He recalled the sensation that had struck him when Kamsa had flung the barbed spear at him in Mathura. The way the world had seemed to reduce to only a few yards: only he and Kamsa contained within a shell, surrounded by roaring, rushing wind. Beyond the roaring wind, he knew that the world still existed, but within that space, there was only Kamsa, he and the flying spear. And then a white streak had flashed before his eyes, tinged with blue at the centre, and the spear had embedded itself into the light!

It struck home as hard as if it had struck flesh and bone and, for a moment, Vasudeva had thought it had hit *his* flesh and bone. He had looked down at his chest, certain he would see the spear protruding, his life-blood spilling out onto the marbled floor of the Andhaka palace. Instead, he saw the tip of the spear in the distance, captured by the white-and-blue light, as securely as a dragonfly in amber.

Then the roaring wind had receded, bringing back the sounds and cacophony of the mortal world, and Kamsa had attempted to dislodge the spear, to twist and pull and turn it – without success. And Vasudeva had known instinctively that were he to reach down and grasp the pole of the weapon, it would come free of the insubstantial light easily.

He had done so, and been rewarded with success. As he took hold of the spear, the white-and-blue light had dissipated. He saw motes of blue

drifting away, sparkling like starlight on a moonless night; then they were gone.

Something similar had occurred now. Kamsa and he had once more been detached from the mortal world by some supernatural force, and he had seen that blue light glow around himself again. He had also seen fear flash in Kamsa's hot-red eyes as Ugrasena's son also recognized what was happening. Then the voice had spoken, urging, commanding, demanding ... and Kamsa's fear was replaced by malevolence.

The world cracked back to life, like a tree split by lightning.

The sound of a thousand soldiers roaring with shocked emotion struck him like a wave. They were roaring, not out of battle rage, for this was no army they were facing on a field of war. They were roaring with outrage at their own prince's actions.

Mingled with their outrage and shock was the warrior's throaty rasp of blind rage. Theirs not to question why; theirs but to kill or die. Their *prince*, their *commander*, had spoken his orders, and with Kamsa, it was either follow and obey without question or be killed without question.

And so they all leaped forward, encircling the two unarmed and defenceless men on the uks cart.

A thousand against two.

Had slaughter ever been this simple?

Vasudeva heard Akrur's cry of outrage and

frustration. His friend had warned him against precisely this event. He had expected no less of Kamsa. Vasudeva felt sad that Akrur had been proven right and he, Vasudeva, so disastrously wrong. Yet he took consolation from the fact that he was not the one who was wrong. It was Kamsa who had chosen to act against dharma. Kamsa's actions here would be

condemned by Kshatriyas everywhere; and after Vasudeva's and Akrur's death under such grossly unfair and unacceptable conditions – two unarmed men cut down by a thousand belligerent soldiers –the Suras and Bhojas would unite against the Andhakas.

The war that would follow would be to the bitter end, for no Yadava, let alone a Vrishni, could stomach such adharma. Kamsa would be destroyed in time by his own precipitous folly. And Vasudeva and Akrur would be held up as martyrs.

But I do not wish to be martyred, Vasudeva thought sadly. I came not to die but to win peace for my people using non-violence. Is this your justice, Lord? Is this how you treat your children who desire peace? Then why should not every Arya raise a sword and let a steel edge speak instead of his tongue?

And then Kamsa came at him, standing on the stirrups of his horse, sword raised at a diagonal, the slashing blade aimed at Vasudeva's neck.

Vasudeva raised his hand instinctively. He was unaware that he held his crook in his hand, the cowherd's crook he carried everywhere when travelling. It had been lying across his lap on the journey here and he had used it to swish away flies from the haunches of the uks a couple of times on the way to the camp. Other than that, it merely lay there, virtually forgotten.

Now, he raised his hand and the crook rose with it.

The blade of Kamsa's descending sword met the length of the crook. Two broad inches of finely honed Mithila steel, sharpened well enough to split the sturdiest body armour, struck an inch-thick yew stick, veined and cracked with age, for it had been Vasudeva's father's crook before him, and who knew

when *he* had picked up the frail branch of a tree fallen to the ground while tending to his cattle and cut and shaped it, and how many decades it had

served both father and son.

The warrior's sword met the cowherd's stick. And the sword shattered. For a moment, the world stood still. The roaring

of the thousand soldiers died away to silence. Each pair of eyes was transfixed. Every face turned. Every voice stilled.

As if time itself had stopped, the earth paused in its turning, the sun and wind and heavens stood transfixed as well; the sword struck the crook and dissolved. It didn't break into pieces or shards or even splinters ...

Dust.

One moment, a beautifully lethal Mithila sword, capable of hacking easily through Vasudeva's neck, or halfway through the trunk of a yard-thick sala trunk in a single stroke, was descending to accomplish its butcher's work. The next instant, it had shattered to powder.

Only the hilt remained in Kamsa's hand; and the battle cry in his throat.

The cry dried up as well.

As he swung the sword, the dissipation of the blade, the lack of impact and his own considerable strength almost toppled him off the horse. He held his seat, then stared at Vasudeva as his horse, spurred on, trotted past the uks cart a yard or three, turned abruptly and finished a complete circle before coming to a halt beside the cart. Kamsa stared at Vasudeva's neck in stunned incomprehension.

Then he turned his eyes to the hilt of the sword in his fist. Bejewelled, intricately carved with the sigil of the Andhakas, finely worked by the most illustrious craftsmen of the kingdom.

Now merely an objet d'art, to be mounted on a marble cup and displayed in a museum, utterly useless as a weapon.

He stared at the hilt in disbelief, blinking.

All around him, his soldiers stared as well.

Then he looked at Vasudeva again, who was lowering the crook to his lap.

A few specks of silvery dust were still swirling in the air, and as Kamsa gazed at Vasudeva – along with a thousand Andhaka soldiers – the flecks swirled round, rose up and were carried away by the wind. They were tinted with blue, and sparkled as they dissipated.

fifteen

Fury rose in Kamsa like bile in a drunkard's gorge.

He reached down and yanked out a javelin from its sheath. It too was finely wrought and bejewelled at the hilt, his sigil carved into the base. He always left one such javelin at the site of any place he attacked – standing on the chest of the chief or leader of the enemy as a symbol of his conquest.

He raised the javelin, hooked it in his armpit, like a lance, and kicked his horse forward. He charged at the uks cart, aiming the javelin at Vasudeva's chest, screaming as loudly as he could.

This time, there was no answering roar from his soldiers. They were still too stunned by the shattering of the sword.

But as the point of the javelin plunged directly at Vasudeva's chest, the cowherd chieftain raised his crook again, barely a few inches, and

countered the powerful lunging weapon with barely enough force to push back a gnat.

It was force enough.

The point of the javelin shattered, the pole itself splintering into a dozen shards. The pieces fell to the ground, some knocking woodenly against the forward right wheel of the uks cart before tumbling to the ground. Only the base remained in Kamsa's armpit – a jagged edge poking out – and a small piece in his fist. He stared at it in disgust as he rode past the cart, turning his mount around again, then tossed it aside. It was good for no more than starting a fire now. He had brought down elephants with that javelin, men by the dozen.

And yet his arm and body thrummed as if he had struck against a stone wall. His fingers were numb from the impact, his armpit and shoulder sore from the force of the strike. He had struck armoured shields with lances at top riding speed and experienced less pain than with this impact.

He stared at Vasudeva in fury. The Vrishni had an expression of frank wonder on his face, as if he too could not understand how what was happening was happening. Kamsa desired nothing more than to smash that face, demolish that expression.

Kamsa turned to look around. He saw a mace in the hands of one of his soldiers, a burly, muscled fellow who had been exercising with the weapon as his men often did, swinging it round over their head to build upper-body bulk and strength.

Kamsa rode over and, without a word, snatched the mace from the man's hands. The soldier stepped back to avoid being knocked down by Kamsa's horse, lost his balance and fell into the mud. Kamsa turned back, the soldier already forgotten, and hefted the mace in his left hand – the right was still numb and senseless from the impact of the javelin.

He roared with rage, and rode straight at the uks cart. He saw the whites of the eyes of Vasudeva's friend, who was as shocked as Kamsa's soldiers, but with a notable difference: the soldiers were merely watching as spectators; Vasudeva's companion was in the firing line of Kamsa's assaults. Kamsa saw the man flinch as he rode straight at the cart, swinging the mace overhead in a classic mace attack approach, then flung and released it.

The mace flew through the air barely three yards or so.

It ought to have caught Vasudeva in the chest, neck and jaw, shattering bone, smashing flesh and battering the heart to pulp. It was meant to be a death blow. The mace weighed no less than half a hundred kilos. Flung with that force from a galloping horse, it would have struck Vasudeva with ten times that weight on impact.

Vasudeva raised his crook just in time to meet the oncoming mace.

It turned to pulp.

Kamsa saw the solid metal crumple as if striking against a house-sized boulder, heard the sound of the metal being crushed, and saw the mace wilt like a flower sprayed with poison. It thumped to the ground, no more than a piece of twisted metal.

Kamsa roared his fury.

Then he turned and pointed at the company of archers who stood staring in disbelief at the extraordinary proceedings.

‘ARCHERS! RAISE YOUR BOWS!’

He had to repeat the order twice more before they obeyed; even so, they moved sluggishly, like men under water. One of them remained gaping open-mouthed and Kamsa vented his fury by pulling out another javelin from its sheath on his saddle and flinging it at the man. The javelin

punched through the archer's neck and came out the other side in an explosion of blood and gristle, almost decapitating the man. His body fell, shuddering and spitting blood from the horrific wound for several moments, accompanied by a wet gurgling sound as the air in his lungs was expelled out of the severed throat. After that, the archers moved more efficiently, their years of training and relentless discipline taking over their numbed minds.

'AIM!' Kamsa shouted. The target was obvious.

The officer commanding the company of archers called out in alarm. 'Sire, if we miss our mark, we shall hit our own!' The danger was obvious: in a field crowded with their own compatriots, the arrows were bound to overshoot their mark and strike friendly bodies.

Kamsa didn't care. 'LOOSE!' he cried.

White-faced and blinking, the archers let loose their arrows.

Over three dozen longbow arrows flew through the air at Vasudeva and his companion. This time, Vasudeva did not even bother to raise the crook. There was no way he could block forty arrows with a single stick.

But he faced the barrage calmly. His face had progressed from the expression of wonderment that Kamsa had seen earlier to a look of acceptance. It was almost beatific in its calmness.

The arrows shattered in mid-air as if striking an invisible wall.

Blue light sparked where their points struck nothingness.

Vasudeva's companion flinched, then stared around in amazement as splinters fell around them in a harmless shower.

Kamsa screamed with frustration. 'AGAIN!' he cried. 'LOOSE AGAIN!' Another barrage. The same result. Kamsa lost his senses completely.

He pointed at the cart, yelling, ‘ATTACK! KILL THEM BOTH!’

But not a soldier moved on the field. The archers lowered their bows, ashen-faced. Those nearest to the cart gazed up in amazement. Several joined their palms together in namaskar, as if paying darshan to a deity in a temple.

Kamsa rode forward, striking these men down, crushing them under his horse’s hooves.

He whipped others, roared again and again. ‘ATTACK! I COMMAND IT. ATTACK!’

But not one man of the thousand moved to obey.

Kamsa rode around in a red rage, killing and maiming his own men. Unable to get them to respond to his commands, he took a fresh sword and hacked them down where they stood. He killed at random, not bothering to check if the man was dead, leaving many mortally wounded. None cried out, none protested. All gazed at Vasudeva and joined their palms in awe, dying without argument.

sixteen

Finally, with dozens of his own soldiers lying in bloody splotches on the field, Kamsa’s anger dissipated.

He leaned over the mane of his horse, pressing his hand down on its neck, the blade of his sword dripping blood. He was more exhausted than after a battle.

He looked up at Vasudeva at last.

‘I accept,’ he said in a voice unlike himself. ‘I will respect the terms of the treaty.’

He gave the command to break camp and return to Mathura. His soldiers obeyed with evident relief, glancing back with fearful respect at the uks cart as they gathered their implements and weapons, and prepared for the journey home. The men spoke in hushed voices of the miracle they had witnessed, of the will of the devas, of the great hand of Vishnu that had protected Vasudeva from Kamsa’s adharmic attack. For Vasudeva’s devotion to dharma was legendary, and while Yama was Lord of Death and Dharma, it was Vishnu, in his many avatars, who was the ultimate upholder of dharma. The Sword of Dharma, as some called him. There were many who whispered that Vasudeva was no less than Vishnu’s amsa on prithviloka, descended to restore dharma on the earth.

A little later, Kamsa’s battalion was riding homewards.

Vasudeva and Akrur sat in the centre of the empty field, scarcely able to believe what they had accomplished.

The last stragglers disappeared from sight, their passing lit by the fading saffron glow of the setting sun.

Vasudeva turned to Akrur. ‘When we set out this morning ...’ he began. Then stopped.

Akrur was looking at Vasudeva with brimming eyes. They shone in the sunset like golden orbs. He joined his palms in namaskar and bowed his head. He touched Vasudeva’s feet.

‘My Lord,’ he said, ‘forgive me for having doubted you. I did not recognize you in this mortal guise.’

Vasudeva clicked his tongue impatiently. ‘Come now, Akrur. You have known me since we were both boys with snotty noses. I am no amsa of Vishnu. I am merely a mortal man, like you.’

Akrur shook his head. ‘No mortal man could accomplish what I witnessed today.’

Vasudeva nodded. ‘I confess I cannot explain how or why this happened. But even so, I would credit this miracle to my conviction in the power of dharma and my belief in ahimsa. I came here determined to convince Kamsa without resorting to violence, and I succeeded. Today’s victory is a triumph of dharma and pacifism.’

‘Whatever name you give to it, Bhaiya, it was a miracle. Call it a miracle of dharma or Vishnu’s hand intervening. Either way, you are a deva among men. Of that, there is no doubt at all.’

Vasudeva smiled ruefully. ‘I am a deva only by name. But if my sense of dharma pleases the gods and helps me serve my people, so be it.’ He looked around at the empty field. ‘At least, I think Kamsa will not come again to *these* parts to do his wicked work.’

Akrur made a sound of disgust. ‘Rakshasa. The way he butchered his own men! I wish you had killed him.’

Vasudeva had taken the reins from Akrur. He clucked his tongue, driving the uksan forward, starting the journey back home. ‘Had I done so, I would have been no better than he. Nay, Akrur. I think what transpired today was a shining example of the power of peace over the path of violence. Violence only begets more violence. Peace ends violence. Had I slain Kamsa today, his people would still have had just cause in attacking my people again, and yet again, the cycle continuing endlessly. By not raising

a weapon or causing anyone harm, I proved my point more effectively than a dozen battles could ever have done.'

'This is true,' Akrur acknowledged. 'I do not think we shall see Prince Kamsa again on this side of the river!' He laughed. 'Who knows, he may even have to retire from warmongering forever. I don't think his men will follow him with any modicum of respect from now on; what do you say?'

Vasudeva smiled. 'He might have some difficulty in that regard.'

Their laughter rose above the treetops as the uks cart clattered and rattled down the bumpy path, mingling with the cries of birds seeking their nests for the night. The news they carried back that night would occasion celebrations across the Sura nation, jubilation at the departure of Kamsa and his plundering army and the prevention of what had seemed to be certain war with the Andhakas.

Sadly, they were mistaken in their assumptions, their confidence misplaced.

The worst was yet to come.

seventeen

Kamsa eethed on the ride homewards.

He could not believe he had been bested by a gowala, a mere *govinda*, a milk-sodden cowherd armed with nothing more than a crook. His head still

spun from what had transpired. He rode alone, even his fellow marauders avoiding him for fear that he might take out his frustration and bitterness on them: he tended to be harshest on those he was closest to at such times. The rows upon rows of cavalry and foot-soldiers straggled on towards Mathura, attempting to keep their voices low to avoid incurring their commander's wrath, but not wholly succeeding.

Kamsa heard snatches of talk everywhere, always about Vasudeva and the 'chamatkar' they had witnessed. He knew that the incident would become a great legend over time, and that it had already damaged his leadership badly. He had held his army together by brute force and fear of his own viciousness. They obeyed him because he was their lord and because they believed that none other could stand up to his brutal belligerence in battle. Now that someone had stood up to him, and triumphed so successfully, they had no reason to fear him any more. Yadavas were too independent minded to enjoy the rugged discipline and command structure of a standing army; if he could not hold these men together, they would soon drift back into their traditional occupations. And if he could not keep his core contingent together, the army at large would lose morale as well.

What had happened was an unmitigated disaster. There was no other way to look at it. He was still badly shaken by it. Outwardly, he succeeded in keeping up appearances. Inwardly, he was trembling with shock. How had Vasudeva done it? It was impossible! Yet it had happened in front of his very eyes. He had tested it every which way he could think of, and found no trickery, nothing to indicate maya or sorcery.

But if not sorcery, then what?

The other explanation, the one his soldiers were bandying about, was too preposterous to consider for even a moment. Hand of Vishnu indeed! As if almighty Vishnu would reach down from vaikunthaloka and protect a simple Vrishni clan- chieftain!

But what else could have accomplished such a feat?

He was still lost in his own morose thoughts when his horse whickered and came to a halt, stamping its feet.

Kamsa looked up to see what was obstructing his way.

A sadhu. A penitent hermit clad in trademark tattered ochre robes, resting his weight on a rough staff. But unlike most tapasvis, he had no flowing white beard or the stick-thin body of one who had wasted away through prolonged fasting and self-deprivation.

Kamsa's horse whinnied uneasily and shied away from the man. Kamsa tightened his already strong grip on the reins, pulling the horse's head down, yanking the bit hard enough to cut its mouth to remind it of the consequences of acting up. It settled reluctantly, but he could see its eyes looking off to one side, rolling to show their whites, as if afraid of the man who stood in its path.

Kamsa frowned down at the sadhu. 'Old Brahmin,' he said impatiently, 'get out of my way. Do you know who I am?'

The sadhu looked up at him imperiously with that supremely arrogant Brahminical look of superiority that Kamsa had loathed ever since he was a boy.

Ugrasena-putra, Padmavati-putra, your end is nigh.

Kamsa's horse reacted before he did, bucking hard. It took a few sharp applications of the stick and some forceful twisting of its mouth to keep it from bolting. Only then did Kamsa allow himself to feel the shock that had struck him the instant that booming bass voice had resounded in his ear.

It's the same voice, the one that spoke to me on the field before I attacked Vasudeva.

He was overcome by a powerful urge to spur his mount on and run the Brahmin over. But the horse was acting very strangely now; it persisted in shying and whickering incessantly despite his repeated warnings to it. It was trying desperately to twist its head away from the old Brahmin. Kamsa raised his stick and was about to administer a harsh reminder of his mastery when he saw something that further chilled his heart.

The old man cast no shadow!

The sun was off to their front and to the right, low in the sky, casting long shadows behind them. The old Brahmin's shadow ought to have stretched from where he stood, down towards Kamsa, leaning diagonally to the left. That was how the shadows of the trees and passing soldiers on either side were falling, moving and distorting as they intermingled. But where the old man stood, with everyone leaving a clear berth for Kamsa to ride along, there was not so much as a whisper of a shadow.

‘What are you?’ Kamsa cried out, suddenly feeling more apprehensive than he had felt at any other time. The encounter with Vasudeva had shaken him to the core, disturbing him more deeply than he had realized. He understood that this was no ordinary being because he had seen his horse’s reaction, the lack of a shadow and the obvious way his soldiers were paying no attention to the old man standing just a few yards ahead – as if they did not see any old man standing there at all.

He suddenly wished he were anywhere but here.

I am Narada, said the Brahmin, one of the original saptarishis, the Brahmarishis who walked the mortal realm when it was newly created; we were here before men and asuras and amsas and avatars and all other manner of beings. We were giants then and we lived inside the earth.

Kamsa found himself unable to speak.

The old rishi peered up at his face and nodded, his ancient face creasing in what might have once passed for a look of amusement.

You are not as feeble-minded as some think. You have already fathomed that I am here only in spirit, not flesh.

‘Bhoot,’ Kamsa said, the word emerging as a croak from his throat, ‘preth.’

Narada-muni’s face wrinkled in that almost-a- smile again, taking on an almost sinister cast.

Neither ghost nor ghoul. Merely traversing between planes on an errand. Usually, I would use a vortal to pass from one world to the next. But today’s errand required a different means.

‘Vortal,’ Kamsa repeated mechanically. He seemed incapable of saying anything original. A band of his marauders passed on the left, their chatter dying out as they registered their lord standing in the middle of the clearing, staring and speaking to..apparently no one.

A kind of portal that enables one to travel between worlds. But vortals require a physical movement from one universe to the other. They also have specific laws governing them, such as the Law of the Balance.

‘Balance,’ Kamsa croaked. His horse had subsided and now hung its head to one side, eyes white, mouth frothing. It seemed to have resigned itself to certain death or perhaps even some far worse fate.

So I used a mirror.

‘Mirror,’ Kamsa whispered, barely audible.

What you see here is merely a reflection of my physical form. That is why I cast no shadow and why, if you were to ride forward now, you would pass through this image of me as easily as through a cloud of smoke. My voice is projected astrally into your brain, which is why you hear me.

‘Astrally,’ Kamsa said, starting to feel afraid. Very, very afraid.

Suddenly, Narada-muni's face grew sombre.

Enough preamble. The reason I am here, Kamsa, son of Ugrasena and Padmavati, is to impart valuable knowledge and advice to you. I know of your failure against Vasudeva, despite my exhortations to kill him. That is why I have resorted to this method to relay my message to you. Heed my words well, for what I am about to say will serve you well in the days and years to come. It may even save your life and enable you to accomplish the great ambition you harbour in your heart. The ambition to be the emperor of the entire world. That is what you desire, is it not?

This time, Kamsa could not speak even a single word. He merely nodded vigorously.

Narada dipped his ancient visage in response.

So heed me well. I shall tell you that which will change your life and make the impossible possible. Pay attention to every word I say now, for I am about to hand you your future on a golden tray. The world shall unfold before you like a lotus in water, offering itself freely. You shall be the king of all prithviloaka as you desire. Every dream shall be realized, every enemy destroyed, every ambition fulfilled.

Kamsa was surprised to hear his voice ask hoarsely: 'Why?'

Narada looked just as surprised.

He raised his head, frowning, turning his vast, sloping forehead into an ancient crumpled leather map that had been folded too small too many times.

Why, you ask, impudent fool! I am about to gift you the secret by which you will rule the world and you question why I do so?

He seemed about to lose his temper, the legendary temper of Brahmarishis. Both Kamsa and his horse cringed, but Narada visibly

regained control of himself.

It doesn't matter. Some day I shall return, in person, and demand of you guru-dakshina, as is my right, and you shall grant me my wish without hesitation or question. Does that answer your 'why'?

Kamsa, eyes wide with shock and fear, nodded several times more than necessary. Passing soldiers glanced at him curiously, then looked at each other. Their commander was known for his eccentricities and extreme behaviour, but this was unlike even him: standing in the middle of the woods, staring white-faced at nothing, and making absurd gestures! Perhaps defeat at the hands of Vasudeva had loosened the last hinge on the door.

For now, all you need to do is listen and do as I say. Exactly as I say. Precisely as I say. Do you follow me, boy?

Kamsa nodded vigorously again, his chin striking the armourplate on his chest more than once.

Narada nodded, satisfied. Then he began to speak:

The first thing you will do ...

eighteen

Days later, Kamsa stood on a rocky escarpment and looked out towards the distant spires of a great city.

Magadha.

A kingdom so rich and powerful and strong at arms that the thought of ever overrunning it by force had never even occurred to him. Yet, because of its strategic position, Magadha was a crucial player in the politics of Aryavarta.

Ever since his mortal father Ugrasena's days of warmongering, Kamsa had heard its name uttered with respect, fear or frustration, often all three in the same breath. He had often fantasized of standing on this very rise, with a great army behind him, akshohinis upon akshohinis spread out for yojanas, sufficient to cast terror into the heart of any king; of falling upon the great city like a bear upon an unsuspecting prey, crushing it before it could utter a single cry or flail out. For that was the only way that Magadha could be taken: by an enormous force and completely by surprise. Anything else would result in failure and ruin.

Now, here he was, alone, exhausted from the long ride. He hadn't told anybody where he was going. The instant Brahmarishi Narada's instructions were completed, as per those very instructions, he had turned his panicked horse and ridden off without a word, gesture or backward glance.

Several of his rioters had caught up with him shortly after, shouting to ask him what he desired of them. He had waved them back furiously, and, when they still followed, he had shot arrows at them from his shortbow, turning in the saddle and aiming above their heads. They had understood then, and had slowed to watch him ride on.

Had the encounter with Vasudeva not occurred a short while ago, they would almost certainly have tailed him despite his violent objection, if only because it was their sworn duty as well as their dharma to protect the heir to the crown and the king-in-waiting. But the encounter had unnerved

them, and his behaviour made them assume he needed some time to himself.

Kamsa suspected they would have set up camp and would be waiting for him to return, and might even send out regular patrols to see where he had gone and to observe him from a distance.

The thought of riding into Magadha on his own, without anyone to back him up, was so far removed from anything he had ever thought or dreamt of, it seemed absurd now. And foolish. He actually feared for his life. The shifting politics of the northern kingdoms made it difficult to be certain of one's relationship with one's neighbours. Without a specific treaty or alliance between Mathura and Magadha, he had no way of knowing if his unannounced, unaccompanied arrival would be regarded as an act of hostility or perhaps even an insult. Arya society thrived on parampara and sanskriti – tradition and culture – and the preparation for a royal visit, as well as the pomp and ceremony of the visit in itself, was an important ritual which enabled both lieges to observe, prepare for, judge and measure one another. The royal processions through the streets of the city were, in effect, a parade for the citizens to view and gauge the visiting king's net worth and military strength. A holiday was always declared to enable all to view a royal visit.

Yet, here he was: alone, bearing no gifts, unannounced, and with unclear politics. He knew almost nothing about the ruler of Magadha apart from the fact that he must be a strong and violently decisive ruler, because he wouldn't be able to hold the reins of a kingdom this strong and unwieldy if he was not. But that was like saying a Kshatriya could use a sword.

Yet, Narada-muni's instructions had been crystal clear: *The first thing you will do is go to Magadha ...*

He shivered as that echoing voice reverberated in his memory again. Kicking his horse, he drove it down the slope of the escarpment.

Beast and rider stumbled downwards, leaving a curling trail of dust that rose lazily into the clear light of afternoon. At the bottom of the slope,

they broke into a shambling trot that soon turned into a canter, heading towards the city.

Their progress was noted and then marked by shielded, slitted eyes behind curved visors.

As they approached, the tips of arrows fixed in strung bows followed the head of the rider, eager to be loosened and to embed themselves in his skull.

But the orders were clear and had come from the highest level, down through the ranks:

A single horse and rider will come. Both as pale as milk. They are to be permitted to pass into the city unharmed, untouched. Nobody will speak to the rider except I. Anyone who attempts to speak with him or slow his progress is to be killed on the spot.

Orders were obeyed without question in Magadha. Men were executed for looking too sharply at those giving the orders, let alone questioning or disobeying them.

At the city gates, a pack of dogs that strayed into the rider's path, barking at the stranger, rolled over yelping, then lay still in the dust, their thin bodies riddled with arrows.

People in the streets gave the rider a wide berth, windows were shut hurriedly, doors barred, livestock brought indoors, children shushed.

The soldiers who enforced the curfew – Magadha was constantly under curfew, around the clock, all days and nights of the year – glanced briefly at the dusty, saddle-weary man of obvious royal bearing and garb, careful not to meet his eyes and to look away instantly. Even their horses shied away from the stranger's mount, which was frothing and almost at the end of its strength.

His horse collapsed on a street, eyes rolling back to reveal their whites completely before shuddering one final time and then lying still. The rider kicked it several times, too tired to flay it as he usually would have done back home, then walked the rest of the way. It was obvious that he had neither received food, nor drink, nor rested or slept for several days.

He wandered through bazaars bursting with produce and wares, an explosion of colour and commerce, in open defiance of the curfew. He was too exhausted to marvel at the richness of goods on display or the profusion of choice. As princes were wont to do in those times, he had lived mainly within the circumference of his father's power, the risk of attack or assassination being too great outside his own kingdom for him to travel far. In his childhood years, Kamsa's father had been at war with most of the world, his ferocity tempered only by age and prudence as he had finally given up the campaigns, the conquests and finally even the rivalries and clashes with neighbours, to sign the recent peace treaty. Those long decades of war had made it unwise for Ugrasena's young to be permitted to go very far from Mathura. The end result was that Kamsa had seen very little of the world, and almost all that he had seen, he had either owned or had some power over.

Here, he had no power, no protection, neither any friends or servers.

Had a thousand pairs of eyes not watched him every step of the way, he would have been waylaid a dozen times and killed well before he reached even within sight of the enormous palace gates. Thieves, crooked merchants, corrupt guards ... Magadha seethed with dangers and threats.

Finally, he reached the palace and even his exhaustion and dehydration couldn't stop him from noting that he was neither questioned nor stopped. Spears were turned away, gates opened for him, shields lowered, eyes looked aside ...

At last, he stood in an inner courtyard of the king's private palace, beside a great fountain.

The enormous, carved doors – inlaid with precious gems and decorated with a great sigil worked in battered gold sheets that were so fine as to be embedded in the grain of the wood through great artisanship – swung noiselessly, and were shut and barred with a booming echo.

The first thing you will do is go to Magadha and meet privately with Jarasandha.

He had done as the saptarishi had instructed.

He was in the private palace of one of the most powerful kings of present-day Aryavarta.

He waited to see what happened next.

nineteen

After a fair amount of time, during which the sun passed from one side of the courtyard to the far end, a giant of a man appeared, treading slowly, as if stepping on sharp stones, and stood before Kamsa.

In a shockingly boyish voice, the man said, ‘Come.’

He turned and walked away in large strides, legs wide apart. Kamsa understood he was to follow and passed through to another courtyard, this one festooned with silks of every colour and other lavish decorations. The feminine nature of the adornments suggested that he was entering a

queen's or concubine's chambers, and he was soon rewarded with glimpses of women.

They sat, lay, stood, and reclined in various poses, some on seats or beds, others on marbled floors, several cavorting in pools and fountains. There were hundreds of women, each one more attractive than the other. Never before had Kamsa seen such variety and range of feminine beauty gathered in one place. He had heard of seraglios, of course, and it was said that once even Mathura's kings had palaces filled with beautiful concubines. But that was in ages past. Now, Ugrasena was loyal to his queen to a fault, and, had Kamsa not been born, Padmavati would have been permitted to cohabit with a maharishi in order to produce offspring. The men of Aryavarta were brothers, husbands, sons, lovers ... never patriarchs. All bloodline and inheritance was through Arya women and they were too proud to ever permit themselves to be used as mere objects of pleasure. Kamsa felt a surge of disgust for this wanton display of womanly flesh. He had no doubt that he was deliberately being taken through these parts of the palace in order to be shown the wealth and power and luxuries of the king, and he resented it every step of the way.

Kamsa passed through the palace of women and then through a number of passageways and corridors and courtyards. It seemed to take forever. He was exhausted from the journey and from the bitterness of his humiliation at Vasudeva's hands, and desired nothing more than to eat and drink himself senseless and sleep for days. But that very humiliation and defeat also drove him on, for he was not accustomed to losing, and Narada-muni's extraordinary words had intrigued him and awakened hope in his breast. He felt that his salvation lay here in Magadha, for surely a ruler this powerful and wealthy could be of use to him, the future emperor of the world, if Narada-muni was to be believed.

Finally, the giant with the boy's voice brought him to another courtyard. This one was bare and bereft of any decoration or sign of luxury. It was little more than an enormous rectangular space with overlooking balconies and what appeared to be doorless chambers on every side. He smelled the rank stench of human sweat, blood, piss, shit and the other unmistakable odours of death and battle, and knew at once that he was in a place where

soldiers trained, fought, lived, and died. In a sense, this was home to him, for he lived and breathed war and such places were as natural to him as a mother's breast to an infant.

He stood, blinking in the bright sunlight, and tried to see who was sitting in the shadows of the balconies, watching, but the angle of the sun was in his eyes and he could only see outlines and the gleam of eyes, telling him that several persons were watching from above.

The giant turned to face him, bending down and grabbing a fistful of powdery dirt with which he rubbed his palms as one did to prevent one's grip from slipping in combat. Then he slapped his bulging pectorals, his biceps, his swollen inner thigh muscles, and charged directly at Kamsa.

Kamsa was not taken by surprise. He had been expecting something along these lines ever since he had entered Magadha's city limits. Indeed, he had been surprised that nobody had accosted or challenged him until now. The giant's attack came almost as a relief.

He sidestepped the giant's onrushing advance, turned, kicked at the larger man's legs, dropping him to his knees, then sent him sprawling with a cry of outrage. The giant landed face down in the dust. Kamsa was on his back instantly, grasping his shaven head. The sweaty oil-slicked scalp slipped from his grip the first time but he crooked his elbow around the man's neck, and took firm hold before yanking his arm upwards. The bicep strained as the giant gasped and struggled, feet and arms drumming in furious protest. A cracking resounded and Kamsa felt the massive neck give way. The large body went limp as the man's excretory organs depleted themselves involuntarily. Kamsa lowered the man's head to the dust slowly, extracting his hand, and rose to his feet.

He stood, gazing up at the shadowed balcony, shielding his eyes from the sun which was directly over the balcony and in his eyes.

'Magadha-naresh!' he shouted. 'How many more of your eunuch champions do you wish me to kill before you grant me an audience?'

There was silence at first. Then a soft chuckling came from one of the shadowy balconies. He saw a movement in the shadows and a man's shape took form.

'Mathura-naresh,' a clear mid-pitched voice replied, 'I thought to offer you only a small snack to remove the dust of the road from your palate. Now, if you desire, you may enjoy a fuller repast by feasting on my concubines whom you passed on your way here. They will feed any hungers of the belly you have as well as slake other needs, and bathe and wash you in scented oils and waters and provide you fresh anga-vastras. Then, when you are rested and refreshed, we shall meet again and talk.'

The shadowy silhouette turned away, returning to the darkened recesses of the balcony.

Kamsa saw movement nearby and turned at once to see another eunuch, also a giant, darker skinned than the first one, standing by the archway through which he had been brought to the training area.

'If you will come with me, My Lord,' said the hermaphrodite obsequiously.

Kamsa heard the sound of something heavy scraping on dirt and turned again to see two other eunuchs dragging away their fallen comrade.

'MyLord,' repeated the eunuch by the doorway. 'If you will accompany me ...'

Kamsa ran to one of the pillars that went from the ground up to the roof of the training house. He caught hold of the pillar in a crouching monkey action. Using his hands and feet, he pulled and kicked himself upward, propelling his body with practised ease. In a moment, he was on the upper level, and vaulting over the railing of the balcony. He landed with a gentle thump on the wooden-plank flooring and grinned at the several armed men who turned towards him with expressions of surprise. They drew their swords and daggers instantly but he raised his arms carelessly, grinning.

‘I wish only to exchange words with the lord of Magadha,’ he said, reassuring them.

None of them lowered his blade or moved an inch.

The man who had spoken earlier stepped forward, eyes glinting as he examined Kamsa over the shoulders of his men. ‘I have heard of your impatience, son of Ugrasena,’ said the king of Magadha. ‘But by your rashness, you deny yourself the pleasures of women, wine, food and rest.’

Kamsa shrugged, uncaring of the many blades pointed at him, aware that one wrong move would cost him his life. ‘I care not for the pleasures of wine, women, food or sleep. Time enough for all those when I have sated my first hunger.’

The king of Magadha looked at him speculatively. ‘And what would that be?’

‘To rule the Yadava nations,’ Kamsa said simply.

There was a long pause during which Kamsa could hear the sound of bowmen on the balconies on the far side of the training court pointing arrows at him – he could hear the stretching of the bows as they took aim at his head, neck, heart, liver ...

Then the lord of Magadha laughed softly and came forward, brushing aside his men as if they were wheat stalks in a field. Their blades went down, their eyes averted, to avoid threatening their master.

The king clapped his hands on Kamsa’s dusty shoulders and grinned broadly. ‘You are a man after my own tastes, Kamsa, son of Ugrasena. I think we shall get along very well.’ And he grasped Kamsa’s hand in a vice-like grip, the traditional greeting of warriors, so hard that Kamsa thought his forearm would snap.

‘I am Jarasandha.’

twenty

As the dazed, shaken men of Kamsa's contingent drifted back into Mathura, word spread about Vasudeva's 'miracle' and Kamsa's abject humiliation. The return of his proud marauders, now with lowered heads, silent and sullen, sent ripples of shock and confusion through the rest of Mathura's military forces.

As usually happened in such times, the exact details of the incident grew exaggerated out of all proportion, growing more distorted with each retelling. One version claimed that Vasudeva had expanded his body to the size of a sala tree and flicked Kamsa across the field like a gnat. Another recounted the tale of how Lord Vishnu himself, deeply offended by Kamsa's challenge to him, had invested Vasudeva with his powers so he could teach the Andhaka prince a lesson he would remember forever.

When Kamsa himself did not return, the rumours grew out of control. He had lost his nerve, people said. He had lost his mind, others insisted, quoting witnesses who had seen him talking to a tree in the woods and cringing as if hearing the tree speak. His absence was taken to indicate his deep embarrassment.

It was even assumed by some that he had banished himself rather than return to face his soldiers again.

Ugrasena and Padmavati received the news of Vasudeva's triumph with great elation. They sifted through the exaggerations and understood that something extraordinary had occurred at the camp, and that a thousand of

Kamsa's men had witnessed it and been deeply disturbed by it. They were not concerned about Kamsa's disappearance. Without saying it in so many words, both king and queen were secretly relieved that he had removed himself from the scene. Dealing with his transgressions had been a difficult proposition for them. By going away, he had resolved the issue. Perhaps he would surface again, but at least for a while, Mathura had a season of rest.

The army, disheartened and disturbed by the humiliation and subsequent disappearance of their commander, began to question its existence. What good was a fighting force whose leader could not face and fight a simple cowherd armed with a crook? What point was there in maintaining the legendary iron discipline and rigorous training of Kamsa's Army if the peace treaty was to be upheld to the letter?

Several akshohinis disbanded, soldiers returning home to their families and fields, glad to be tilling the soil or raising livestock instead of slaughtering innocent Yadavas. They kept their spoils, for those had been earned in the course of duty, and took their pay for the time they had spent in Kamsa's service;

but thereafter, they were happier being farmers and citizens rather than soldiers.

The marauders remained in service, for they were soldiers for life. For them, the only retirement was death, the only holiday granted for recovery from grave illness or grievous injury; the only payment, the spoils of war and the largesse of their commander.

They received word from the spasas who had trailed Kamsa in the woods and learnt that he had gone to Magadha. The spasas had not chanced following him into Magadha – they would not have been allowed to pass as he had – and knew not what had transpired inside the city. They could not even tell if Kamsa lived or not. Ever since he had gone into the great kingdom, he had not been heard from or seen again. They tried to glean information from travellers from those parts, but even the citizens of Magadha knew nothing beyond the fact that their king had granted safe

passage to Kamsa and that he had been permitted to enter the palace. Apart from that, not a single scrap of news or information came out of Magadha.

All they knew was that Bana and Canura had also disappeared at around the same time as Kamsa. Some said they had been seen riding south. Others, east. None knew for certain. But they had gone away; that was certain. Everyone assumed that they too had deserted like the rest. After all, as Kamsa's closest friends and advisors, they had committed the lion's share of atrocities and war crimes. In the present mood of Mathura, they would have borne the brunt of the anti-Kamsa wave sweeping the kingdom. The rumour was that they had vanished precisely to avoid this controversy.

After the regular army disbanded, the marauders stepped down as well, disgusted by the breakdown in military discipline and the cavalier, almost festive atmosphere in Mathura. Which is to say, they remained in uniform, occupied barracks, and drilled daily as well, but they no longer patrolled the perimeter of the city or the kingdom's borders. These latter lapses in duty were not their own choice, but on the orders of the king. With Kamsa gone, Ugrasena resumed his duty as their supreme commander, and it was his wish that the marauders be disbanded. They compromised by stepping down temporarily, making it seem as if they were disbanding but, in fact, merely pretending to do so. They remained close to the palace, their fingers on the capital's nerve centre, knowing that if their master returned, he would expect them to be here, ready to serve at a moment's notice.

But with each passing day, their morale ebbed and waned. Held together mainly by Kamsa's obsessive, self-driving ambition, they lacked a cohesive force or motivation now. What if Kamsa never returned? The politics of the Yadava nation were a perpetually shifting quicksand of major and minor interests, some openly conflicting, others intertwined in a complex series of convenient alliances and temporary truces. The longer they stayed loyal to an absent master, the more time they were out of the swirling circuit of contemporary interests.

Already, the resentment that people had felt towards Kamsa's brutalities was being directed towards them, the executors of that brutality. When

they went on their twice-daily patrols of the inner city – a ritual initiated by Kamsa, designed to remind the people as well as the regular conscripts of the superiority of the marauders – they were greeted with abuses, jeers and stones flung at them from rooftops. One night, two of the rear enders in their jogging column were pulled away into dark alleys by anonymous mobs and stabbed to death before they could cry out or fight back. It was only a matter of time before full-scale reprisals were launched against them.

Ugrasena and Padmavati debated briefly over how best to take advantage of this unexpected turn of fortunes. Both happily agreed that the best answer would be to invite Vasudeva to ally with them openly and to fix a date for the proposed wedding of the Sura Yadava king with their stepdaughter Devaki.

Devaki's father, Ugrasena's brother Devaka – after whom Devaki was named as was the custom in Arya royalty – was happy to give his consent. He had been most pleased at the prospect of her matrimonial alliance with Vasudeva and the peace treaty, and most apprehensive once word of Kamsa's misbehaviour had threatened both the alliance as well as his daughter's nuptials. A peace-loving man devoted to bhakti and spirituality, he was thrilled at Kamsa's self-banishment and happily threw a grand feast to celebrate the announcement of the wedding date. The city celebrated with them, and when the auspicious date of the wedding was announced publicly, cheers rang out in the streets. It had been a long time since Mathura had something to celebrate.

Devaki and Vasudeva were both thrilled, of course. ‘I never dreamt you would accomplish so much so easily,’ she said to him when they met in Vrindavan for a walk one evening, chaperoned by Akrur and Devaki’s hawkishly watchful daimaa. This was their last walk before the marriage. After this, they would meet only on the day of the wedding when Vasudeva brought his baarat – the lavish groom’s procession – to her father’s house to claim her.

He smiled, as self-deprecating as always. ‘What had to be had to be,’ he said simply.

‘And I had to be yours,’ she said, then blushed at her own audacity.

He nodded. ‘And I yours as well.’

Only the watchful eyes of their chaperones prevented them from showing their affection more clearly. Soon, the brief hours of their assignation flew by and it was time to go.

‘When I see you again, it shall be as your bride,’ Devaki said, her raven-black eyes brimming.

‘I shall ask the sun to dim his light, as he will not be able to contest your beauty,’ Vasudeva said.

They parted with tears of anticipation. Even the stern wet-nurse, sensitive to her young mistress’ depth of emotion, was quietly sympathetic.

Akrur was equally quiet as he drove the uks cart away from Vrindavan, allowing his friend and king to dwell on the assignation at leisure.

Vasudeva looked back one last time at the idyllic grove. The next time Devaki and he visited it, they would be wife and husband. They would have no need of chaperones then, or care for how they showed their affection for each other. They could quaff as much of Vrindavan’s famous soma or honey wine as they wished, and do with one another as they pleased.

He smiled to himself, looking forward to that day.

He had no way of knowing then that it would never come.

twenty-one

Jarasandha rode with Kamsa through the streets of Magadha, which were devoid of people. Even the merchants and bazaars, traders and whores and people scurrying through the lanes on urgent errands were gone.

Kamsa asked Jarasandha why this was so. The men accompanying the king glanced sharply at Kamsa as if expecting his host to order him cut down on the spot for daring to question their master.

But Jarasandha only smiled and told him that the citizens had cleared the streets on his orders.

Kamsa marvelled at a king who could shut down the business of an entire city simply so he could ride through the streets. He thought of mentioning to Jarasandha that such regal arrogance would never be tolerated in Mathura or any other Yadava nation. Then he recalled that Magadha was not a republic like most Arya kingdoms and kept quiet.

‘Do you know anything about Magadha at all?’ Jarasandha asked as their horses picked their way along narrow, cobbled streets packed on either side with hovels jammed so close to one another that they seemed to share common walls. Some were piled three and four houses high, which made Kamsa think that they might fall at any moment.

He answered his host’s question as best as he could: ‘Only that you take in those who are outlawed and banished by other Arya nations.’

Jarasandha did not nod or acknowledge Kamsa in any way. He was a quiet, lean man, with the appearance and manner of a munshi rather than one of the most powerful kings in the Arya world. Kamsa thought that had he passed him walking on the streets of Mathura, he might have run him over without even realizing he was someone important. But there was no mistaking the power of his grip, or the casual yet supremely confident way

he spoke, and the sense that he saw, heard, and knew everything there was to see, hear and know. The sheer power that he radiated was magnetic. Kamsa had never met anyone whose physical appearance so belied his inner power and strength. He wondered idly how difficult it would be to kill Jarasandha in hand-to-hand combat. He assessed every man he met the same way, that being the reason why he had been able to despatch the eunuch so quickly – he had already noted the man slightly favouring one knee during the long walk through Jarasandha's palace.

Jarasandha's voice was neither deep nor high-pitched, pleasant to the ear, clear enough to be understood even when he spoke quietly, which was almost all the time. In fact, he spoke so quietly that Kamsa kept feeling the need to lean closer. He found himself having to resist this urge several times as they descended the winding hillside road. It would take him a long while to realize that this was precisely why Jarasandha spoke so quietly, compelling others to be quiet around him in order to hear what he said. Powerful men exerted their power in such ways.

'Unlike other Arya cities, Magadha was never the name of a kingdom. It was the name given to the non-varnas.'

'Non-varnas?' Kamsa asked. His interest in most things outside the realm of combat, fighting techniques and war stratagem was negligible. He had thrown one of his first tutors from a high balcony in his father's palace because the man had bored him too much with a lecture on the history of Bharatavarsha. He had been eleven years old at the time. Ugrasena had had considerable difficulty persuading other learned tutors to agree to tutor his son thereafter.

'Any varna that is not one of the four basic varnas,' Jarasandha said, matter-of-factly, 'Kshatriya, Brahmin, Vaisya, Sudra.'

'Of course.' Even Kamsa knew that much. Although he had found that Brahmins and Kshatriyas each tended to put their own varna first when reciting the four names.

‘It is possible for a person of any varna to move to another varna through his own work, and through recognition of his new status by his peers of the other varna. There may be any number of reasons for him to want to do so: upward mobility, a change of profession

or residence, or the other way around, a diminution of his circumstances, wealth or status. A person may also be compelled to move to another varna if he is unable to fulfil the obligations of his original varna. For example, a Kshatriya who is more devoted to rituals and worship than to the art of war is, subtly or not-so-subtly, advised by his Kshatriya peers to become a Brahmin. Or vice versa.’

Kamsa nodded, even though, being ahead of Kamsa, Jarasandha could not see Kamsa’s action. ‘Yes, I see,’ Kamsa felt compelled to say aloud.

‘But what happens when two varnas inter- marry? What of the children produced by that intermarriage?’

Kamsa shrugged. He had never thought or cared about such matters before.

‘Theoretically, they could claim either of their parents’ varnas as their own. But what do they do until they are old enough to do so? Or even after they lay claim to the varna of either parent, what do they do if that community refuses to recognize or accept them as such?’

Kamsa had no idea.

Jarasandha glanced back at him, compelling Kamsa to sit up straighter and pay closer attention just by the power of his gaze. ‘They become non-varnas. Or, to use an inaccurate but more familiar term, out-castes. Although, of course, varnas are not castes at all, not in the sense that our Western brothers across the oceans use the term.

But in this case, one might as well use the term, for, like those who do not fulfil the obligations of their caste in those foreign societies, the offspring of two different varnas in Aryavarta are veritable non- varnas. Out-castes

in every sense of the term; they are not permitted to marry, conduct business, seek employment or employ others, trade, cook, clean, reside, or otherwise live within either community. In short, they have to hit the road and keep moving from place to place, snatching a brief respite at each new place by lying about themselves or producing fake bona fides and references, until they are found out or penalized for their deception.'

Jarasandha paused. 'The penalty for claiming to be of a varna other than one's own, in most Arya capital cities, is death.'

Kamsa caught a note of deep bitterness in this last announcement. He listened with more interest. It seemed Jarasandha had a more personal stake in this impromptu lecture than Kamsa had realized at first.

'So where do these non-varnas or out-castes go if they wish to survive, let alone thrive or prosper? Where can they seek employment, residence, enrichment, mates, companionship, and all the rest that life has to offer?'

Without waiting for Kamsa's answer, Jarasandha raised a thin, wiry, muscled hand and gestured at the city. 'Magadha.'

Kamsa blinked. 'You mean ...'

'Magadha means "out-caste",' Jarasandha said. 'There are other terms for those who fall between varnas: Vandi, for a son begotten by a Vaisya man upon a Kshatriyawoman; or Vamaka, which means the same. Or the Kshatriya tribes currently known as Atirathas, Sutas, Ayogas, Vaidehas, Swapakas, Pukkasas, Ugras, Nishadas, Tenas, Vratyas, Chandalas, Karanas, Amvasththas ...' he continued reeling off names for several minutes until Kamsa's head swam.

'Are all of these out-castes?' Kamsa asked, astonished. He had known men by these names, and since Kshatriyas for hire mostly sought employment by their tribe or clan names rather than their birth names, that would mean they had been of these tribes ... out-castes! Several of his marauders were

from these varnas – or *non-varnas* as Jarasandha would have it. It was hard to believe.

He mentioned this to Jarasandha who nodded. ‘Kshatriyas, being bhraatr united by war, will often help Magadhans conceal their true origins.’

‘You mean ...’ Kamsa frowned, ‘my other soldiers know that some among them are not pure-breed Kshatriyas?’

‘Indeed,’ Jarasandha said. ‘There is an unspoken rule among Magadhans everywhere. When asked point blank what their varna is, they must always answer “Magadh”. For if they deny even this title, what do they have left to cling to? You will find that they will always answer “Magadh” and that they will do so with great pride, even if it means imprisonment or penalty of death.’ He gestured again at the houses they were passing, less crowded than the ones on earlier streets, evidently a slightly less impoverished section of the city. ‘This is their last refuge. Those who become Magadhans understand that the title is more than a varna or a nationality. It defines a person.’

Kamsa mused on the implications. ‘You mean that your kingdom is made up entirely of half-castes, mixed varnas and out-castes?’ He was more than a little shocked: he was, after all, a Raj-Kshatriya, not merely a warrior varna but a warrior-kings’ varna. It was bred into his blood.

Jarasandha laughed. ‘Yes. That is what I hav ebeen explaining to you, my Yadava friend. But do not fret, we shall not make you impure through contact with us. Remember, the code of the Kshatriyas tells us that fighting brothers are united despite varna, stature, class or sex.’

So it did. But the concept of an entire kingdom – or, well, a city – composed wholly of out-castes was still mind-boggling. Kamsa tried to work through the politics of this situation, then gave up. It was too complicated. And as a prince brought up at the helm of power, he was as chauvinistic about his superiority by birth and entitlement as any high-born Arya; the very notion of being surrounded by an entire city full of out-castes made him ... queasy.

Something else occurred to him, something that his war-oriented mind found easier to grasp: geography. ‘But then how did you build this city?’

Jarasandha raised a finger, correcting him. ‘You mean to say, *where* I built this city? For the *how* is self-evident, it was built as all cities usually are. But the location was the main issue. For where do out-castes go? What place is given unto them? The short answer: none. Nowhere. That is why I had to *take* this land, *carve* it out of the neighbouring states to make my own.’

Jarasandha turned his horse abruptly to face Kamsa. ‘Until now, we have had to fight and fend off the repeated attacks and attempts by those same neighbours to take back what they consider to be their land. For long have I waited patiently, building my strength, expanding my forces, gathering more and more Magadhs, awaiting this day. Now, at last, I am ready to put into action the next phase of my great plan. To prove Magadha as not just the great city it already is, but as the capital of a great kingdom, the greatest, most powerful Arya kingdom that ever existed. This city that you see around us will be just a minor township in the great kingdom of Magadha that I am about to build, my friend. A minor township!’

Kamsa nodded, impressed. ‘A great ambition.’

Jarasandha laughed. ‘Far more than just ambition. A reality, awaiting the right moment to be unleashed. And that moment is *now*.’

He pointed at Kamsa. ‘All that remained was one final piece of the plan to move into place. And that piece has now arrived at my doorstep.’

Kamsa frowned, trying to understand what he meant. Piece? Arrived?

Jarasandha laughed again, this time echoed by his entourage. ‘That means you, my friend. *You* were the final piece I required to complete my great plan. Now that you have arrived, I can put into motion my campaign to build the greatest empire the world has ever seen. And you, Kamsa, son of Ugrasena, shall be its chief architect!’

twenty-two

Before Kamsa could utter a word, Jarasandha turned the head of his horse and rode the rest of the way up a steep, winding road to the top of a high hill, the highest point in Magadha, Kamsa realized as he followed. On his approach to the city, he had seen that it was built on a virtually desolate plain, with sharp crags and dips. He assumed that Jarasandha wished to go to the top of this rise to afford him a bird's-eye view of the city. Kamsa wanted to tell his host not to bother. He had seen enough of Magadha. It's squalor and filth; the crowded, narrow lanes with houses almost falling over one another, falling apart, rather; the stench of human lives; the poverty; the lack of any public sanitation or drainage system ... it had taken every ounce of his willpower not to turn his horse and ride back – or away. He had obeyed the sadhu, Narada's orders; he had come to Magadha and met Jarasandha. But apart from big claims, the king did not seem to have much to offer. How could a lord of out-castes do anything to further his, Kamsa's, career? How could he, Kamsa, accept help from such a person, no doubt an out-caste himself? It pained his sense of self-worth and high-born stature. No. This was a mistake. He would listen to a little more, then slip away at the first chance he got, seeking alliance and assistance elsewhere. There were other enemies of the Sura Yadavas, other political forces seeking to further their own causes and careers. Aryavarta was a seething hotbed of politics and ambition. It would not be difficult to find allies.

Then he topped the rise, close behind Jarasandha's mount, and caught his breath. The king of Magadha laughed as he turned and took in Kamsa's stunned expression. He used his reins and his feet to expertly reverse his

horse, making it trot backwards so he could continue looking at Kamsa, who came forward unable to help the dazed look on his face.

‘Well, Prince of Mathura, whatever you were expecting today, I do not think this was it!’ And Jarasandha turned and said in a louder tone to the large gathering of men awaiting them on the hill: ‘What do you say, my friends?’

A resounding chorus of nays and gruff laughter greeted his query.

Kamsa stilled his horse and tried to still his heart too as he looked at the men gathered on the flat, unpaved promontory overlooking the city. Some he recognized at once from gatherings of Arya nations during various concords; others he identified by the sigils stitched onto their breastplate or garment; and others he could not identify at all, but knew at once to be rulers or lieges of some standing from their stance, attire and bearing. There were some two dozen men

gathered at that spot and his head reeled as he gazed at each one in turn, their moustached, bearded or clean-cut faces grinning or smirking in response to his stunned expression.

Kings, they are all kings, every last one of them.

Kamsa and Jarasandha dismounted, their horses led away by waiting hands.

‘Yes, Kamsa,’ Jarasandha said, as if reading his mind. ‘You see gathered here today the most powerful royal caucus in all Aryavarta. These are all lieges who have sworn allegiance to me. Together we propose to build the greatest empire this mortal realm has ever seen.’

‘With you as emperor, of course,’ Kamsa said cunningly, showing he had not been completely disarmed by Jarasandha’s well-mounted surprise. He grinned boyishly to undercut his own sarcasm.

Jarasandha laughed. ‘I like this boy more and more. Yes, of course I shall be emperor. For I control not just a substantial fighting force now, but every out-caste, half-caste, or even those who feel unwanted or unassimilated in any community will gladly ally with me at a moment’s notice. Do you know what a great portion of Arya communities is made up of such people?’

Kamsa nodded, conceding the point. Varnas were not iron-clad, and were never intended to be so. But sadly, those who fell between them or did not satisfy the requirements of their own varna, were often shunted aside or openly shunned by their own, leading to discontent and inequity. He had often used these inequities to serve his own selfish purposes. Jarasandha was doing the same, but on a much, much greater scale.

He seeks to recruit every out-caste in the world! That would give him the greatest army ever assembled, not to mention spasas and allies secretly embedded within every court, every community, every army.

‘And where do these fine chieftains come in?’ he asked, indicating the who’s who of Arya royalty assembled around them.

Jarasandha smiled. ‘Each has his own motive for allying with me. Everyone gets his fair share. As will you. For instance, you want to rule all the Yadava nations, do you not?’

Kamsa swallowed, trying not to show his eagerness and almost succeeding. ‘I could do that on my own,’ he said, trying to act nonchalant.

Jarasandha chuckled and beckoned someone forward. ‘I think not.’

Kamsa started as Bana and Canura appeared, smiling cautiously in greeting. ‘Well met, Lord Kamsa,’ they said in turn. ‘We have always served you loyally, and will continue to serve you—

‘In exchange for their own fiefdoms, of course,’ Jarasandha added slyly.

Kamsa stared with growing rage at his war advisor and second-in-command. ‘You are both half-castes? And you spied on me all this while?’

Their faces lost colour and they stepped back, wary of Kamsa’s temper. Jarasandha came forward, interceding.

‘Calm down, my young friend. Were you to try and root out all my spies from your midst, you would be left with a very poor fighting force indeed. Speaking of which,’ he said, smartly changing the topic and diverting Kamsa’s attention, ‘I believe you have almost no fighting force left now. Is that not so, Bana?’

Bana nodded nervously, keeping his eyes on Kamsa and his distance from his former master as he spoke. ‘Aye, sire. The army has disbanded. The marauders are falling apart, losing men daily. And Vasudeva has been given charge of Mathura’s security.’

‘Vasudeva?’ Kamsa’s anger was instantly diverted, his outrage roused. ‘How can *Vasudeva* be given charge of *my* forces? He is not even an Andhaka!’

He moved towards Bana as he spoke, his first impulse as always to batter and punish the source of the news that caused him discomfiture.

Jarasandha stepped forward smoothly. While lean and lithe, he moved with a panther-like grace that spoke of powerful, well-oiled muscles and a wealth of experience in close combat. Combined with his intense eyes that seemed to bore into you and quiet tone, he came across as a lethal predator who had no need of showing off his strength in order to subjugate.

Kamsa instinctively took a step back. It was the first time he had ever done that for any man in his life.

‘All is well. This is to our advantage. You can claim that he deviously insinuated himself into your father’s good graces ...’ he paused, keeping his eyes fixed on Kamsa’s, unblinking, ‘or your mother’s bedchamber ...’

Kamsa flinched, his fists coming up at once. Ever accustomed to expressing his anger at the very instant it exploded, he was unable to control it quickly enough. Jarasandha's insulting insinuation coming immediately on the heels of Bana's disturbing news was too much for his limited self-will to control. He exploded.

Jarasandha's hands caught his fists in grips as tight as iron vices, clutching them without so much as a downward glance. He moved closer, close enough for Kamsa to smell the pungent, sweet odour of tambul nut on his breath. 'A *king* uses whatever he must, whatever he can, in order to further his cause. I speak not of violating your mother's body, merely sullying her name. The accusation would be levelled at your enemy. Is it truly so hard to swallow?'

Kamsa stared at the piercing grey eyes that looked up at him from a height at least half a foot lower than his own. He recalled his old battle master cuffing him as a boy and telling him that the greatest warriors needed not height or great musculature or even elaborate weaponry; that, in fact, they were almost always short, lithe, of small build and deceptively childlike in appearance. 'Tis *not what you have*, 'tis *what you do with it that counts*, old Venudhoot had said, before hawking and spitting a gob of phlegm in the dust of the training field. Kamsa had learnt everything he knew about hand-to-hand combat from the old teacher before he had finally bested him on the wrestling akhada and broken his neck. He had been fourteen then and had never had a fighting master thereafter.

Now, it seemed he had one.

He looked into Jarasandha's eyes and understood what this new master was telling him. He was not insulting his mother, not really. He was merely laying out a strategy. One that would lead to Kamsa climbing the first step on his road to ruling the Yadavas: he was telling him how to become the king of Mathura.

twenty-three

*'Dvivida, Pundra, Dhenuka, Karava, Baka,
Kirata, Pralamba, Putana, Mustika, Karusha, Akriti, Meghavahana,
Bhauma, Vanga, Dantavakra, Bana, Arista, Paundraka, Canura,
Bhishmaka, Bhagadatta, Purujit, Kesi, Trnavarta,
Agha...'*

The list of names of kings reeled off the tongues of Jarasandha's aides, Hansa and Dimvaka, in quick succession like honey off a bear's tongue. Even Kamsa was impressed. He guessed that such a show of royal strength was rarely seen outside of an Arya kings' summit.

They must surely represent half the power of Aryavarta. Kamsa then smiled wistfully and corrected himself: *we.* We *must surely represent half the power of Aryavarta.* Add Jarasandha's own hidden forces of half-castes, quarter-castes, and other embedded supporters awaiting his command to rise, and it was the most formidable single power ever assembled in Arya history. With such a caucus, Jarasandha could become the emperor of the world, not just Aryavarta. Kamsa felt a rush of joy and power such as he had never experienced before – not since the days when he had discovered the joys of slaughter on the battlefield.

Hansa and Dimvaka, each speaking from what appeared to be a carefully rehearsed and orchestrated script, spelt out the domains each king would govern as part of the agreement signed with Jarasandha. Kamsa, unable to write his name clearly in Sanskrit or even commonspeak, had let one of the aides write his name on the list of signatories and seconded it with the impression of his thumb, ignoring the pretty calligraphy of the others. What use did a king have with writing, art, music and all that nonsense?

He desired only power. And for what Jarasandha was offering him, he would have given the Magadhan king his mother's *corpse* if he desired, not merely her name sullied by rumour. What use was a mother who did not stand up for her son, after all? His heart had hardened towards everyone back home on hearing the news from Mathura: they were carrying on as if he had been an oppressor and tyrant, not the liberating hero he truly was! The fools! Allowing Vasudeva to run Mathura! Were they utterly blind and brainless?

After the formalities were done, Jarasandha rose again.

'My kings,' he said. 'We are all of an accord. Time now to cast the die; to start out upon the long path that will take us to our shared destiny.'

He gestured to his aides. Dimvaka, the larger and stronger of the two, picked up what appeared to be a sigil on a pole. He raised it high above his head, muscles heaving, and waved it to and fro. The red flag flashed in the evening sunlight, probably visible across the length and breadth of the city below.

At once, in response, a great roar rose from below.

Jarasandha gestured to the assembled allies. 'Come, see for yourself the launch of our great juggernaut.'

Kamsa joined the rest at the edge of the promontory, careful not to step too close to the rim. He did not trust any of his new allies enough not to suspect them of trying to shove him over. After all, the fewer of them there were, the greater each one's kingdom. But there seemed to be none of that petty rivalry here. Seeing how politely and graciously they moved and made space for one another, he instantly felt ashamed of his bumpkin-like behaviour. These were real kings already. He was merely a rough boy who liked killing and power so much that he wanted nobody above him to tell him what not to do.

He caught Jarasandha watching him with that sly, knowing gleam in his cat-grey eyes. He nodded curtly, pretending to look down, but he knew that Jarasandha had caught his moment of self-loathing and weakness. The Magadhan seemed to see deep within his soul with those eyes.

The next moment, he looked down, and forgot everything else.

Magadha was being set ablaze.

Riders were racing through the city, riding like madmen with blazing torches in hand, setting light to houses, rooftops, hayricks, wagons ...

A dozen fires were already blazing furiously. After the heat of the day, the close-packed houses were taking light like tindersticks. Soon, the whole city would be a morass of smoke and ruin.

‘But why?’ he said, before he realized he was speaking aloud. ‘Why would you do such a thing?’

Heads turned to glance at him. Several faces wore sardonic, sympathetic expressions for the young novice who had yet to learn so much about politics and kingship. Others glanced scornfully at him before turning away with a shake of their heads. He knew that there were some who questioned if he even deserved to stand among them in this alliance. After all, he was the only one who was merely a crown prince, and a shamed and self-banished one at that, not a king in his own right. But Jarasandha had no such contempt or scorn creasing his smooth features.

‘I told you, Magadha is not a city or a kingdom; it is a word that means out-caste. No-caste. Non-varna. This gathering of hovels you see below ...’ he gestured expansively, ‘was merely a temporary refuge; not a permanent abode.’

‘But still...’ Kamsa wrestled with words, trying to frame his thoughts in a way that would not make him seem too ignorant and naïve. ‘How can you burn your own houses? Your own people?’

Several kings snickered. Kamsa turned red with anger and embarrassment. Jarasandha put a hand on his shoulder, reassuring him. ‘The people are safely away; and all the warriors and fighters ... in our forces.’

Kamsa swallowed and turned his head, listening. ‘But...I can hear them screaming...on the wind.’ He glanced down. ‘You can see them too. There are people there ... dying in the fire.’

Jarasandha shrugged. ‘Only the very young, the very old, the infirm.’

One of the older kings, Bhagadatta, grunted and quaffed a large goblet of wine, the spill staining his white beard crimson. ‘Women, children, olduns, infants, sick men ... of no use to an army on the move.’

Kamsa stared at Jarasandha, who nodded. ‘From now on, we are an invading force. Ever moving, unstoppable, undefeatable. Like the great god Jaggañath who was a relentless force of nature, ever moving onwards. By killing their families, their loved ones, burning their houses and leaving them nothing to come back to, I remove every distraction that my soldiers might have in the campaign ahead. Now, they have nothing left to do but fight, win, destroy; and if they triumph, rebuild a new city, raise new families. This is the Magadhan way. First destroy. Then rebuild.’

‘One must burn the grass in order to grow it anew,’ said a younger, sly-looking monarch named Meghavahana who kept fingering a large emerald ring on his heart finger.

Jarasandha continued speaking softly: ‘Once the city is burnt, we shall descend again, and take our places at the helm of our forces assembled outside the gates of the city. My army will lead, with the others bringing up the flanks. We shall cut a swathe across Aryavarta like the greatest herd of uks ever seen, bulls rampaging across the land, and when we pass, we shall leave none standing. We shall take what we please, do as we will. We are warriors one and all, we are kings.’

Kamsa nodded, understanding. And now that he understood, he could even take pleasure in the sound of the screams, the cries and wails of the dying, desperate, abandoned ones. As the smoke rose and the city blazed, and the kings around him drank and jested and bickered and talked, he felt a sense of pride and accomplishment. To burn his own city, put his own weak and infirm to death, what an epic warrior and commander Jarasandha was! He had never known one like him before. He looked at his new friend, admiringly, fondly, and felt proud that he had made such an ally. He found himself unable to take his eyes off this magnificent man, this incredible leader.

Jarasandha glanced at him from time to time and smiled slowly.

When it was time, they descended the hill, brushing aside the stench of burnt corpses and houses. Horses bore them through the gutted streets. Kamsa gazed in morbid fascination at the sights that met his eyes: mothers and infants clutching one another in the last throes of agony, burnt black. Old men sprawled across pavements, infants curled into foetal balls in the agony of burning. Everywhere he looked, he saw a charnel house; burnt corpses leering down at them from the scorched remains; twisted bones and cracked skeletons oozing putrid juices. The kings rode on without a care, the hooves of their horses crushing the charred skeletons underfoot, sending up a terrible percussion as they galloped through the devastated city. The kings laughed.

Kamsa thought it was easy for them to laugh. These were only low castes to them, not real Aryas. He wondered how they might feel if it had been *their* cities turning to ash, *their* women and children and olduns trampled underfoot ... He thought they might not be laughing as generously then. He caught Jarasandha glancing at the backs of the heads of the other kings and knew then that the Magadhan was thinking the same thing.

He does this to prove that he will go to any lengths to succeed, Kamsa thought with a flash of insight. *For only through his own cruelty and example does a leader command the fealty of his followers. By showing how far he can go, Jarasandha has outmatched them all before the war has*

even begun. Now, they know that they dare not cross him. For what might not a man do when he is willing to slaughter his own in order to succeed?

He smiled secretly to himself, pleased to have gained this insight into Jarasandha's strategy.

He spurred his horse and rode on, following his new teacher and guide. To the end of the earth, if required.

twenty-four

Kamsa bellowed a warning as he galloped forward and threw himself off his horse. He fell upon the pair of assassins, bringing them down to the ground, where all three of them sprawled, the two attackers struggling, twisting, vying furiously to stick their knives into him as they rolled in the dust. He tasted blood and knew that one of their knives had slashed his lip and cheek. He felt hot blood spilling down his neck. He ignored it and grasped the assassin's neck. With some surprise, he found that it was a girl, her head shaven and disguised with a scarf. She bit into his forearm, drawing blood. He roared and threw himself back, slamming himself onto the ground as he used the force to jam her head in a death-lock. He felt her neck crack satisfactorily and released her, just as the second assassin flew at him with a dagger curved like a bull's horn. This one was barely a boy. They struggled in the dust for a few seconds, then Kamsa swung the boy down with a sudden, jarring impact, smashing his shoulder and loosening his grip. With a second swift action, he rammed the hilt of the

curved blade back towards the boy, through the assassin's own chest, punching through the bone and into his heart. With a moan and a gurgle of blood, the boy died.

Kamsa rose to his feet, looking around warily, ready for more attackers. But there were none. Jarasandha dismounted his horse, examining the dead assassins quickly. Behind him, the city they had just ransacked echoed with the clash of fighting and the screams of the dying. Kamsa leaned against a brick wall broken by a downed elephant. The beast's tusks lay close enough for him to touch. The house upon which it had fallen lay exposed to the sky, filled with muddy water from a huge cistern that had broken and spilled nearby. Chaos reigned.

'Gandharis,' Jarasandha said, even as Hansa and Dimvaka came up at a gallop, dismounting and joining their master. They stood with swords drawn, ready to fend off any further enemy, but it appeared that there were none left. After a three-day siege, the city had betrayed itself, Jarasandha's Magadhangs rising from within to slay their lords and neighbours before opening the gates to let in their emperor, to whom they had secretly sworn allegiance. 'Do you know what this means?'

Kamsa shook his head, catching his breath. He was almost too tired to stand on his own. He had no recollection of when he had last slept, and only a hazy memory of eating some kind of roasted meat the previous night, or was it two nights ago? His body ached all over, bleeding from a dozen or more superficial wounds, and his hip felt as if it had been dislocated badly. He had lost count of how many he had slain, and he neither knew the name of the city they had just ransacked, nor the kingdom. There had been too many cities and kingdoms these past several days. Life had turned into one battle after another, siege followed by battle, battle followed by skirmish, rally followed by attack ... war was his only food and drink; rest, a forgotten friend; sleep, a lost lover.

'It means my fame has spread to the farthest corners of Aryavarta,' Jarasandha said proudly, taking the scarf of the girl assassin as a souvenir. He tucked it into his waistband, along with the curved dagger, after he had wiped it clean on the dead boy's garments. Neither the boy nor the girl

looked older than ten years, and their striking resemblance made it obvious that they were siblings. It was their apparent frailness and youth that had enabled them to reach this close to Jarasandha, clutching one another and stumbling along, pretending to be weeping survivors. But Kamsa had not been fooled. He trusted children least of all. After all, had he himself not been a butcher of a boy, remorseless in killing?

‘If Gandahar wants me dead badly enough to send assassins this far south,’ Jarasandha mused, ‘it means our campaign is making them quake even across the Himalayas. They fear that once I am done subjugating the subcontinent, I will turn my eyes further north.’ He grinned, displaying blood-flecked teeth. ‘And indeed I shall. But I shall not stop at Gandahar. I shall go farther north, to the limits of the civilized world.

Beyond Gandahar lie Kasmira, Kamboja, Parada, Rishika, Bahlika, Saka, Yavana, Parasika, Parama Kamboja, Huna, Uttara Kuru, Uttar Madra, Hara Huna, Tushara, Pahlava ...’

Kamsa frowned at the unfamiliar foreign names, though he recognized many of them from his poring over his father’s maps as a boy. Geography had always been of great interest to him: he understood the concept of land and the fact that he who dominated the land owned all that stood upon it. That was true kingship, not this munshi’s business of taxation and levies and lagaans. *What good is calling a place your own if you cannot walk the land and command the obedience of those who live upon it!* his father had growled once at his advisors, back when Ugrasena had been a warrior king, not just an old man governing a dwindling domain.

Kamsa swayed slightly, light-headed and disoriented. Jarasandha looked up at him and said gently: ‘My friend, you deserve some rest. You have saved my hide for the third time in as many days.’

Kamsa shrugged self-deprecatingly. ‘Someone has to keep an eye on our future emperor.’

Jarasandha smiled his quiet smile. ‘And you have done that very well. So well, in fact, that I think it is time for you to rest those tired eyes on

something more comely.'

Kamsa frowned, unable to fathom Jarasandha's meaning.

Jarasandha clapped his hand on Kamsa's shoulder, making him wince: he had been slashed there by a passing spear. 'Come, let us leave my Magadhans to enjoy the spoils of war. It is time I showed you what we are fighting for.'

They rode away from the ransacked city, the orchestra of cries and screams dying away in the distance. Kamsa was too tired to even ask where they were going. He let his horse follow Jarasandha's, noting that except for the ever-present Hansa and Dimvaka, nobody else came with them. That was unusual in the extreme.

After three days of rough riding, they passed over a final rise and Jarasandha unfurled the vastra he had wrapped around his face, on his aides' advice, to protect his face as well as conceal his identity.

'Behold,' he said.

Kamsa stared at the city below. Incomplete though it was, little more than a skeleton partly fleshed and barely clothed, its epic ambition, architectural magnificence and sheer audacity was breathtaking. He had seen nothing like it, nor heard of such a city. Ayodhya, Mithila, all the mythical cities paled before the freshness and beauty of this wonder rising from the desolate wilderness. 'It is Swargaloka,' he said, dazed.

Jarasandha laughed and clapped him on his back. 'I call it Girivraja. It shall be the new capital city of the new Magadha. Centre of the world!'

They rode together through the wide avenues of the city, Kamsa marvelling at how precisely each broad road ran from north to south, east to west. He gazed up in wonder at the magnificent towers, the great mansions, the superbly carved facades, the sculpted pillars and arched windows ... the sheer opulence and luxury of the place. Every street was a

beehive of activity. They passed workers carrying materials, hammering, sawing, cutting, chiselling, polishing, raising pillars, carving ...

‘Vishwakarma himself must have designed it,’ Kamsa said, referring to the architect of the devas. He had never seen such house designs or patterns before. It was like something out of a story about gods and heaven.

Jarasandha pointed out the hills rising around the city, upon each of which watchtowers were being built, connected by a great wall that ran around in an enormous circle. A forest of Lodhra trees overran the hills and the surrounding countryside, rendering the city near invisible unless one approached within a hundred yards of the tree-protected wall, while the towers could spy anyone approaching from a yojana away. The hills were named Vaihara, Varaha, Vrishava, Rishigiri and Chaitya and they were almost high enough to be considered mountains. Jarasandha explained that although this meant that once enemies broke through the walled cordon, they would be able to look down upon the city, the cleverness with which the architects had used the natural wood cover and rock formations afforded numerous defensive points for the city’s guardians. And, of course, no enemy could ever come close enough in the first place.

Moreover, because the city was at the site of the ancient hermitage of Gautama, he of great fame, it was a highly auspicious location as well. ‘After all,’ Jarasandha grinned, ‘even we half-castes do care about such things.’

Finally, they came to a hamlet nestled in the very centre of the city, with an artificial lake and the under- construction structure of a great palace overlooking the lake. Gardeners were already hard at work laying out sumptuous gardens around the complex. Here, the construction was busiest, and the richest materials in evidence.

They dismounted as Kamsa looked up at the richest palace he had ever seen. It made his father’s palace look like the oversized cowshed it had once been.

‘Home,’ said Jarasandha, gesturing in a manner that suggested that it was as much Kamsa’s as his own.

twenty-five

Kamsa was wonderstruck by the beauty of Jarasandha’s palace and his rising capital city. The Magadhan had been right. It was one thing to be fighting a vicious war campaign for supremacy of the subcontinent and quite another to actually see some of the fruits of that labour already being polished and prepared for one’s repast. After the brutality and relentless bloodshed of the battlefield, this was like coming home.

Kamsa wished he could pick up the entire palace and the city and carry it on his back all the way to distant Mathura. How the Yadavas would ogle and exclaim! Clansmen would come from hundreds of yojanas away to gape at the sight! The simple gowalas and govindas of the Yadava nations had no comprehension that such luxury and beauty could even exist, let alone be possessed by such men as they.

And here I am, Kamsa thought, *allied with the emperor of the civilized world.*

For he had no doubt that Jarasandha’s campaign would succeed. Already, their victories were becoming legendary, their onslaught relentless and unopposed. Or, rather, they were opposed but feebly, futilely. No army could dare oppose the Jagannath-like progress of Jarasandha’s great coalition. Even Kamsa had no idea how many akshohinis his friend and ally commanded; where the king of Magadha was concerned, truth and

rumour mingled freely to produce that inseparable compound one could only call legend. All that was certain was that the juggernaut rolled on and, day by day, the greatest empire the world had ever seen was being stitched together like a patchwork quilt held tightly by Jarasandha's brilliantly conceived network of affiliations and alliances.

Many Arya kings had held rajasuya and ashwamedha yajnas, going forth with Brahminical rituals to lay claim to larger tracts and kingdoms. In time, they had lost all the ground they acquired when other Arya kings did the same. None had ever before had the foresight and political mastery to put together such a superb coalition of vested interests, each supporting the other in a seemingly impossible yet unquestionably sturdy web of solid structures. Kamsa had begun to realize that Jarasandha's brilliant plan might not just see him seated emperor but keep him on that hallowed throne for generations to come.

Political alliances are the bedrock, military victories the foundation, and the loyalty of the people the structure of a house, Jarasandha had said to Kamsa one night over a meal. *An emperor must have all three to stay an emperor.* He did not need to add: *And I do.*

In a sense, he mused as they reclined on welcoming, satin-cushioned seats and were served wine and fruit by comely servants, Jarasandha's campaign of conquest was being waged much the same way his magnificent new capital city was being built: brilliant architecture executed with painstaking craftsmanship and artistry, by loyal and dedicated workmen.

Kamsa's thoughts were diverted momentarily as two of the most beautiful women he had ever seen approached demurely, clad in luxuriant garments and jewellery that clearly set them apart from the palace staff. Assuming they were Jarasandha's wives or concubines, he averted his eyes. Though never one to shy away from ogling another's woman, he would never transgress upon the territory of this friend. For the first time in his life, Kamsa had a true friend, the first man he truly respected.

'Kamsa,' said Jarasandha, 'meet Asti and Prapti. They are the jewels of my heart.'

Kamsa murmured a rough greeting, sketching a polite namaskar. He was startled when the two women knelt beside him and began bathing his dusty, chapped and cut feet with warm, scented rosewater. ‘What ... what are you doing?’ he asked.

They looked up at him with doe eyes, openly flirtatious, yet politely demure. ‘Arghya, Mathura-naresh,’ they said together in a single singsong chant. Then giggled.

Kamsa looked at Jarasandha for an explanation. Jarasandha grinned. ‘My daughters speak as eloquently with their eyes as most women do with their tongues. Their eyes are saying that they like you very much. They would be pleased to have you as their husband.’

‘H ... husband?’ Kamsa had not stammered since he was a little boy. He sat upright, staring first at the two beautiful girls, then at his host.

‘Yes, a legally wedded husband. I would be honoured if you would consent to accepting the hand of one of my daughters in marriage and becoming my son-in-law. Tell me, which one do you prefer?’ Jarasandha frowned as he tried to evaluate his daughters’ assets objectively. ‘Prapti has the best child-bearing hips and lushest body. But Asti has the sweeter nature.’ He shook his head. ‘I dote equally on them both. It is impossible for me to choose. You must decide for yourself. Which one do you prefer?’

Kamsa swallowed nervously. Both women had finished the ceremonial washing of his feet and were awaiting his answer. He saw from their pointed glances that while immaculately mannered, they were not shy in the ways that counted. There was mischief in the warm brown eyes of the one with the riper body. And a promise of sweet nights in the other, more slender girl, who had cool grey eyes, reminiscent of her father’s steely pupils. He bit his lip, trying to find the right thing to say without causing offence. ‘Both are so beautiful...’ hesaidhesitantly, ‘Icannotdecide...’

Jarasandha spread his hands. ‘Then you shall marry both. So be it. It is decided. You are a man of large appetite; my daughters will be more content with one Kamsa than two of any other man. The wedding shall be

organized tonight.' He clapped his hands, summoning Hansa who was only a few yards away. 'Make the arrangements.'

'Tonight?' asked Kamsa, astonished. This was all happening much too quickly for him to keep pace.

'We do have a war to wage,' Jarasandha said apologetically, peeling a grape with expert fingers. 'After we finish the first phase of our campaign, you shall have leave to enjoy the company of your new wives. I shall see to that myself. But for now, one night will have to suffice. We shall return to the front lines tomorrow morning. A good commander cannot leave his forces unsupervised for too long.'

The wedding was a blur of colour and pomp and pageantry. Despite the incompleteness of the city, Jarasandha was able to put on a display of royal extravagance more fantastic than Kamsa could ever have imagined. The night that followed was short, rituals and ceremonies taking up most of the moonlight hours. He barely had an hour alone with his new brides, although they wasted no time in making good use of it. He was yawning when he stepped out of his bedchamber to follow Dimvaka through the winding corridors the next morning at dawn.

At the wedding, Jarasandha had introduced Kamsa to his son Sahadeva. Kamsa had barely begun to wonder why, if Jarasandha had a son, he was not on the battlefield with them, when Jarasandha explained that the entire city they had seen, with all its beauty and splendour, was Sahadeva's doing. 'Some are warriors on the field,' the father said, 'others build empires out of wood and stone.' The implication was self-evident, but there was not a trace of irony or disappointment in Jarasandha's tone. He had clearly accepted his son's choice of vocation and was at peace with it.

Even so, Kamsa could not help feeling a surge of jealousy when he clasped hands with the handsome, almost girlish Sahadeva, whose hands were softer than any man's he had clasped before, hair curled in delicate twirls around his effeminate, not unattractive features. He had never known that Jarasandha had a son. Good that he was only an architect, a builder, and an artist, not a warrior.

In his heart and mind, Kamsa had come to think of himself as Jarasandha's true son. For the Magadhan was, in every sense, the father he had always desired and never had. The father he respected and loved, and who acknowledged and praised him in return.

I would give my life for him, he thought fiercely as they rode out from Girivraja the next morning. He loved the man he was following more than he had ever loved anyone or anything before. He had not protested or debated when Jarasandha asked him to marry his daughters who happened to be beautiful and everything a man could desire, but he would have done the same had they been wart-ridden and ugly in the extreme. Jarasandha had only to ask him to ride his horse off a cliff and he would do so without question, trusting that there would either be a river below to break his fall, or the sacrifice of his life was necessary for his friend's cause. No act was too gruesome, no sacrifice too great.

In the days and weeks that followed, his resolve was put to the test and only strengthened and tempered further, as steel is tempered by fire followed by ice over and over again until the layers of beaten metal bond permanently. Even Hansa and Dimvaka, perpetual protectors of the emperor and eternally by his side, were hard-pressed to match Kamsa's ability to spot and deflect assassins, attacks, murder attempts and outright assaults. No Kshatriya in the coalition fought as fiercely, no warrior risked as much, no leader achieved as many victories. As ruthless in carrying out as he was in deflecting assaults, Kamsa grew from the hot-headed Yadava prince who rode into Magadha to a finely tempered commander of men in battle. Mathura iron, never known for its temperance, now as solidly bonded as Mithila steel.

Finally, a day came when Jarasandha turned to him and said, 'It is time for you to go and stake your claim to your own domain.'

Kamsa knew at once what his father-in-law meant, but pretended he did not understand. 'This is my domain, by your side.'

Jarasandha slapped him lightly on the cheek, a gentle admonishment. 'You would be an emperor's lackey all your life? You are destined to be a king, and

a king of your own domains. Remember what you asked for when you came to me. The reason why you formed this alliance, signed the accord. All the others have carved out the kingdoms they desired. Only you remain by my side. It is time for you to go home and command the Yadava nations.'

Kamsa hung his head unhappily. 'Let me stay a while longer.'

'If you stay a day longer, you will stay forever,' Jarasandha said gruffly. He cuffed Kamsa across the ear, too gently to hurt but firm enough to convey his insistence. 'Go. Show me your face again only when you have become lord of all Yadavas. Put all that I have taught you to good use. Make me proud.'

Kamsa left, his heart aching and feeling as if he were leaving home to go out into the wilderness, while, in fact, it was the other way around.

Jarasandha watched him go and said softly to Hansa and Dimvaka who flanked him as always: 'We have watered and nourished and nurtured enough. Now, let us see whether the seed we sow in Mathura shall bear sweet fruit or not.'

Kaand 2

One

A peace accord is a piece of parchment sealed with wax and signets. A wedding is a union of families sealed with frolic, food, and love. Ministers and politicians preen and pose at the former and everyone tries to claim credit, even those who have not contributed at all. At a wedding, everybody has the time of their life and each person deserves equal credit.

Mathura roared, whistled, clapped and cheered as Vasudeva and his four brothers emerged with their new brides. The feasting and celebrations, spanning several days – weeks actually – had culminated today. Mathura herself resembled a bride. The city had played host to the Andhaka kingdom and to her siblings, the Sura and Bhoja nations as well. It had

been too long since the Yadavas had known such unfettered joy, and they made the most of it. As passionate, boisterous, large-hearted people, they revelled in the feasting and in the relaxing of inhibitions. Released from the fetters of clan and inter-kingdom rivalry and violence, all Yadavas joined in with equal fervour, sharing food and wine and good humour as if this were the last celebration on earth and they the last revellers.

In the Andhaka pavilion, a host of richly garbed and bejewelled royalty joined its few hundred voices to the roar of the lakhs thronging the avenues, streets and by-lanes. The gathering was the kind that few had seen before in their lifetime. People were cheering from places as far away as Gokul – a tiny village where Vasudeva's dearest friends, Nanda and Yashoda, resided – for many in such outlying areas could not afford the expense and time spent on the long journey, nor leave their fields and kine unattended. Instead, they festooned the entire length of their tiny villages, and thus the Yadava nations, with their joy at the union.

Vasudeva's parents, Sura and Marisha, were looking radiant. His sisters were present too: Pritha (better known as Kunti – a name derived from her adoptive father Kuntibhoja's name), Srutadeva, Srutakirti, Srutasrava and Rajadhidevi. Vasudeva's brothers – Devabhaga, Devasrava, Anaka, Srinjaya, Syamaka, Kanka, Samika, Vatsaka and Vrika – were joyously celebrating the occasion since, along with Vasudeva, four of them had married Devaki's sisters – Kamsavati, Kanka, Surabhu and Rashtrapalika – which meant that the festivities and happiness were multiplied tenfold.

Apart from five daughters, Ugrasena had nine sons – Kamsa, Sunama, Nyagrodha, Kanka, Sanku, Suhu, Rashtrapala, Dhrishti and Tushthiman – of whom only Kamsa was missing. Kamsa's brothers were nothing like him in nature or outlook, and Ugrasena had wisely given each of them a substantial state to govern independently, thereby keeping them away from the centre of power as well as apart from each other. With each brother a minor king in his own right, there was no petty rivalry to spoil their relationship. This meant that there was no acrimony soiling the gruff voices of elation that they were adding to the festive clamour with enthusiasm.

Ugrasena's brother Devaka had four sons: Devavan, Upadeva, Sudeva and Devavardhana; and seven daughters: Santideva, Upadeva, Srideva, Devarakshita, Sahadeva, Devaki and Shritadeva. Devaki's sisters surrounded her like diamonds clustered around a white solitaire, sharing their sibling's joy as well as flirting openly and outrageously with their brother-in-law, for among Yadavas, a sister's husband was second only to one's spouse.

Then there were the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Andhaka dynasty, a veritable genealogy in the flesh: Ahuka – Ugrasena and Devaka's father – and his ageing sister Ahuki were in attendance at the festivities. Ahuka and Ahuki's father Punarvasu was there, still standing proud and tall and with a great deal more darkness in his hair than white. Punarvasu's father – Ugrasena's great-grandfather – Avidyota, and his wife were present, and even the great patriarch of the nation, Anu, was present. That made for five generations of Andhakas all together in one place! At well over a century, Anu was too old to walk on his own, and was carried on a royal seat, cackling with delight, for he loved weddings almost as much as he loved his soma. Unfortunately, Andhaka himself—not he whose name now belonged to an entire nation, but the seventh descendant of that original Andhaka – had passed away only a few winters earlier. He was sorely missed, but a hundred-and-fifty years was a passable age to gain moksha, and his memory graced them all.

These, of course, were merely the immediate royal family, which, if you counted the spouses, children, and entourages, numbered several hundreds.

On the Sura side too, there were as many if not more. Families begat tribes which begat clans which begat nations, and there was not a soul in the three Yadava nations who did not know some relative, however distant, related to any stranger he happened to meet. Akrur even had a formula that he applied to each new person he met. He would ask them to recite their genealogy seven generations back, which usually covered living forebears, since all Aryas married young and became parents in their adolescent years with just a few rare exceptions. Before the litany of seven names could be completed, he would pounce on one he found familiar and excitedly point out his relationship to that forebear, finally tracing how the

stranger and he were directly related. It turned out he was related to everyone at the wedding! He remained as enthusiastic even when Vasudeva gently pointed out that as Yadavas, one and all, ultimately they were all related to each other.

And the people ... Which kingdom does not relish a grand royal wedding? That too one that serves to cement the relationship between nations, and brings some much-missed peace? Even in the short months since the extraordinary incident at the army camp and Kamsa's subsequent disappearance, Mathura's air had started smelling of a garden in full bloom, with the former fetid stench of the dungeons fading out of most citizens' memories. Whatever doubts or hesitation anyone might have had were set aside for the duration of the wedding. The Sura wedding invitees who had arrived with Vasudeva as part of his wedding procession had grown so accustomed to Vrindavan's honey wine that it was all they drank night and day. In the quarters occupied by the wedding guests, the revelry had raged morn to night, then all night long.

It was with a great effort that Vasudeva himself succeeded in remaining relatively sober during this period. He alone could not easily forget how precious this occasion was, how hard-won this joy, and how each peal of laughter or whistle and cheer had been paid for with innocent blood.

Another issue that plagued his mind was the infuriatingly erratic but incessant flow of news from distant regions: news of a great war campaign being waged by the demoniac Jarasandha of Magadha and his many allies. Accurate news was hard to come by, for few survived or were able to flee this far to tell their tale, but from the fragments that had drifted this way, he had formed a rough outline of a terrible invasion in progress. It was made worse by the knowledge that Aryas were waging war against fellow Aryas on such a scale. Even the most tenuous accounts and rumours agreed on one thing: the scale of bloodshed was epic, the slaughter massive.

Vasudeva's brothers, his allies, the Council, all shook their heads and stroked their beards sadly and commiserated with the plight of fellow Aryas in those distant lands. But they also thanked the devas that *their*

misery had ended so fortuitously with the departure of Kamsa and the success of the peace treaty enforced by Vasudeva. It did no good for Vasudeva to remind them that the storm that raged in their neighbour's yard could easily turn and ravage their own tomorrow; or that Kamsa had only gone away, not died a mortal death. Yadavas were positive in their outlook and never cared to dwell on the worst. People of the moment, they seized the day and every little joy it brought. It was the only way to gain some satisfaction and joy from an uncertain life.

But now, Vasudeva himself had succumbed to the enormous swell of sheer delight sweeping him along. How could he resist? What pomp, what splendour, what majesty! It was a wedding that would have honoured a god! His head swam to even count the many rich treasures he had been gifted, and his heart filled with pride that he had been able to afford the queen's dowry he had given the Andhakas in return. To quote Devaki's favourite phrase: Truly, today, they were both rich. They were rich in pleasure, love, goodwill, and in coin and kine!

Vasudeva savoured the warmth of the sun on his face, the fragrance of the blossoms, the colour and pageantry of the pavilion, the uplifting roar of the crowd and the delectable soma. Ahead was the uks cart, the uksan painted gaily as was the Vrishni custom, the driver seated and waiting to cart them away. It was time to go home and unlock the door to the future.

Vasudeva turned to his bride to assist her up the cart. Her face peeped out of the deep-red ochre wedding garments, bashful and demure, as if she had only just picked him out of a swayamvara line-up and was suddenly contemplating the implications of going home with an absolute stranger for a husband.

He winked at her, and she turned a deeper shade of red but winked back with a coyness that thrilled him. Ah, he would have children by this woman, a prodigious flock that they would raise together to be the joy of the Yadava world. Five, ten, a dozen bonny children! And that was the number *she* had spoken too, shyly, with eyes averted, but with a mischievous twinkle in them.

His bride safely ensconced upon the uks cart, Vasudeva sat beside her. The crowd achieved a new level of ecstasy as dhols, kettledrums, conch-shell trumpets and all kinds of musical instruments, vocal performance, and accompaniments – including the joyful baying of hounds, neighing of horses, lowing of kine, and trumpeting and foot-stamping of elephants – combined to create a deafening wave of sound that threatened to raise the cart and carry it all the way to his doorstep. He laughed till tears poured from his eyes in joy, and put a hand gently on the shoulder of the driver of the cart, speaking into the man's ear to tell him he could start the long, slow procession. It was customary for one of the bride's brothers to drive his sister and her groom home in order to extend the bride's familial connection as long as possible. He assumed that the man was one of Devaki's nine brothers; it hardly mattered which one.

The man turned his face to Vasudeva and, suddenly, it mattered a great deal.

The man driving the uks cart was none other than Kamsa himself.

two

Vasudeva's brothers, each seated with his bride in an identical uks cart drawn by painted uksan and driven by one of Devaki's brothers, shouted to him to get a move on. Vasudeva heard their voices as if from a great distance. His attention was focussed on Kamsa's face.

The prince of Mathura looked so different, he even tried to convince himself that it was one of Kamsa's *brothers*, not the man himself. But

there was no mistaking that heavy brow, those almost colourless grey eyes, the jutting jaw and mien of menace. The face was sun-darkened, as were the burly arms gripping the reins; the body had filled out, grown more muscular, bulging powerfully beneath the incongruous, gaily coloured anga-vastra. There was something different about the man that went beyond just the physical muscularity. It was as if Kamsa had grown years in the few months he had been absent. Not that he had aged. If anything, he seemed more vital and vigorous. It was an overall drawing in of energies, a focussing of psychological and physiological strengths, a sharpening and a tightening.

It is, it is ... Vasudeva groped to understand what he saw, even as his mind raced wildly through the myriad implications and possibilities that Kamsa's reappearance entailed ... it is, he realized at last, as if Kamsa had gone away into the wilderness alone, and had undergone a rite of passage that had made him a man.

Yes. For the face that turned to look back at Vasudeva was not Kamsa the spoilt brat accustomed to having his own way in everything, or even Kamsa the brutal bully who viewed the entire Yadava world as his playground. It was the face of a man who had recently matured and grown into the full possession of his adult faculties.

Kamsa had left a boy, returned a man.

Vasudeva had no idea what this man intended, or what he might do. He could not read his eyes, his face, or fathom his inner spirit.

The question was, would the man act as the boy had done, or ...

And in that *or* lay an infinity of possibilities.

Vasudeva felt a hand on his back, prodding him gently, insistently.

It was his bride, one hand holding her coverlet in place to maintain the custom of modesty, while urging him eagerly to start on the journey to her

new home.

He swallowed and looked at Kamsa.

To his surprise, his brother-in-law merely smiled slyly and began driving the uksan forward. The crowd roared with delight, its excitement reaching an apogee as the princesses and their new husbands clattered away on the carts. Children ran alongside the carts, yelling, laughing; those too old to be out on the streets watched, beaming, from their houses; those on the streets cheered uproariously. The sound of drums and music could be heard all across the city. Beside him, Vasudeva heard his new bride laugh with pleasure, an open-throated laughter that should have gladdened his heart as well.

But all Vasudeva could think of was: *Kamsa is back.*

What did he mean to do? Surely he wasn't going to drive Devaki and him home like a good brother!

That would be too much to expect from *this* brother-in-law.

No, Kamsa must have something in mind. Why else would he have appeared unexpectedly, on their very wedding day, and taken his place on the uks cart as if he was just fulfilling his brotherly duty?

Vasudeva looked at the broad back. Kamsa had changed so much that even the crowds did not recognize the crown prince at first glance. Those who noticed him at all assumed he was one of his brothers – after all, there was a striking resemblance. Did the external change reflect an inward one as well? What were Kamsa's intentions?

Vasudeva did not have to wait long for the answer.

Suddenly, a sound broke the din of cheering and celebration – a sound that almost seemed to be part of the overall cacophony at first.

It was the sound of a woman screaming.

It was joined by other screams, both male and female.

Slowly, the din in the great square began to die out as people realized that something was amiss.

As the cheering and yelling and whistling dwindled, the screaming grew more audible.

Then, even the music stopped. And the terror began.

three

After leaving Jarasandha, Kamsa had not ridden directly to Mathura.

His new ally had promised him an army of his own when he returned, the better to help him take charge of his homeland and weed out the rebellious elements among his own forces. It was to collect this fighting unit that he had gone after taking leave of Jarasandha.

During the months they had fought together, Jarasandha had taught Kamsa a great deal about warfare, battle strategy, governance, dominion, and related matters. He had mentored Kamsa more effectively than any tutor had until then. Unlike the gurus Kamsa had had as a boy, Jarasandha's teachings were hard-won ground truths, ripped raw and bleeding from the reality of his life and adventures. Kamsa's own enthusiasm enabled him to learn more effectively. Instead of the sullen resentment or sneering

indifference he had shown to earlier gurus, he received every mote of wisdom from Jarasandha with admiration and respect.

True education comes about through insightful *learning*, not from being *taught*. The greatest lessons are those gained through self-awareness and realization, not merely rote learning. This is especially true for a Kshatriya for whom practical knowledge was the most valuable and often made the difference between life and death, unlike the memory-testing scriptures that Brahmin acolytes were required to parrot almost from the time they could speak.

Kamsa had learnt his lessons well with the king of Magadha and among those lessons was the crucial insight that while any good leader could rule a kingdom, it took an extraordinary one to continue to rule it. His encounters with Vasudeva and the shocking failure he had experienced on both occasions had shown him the importance of relying on more than brute force to defeat his enemies. The news of his army's disbandment and the subsequent dissolution of the marauders made Kamsa realize the necessity of an elite unit that would serve him with absolute loyalty. His own countrymen and clansmen, while great fighters, were too independent minded. He needed a group of prime soldiers who would obey and serve him unquestioningly, unto death.

For this, Jarasandha had given him the Mohini Fauj: An army of eunuchs named after the avatar in which Vishnu the Preserver had taken the feminine form in order to deceive the Asuras.

Mohini – a woman who was in fact a man, and vice versa.

Mohini Fauj – a motley collection of boys taken from enemy camps and kingdoms during Jarasandha's many raids and invasions, clinically emasculated and trained into superb fighting units. The eunuchs had no nationality, no family, tribe, clan, faith or affiliation. They lived and fought purely for the honour of the Kshatriya code, and to serve their commander. Their only means of proving their self-worth was through fulfilling the wishes of their commander.

Jarasandha had raised a particular unit to obey Kamsa as their leader. For them, Kamsa was god incarnate, the ultimate being, one who could do no wrong. By implication, all those who opposed him were evil incarnate and must be destroyed. Their world was neatly divided into these two convenient compartments. Kamsa = Good. Kamsa's Enemies = Evil. As simple as that. They were indoctrinated so deeply that they could not comprehend any world view that challenged it. In short, it was simpler to kill them than to attempt to argue them out of their conviction that Kamsa was god.

And killing them was not simple at all.

The dregs of their communities, witness to the most horrific war crimes, abuse, atrocities, brutalities and every other variation of human cruelty, they had had every drop of humanity drained from them through a training regime designed by Jarasandha himself, a regime of such sustained, vicious and inestimable indoctrination that only the hardiest, most indestructible specimens could survive it. Those that did survive were deemed to have excelled, because survival against such odds as Jarasandha stacked against those pathetic eunuch-orphans *was* excellence in itself. They came out as lethal killing machines, superbly conditioned and honed to fighting prime, obeying only Kamsa, committed to destroying all others regardless of the risk to their own lives and well-being.

Jarasandha had demonstrated how his Mohinis could be ordered to maim themselves, commit suicidal actions and endanger the lives and limbs of their fellows at a single command. He had squandered several Mohinis just to demonstrate this fact. Those that survived with mutilated bodies or severed limbs had to be executed because a Mohini had to be utterly self-sufficient and ruthless to a fault. Even Kamsa was not privy to the training regime, or to the process of indoctrination, as these were personally supervised by Jarasandha and none but he possessed full knowledge of all the details and methods employed.

It did not matter. What mattered was that he had been handed a fighting force of such formidable power that no other force comparable in number could survive an encounter with his Mohinis. If anything, they could be

put up against a force far superior in number, position, or means, and while they might not always triumph against impossible odds, they would cause such damage to the enemy as to render his victory hollow.

It was this Mohini Fauj that Kamsa had gone to collect from the remote wilderness camp where they were spending their days in endless training and preparation. Jarasandha had not permitted the Mohinis to be used in his own army, or to serve anyone else but Kamsa himself. At one point, Kamsa had wondered aloud about a situation in which he commanded them to wage battle against Jarasandha. Would the Mohinis comply? Would they remain loyal to him?

‘You would cause me great losses,’ Jarasandha replied, answering the question quite seriously and without taking offence. ‘But eventually, your Mohini Fauj would be wiped out to the last individual.’

Kamsa had chuckled and said that if the Mohinis were able to get to Jarasandha himself before being cut down by superior numbers, it wouldn’t matter if they were wiped out. After all, the ultimate goal was to kill the enemy’s leader, was it not?

Jarasandha had smiled and said that Kamsa had a great deal to learn about warfare. Those were the initial days of their friendship.

‘The purpose of war is not merely to kill one’s opposing king or commander, it is to render that kingdom or force incapable of attacking you again. It’s not enough to cut off the head, it’s more important to sever the limbs and puncture the vital organs.’

Kamsa had frowned, not able to extrapolate the application of this anatomical metaphor to actual warfare. Jarasandha had shrugged, saying Kamsa would understand in time. ‘But to answer your question about the Mohini Fauj,’ the Magadhan said, ‘they might succeed in causing me great losses before being cut down to the last man, but they would never succeed in harming me personally.’

Kamsa had chortled and suggested that Jarasandha was saying that because he couldn't concede that his forces could ever be defeated.

'No, my friend,' Jarasandha had said good-naturedly. 'I say that because while my Mohinis will indeed obey you unto death, they do so not because they are loyal to you, but because they are loyal to me. You see, they obey you *because I tell them to obey you*. They obey me *because they are trained to obey me*. That is a crucial point. If, by some unhappy mischance, you were to order them to attack my army, they would do so, but they would stop short of causing me any personal harm.'

Kamsa frowned and asked how that was possible if the Mohinis thought of him, Kamsa, as god incarnate.

Jarasandha smiled his calm smile and said, 'They think of you as god incarnate, but of me as god in person. You are my incarnation. I am god himself!'

It turned out that Jarasandha could name any man or woman as his avatar or amsa and the Mohinis would worship that person as their master thereafter. But Jarasandha himself always remained their true god and commander.

After that, Kamsa never asked any theoretical questions regarding the loyalty of the Mohini Fauj. He simply accepted the gift he had been given and used it as best as possible.

When he returned to Mathura, he had taken the Mohinis with him.

Now, he raised his whip and spun the lash, once, twice, a third time, giving his aides the predetermined signal to start the 'festivities'. It was time to let Mathura know that its crown prince was home.

four

At first, Devaki could not comprehend what she saw.

The procession had just begun moving. She had even prodded Vasudeva impatiently to continue on their way. After days of ritual ceremonies and feasting and celebration, days and nights spent with more people than she had ever had around her in her life, she wanted nothing more than to be alone with Vasudeva.

My husband. The words warmed her heart, made it glow.

She was happier than she had ever been, looking forward to the rest of their life together. As the uks cart trundled forward, she laughed, raising her hands to wave gaily at the crowds, at the children running alongside, at her sisters in the carts following them...

That was when she saw the woman attack the soldiers.

Soldiers of both Ugrasena's and Vasudeva's armies were lining the avenues, ostensibly to keep the crowd back and clear a path for the wedding procession, but also to keep the peace. Fat chance of that with the populace wild with joy and venting years of pent-up energy on this tumultuous event.

Most of the soldiers wore a festive look, with the citizens having smeared coloured powder on their faces as well as each other's, and made no attempt to curb their smiles. Both armies mingled freely, chatting, exchanging views on the wedding, the food, the grand arrangement, boasting of which wedding party had celebrated the most, consumed the most honey wine, eaten the most sweets – basically behaving like brides' and grooms' relatives at a wedding feast.

Devaki's gaze happened to fall upon a woman approaching two soldiers from behind. The woman in question was dressed in garb as gaily coloured as the rest of the crowd, but it was the way she moved that caught Devaki's attention. She had a liveness about her that was almost like a dancer about to perform an acrobatic step.

As Devaki watched – half her attention diverted towards bestowing her brightest smiles upon the throng, her hands flailing to acknowledge and return the cheers of the ecstatic crowd – she saw the woman raise her hands. Something she held in each hand flashed brightly in the morning sunlight. Something metallic and highly burnished, with sharp edges. The objects flashed as the woman moved her arms with great grace and speed, and the two smiling soldiers abruptly lost their smiles and collapsed where they stood.

The next moment, the woman was lost in the crowd. But not before Devaki saw the things she held in her hands rise again to catch the sunlight. This time they did not flash *as* brightly, for they were covered with something dark and reddish. But she knew at once what they were. Blades. The woman had just killed those two soldiers, cutting them down from behind like sheaves of wheat.

Devaki caught another glimpse of flashing steel elsewhere and turned her head.

She saw another woman hacking down another soldier, then a second, then a third, and yet another. This other woman too moved with a fluid, effortless grace that was no less than any classical dancer, swirling, flowing, slashing ... She swung and soldiers died.

Suddenly, there were flashes of steel everywhere as far as she could see, winking in the sunlight, visible even through the dense, colourful crowd.

Flashes of steel.

And splatters of red.

Then the screams began. First a single woman, as she stumbled over a dead soldier and reacted instinctively.

Then several more as they found other dead soldiers.

Then the puzzled shouts of men as they found corpses too, or glimpsed other soldiers being killed.

Slowly, the din and cacophony of celebration died down, even the music faltering, then halting, then dying out altogether.

Suddenly, a terrible silence fell.

In those few moments, Devaki heard the sounds of slaughter: The liquid thud of knives hacking through flesh and bone. The choked death grunts of dying soldiers. The swishing and tinkling of garments as the female killers went about their deadly work, incongruously clad in festive garb.

Then a new cry rose from the crowd.

‘Assassins!’

At once, a new mood swept the enormous collective. A mob is like a body of water. Spill fragrant essence into it and it will turn lavender and aromatic; spill offal and it will soon be covered with a layer of scum and reek. The same crowd that was ecstatic with joy only moments ago, was now terrified.

Soldiers were dying across the city by the hundreds. Andhaka as well as Sura soldiers. The soldiers killed were only a fraction of the whole force, but the vast number of soldiers untouched by the violence could barely comprehend what was happening, let alone identify the ones responsible.

For one thing, the killers were women, clad like normal Mathura women, and therefore virtually indistinguishable from the rest of the crowd. They killed, then hid their weapons beneath their voluminous garments and

moved to their next target, working with chilling efficacy and ruthlessness. Nothing the soldiers had experienced had prepared them for such attackers. How could they fight the enemy when they could barely tell them apart from the tens of thousands of ordinary female citizens?

For another thing, the crowd was drunk on celebration and joy; emotions ran sky-high, and the moment the killing began, people overreacted. Some began attempting to flee, causing stampedes. Others tried to apprehend the killers and, in the process, got themselves killed, or grabbed the wrong women in their haste. Chaos broke out. The only ones who benefited from the chaos were the killers themselves. Moving through the crowds, killing at will, they reaped a terrible harvest. Safe on the uks cart, Devaki saw blood and slaughter and stampedes all around. She saw children run down by panicked crowds attempting to flee. She saw soldiers draw their weapons and hack blindly at the crowds around them, confused and angry at their comrades' death. She saw citizens take hold of the assassins, only to be hacked down brutally in a moment. The celebration had turned into a slaughter. The wedding procession into a funeral procession. The cheers and whistles and cries of joy turned to screams of terror and howls of agony.

Devaki clutched Vasudeva's anga-vastra and yelled to make herself heard over the din. 'Do something, My Lord! Stop this madness!'

But Vasudeva did nothing. He only sat there, watching the terror spread like wildfire.

She gaped, unable to understand why her husband wasn't doing anything to stop the madness, or at least shouting to control the crowd. She could see the look of horror on his face, the shocked gaze which meant that he was registering everything that was going on. 'Vasudeva!' she cried.

He turned to her, slowly. She was moved by the infinite sadness in his gaze. As always, his face made her feel that she was looking upon some exalted force.

He stared at her silently for a moment, then lowered his eyes in sadness.

‘My Lord,’ she sobbed. ‘Your people are dying!’

She realized her mistake and corrected herself: ‘Our people are dying!’

He did not respond in words. Only raised his eyes sadly again, looking over his shoulder at her brother at the head of the cart.

Frowning, she looked in the same direction.

She recognized him, somewhat darker and more leathery, the body more muscular and manly, but it was him.

Finally, comprehension dawned that it was *he* who was driving the cart.

And suddenly, she knew why Vasudeva was not doing anything. Why he *could not* do anything; why her wedding day had turned into a nightmare.

‘Greetings, sister dearest,’ said Kamsa, grinning amiably. ‘Allow me to offer my heartiest congratulations on your nuptials ... and commiseration, for you will not live to enjoy a long and happily married life.’

five

Kamsa was thrilled at how easily his plan had been put to action.

Along with Bana and Canura, he had hatched the idea of infiltrating the city and striking when Mathura was most vulnerable: during the royal wedding. With the kingdom in the grip of wedding revels, and visitors arriving by the tens of thousands from all corners, it had been easy for him to enter the city. Procuring suitable garb had posed no great challenge either, with the markets filled with traders and craftsmen from all across the Yadava nations offering wares and services for sale. Not that he had needed to purchase anything; his forces had simply taken what they wished, but they had been cautious enough not to do anything that would attract too much attention. Once they had secured the appropriate garb from houses lying empty – the inhabitants busy carousing during the wedding feasts – his Mohinis had mingled with the crowds and awaited the start of the procession.

As for Kamsa taking his place on the uks cart, it had been simplicity itself. He had just kept enough of his face concealed by his head-cloth to confuse the guards into assuming that he was one of his many brothers and clambered aboard. His brothers never suspected because once they saw him seated on the leading cart, they assumed he was this or the other. They were merry in their cups as well by then, after all.

His greatest advantage lay in the fact that no one expected him to be at the wedding. It was inconceivable that he would appear at such a time, that too in so surreptitious a manner. It had never been his way. The Kamsa of yore, the younger, brasher Kamsa, would have simply charged in: galloping, roaring with fury and hacking down or riding down anyone who obstructed his path. These devious subtleties were Jarasandha's teachings bearing fruit.

Once the procession had begun to move, he had given Bana and Canura the signal to direct the Mohinis to get to work; and they did so with the same ruthless ease with which he had watched them hack down enemy warriors during the training skirmishes Jarasandha had set up for his viewing pleasure. The sheer tumultuous chaos of the wedding, the enormous crowds, the emotional fever-pitch, and the silent, *deadly* smoothness with which his Mohinis moved through the city, killing Mathura and Sura

soldiers alike, thrilled him. It was almost artistic in its speed, precision and acrobatic beauty.

There, a Mohini slashed her blade under the guard of a Mathura soldier, pirouetted, then pierced the abdomen of a Sura soldier who was rushing at her in a blind rage; then swished around in a third spin, her swords disappearing into the folds of her garment. The next instant, she was lost in the crowd, head lowered, working her way discreetly to her next target as the horde of horrified witnesses around her tried to make sense of what had happened.

Here, a small band of soldiers formed a protective cordon around his cart – putting their bodies and their lives at stake for the royal couple they sought to protect – as a Mohini came sprinting from their flank, ducked under their slow, defensively raised lances, and slashed briefly but with killing perfection at each of them in turn, not killing at once, but mortally wounding. The entire cordon collapsed as one man, bleeding to death in agony as the uksan, unable to stop in time, stomped over their prone bodies, and the wheels of the cart lurched and heaved as they crushed the dying men underneath.

Everywhere, the same dance of death was being performed.

Kamsa glanced back at his sister, gratified at the expression on her face and on that of Vasudeva's as well.

‘Well, sister, how do you like my wedding gift?’

Devaki's face stared back at him. ‘Wedding ...gift?’ she repeated, uncomprehending.

Kamsa gestured broadly, indicating the city, the crowds, the screams, the chaos, the dancing Mohinis slaughtering hapless Yadava soldiers by the dozens, the hundreds, the stampedes, the terror – the madness and beauty of the whole scene. ‘A great performance, is it not? Have you seen such

artistry from our classical danseuses? I think not. I trust you are pleased with this great demonstration.'

'Abomination!' she spat, recovering her senses. 'How could you do such a thing? During your own family's celebrations?'

Kamsa laughed. 'My family's celebrations?' He clucked his tongue at the uksan, guiding them past a pile of writhing bodies left in the wake of a stampeding horde; most of them were very young children. He ignored the pitiful cries of those left broken and bleeding in the pile. 'No, Sister. You confuse politics with family. This is merely part of the Sura plot to take control of Mathura. You are merely a bonus!'

Devaki made a sound of despair. 'Stop it at once, Kamsa. Call off your mad dogs! Stop this mindless killing.' Tears spilled from her eyes, causing her kohl to streak. 'I beg of you, Brother. Lay down your arms. This is an occasion of peace and brotherhood!'

Kamsa grinned at her. 'You have been thoroughly brainwashed, Sister. I am merely doing now what our enemies would have done very soon to us anyway.'

Vasudeva spoke up, cautious but unafraid. 'You are killing your own Kshatriyas as well as mine, Kamsa. Are they your enemies as well?'

Kamsa shrugged, avoiding looking directly at Vasudeva just yet. 'They are either *with* us or *against* us. By standing with *your* men, they show themselves to be *your* men. Therefore they must be put down. I intend to clean out the rot from Mathura completely this time. Oftentimes, to save a healthy body one must sever an infected limb. I fear that my kingdom's military is badly in need of overhauling.' He lashed the whip at a foolish woman joining her hands together and begging the lords on the cart to help save her dying sons. 'It is time we brought some fresh blood into Mathura. And now is as good a time as any.'

Everywhere he looked, he was pleased to see the plan proceeding perfectly. Yadava soldiers were no match for the ruthless efficiency of his Mohini Fauj and were falling like flies. Within seconds, he would be clear of this crowded avenue and proceed to the next part of his plan, which was to—

Kamsa!

He dropped the whip. His head pounded with excruciating agony. ‘Guru!’ he cried involuntarily, calling out for Jarasandha as he often had during the preceding weeks when in situations of extreme risk or pain, appealing to the only man who had ever treated him as a father ought to treat a son, the only real teacher, master, preceptor he had ever acknowledged as worthy of commanding his attention.

Jarasandha cannot help you. This is your bane to break. And break it you must. Or it will break you!

‘WHAT ARE YOU BABBLING ABOUT?’ he cried, not caring that he was shrieking the words aloud, or that both Devaki and Vasudeva were exchanging glances and staring at him, as were several of those in the crowd who were not too preoccupied to recognize the altered but still recognizable face of their crown prince.

Devaki, your sister, will bear the male child that will be your undoing. Kill her now, or she will grow the seed of your destruction within her womb.

Kamsa writhed in agony. On the earlier occasions that Narada had spoken to him, in his mind as well as in spectral form in the forest, there had been only a gnashing sensation, like a deep rumbling of thunder too close to his head for comfort. But this time, it was as if the thunder was inside his head, crashing and resounding across the battered walls of his brain. ‘I ... am taking control ... of my destiny ...’ he said, panting when he finished the brief statement. It was a statement he had learnt from Jarasandha. This part of his plan was aimed at taking control of his own destiny instead of waiting for it to be handed to him the way he had waited all his life. He

had a plan, a beautiful, perfect plan. And the first part of the plan was going masterfully.‘My Mohini Fauj ...’

Your Mohini Fauj will not save you from the One who approaches. Once He sets foot upon this mortal plane, none will succeed in opposing Him. Not even your great guru. The only way to protect yourself from Him is to kill the woman who will bear His mortal avatar in this lifetime. Kill Devaki.

‘But ... ’ Kamsa said, unaware that he was rocking from side to side like a drunkard in the seat of the uks cart, or that even his Mohinis had stopped their slaughter to stare at him in consternation. Bana and Canura were watching him as well, open-mouthed with astonishment.

With a mighty effort, he raised himself up and roared to the skies. ‘WHAT CAN A SINGLE MORTAL CHILD DO TO ME? WHO IS HE? I FEAR NO MAN! I AM KAMSA!’

Silence fell across the avenue as all stopped to listen and stare. Into that silence, Kamsa heard the voice of the bodiless one speak like thunder out of the clear sky, and this time, not just he but everyone around him heard the words as well: as clear as a peal of booming thunder on the heels of a rage of lightning.

He is Hari incarnate. Vishnu reborn. If you are Kamsa the Great, then he is the Slayer of Kamsa!

six

Devaki cried out as Kamsa grabbed her by her hair and dragged her to her feet.

Vasudeva stood as well, the uks cart shuddering under the shifting weight of the three of them, but was careful not to make any sudden or threatening movements. It was obvious to him that Kamsa was a man already far beyond the verge of madness. If he had doubted it before, he knew it for certain now. The last several minutes, spent watching Kamsa debate and rage against an invisible voice, was not the reason Vasudeva doubted Kamsa's sanity. He too had heard the voice speak, had heard its brain-crushing thunder and felt its formidable menace. It was not that reaction that made him question his brother-in-law's mental stability. It was something else, something much deeper, more subtle, something he had glimpsed even on that day in the convocation hall when Kamsa threw the barbed spear at him ... But there was no time to dwell on such subtleties now.

Kamsa held Devaki up by her hair like a rag doll. She screamed and wept copiously – not because of fear, but due to her shame at being treated thus.

Devaki was a strong woman, brought up in the Arya tradition that regarded women as the true leaders of their clans. To be treated in this fashion by *any* person was inconceivable, let alone by one's own brother on the day of one's espousal.

Kamsa seemed to care nothing for the humiliation or pain he was causing his sister. His eyes were wide, the whites showing all around, the pupils mere pinpricks, face engorged and red with blood, a vein pulsing in his temple, the muscles and tendons of his powerfully muscled neck, shoulders, arms and chest bulging and straining as he held his sister up high, as if displaying her to the world.

Everywhere – across the great square and the avenues approaching it, on rooftops and windows, casements and verandahs, from the palace and from the streets – horrified eyes watched the drama unfold. Even the Mohinis, swords dripping blood, had paused in their slaughter to wonder at what was about to happen. The dying and the wounded groaned and cried out, unattended, as every citizen – shaken to the core by the shock of the brutal assaults, and now by the bestial behaviour of the crown prince – gaped at the dreadful tableau unfolding on the cart at the helm of the procession.

‘This woman?’ Kamsa bellowed, his voice carrying like a lion’s throaty roar across the square. ‘This woman would be the cause of my destruction? My own sister?’

His voice revealed his outrage and hurt. It was difficult to believe that a man like Kamsa could be hurt emotionally; but, of course, he was no less vulnerable to the arrows and barbs of human pain than any person. If anything, Kamsa was more sensitive than most, imagining slights where none had been intended, humiliation where none existed. As a young boy, he had spent many hours and days brooding over things his companions or playmates had mentioned casually or in play, refusing to rejoin their games or pastimes, often venting his anger on his pets, horses, kine and servants until he was old enough to take out his anger upon those who caused him these hurts, gradually working his way up the scale until the day he had flung his old tutor out of a palace window to his death. He harboured a self-righteous sense of outrage about his temper fugues, an air of being treated unfairly by an unjust and biased world. And never was it so evident as now. Even after his many atrocities and brutalities – after he had crept deviously into his own kingdom’s capital on the very day of his sister’s nuptials, wreaking havoc and causing mayhem all around – here he was, eyes brimming with tears of indignation, holding up his blood-kin as if she was something less than human, heartbroken at her betrayal! Thus are the wicked utterly convinced of their own righteousness, and thus are those who believe themselves the most upright often the least capable of upholding their own lofty principles.

‘Kamsa,’ Vasudeva said gently, careful not to provoke him further by action or vocal inflection.

‘Devaki means you no harm. She loves you as you are her brother. Look at her. See for yourself. She is a woman unarmed and intending no violence.’

Kamsa turned his mask of fury upon Vasudeva, and it took all of the Sura king’s self-control to keep himself from flinching. It was indeed like looking upon a mask rather than a man’s face, so distorted and bloated by fear and hate was Kamsa’s visage.

‘Are you in your senses, Vrishni? Did you not hear the saptarishi’s words? She will bear the child that will destroy me! Her womb will carry my slayer into this mortal realm.’

Vasudeva kept his head lowered, deliberately crouching a little to keep his considerable height below Kamsa’s eye level, his own eyes cast downwards rather than looking directly into Kamsa’s. He was keenly aware of how tightly Kamsa’s hand was wound around Devaki’s hair, and of the drawn sword in Kamsa’s other hand that needed only an instant to strike a death blow.

‘But she is just newly wedded to me, barely just a wife, let alone a mother. How can there be any child in her womb? Do you think she and I would violate the sanctity of our customs and traditions thus? Never! Whatever the voice may say, Devaki does not bear you any harm, nor does she bear any child that could possibly harm you!’

Kamsa was in no mood to listen. He turned his flashing eyes towards Devaki again, the poor woman squirming and writhing in pain, for Kamsa had her in a grip that not only held her up by the roots of her hair but also twisted her neck and torso agonizingly.

Vasudeva saw that were Kamsa simply to wrench his hand in a certain action, he would break Devaki’s spine and neck as easily as one might snap a dry twig by twisting it suddenly. Given his musculature and strength, the sword was redundant; Kamsa was capable of killing Devaki with barely a wrench of his wrist.

The crown prince of Mathura heaved and said in a tone of infinite suffering: ‘What you say matters not, Vasudeva. She is the one who will someday bear the instrument of my death. The only way to protect myself is to kill her now, before she slips out of my grasp and fulfils her destiny. I was warned *now*. There must be good reason why I was instructed thus at this point in time and not tomorrow or ten years from the morrow. I must obey.’

Kamsa raised his sword with the ease of an accomplished warrior, tossing it up in the air and catching it easily. He then gripped it in his right hand, with the point inwards, like a dagger. His massive back muscles clenched as he brought both arms closer to each other in a pincer-like action, the sword now poised directly above the weeping Devaki’s breast. She stared up in misery at the weapon of her annihilation, crying out for mercy. Vasudeva felt his whole world tremble on the brink of an abyss. It was impossible to believe that only a short while ago, his new bride and he had been about to embark on the first journey of their newly wed lives. What evil twist of fate had turned their joy into terror so abruptly?

He knew that being subservient and obsequious would not serve any longer. He must penetrate the veil of conviction that Kamsa had wrapped around himself. And he must do it at once. Otherwise, the sword would pierce the breast of the woman he loved and his world would lie bleeding upon the uks cart.

Vasudeva raised his head, drawing himself to his full stature, speaking in his normal voice. Despite his gentle nature and love of all living beings, he was a chieftain, a general, a king among men. He spoke now, not as a gowala, a cowherd, a husband or even a brother-in-law. Simply as a king. His voice rang out clearly across the sea of stunned faces filling the square.

‘So you serve a *voice* then? *That* is Kamsa’s lord and master? A disembodied voice that only *you* can hear and which speaks inside your head?’

He did not curb the scorn in his tone, the natural cynicism in the phrasing. He sought now not to appease but to provoke, to draw ire upon himself. Words were his only arrows, his voice the only bow.

Kamsa's back tensed, his arms flexed. Almost without realizing it, the arm holding the twisted mass of Devaki's hair in its fist loosened a little. Not enough for Vasudeva's wife to be free, but just enough to give her a moment's relief. She gasped, hitching in her breath and hope. Kamsa turned to look at Vasudeva, head lowered on his powerful neck, eyes glowering like those of the wound-maddened boar deep in the Vrindavan forest. Vasudeva still bore the scar of that boar's left tusk on his calf where the beast had cut open a gash. He had never forgotten the malevolence with which the boar had watched him from the leafy depths of the undergrowth, challenging the two-legged intruder to face him in his domain. Vasudeva had been seven years of age. He had killed the boar, but not because it had wounded him; he killed it because it had killed three other children and two grown men and had become a menace to their village.

Kamsa's eyes glowered in the darkness of his own face. He raised the sword, fingers deftly manoeuvring the blade till it was once again held in a forward grip. Now the point was aimed directly at Vasudeva's right eye.

'I serve no master. I have no lord. I am Kamsa,' he said, the words exploding from his heaving lungs and bursting from his mouth with frothy spittle. 'You dare call me a slave?'

Vasudeva had done no such thing, but that was Kamsa's way – to exaggerate everything in order to emphasize how unjust and unfair the other person, or the world, or the universe at large was to him, Kamsa. Because, of course, he, Kamsa, was the centre of all creation.

Vasudeva stood up to that gaze, meeting Kamsa's fevered eyes without blinking. He used Kamsa's own paranoia against the man. 'A voice speaks, you obey. If you are not its slave, why do you obey? How do you even know whether what the voice tells you is true?'

‘Because it has spoken before, and what it said came to pass!’ Kamsa said, still holding the sword pointed at Vasudeva. ‘I have no time to bandy words with you, Sura. The voice has told me that this woman will be the cause of my destruction. I believe it. I do not care if you believe or not. I will kill her to protect myself.’

‘And be known as a woman yourself!’ Vasudeva’s voice rang out loud and clear.

Kamsa stared at him.

‘You command an army of womanly warriors.’ Vasudeva gestured at the Mohinis. ‘You raise your sword against an unarmed woman, your own sister, no less. What will itihasa say about you in times to come? It will say that Kamsa was a woman among men, a eunuch who recruited others of his kind, who did not dare to face warriors with weapons; he chose only to kill by stealth, deception, and attack defenceless women of his own house!’ Vasudeva raised his hand now, pointing his finger at Kamsa. The tip of the finger barely inches from the tip of the sword. ‘You will be known as a craven without dharma or honour.’

Kamsa roared with fury, bristling with such rage that he was momentarily rendered speechless.

Vasudeva moved closer, into the arc of the upraised sword, close enough for the edge of the blade to be almost touching his own neck, the blade itself poised over his shoulder. He looked directly into Kamsa’s eyes, challenging him openly. ‘Too craven to fight *me* as a man.’

Mathura held its breath as Vasudeva stood before Kamsa, his neck bared to the edge of Kamsa's sword. One sideways cut of that muscular arm and the blade would bite into Vasudeva's neck and sever his most vital vein. The Sura king had no defence, nor a weapon of his own to counter Kamsa's. He faced certain, instant death.

Yet, Vasudeva stood ramrod straight, eyes unblinking, face fearless and set in the equanimous manner of a warrior who faced death daily and accepted its inevitability. For Vasudeva was a true warrior, not a mercenary thug like Kamsa who fought for personal gain and selfish motives, but a Kshatriya of the highest order, serving only the cause of dharma. Not just a *soldier* of dharma, a *sword* of dharma. And what does one sword have to fear from another?

It was Kamsa's hand that shook. It began as a tremulous quiver, just a single ripple of his etched-out muscles, as if the sword had grown too heavy for him to hold straight. Then the entire arm began to shudder and shake, and then the elbow bent at the crook and the sword descended, falling out of Kamsa's numb grip to clatter on the wooden planks of the uks cart.

The rest of him shuddered as well, a quaking of his entire body that bent him over double, bringing him to his knees in a posture curiously like supplication. His other hand, grown as numb as the first, released his sister involuntarily, and she fell, gasping with relief, on the cart. Kamsa shook and shivered like a man in the grip of a malarial fever, and from his mouth came a trickle of drool ... and a single word ...

None but Vasudeva heard that word.

Then, Kamsa buried his head in his own lap, his arms held out by his sides, twitching of their own accord. To all those watching, it seemed as if he had surrendered to Vasudeva, and was now repentant for his sins. It was a profound moment for all those who witnessed it. A moment of great clarity. For in that moment, every Yadava knew the truth: Whether by

divine miracle or by dint of superhuman power, Vasudeva could not be defeated by Kamsa in single combat. This was the third and final encounter between the two men, and even the most sceptical supporter of Kamsa or hater of the Suras and Vrishnis could no longer deny the stark evidence of their senses. Kamsa could not kill or harm Vasudeva. ‘Not so much as a hair on his head,’ people would say with pride and wonder afterwards.

Vasudeva looked to his bride. Devaki lay crumpled in a heap, crying a little but mostly just in shock from the violence of the episode and the proximity to death. Vasudeva gently cradled her in his arms. She looked up at him and, while she said nothing, her light-brown eyes – the colour of freshly threshed wheat from a good harvest – spoke eloquently. His own eyes read them easily. He knew that she was telling him that he should have killed Kamsa much before this day; that her brother was a monster, a demon, a rakshasa among men, and deserved no more than to be put down like one. She was pleading with him to do so even now. Her eyes cut away from him, seeking out and finding the sword that Kamsa had dropped, and which now lay only a foot or two from Vasudeva. She looked at the sword then raised her eyes to him, then looked pointedly at Kamsa. Words could hardly have expressed it any more clearly.

Vasudeva’s heart filled with a great sorrow. He knew that Devaki was right. Pacifist though he was, he was no fool. Had Kamsa never returned to Mathura, there would have been no need for Vasudeva to go after him and seek his destruction. But now that he had returned, making his intentions so clear to one and all, celebrating his return with a chilling dance of blood and death, laying violent hands upon his own sister, Vasudeva’s wife, he was no more a potential threat. He was a tangible enemy.

And the voice. It had said that Devaki would bear the child that would kill Kamsa. Vasudeva had heard it, even if Devaki had not. He had also heard Kamsa’s utter conviction that everything the voice said to him was true. He had called it ‘saptarishi’ and who was to say that it was *not* a saptarishi speaking to him from some ethereal plane? Far stranger things had occurred in Aryavarta of yore. What mattered was that Kamsa believed the voice and it had pronounced that Devaki’s son would prove to be the death

knell for Kamsa. Now, Kamsa would kill Devaki; or, if he didn't wish to see his wife murdered in cold blood, Vasudeva would have to kill Kamsa.

Devaki looked up at Vasudeva, waiting.

When Vasudeva made no move, she took the initiative. Reaching out, she picked up the sword and turned it around, inverting it so that the hilt faced Vasudeva, and offered it to him.

As soon as she did this, the watching crowd broke out of its stupor.

First one citizen shouted hoarsely: 'Aye!'

Just that single word, so clear yet terrible in its surety.

Then: 'Kill him!' This from the woman who had begged Kamsa for mercy and aid before he stopped the uks cart.

'Kill the prince!' cried another. A chorus of ayes followed this one.

Then a young boy's voice called out: 'Lord Vasudeva, save us!'

And the dam broke.

With one voice, the entire populace shouted for Vasudeva to kill Kamsa, to slay their crown prince, to destroy the monster, put down the rakshasa, kill, slaughter, murder, finish.

Vasudeva looked around, not sure whether to be pleased or saddened. Pleased, for it was evident how dearly the people loved him. Sad, because it was their own crown prince they wanted killed. He gazed at the sea of upturned faces, shouting mouths and pumping fists.

Amongst the crowd, he could see Kamsa's mercenaries, confounded by the developments of the past several minutes and unable to decide what to do next. At least the killing had stopped for the time being. He also noticed

the soldiers of both Andhaka and Sura colours moving in discreetly to ring Kamsa's warriors. He saw Kamsa's allies and aides, Bana and Canura, looking around in dismay as they took in the obvious fury of the crowd. It was one thing to infiltrate a happy and celebratory crowd of wedding voyeurs and take them by surprise and quite another to stand in the thick of a raging mob that knew exactly who you were and wanted you dead. Right now, the people's attention was on Kamsa. The moment Kamsa was slain, they would look around to seek out his soldiers and, judging by the intensity of their anger, they would flay them alive for the deaths they had caused today.

Vasudeva raised a hand, requesting silence. The din faded, reluctantly but respectfully, and he was able to speak.

'I know you desire this, and I do not say it would be wrong. What Kamsa has done today is sufficient to condemn him forever. Even so, I cannot take his life summarily.'

Querulous cries of outrage rose from all around. Vasudeva raised a hand again.

'I signed a pact of peace with your king not long ago. Regardless of how many times and in how many ways your own prince and your own soldiers – his erstwhile marauders – may have broken that pact, *I* cannot do so. I will not do so. I have upheld the sacred accord signed and sealed between me and your king Ugrasena all these many days, and I shall do so even today. Kamsa shall be taken to your king to be judged by him and brought to justice as your king sees fit. It is King Ugrasena's prerogative, not mine, to judge him and punish him with whatever danda he sees fit.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Vasudeva glimpsed Bana and Canura sidling away backwards, seeking to make good their escape.

Raising a hand, he pointed directly at them, drawing everyone's attention to them. Both men froze, aware of the hundreds of pairs of eyes upon them now: angry, vengeful eyes.

‘However, the men Kamsa brought with him today – the ones who butchered so many innocent bystanders and honourable soldiers as they stood at their posts – these men are outsiders and I, being the king of the Sura nation as well as the co-protector of the Andhaka nation, have as much power to pronounce judgement upon them as King Ugrasena. Seeing the grave threat their freedom poses to each of us gathered here, I deem it fit to try them here, try them *now*, and stop them from carrying out their vile plans.’ He paused, raising the sword to point directly at Bana and Canura. ‘Apprehend them at once, dead or alive.’

With a terrible roar, the crowd moved to do his bidding. The Mohinis, unable to understand the dialect of Mathura or the Yadava tongue fluently, were unable to comprehend Vasudeva’s words. However, they sensed that something was amiss, and several were ready to act. But this time, they were hemmed in tightly. It was difficult to pirouette and spin and dance acrobatically with flailing swords when one had barely a foot of room to stand in. The crowd converged on them like a pond swallowing pebbles, and while several succeeded in causing more deaths and wounds before succumbing, they all went down without exception.

Vasudeva watched grimly as the crowd meted out the punishment they felt Kamsa deserved upon the mercenaries who had done his bidding.

‘Is it just?’ Devaki asked him. ‘To condemn ordinary soldiers, even mercenaries, to death thus? While sparing my brother simply because he is a prince? Is this not unfair and unequal treatment? Are not all men to be treated equally under dharma in Arya law, in your own words?’

Vasudeva nodded. ‘I do not spare Kamsa because he is a prince. I spare him because he is an Andhaka, and I have signed a pact that states that I will not kill any Andhaka.’ He pointed at the crowd, slaughtering the assassins one by one. ‘Those men – or whatever they are – may be equal under dharma. But they are not Andhakas.’

Devaki caught his arm, pressing herself against his side so she might whisper into his ear. ‘If you will not do it, let me,’ she said. ‘Give me the sword; I shall kill him. We cannot let him live.’

Vasudeva caught her hand gently before it could take hold of the sword and take it from his hand. ‘We must let him live and let your father judge him under law. Or we would be just as demoniacal as he.’

She looked up at him, and in her eyes he saw her acceptance but also her anxiety.

eight

King Ugrasena’s court was filled to bursting. There was barely room to stand. Hundreds more waited outside the sabha hall and the palace grounds and the streets outside were packed as well. The entire kingdom waited to hear the outcome of Kamsa’s trial.

A flurry of excitement rippled through the crowd as King Ugrasena entered from a private entrance and took his place upon the royal dais. Queen Padmavati was by his side. Vasudeva and Devaki were present as well, as were Kamsa’s brothers and their new wives. The ministers of the court, the preceptors, the purohits, the Brahmins, there seemed to be no one who wanted to miss the trial. In many ways, it was a curious echo of the same collective that had gathered at this same venue for the sealing of the peace accord.

Ugrasena waited for the court crier to reel off his long list of antecedents and titles before taking his seat. Everyone else remained standing, but Ugrasena knew that he would not be able to get through this procedure on his feet. He could barely get through it at all. He glanced at Vasudeva, wondering what alien metal the man was made of. Had he been Vasudeva’s

age and in his position, he would have struck down Kamsa where he stood without a second's hesitation. There was no law, no dharma and no Arya court that could possibly condone all the evil that Kamsa had unleashed upon his own people as well as their neighbours.

The months of Kamsa's disappearance had been among the most blissful of Ugrasena's later years. He had even begun to hope that his son was dead, lying slain on some foreign battlefield, or murdered in the dark filth of some alley behind a drinking house or place of ill repute. The change in his queen had been palpable as well. After suffering the shock of learning the truth of what Kamsa had been up to, she had grown into a pale shadow of her former self. While no longer the stunning beauty he had married over two decades ago, she had at least been carrying her age gracefully, which was more than could be said about himself.

Now, he decided, it was time to end this travesty once and for all.

'The facts of the trial are unquestionable,' Ugrasena said. 'This morning, we have heard them all, reported by the most reliable witnesses possible.' He glanced warmly in Vasudeva's direction. 'I shall not dither or delay justice any further. Dharma dictates that Crown Prince Kamsa be given the sharp edge of the fullest extent of the law for his many crimes against humanity.'

A murmur of approval passed through the gathering.

Ugrasena went on grimly, ticking off the points of his judgement one by one as the court munshis raced to keep pace with his recitation. Later, the purohits and scholars would rephrase and clean up his pronouncement to ensure that the official record was properly pompous and officious enough to be fit for posterity. Right now, he used brevity and incisiveness to convey his points sharply and quickly, concerned more with getting over with it than with the beauty of phrase.

'First, I strip Kamsa of his crown. No more is he crown prince.' That was crucial under law, for a crown prince was, by virtue of his position, not subject to any judgement of any court of the land. In fact, since the king

was himself the chief dispenser of justice in a Yadava republican court, the crown prince was the chief-justice-in-waiting, so to speak. A court could hardly rule against one of its own senior officials. By stripping Kamsa of his crown, he had removed that legal hurdle.

‘Secondly, I divest Kamsa of all his royal titles, possessions, lands, property and anything else of value that he may currently own, may have owned in the past or may claim to own in future, under my authority as his pitr as well as the king of the Andhaka nation. As all possessions of the royal family are merely community property given to them for their use, Kamsa’s possessions belong to the Andhaka nation, and the Andhaka nation hereby takes them back.’

With his wealth, inheritance, property, servants, soldiers, in short, *everything* gone, Kamsa no longer possessed anything of value with which to buy support or raise military opposition; neither would any heirs that Kamsa might have appointed or produced biologically, of which Ugrasena was not aware. Again, a point of law, but a crucial one to avoid future complications.

‘Now, Kamsa is an ordinary citizen, subject to ordinary laws. As such, I find him guilty of multiple counts of abuse of the peace accord between our nation and the Sura nation. I also find him guilty of numerous instances of assault, murder, conspiracy, rioting, and other crimes.’

Ugrasena paused, eyes sweeping the rapt faces of the gathering. After a long time, he felt strong, in command, as if he was truly king again.

Kamsa had emasculated me, he thought bitterly. Unable to fully accept the truth of his misdeeds or punish him myself, I had lost all confidence in myself as a ruler.

That was another debt he owed Vasudeva. By his honourable actions and decisions, exemplified by the brilliant manner in which he had apprehended Kamsa rather than simply executing him, he had reasserted dharma in Mathura. It was a powerful message and one that Ugrasena intended to underline now.

‘For all these crimes, I, Ugrasena, king of the Andhaka tribes collected into one nation under Sri the Eternal, Isa the Supreme, and Narayana the Infinite, condemn Kamsa to be executed in the public square in front of the palace.’

He raised his rajtaru, pleased to note the steadiness of his grip and the firmness of his voice. ‘Such sentence to be carried at once.’

The rapping of the rajtaru on the floor of the dais boomed and echoed throughout the sabha hall.

nine

Padmavati sighed as Ugrasena pronounced the judgement. As a mother, her heart broke to hear such a sentence. Not because she disagreed, but because she lamented that her son, her flesh and blood, should have brought himself to such a pass. What had she done wrong? Should she have nursed him longer as an infant? Cared for him personally rather than have the daimaas look after him? Been stricter in her punishments? She was wracked with self-doubt, questions, anxieties and guilt.

The people suffered from no such dilemma. The roar of approval that greeted Ugrasena’s sentencing made that clear. The enthusiastic cheers and shouts that echoed through the sabha hall, the palace and the streets could not be called jubilant – for which kingdom enjoys the execution of its own crown prince? – but it was certainly coated with relief. Nobody had doubted that justice would be done, but after long years of being at the

receiving end of Kamsa's atrocities, and the ugly disputes, feuds and other conflicts, the people's faith in the king had slipped a little.

Today, that faith was renewed with vigour.

Shortly after, Padmavati stood at the balcony overlooking the courtyard of the palace. As with the sabha hall, every inch of space was packed with eager citizens wishing to witness the execution of the former crown prince. Never before had such an event occurred. She prayed it never would.

Beside her stood Ugrasena, discreetly leaning on a royal crook that was not visible to the crowds below: a king had to keep up the appearance of strength, even if he was ailing and frail. Vasudeva and Devaki stood with them. Kamsa's other brothers and sisters and their spouses stood nearby. The atmosphere was grim and heavy and fraught with a certain tension that she understood: not tension for the event, but a kind of tense anticipation, awaiting the end of the event, so they could breathe freely again. Even Kamsa's brothers, blood-kin though they were, displayed the same impassive expressions, waiting for the danda to be carried out, and the black sheep of the family to be eliminated. Growing up, Kamsa had made enemies of them, one and all; and the chief reason why Ugrasena had chosen to send them out to govern other regions of the kingdom was to avoid their coming into mortal conflict with Kamsa. Padmavati could see no vestige of love or regret on any of their faces, and this made her sad as well. What had Ugrasena and she done to produce a son so unloved and hated that an entire kingdom, including his own family, now looked forward to his execution?

For the people, there were far stronger implications of today's event. This execution would change the history of the Yadava nations forever. It would prove that no one was above dharma. It would reaffirm their faith in an idea – of a republic – that had been faltering for years.

Padmavati forced herself to look down at Kamsa. He had been pressed into a kneeling posture on the execution platform below, his head resting upon a wooden block. The executioner, a giant of a man who was in reality a shepherd of the mountain tribes – the only community that undertook to perform such executions – stood patiently beside him, a large mace leaning against his thigh.

Oddly enough, Kamsa had done nothing, said nothing throughout the brief trial and sentencing. He had simply knelt thus, as he knelt now, head bowed, long hair unfettered and falling across his face, concealing any expression or trace of emotion. In no way did he betray any other response or feeling. He did not utter a single word or make a sound.

She supposed that he was filled with remorse for his misdeeds and overcome by guilt and shame. She hoped that was the case. It would have been too terrible to bear had he ranted and raved and called out for mercy or abused his accusers. True, he had the right to do so, but it would only have made people pity him. Weakness among Yadava Kshatriyas was unforgivable. They would have mocked him, scorned him ... *hated* him for not accepting his death like a Yadu. This way, he would at least die honourably, executed by official danda, punished under dharma. He could even be cremated officially, his ashes scattered in the Yamuna as those of his ancestors had been. *And soon, my ashes will fall into the river as well*, she thought, sadness pressing against her heart like a cold fist, *for how will I live with the shame of this?*

The magistrate presiding over the execution looked up at the balcony. Ugrasena raised his rajtaru, the signal to begin. The executioner lifted the mace over his head, his powerful hands hefting the massive length of iron, dimples appearing in his shoulders and back. Unlike the maces carried into battle, this tool was not plated with steel, silver, gold, or even copper or brass. No filigree work adorned it, no shaping altered its menacing bulk. It was simply a black pillar of iron with a bulbous head thrice as large as a grown man's, pitted, scored and dented in several places from use. She wondered how many condemned men the mace had crushed to death, whose blood would mingle with her own, for the blood that ran through Kamsa's veins was her blood.

With the head of the mace lifted as high as his muscled arms could raise it, the shepherd steadied himself to take careful aim. He was known to accomplish his job in a single blow, and Padmavati prayed that he would do so today as well. She could not imagine the cruelty of a man half-crushed, half-dead, lying on the wooden block, suffering.

‘Be merciful; make it quick. He is my son after all,’ she prayed. For her, whatever he may have done, it all came down to a single point: Kamsa was her son. And she could not find it in her heart to wish him cruelty even now.

The mace hovered in the air for a moment, then began its terrible descent. A sound rose from the crowd, an instinctive natural sound that originated deep in the chests of the onlookers and rose to their throats as a wordless growl. As the mace descended, the growl rose to a roar and exploded.

The deadly tool crashed down, hard enough to smash a skull to pulp, to end life instantly, to shatter bone and mash flesh and splatter blood.

The executioner grunted with the effort.

But instead of meeting skull and flesh, the mace was met by an upraised hand. At the very instant that it began to fall, Kamsa’s hand shot up and, with unerring instinct, met the head of the mace with its palm. It was not entirely uncommon; men were known to panic and attempt to save themselves at the last instant. The mace ought to have smashed the hand along with the skull, without its descent being affected in the least.

Instead, Kamsa’s outstretched hand slapped against the head of the mace, successfully halting its purposeful approach. Stalled mid-hurtle, the mace stayed there: an inch above Kamsa’s head.

A gasp rose from the watching crowd. Incredulity. Disbelief. Shock. Such a thing had never happened before. The executioner stared down, baffled. He then tried to haul the mace up again, intending to bring it down and do the job properly the next time. He had assumed that he had not wielded the

mace correctly the first time; that was the only explanation which made sense.

But though the executioner struggled fiercely, his corded arms, shoulders, back and neck muscles straining until they stood out in etched relief, the mace did not budge.

Then, Padmavati saw Kamsa's fingers begin to close upon the head of the mace, the balls of the fingers pressing *into* the solid iron bulb.

And the iron yielded.

Kamsa's fingers dug into the metal like a child's fingers squeezing a ball of mud. The executioner stared in disbelief, then lost his grip on the mace and backed away. Nothing in his entire life had prepared him for such an occurrence. People across the courtyard gasped and cried out in shock, pointing.

Kamsa rose to his feet. He was holding the mace by its head. He looked down at it and slowly closed his fist, crushing the solid iron bulb as easily as the mace ought to have crushed his head moments earlier. Then he tossed the mace aside – directly at the executioner. A hundred kilos of iron struck the man in the chest, shattering him. He fell off the execution platform, landing on his back on the stone courtyard, broken beyond repair. People screamed now, unable to comprehend what was happening. Perhaps the oddest thing of all was the way Kamsa looked at his own hand, flexing the fingers, and then stared at the dying executioner with the mace embedded in his chest, *as if he is ... Padmavati groped ... as if he's as shocked at his own feat of strength as everyone else!*

Kamsa seemed to accept his new-found strength at last and raised his head, looking around at the watching crowd. His hair fell into his face, concealing most of his features. Only one eye glared out, bulging, red-veined, the pupil reduced to a pinpoint; and brilliant white teeth flashed in the dark shade of his hair-curtained face. He lifted his heavy-lidded eyes and gazed up at the balcony. Padmavati flinched as his eyes sought out and found her. She thought she saw him grin by way of greeting; then that

terrible wild-eyed gaze passed on to find his father. There it stayed. She sensed Ugrasena standing his ground, neither flinching nor showing any reaction that might give Kamsa any satisfaction, but from the trembling of his hand upon the crook that helped support him, she knew that the effort cost him dearly.

Kamsa chuckled.

Padmavati suddenly realized that Kamsa had expanded in size. Instead of his normal height of two yards, he was a good yard taller now. In fact, he was growing even as she watched. She had barely taken her eyes off him, to look at her husband, and found him a head taller when she looked down again. Now, he was twice his height, his width expanding proportionately. Now, thrice his size ... She heard the platform creak as his weight increased as well, now four times, then five times. Kamsa then started growing exponentially, rising like a coiled cobra expanding to its full height. The crowd gathered in the courtyard screamed and shouted in terror, unable to make sense of this new phenomenon.

And Kamsa continued to grow.

ten

'YADUS OF MATHURA!'

The voice boomed like a peal of thunder mingled with a grinding metallic sound. Ugrasena's ears throbbed painfully with the impact of the sound. Beside him, Padmavati clapped her hands over her ears. Devaki did

likewise. In the courtyard, people reeled and fell back, stampeding to get away from the monstrosity that stood in front of the palace. Elsewhere, horses reared and whinnied in panic, elephants trumpeted in anger, kine lowed in protest, babies howled in dismay.

The being that had been Kamsa just a few moments ago now towered above the height of the palace, with just the head measuring a hundred yards in height. It was the width and thickness of a mansion. Dust clouds, raised by its movement, boiled and seethed around it, lending it an air of sorcery, as if some conjuror had tossed down a crystal ball of magic powder and this impossible thing had emerged. The puranas told of such things: creatures that altered shape at will, grew in size or diminished in stature as they pleased. But this was no creature out of a puranic tale. This was Kamsa!

BY CONDEMNING MY MORTAL BODY TO DEATH, YOU HAVE RELEASED MY TRUE FORM. UNTIL TODAY, I TOO HAD JUST PREMONITIONS AND GLIMPSES OF MY TRUE IDENTITY. BUT BY BRINGING ME TO THE POINT OF DEATH, YOU HAVE UNLOCKED MY TRUE NATURE. THIS IS WHO I AM. NOT A MERE MORTAL LIKE YOU. LOOK UPON ME AND WEEP, FOR I AM YOUR DESTINY. I AM YOUR DEATH. I AM YOUR OVERLORD!

Ugrasena sucked his breath in, struggling to support his weight on the crook. He realized that he had inadvertently been leaning back, causing his balance to fail. He reached out and grasped the balustrade, using it to prop himself up. It no longer mattered if anyone saw him; nobody had eyes for him any more, or for anything else except the giant rakshasa that loomed in the palace courtyard.

Yes, a rakshasa, for what else would you call this being! His mind shuddered, desisted from accepting what he was experiencing with his own senses. It was something straight out of the scrolls that recorded ancient tales and forgotten legends.

Grotesque, malformed, hideously shaped and bulging out from unexpected places, it appeared to be more a war machine than a living creature. Its

size was the feature that was least unusual about it. Its massive muscles were an epic parody of Kamsa's physique. Its feet were ringed with a fuzzy down that was more goat- or sheep-like than human. It took a step forward, crushing the remnants of the execution platform to splinters, and the earth reverberated with the thud of the impact. When it spoke, its tongue protruded, a violent, swollen purple tongue crawling with life. Were those *serpents* weaving in and out of the flesh of its tongue? And the eyes, those terrible bulging eyes with the pinpointy pupils – there were living things squirming inside its eyeballs as well, wriggling to and fro and falling ... to land with a sickening plop on the courtyard far below, each the size of a finger, trailing a blood-red, mucus-like residue.

Despite this macabre transmogrification, there was no question that the being was Kamsa. That face, swollen and fat with hatred and rage; those eyes glittering through the curtain of filthy ropes of hair; the overall shape of those features; that body, the way it moved and walked and turned its head ... even the voice, thunderous and with its undertone of gnashing metal, was still recognizably Kamsa's. As the creature spoke – almost to itself at times – with curious lapses into a kind of self-questioning tone, Ugrasena realized that the being was discovering its true self even as they were viewing its transformation.

'TOO LONG HAVE I ENDURED IN THIS FRAIL, MORTAL FORM. TOO LONG DID I STAY IMPRISONED IN THAT PUTRID CAGE OF MORTAL FLESH AND BONE. THIS IS THE DAY OF MY RESURRECTION. YET I DO NOT THANK YOU, FOR THIS TOO WAS ORDAINED, AS WERE ALL THE THINGS THAT HAVE PASSED AND THOSE THAT ARE YET TO HAPPEN.'

The giant took another step, this time stepping right onto a section of the crowd of onlookers who had come to witness the execution. Ugrasena saw a dozen innocents crushed like ants beneath the giant foot. Kamsa did not even realize that he had ended their lives. All he had done was shift his weight from one foot to the other.

Ugrasena realized that he had to take charge of the situation somehow, or at least attempt to do so. The being was not killing people ... not by its own

volition ... at least not yet ... Perhaps if he kept it talking for a while longer, he could pre-empt some violence.

‘Who are you?’ he cried, his voice cracking with age and emotion. ‘You are not my son Kamsa. What are you? Identify thyself, creature!’

Kamsa turned and looked down at him. The yard-thick black lips curled to reveal ivory-white fangs. ‘WHO AM I? WHY, I AM THE ONE YOUR WIFE NAMED KAMSA. DO YOU NOT KNOW WHY SHE NAMED ME SO? ASK HER THEN. ASK HER WHY SHE NAMED YOUR FIRST-BORN KAMSA!’

Ugrasena frowned. What was the creature talking about? Surely, it was raving. Then he glanced at Padmavati and saw the way she stared up at the rakshasa, her face drained of all colour, and realization dawned.

‘My Queen,’ he asked her, ‘what does this monster mean? Can you explain?’

Padmavati looked at Ugrasena. In her eyes, he saw a terrible truth.

She knows what the rakshasa means. She knows!

‘My Lord,’ she said, ‘this is a creature from the netherworld. A being out of myth. It seeks only to delude and confound you. Do not believe anything it says.’

But her voice rang false and her face betrayed the truth.

Ugrasena hobbled over to where she stood, the crook striking the marbled floor of the balcony with a sharp crack. ‘Speak the truth,’ he commanded. ‘I demand it.’

She blanched and turned away. But he caught her arm and pressed upon it.

Slowly, with her head lowered, and tears starting to trickle, she said, ‘He was named after Kala-Nemi.’

‘INDEED,’ said the giant towering above the city, its voice carrying to the farthest corner of Mathura, its terrible form visible from every place in the city. There was a tone of glee in its voice now; as if it had finally unlocked a great secret, something it had sought for long. *‘AMSA OF KALA-NEMI. HENCE, K-AMSA! FOR THAT IS WHO I WAS IN MY PAST LIFE UNTIL THE SURYAVANSHI IKSHWAKU KSHATRIYA KING OF AYODHYA DEFEATED ME AND THE BRAHMARISHIS VASHISHTA AND VALMIKI CONDEMNED ME TO CENTURIES OF IMPRISONMENT. KALA-NEMI.’*

Rama Chandra of Ayodhya had defeated this being? Yes, Ugrasena recalled hearing some tales of his derring-do from his preceptor as a boy. Never did he expect to see the stuff of those fireside tales and bedtime stories come to life in this way.

He raised his crook, pointing it angrily at the giant.

‘What is it you seek here now? Why have you returned to prithviloka? And why did you choose the body and form of my son as your receptacle?’

The bulging face stared down at him. Ugrasena saw now that there were things moving beneath the surface of the rakshasa’s *skin* as well, all over his body. Tiny, writhing forms in a variety of shapes, like insects of various kinds – centipedes, millipedes, roaches, bugs, and other crawling creatures – moving here and there, causing the beast’s skin to ripple and bulge at unexpected places and in unsettling ways. He swallowed nervously, not letting himself think of the impossibility of fighting such a being. What weapon could he use against it? How many warriors would it take to lead an assault? Where and how would they strike at it? Could it be wounded? Killed? How?

‘YOUR SON?’

The being that had once been Kala-Nemi and was now Kamsa issued a sound that made even Ugrasena cringe with pain. It was like a horse coughing right into one’s ear.

The being dribbled as it spoke, its spittle as alive as the rest of its existence. Several writhing forms spattered onto the balcony and coated it in a slimy white fluid. Ugrasena saw one crawling at his foot and brought the crook down upon it, impaling it. A tiny scream of agony reached his ears. He resisted the urge to void his guts over the balcony railing.

'I AM NOT YOUR SON, UGRASENA. I HAVE NEVER BEEN YOUR SON. I AM NOT BORN OF MORTAL MAN. AGAIN, ASK YOUR QUEEN IF YOU DO NOT BELIEVE ME. ASK HER WITH WHOM SHE LAY IN ORDER TO CONCEIVE ME. IT WAS NO MORTAL MAN, LORD OF MATHURA. IT WAS CERTAINLY NOT YOU!'

As the being laughed, spewing living saliva, Ugrasena glanced at Padmavati. She had fallen to the ground, her face buried in her hands, weeping bitterly. He felt sad for her, but also anger and disgust. Could it be true, then? Her reaction suggested it was. What did it matter now anyway? The crisis that faced him, that faced them all, was far greater than a mere question of paternity. The future of their entire race was under threat now. He could be an angry husband later, in the privacy of his bedchamber; right now, he was still king of Mathura. And as king, he needed to know the enemy's intentions.

'Tell me then,' Ugrasena said. 'What is it you desire from us now?'

Kamsa looked down at him, then up at the sky, then around. From that height, Ugrasena guessed that the giant could surely see the whole of Mathura, as well as much of the surrounding countryside.

He could probably cover the entire kingdom in a few hours if he leaps and runs. And he could destroy it in days if he wishes.

Finally, the giant completed his examination and looked down again. Ugrasena glimpsed that same hideous smile. 'ONLY WHAT I DESERVE,' Kamsa said with unexpected simplicity, then added: 'TO RULE THE YADAVA NATIONS FROM NOW UNTIL THE END OF TIME, FOR I AM IMMORTAL AND THIS REWARD OF ETERNAL LIFE IS GIVEN UNTO ME AS MY JUST DESERTS FOR PAST SERVICES RENDERED.'

He seemed to pause and think for a moment, then his face brightened grotesquely as he beamed with insane delight. ‘YES. *IT IS SO. I AM YOUR NEW KING AND, AS OF THIS MOMENT, I CROWN MYSELF KING ETERNAL. BOW TO ME, MATHURA. BOW ... OR DIE!*’

eleven

A pall of dread hung over Mathura. The Yadavas set great store by signs and omens, all of which were ominous. Calves were born stillborn or deformed. Milk was curdling everywhere in the kingdom; even freshly drawn milk lay in frothy lumps in the pail. A mysterious illness swept the kine population; many believed that it was engendered by the vile effusions the giant Kamsa had exuded. Hundreds of thousands of heads of cattle died and more continued to die in the weeks that followed. Sown fields were picked clean of seeds by birds. Crops ready for harvesting were suddenly found devastated by rodents, vermin or fungi. Yokes cracked, uksan’s legs broke and they had to be put down, horses went mad and attacked their own syces, elephants went into masti outside of season, rampaging through the villages, causing havoc. One moment the sky would be promisingly overcast, the next, it would turn cloudless. A river broke its banks and washed away an entire village even though it was late summer, almost autumn; there was no logical explanation for the deluge. Other rivers dried up overnight, leaving fish gasping and dolphins flailing pitifully on the riverbeds. The villages they served reached drought-like conditions despite a record monsoon. Strange phenomena appeared in the western and eastern skies, as if the sun was about to rise at midnight, or had just set at midday. Brahmacharya acolytes who had been able to recite thousands of Vedic shlokas found themselves perfectly blank-headed,

barely able to stammer a few lines. Water drawn from the sweetest wells came up foul and rancid. Newborn babes found no milk in their mothers' breasts; others choked in their cribs and died of unknown ailments. People saw their dead ancestors move about amongst them, warning of impending doom, urging their descendants to migrate to distant lands. Soothsayers, astrologers, priests, madmen, philosophers, poets, cowherds ... all agreed that a great and terrible disaster was imminent. Many predicted that the extinction of the Yadava race was nigh. Nobody laughed or disagreed.

The reign of Kamsa had begun.

twelve

Kamsa smiled as the masons worked. He had reduced himself to his normal size, but still seemed somewhat larger than before. Vasudeva had observed that each time he expanded into a giant and then regained his human form, he appeared a little changed. Once, he noticed something creeping beneath the skin of Kamsa's arm, sluggishly, as if unable to move as energetically in human flesh as it would in a bigger, rakshasa body. Slowly, as Vasudeva watched discreetly, it seemed to be absorbed back into the arm. On another occasion, Kamsa's face reduced to normal human size along with the rest of his body, but the eyes themselves remained rakshasa-like, the contrast between the human face and rakshasa orbs horrifying to behold.

Vasudeva wondered if something in Kamsa's substance changed each time he underwent the transformation. If, perhaps, eventually, Kamsa would become all-rakshasa, with no trace of the human left.

It was a chilling thought. Kamsa was already the terror of the land. After the day of his execution – ‘the day of my rebirth!’ as he called the day, demanding that it be made a public holiday in Mathura to be celebrated by all Yadavas henceforth, on pain of death – he had initiated a pogrom of terrible efficiency. His aides-de-camp, Bana and Canura, had miraculously survived the battering by the crowd on Vasudeva’s wedding day. They had been scheduled for execution following Kamsa but were freed and reinstated to his side, and had been proclaimed mahamantris by him. There were seven mahamantris already in place at the royal court, and since no more than seven could hold the post at any time, Kamsa had killed the other seven, leaving only Bana and Canura to manage the day-to-day administrative affairs of the kingdom. He had also slaughtered the rest of the court officials, nobles, and others who had either opposed him in the past, disagreed with him privately or publicly, or offended him inadvertently. When each one was brought before him for ‘trial and sentencing’ under the new ‘justice system’ that he had initiated, he seemed unable to recognize several of them, but shrugged and gave the command for execution anyway.

The new execution platform, constructed overnight to replace the old one that Kamsa had shattered as a giant, soon turned red with the blood shed over its planks. Nobody came to witness executions any more, for, often, Kamsa would point randomly at the crowd and say that he recognized a woman who had once giggled when he was passing by, or a boy who reminded him of a long-ago playmate who had won a race against him, or some such whim, and the person would be dragged up to the platform and executed then and there. All grist for the mill.

Now, he was overseeing what he termed the ‘restriction of facilities’ for the ‘former’ king and queen Ugrasena and Padmavati. Since he had declared himself King Eternal, Ugrasena and Padmavati were redundant; their very presence an offence to the current sovereign.

Arya tradition required Raj-Kshatriyas to spend the third, autumnal phase or ‘ashrama’ of their lives, vanaprastha ashrama, in the shelter of the forest. In point of law, Kamsa was correct. By tradition, Ugrasena ought to have retired to a hermitage in the forest by now, Padmavati accompanying

him voluntarily as was the custom, and have been available to his children and former citizens as a mentor and advisor, the physical remove from active politics and prohibition against owning property or accumulation of wealth ensuring that he could never become a political rival to his heirs. Ugrasena was well past the age. In fact, he was on the verge of sanyasa ashrama, the phase of complete renunciation when a Raj- Kshatriya devoted his energies and remaining lifetime to the contemplation of godhead, preparing himself for union with the infinite power of Brahman, the all- pervasive. The only reason Ugrasena had remained on the throne until now was because he had known that Kamsa was ill-prepared to take on the task of running the kingdom. That, and the enduring strife between the Yadavas had kept him on the throne, draining his dwindling strength in statecraft when he ought to have been enjoying the fruits of his long life and considerable accomplishments.

Kamsa reasoned, in the convoluted thought process that he had developed since his ‘rebirth’, that since Ugrasena had failed to take vanaprastha ashrama at the prescribed time, regardless of his reason for flouting tradition, he had consumed part of Kamsa’s birthright. Kamsa reminded those listening that he was not Ugrasena’s son, but Padmavati’s. Since Arya dynasties and society were matriarchal, he was the heir to the throne and, as Padmavati’s eldest son, entitled to reign. Since Ugrasena had deprived him of his entitlement, he had committed treason against Kamsa, the rightful king, and as such, Kamsa was justified in doing whatever he pleased with him. This was a gross simplification and distortion, of course. In point of law, if Ugrasena could be proven to have transgressed by wilfully denying his heirs and the kingdom their rightful change of liege – which was clearly not the case here – then, in that unlikely scenario, Ugrasena might perhaps have been banished into permanent exile, to spend his last years in the wilderness, never to return to Mathura. Under the circumstances, this would have been a merciful sentence as well as the right one under dharma.

But Kamsa had chosen instead the sentence he was now overseeing.

Vasudeva watched with great sadness as a hundred masons, bricklayers, stone workers and other artisans and craftsmen worked feverishly to

complete the task given them. They were building a wall around the private chambers of Ugrasena and Padmavati – not the entire palatial mansion, which was a veritable palace in itself, and which they had formerly occupied, but a tiny section of the same, barely more than an apartment. It was, in fact, the apartment that housed Padmavati's maids and was, as such, grossly unfit for a queen, let alone a royal couple. It had been stripped of any 'luxuries' and filled instead with dirt, assorted plants, and even insects and rodents specially brought from the woods and set loose inside the rooms. The roof had been painted half blue and half black. A hole had been made high up on a wall, and a pipe trickled water from this hole into one of the chambers, which in turn spattered on the muddy floor beneath, turning it to mush, and it was apparently up to the occupants to provide a pathway for this 'river' to flow neatly through their 'domain'. There were no facilities for the two occupants to use as a toilet; merely two medium-sized chambers filled with this assortment of filth and vermin. Two tiny windows set high near the ceiling let in whatever little light and air could find its way into that claustrophobic space.

This, Kamsa said proudly, was to be their vanaprastha ashrama. Their forest abode!

And to ensure that they remained within this space as surely as they would have remained in an actual forest, he was having it walled in. Even an elephant would have a hard time breaking through the two-foot-thick stone wall he was getting built, rising from floor to ceiling. No door remained to enter or exit the 'forest world'. From time to time, some raw vegetables – herbs and roots and tree bark, and the occasional fruit – would be pushed in through the high windows or the water pipe to perhaps be found and eaten by the residents or, if they were not quick enough, their fellow inhabitants.

Kamsa turned to Vasudeva and said cheerfully: 'There; it is done. Isn't it marvellous? They shall be so happy in their forest world. So restful! I think they will become true yogis in no time at all.'

Vasudeva had tried his best to plead on behalf of the imprisoned king and queen, begging with Kamsa to give them even just a clean apartment with

daily meals and facilities for their toilet. But Kamsa had acted as if he did not hear him, and had extolled the virtues of his ‘brilliant’ plan in a succession of self-aggrandizing compliments. Vasudeva had known that were he to press the point, Kamsa’s anger would turn upon him. Yet, he had tried and tried again, risking his life and not caring. What Kamsa was doing was simply executing a death sentence upon his parents: a slow, agonizing death sentence that would be implemented through starvation, disease, pestilence, deprivation, or all of these. But Kamsa had neither budged an inch from his plans nor had he lost his temper at Vasudeva. If anything, he seemed to have grown remarkably fond of Vasudeva, treating him like family, displaying a disturbing warmth and affection that was in stark contrast to his earlier hostility. This was enough to make Vasudeva’s insides churn with disgust. He hated to have to stand by and watch Kamsa commit these atrocities, let alone be treated as if he were complicit in these crimes and sins. But for Devaki’s sake, he held his peace.

Now Kamsa clapped a hand on Vasudeva’s shoulder. ‘Come now, brother-in-law, let us retire in private. I wish to have a few words with you. It is time for us to resolve our situation.’

thirteen

Devaki paced the halls of her chamber, waiting anxiously for Vasudeva to return. Under the new martial law imposed on Mathura, women were not permitted to travel unaccompanied by a man outside their homes. Even when they did travel with their menfolk, they were compelled to be clothed from head to toe in garb that must not be found provocative in any way, and their faces veiled. If found violating any of these conditions, the

woman in question would be regarded as chattel and thrown into one of the many danda-ghars that had been built specially for this purpose ... to be suitably punished by Kamsa's soldiers for as long as they saw fit. There were stories, fearfully whispered, of mahamantris Bana and Canura deliberately lifting the veils of women they passed by, and, if the faces they saw pleased them, accusing the women in question of violating the law by having 'enticed' them through provocative gestures, words or simply the way they walked. It was straight to the danda-ghars for those poor unfortunates. The lucky ones were too ugly, too old, disease-stricken, or otherwise unappealing. Naturally, to avoid falling prey to this gross injustice and misogyny, women virtually had stopped travelling outside at all. Even Devaki had no choice but to stay indoors. In Kamsa's Mathura, nobody was above the law, not even his own sisters.

Devaki heaved a sigh of relief as she saw Vasudeva's familiar, neatly pressed hair as he passed across the courtyard of their house, disappearing below the balcony on which she stood. She spun around as his footsteps sounded on the stairway and the instant he appeared at the top of the stairs, she went to him, eagerly. The sight of his face, pale and drained of all strength, shocked her. She instantly glanced behind him, then over her shoulder at the courtyard once more, fully expecting to see Kamsa's soldiers – the new army, they called themselves – come with him to bear both of them away for immediate execution. Each day since the ill-fated day of Kamsa's 'beheading' had been spent in expectation of that moment. Seeing Vasudeva's face, she feared it had arrived at last.

But there were no soldiers, only Vasudeva, sinking down into a seat, holding his head in one hand, eyes wet with emotion.

'What is it, My Lord?' she asked. 'Pray, tell me. Is it execution for both of us? Has he condemned us at last? He has condemned and executed almost everyone else by now. Why not us as well? Tell me, Vasudeva, is it execution?'

He looked at her at last, his hand finding hers and stroking it passionately. 'No, my beloved. It is worse. Far worse.'

She stared at him, wondering what he meant. What could be worse than execution?

He told her.

255

And it was so. There *were* things far worse than merely having one's head crushed to death or being put to death in any fashion, however slow or quick. Her young life and limited experiences had never allowed for such possibilities; but that did not mean they did not exist.

By the time he finished explaining the terrible, horribly unjust terms of Kamsa's 'solution', she was shaking. Her head turned from side to side, trying to deny it all, to pretend she had never heard it. But the tears that fell from her eyes to splash hotly upon her hands contradicted that gesture. Finally, she broke down, sobbing bitterly, chest heaving as he put his arm around her, comforting her. Even in her deep distress, she could feel Vasudeva's pain as his eyes shed tears too. Together, they held each other and wept.

'It is a nightmare,' he said at last, 'and like all nightmares, it will end. But for now, we must live through it. Do you understand, my love? We must live through it.'

She nodded, then shook her head stubbornly. 'Why? Why not just ...' She could not complete the thought, but her meaning was evident.

He shook his head firmly. 'Because someone must stand up to him. Some day, his time will come to an end. If we end our lives, how will we stand up to him when that time comes?'

'What if his time never ends? What if he really *does* rule forever, as he says he will? *King Eternal!*' She spoke the phrase scornfully, directing her emotion at the cause of her misery.

‘No living thing is forever. Anything that is born must die. Kamsa was born of mortal woman. He is a rakshasa and possessed of great power. But some day, he too will end. Or be ended. And we shall be the instruments of that ending.’

She looked up at him, wondering at his conviction. ‘We shall kill him? Is that your plan?’

He nodded. ‘Perhaps. I shall certainly try. Although I fear he may have grown too strong for any mortal man to kill. Still, I intend to make an attempt.’

Her heart clenched at the thought of losing her husband. ‘When?’

‘When I go to him with our first...’ He swallowed, looking down, unable to say the word. ‘Until that time, I shall do exactly as he says, hoping that perhaps, against all odds, he relents, perhaps even sets us free to go home to my people. But if he dares to try to harm our first ...’ again, he seemed unable to say the word, ‘... then I shall kill him.’

Devaki was silent. She recalled their conversation in Vrindavan when she had urged Vasudeva to kill Kamsa and he had refused. She did not begrudge him that refusal, nor his refusal to see that Kamsa was no mortal man but a rakshasa. She respected the fact that Vasudeva was his own man and made his own judgement and choices. But she feared that the time for that mode of action had passed. She feared that things would be different this time. Quite different. Though she wasn’t sure how.

But she said nothing. Perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps Vasudeva would succeed. Perhaps he would not even need to take that last, desperate step.

Perhaps ...

Devaki shook her head, trying to clear it. As she did so, she felt her belly stir and instinctively put a hand to her stomach.

Vasudeva looked at her, concerned. ‘Are you well? Do you require anything?’

She shook her head. ‘No. We are quite well. Healthy. All is as it should be.’

He was silent for a moment, contemplating the irony of that statement. ‘How long?’

She had done the mental calculations already and was prepared with the answer. ‘Late summer ... no, later, probably during the month of Bhaadra.’

Less than six months from now, thought Vasudeva.

They fell silent then, contemplating the future, the possibilities.

Darkness fell as they sat there. Kamsa had denied them servants or aides, allowing them only a house that was guarded by his sentries day and night. Nobody could enter or leave except Kamsa and his emissaries. They could leave only when summoned by Kamsa himself. It was home imprisonment, no doubt about it, but it was a far cry from the miserable incarceration to which he had condemned Ugrasena and Padmavati.

Vasudeva kissed his wife’s forehead and thanked the devas that Kamsa had not treated them as he had his own parents. The thought of Devaki suffering thus through the term of her pregnancy was unbearable. This way, she could at least bring the child into the world safely and hygienically.

And then?

He had said that he would kill Kamsa if he attempted to harm their first-born. He had meant it. But he did not think *this* Kamsa was subject to the same limitations as the Kamsa who had faced him on the three previous occasions when he had been unable to harm or kill Vasudeva ...

But I have never attacked him. What would happen when I try?

There was only one way to find out: the hard way. Six months. He would find out in six months. They sat in the gathering gloom of dusk and waited together.

fourteen

The eunuch stood in front of Kamsa's throne. This was a very different sabha hall from the one Ugrasena had presided over. A very different throne as well. This was part of the new palace that Kamsa had designed to suit his purposes, part of the new Mathura. It was a new world, after all, refashioned in his image, to serve his needs and intents; and altering its appearance was important to him. He had never liked the gaily coloured pageantry of the Yadavas, the attempt to mirror all the emotions and shades of life in garments, accoutrements, art, décor, architecture, and everything else that was man-made. What about death? Was *that* not a part of life? Was it not out of his own death that Kamsa had been reborn? One age must pass in order for the next to begin, the way the day died every sunset to give way to the night, as one lifetime ended in order for the aatma to transmigrate to the next. Death was an essential part of the cycle of existence. And what was the colour of death? White, of course. Sterile. Utter blankness. Emptiness. Void. A blank scroll upon which one could write anything one desired, create new worlds, erase old ones.

And so he had had everything painted white. The walls, the floors, the ceiling, every garment, even the tapestries had been painted over with

lime. The statuary, the houses of the city, and everything else that was coloured was coloured white.

Kamsa had introduced a compulsory dress code for all citizens and, of course, that was white as well. Nobody was permitted to sport so much as a dot of colour anywhere upon their person – apart from their natural brown skin, of course. Speaking of skin, those who were fairest were to be regarded as superior to their darker bhraatren, with a grading scale that logically followed, the darkest, blackest-hued Mathurans to be shunned and considered unclean and untouchable, fit only for the most lowly, menial tasks: the cleaning of cesspits, the disposal of carcasses, the slaughter of diseased beasts, the performance of executions, and so on. Kamsa himself permitted only fair-skinned and beautiful people within the royal precincts, which was also the only part of the city where women were permitted – encouraged, even – to move freely, dressed as they pleased, even under-dressed if they so desired, or rather, if *he* so desired. White was right. White was might. White was wonderful. This was Kamsa's world. A White world.

The eunuch was dressed in black.

It offended Kamsa.

He contemplated having the eunuch stripped, then flayed, then fed to his pets. Anyone who displeased him was thrown off a balcony, to be eaten by the beasts that roamed the courtyard at the back of the palace. They rarely went hungry. Just that morning he had been compelled to have a serving boy thrown into the courtyard for ... for? Well, he couldn't recall exactly why he had had the boy thrown down, but it must have been for good reason. And even if he *hadn't* had a reason, he was King Eternal; he could do as he pleased.

He had got men and women thrown down on far flimsier grounds than not wearing white.

Like this eunuch.

The fellow was tall and strongly built, like all Mohinis. Apart from the fact that Jarasandha picked only the tallest, biggest specimens to be recruited into the fauj, the built of the Mohinis was the result of the special diet and exercise regime that he kept them on. The eunuch was dusty from the long journey, and clearly exhausted. But he stood straight, eyes steady and unwavering, waiting for Kamsa's answer to his message.

Kamsa had forgotten what the message had been.

'What was it that Jarasandha said?' he asked, irritated that he should have to ask again. Clearly, the courier had not delivered his message with sufficient clarity the first time, or Kamsa would not have forgotten it so easily. Incompetence was such a disease these days.

'My Lord,' the eunuch said, bowing his head again as he repeated his missive, 'Lord Jarasandha enquires after your well-being and asks if you require his assistance in governing your kingdom.'

Kamsa frowned. 'Assistance?'

The courier dipped his bald head, a shiny spot gleaming through the layer of road dust – that must have been the spot where the man touched his head with his folded hands while bowing in the Magadhan fashion. 'My master offers to provide military aid, financial aid, or anything your Lordship desires.'

Kamsa waved away the offer with a sneer of contempt. 'I require no aid or assistance. This is *my* kingdom, I am quite capable of ruling it myself. Besides, your lord might not have heard but, of late, I have discovered my true nature. I am reborn.'

The eunuch bowed again before speaking. 'My lord is aware of this. He wishes to congratulate you upon your rebirth and to wish you much success in fulfilling all your ambitions.'

Kamsa nodded. ‘Good, good. Now, is that all Jarasandha sent you to say? Because if it is, I have other matters to attend—’

‘There is one last thing, My Lord.’ The eunuch sounded apologetic.

Kamsa looked down his nose at the man, imperiously. Something worm-like and slimy emerged from his right nostril, coming into his field of vision. He ignored it. After a moment, it dropped and fell with a small plop to the floor, where it began squirming its way across the polished floor, leaving a trail of slime.

‘Well?’

‘My lord says to take the prophecy seriously.’ Kamsa raised his eyebrows. ‘Prophecy?’

‘The prophecy of the eighth child.’

‘Ah! My sister’s eighth child. Yes, I am aware of

that prophecy. After all, it was delivered to me by Saptarishi Narada. I would hardly forget it.’

‘Of course, My Lord. Emperor Jarasandha merely wishes to ensure that you realize the—’

‘Did you say “emperor”?’

The eunuch bowed. ‘Aye, your majesty. My master is now the declared the emperor of Aryavarta, with his capital at Magadha. The new Magadha, that is.’

‘Yes, I know about the new Magadha. I saw the city while it was being built. But “emperor of Aryavarta”? Really?’

The eunuch simply bowed in response, remaining silent.

Kamsa thought about that for a moment. Emperor of Aryavarta. What did that make him, Kamsa? A mere king? A rajah? Or a maharajah? Why

couldn't *he* be emperor of Aryavarta too? All he had to do was go forth and conquer the rest of the Arya nations. It would not be difficult at all, not *now*, with his new army and his newfound powers. But that would mean leaving Mathura, leaving the Yadava nations. And the Yadus were itching to rise up and rebel against him, the fools. He could not afford to leave Mathura just yet. Also, Jarasandha had now declared himself emperor. He would not like it if Kamsa did so too. There could hardly be two emperors! Kamsa would have to fight Jarasandha in order to claim sole emperorship. He did not wish to do that. Jarasandha was like a father to him. Also, he was the only person Kamsa feared more than himself.

'What were you saying?' He had lost the thread of the courier's missive again.

'The *eighth child*, My Lord. It will be your undoing. You must ensure that it is never permitted to be born.'

Kamsa nodded, distracted by thoughts of empire and emperorship. 'Yes, yes. I have already seen to that.' The eunuch persisted: 'My lord Jarasandha urges you to slay both the woman and her husband immediately. It is the only way to be sure.'

Kamsa looked at the eunuch coldly. He felt more worm-like things wriggling down his nose. He felt other things squirming and crawling and creeping about his body as well. Getting upset did that to him, it fed his parasites, helping them breed and flourish. The eunuch had finally succeeded in upsetting him by daring to tell him what to do, rather than delivering his message and keeping quiet as he ought to have done.

He began giving the order for the eunuch to be thrown to the beasts, then paused. This was not one of his lackeys or servants, or even a citizen of Mathura. This was one of Jarasandha's personal guards. The elite of the elite within the Mohini Fauj. Jarasandha's most trusted inner circle. He might not look kindly upon Kamsa feeding the man to wild pets.

Then again, Jarasandha had declared himself emperor of Aryavarta. While Kamsa was still just king of Mathura, at best king of the Yadavas.

He gave the order for the eunuch to be fed to his pets. He ignored the man's shocked admonitions as he was dragged away, as well as his threat that Jarasandha would not be pleased.

So what? If Jarasandha did not like Kamsa's treatment of his courier, he could come himself and sort it out with Kamsa. He might be emperor of Aryavarta, but here in Mathura, Kamsa was king. King Eternal!

He plucked out a particularly troublesome parasite from his nostril, stared at it with honest curiosity, then crushed it between his thumb and sixth finger – the new finger which had recently grown between his thumb and forefinger. White slime dripped from his hand. He wiped it off on the armrest of his throne just as a soldier came in to inform him that Chief Vasudeva was here to see him, at Kamsa's own request.

fifteen

Vasudeva cradled his newborn son in his arms. Precious, precious child. Fruit of his and Devaki's love. The most beautiful creature upon prithviloka – in all the three worlds. He wanted only to cradle him and love him and cherish the boy until he grew into manhood. This child was the fulfilment of their life, the symbol of their love and happiness. He ought to walk through perfumed gardens, bathe in cool rivers, frolic with kine and dogs and playmates, be schooled in the Vedas and sit wide-eyed while listening to the great legends and mighty epics; be nursed, fed, clothed, educated, bred and groomed to be a lover, a brother, a husband, a mate, a friend, a citizen, a chief, a king. He deserved all the wonders of the earth and everything upon it. His name was Kirtiman.

Vasudeva held out his hands, holding the newborn carefully in both hands, and offered him to Kamsa to see.

‘My Lord,’ he said, fighting to keep his voice level and all emotion at bay, ‘as you commanded, I have brought to you my first-born son. This is your nephew. A beautiful, perfectly formed boy. Look upon his beauty with your own eyes. We have named him Kirtiman.’

As Vasudeva spoke, Kamsa moved from the throne to lie upon a cushioned bed. Female attendants had begun removing his garments and pouring scented oil onto his back. Now, as Vasudeva raised the infant up, Kamsa grunted and turned his head a fraction, glancing carelessly down. The attendants began massaging his back, kneading the muscles expertly and rubbing the oil into his skin. Vasudeva tried not to look too closely at the places where unspeakable things bulged and protruded and writhed beneath the skin, or peeped out from Kamsa’s nostrils, ears, or even his eyes; but the female attendants seemed unperturbed by these parasitical abominations. They even seemed to find them out and press down harder on those spots, as if trying to crush the moving parasites beneath the skin. The sight filled Vasudeva with disgust. He fought to retain his composure.

‘Why does it not cry?’ Kamsa asked.

Vasudeva was at a loss for words. ‘My Lord?’ ‘Babies cry. They bawl. Why does this one stay so silent? Is it without tongue?’

Vasudeva swallowed. A trickle of sweat escaped his hairline and ran down his temple to his ear. ‘My Lord, babies cry only when they are in need, or when something troubles them. Our Kirtiman is a peaceful, contented child. He does not cry because nothing troubles him yet.’

Kamsa grunted, turning his head away, shifting slightly to allow the masseuses better access. They continued their kneading and pressing and – Vasudeva was certain of it now – seeking out of parasites to press and kill all over Kamsa’s body, not just on his back. Apparently, this was a daily ritual.

Vasudeva waited for several moments. When nothing further was forthcoming, he began to think that perhaps Kamsa had fallen asleep. He dared not speak again. Better to wait in silence. If he had fallen asleep, Vasudeva might be able to slip away quietly. Kirtiman would be hungry soon, and Devaki was anxiously waiting back home, on pins and needles. Every moment that Vasudeva remained away must be agony for her.

Just when he grew certain that Kamsa had fallen asleep, the rakshasa said, 'Make it.'

Vasudeva had no idea what Kamsa was talking about. 'My Lord?'

Kamsa turned his head again, his eyes staring down at the infant in Vasudeva's arms. 'Make it cry.'

Vasudeva swallowed. Two more beads of sweat burst free from his scalp and trickled down. He was sweating profusely now, though it was relatively cool and quite breezy in the palace.

'Yes. Make the little creature cry. Make it bawl. Make it howl with terror. That way, I will know that it fears and respects me. I take this calm silence to mean that it is content unto itself, that it neither acknowledges nor fears me. That is gross disrespect. I do not tolerate such behaviour from my citizens, let alone my own nephew. It must be taught manners.'

It. It. As if he spoke of an inanimate object, not a human being. Though he had heard Vasudeva speak his name clearly. *Kirtiman. My son. Not an 'it'!*

'My Lord...' Vasudeva felt a tear brimming in the corner of his left eye. He fought to blink it away, to prevent it from spilling forth. 'This is your nephew, my first-born. As promised, I have brought him to you. As you can see, he is a harmless little baby. He can do you no harm at all.'

'The prophecy says otherwise.'

Vasudeva struggled to find words that would be brilliant and incisive in their logic, glittering diamonds of intellectual rigour, perfect gems of eloquence. Words were all he had to convince Kamsa, to plead with the rakshasa for his son's life. 'The prophecy ... if it was a prophecy ... spoke of the *eighth* child of your sister. The eighth. Not the first. This is her first-born.'

Kamsa sat up. He gestured. The masseuses moved back at once, heads lowered, eyes averted. Another gesture and they stepped away, as he leveraged himself off the cushioned couch and stood. His body gleamed with oil, red splotches marking where the parasites had been squashed beneath the skin in various spots. The first ones were beginning to turn pink, lightening in colour as the body absorbed them into itself.

He is growing less and less human each passing day. More and more into a rakshasa, Vasudeva could not help thinking.

'I received another message today,' Kamsa said. 'It warned me to take the prophecy seriously. It advised me to kill my sister as well as you. That way, there would be no way the prophecy can come true.'

Vasudeva felt the bundle in his hands grow lighter with each passing moment, as if Kirtiman were turning to air, to dust, to ash ...

'But the sender of the message did not know that I have already tried to do that, in my attempts to kill you earlier. And we both know how that went.'

Kamsa grinned unexpectedly, like a man sharing a guilty secret with an old friend. Vasudeva, taken by surprise, tried to summon up a smile in response. But Kamsa's expression told him that he had not been very successful. Sweat and tears mingled on his face, streaming down freely now.

'I am unable to kill you, Vasudeva,' Kamsa said casually, stepping down from the royal dais, taking each step very slowly, each corded muscle in his lower body showing prominently. 'I do not know why. It does not

matter why. I cannot do it. That is a fact. So the only way is to kill Devaki; and end the prophecy.'

'No!' Vasudeva blurted out. 'You cannot! You must not! She is your sister.'

'She is the bearer of my doom,' Kamsa said calmly, now standing on the same level as Vasudeva, just yards away. He moved towards Vasudeva, his eyes on the babe in his brother-in-law's arms.

'I beg you!' Vasudeva cried. 'Spare Devaki. Please. Spare her life. I will do anything you say!'

Kamsa stopped before him. He was within reach of the baby now, only a yard away from Vasudeva. He looked down at the infant, then at Vasudeva's face. 'She means a great deal to you, does she not?' He sounded almost kind, gentle even.

'She is my world.' Vasudeva wept. 'She is my life.'

Kamsa considered this for a moment. Then said quietly: 'Give me the child.'

Vasudeva raised his eyes. He looked into Kamsa's eyes. Rakshasa eyes. No more human. Perhaps they never had been human. He searched for words but there were none left to be uttered. Kamsa's meaning was crystal clear.

Vasudeva handed the bundle to Kamsa. The child. The peaceful, gurgling, uncomplaining boy. Beautiful boy. Boy of a thousand dreams; a brilliant future. Some woman's lover, husband, brother; some man's friend, companion. He handed over his own life to Kamsa and felt his heart diminish as he did so. A part of it was gone forever, never to return.

Kamsa grasped the child by the leg. He held it up to look at it, like a carcass on a butcher's hook. Like a beast hung upside down to be drained of blood. Like a dead thing.

‘Slayer of Kamsa?’ he said scornfully. ‘This?’

He turned his head this way, then that, examining the now-wailing babe intently.

‘So,’ he said, ‘it does know how to cry after all!’ He laughed.

And then he swung the child around, over his head. With great force and speed.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

And then released it.

sixteen

With a great roar, Vasudeva rushed at Kamsa.

Even the rakshasa was taken by surprise. Not many had dared oppose him since his rebirth. Even fewer had dared attack him. His demonstration of his powers on the day of his execution and rebirth had ensured that. Who would dare to go up against a rakshasa capable of expanding his size a thousandfold; large enough to crush entire hills, uproot whole forests, toss

herds of elephants like pebbles? Only the doomed or utterly desperate. Both had tried. And failed. The swift ease with which Kamsa had despatched those first few comers had cemented his reputation. He was unbeatable, someone who couldn't be killed. Better to try running away from him than attacking him.

But none of them had been a king. A senapati. A Raj-Kshatriya.

Vasudeva was all these things.

Like all true pacifists, he was a great warrior. A master of weaponry and tactics, attack and defence, combat and strategy.

He had hoped, prayed, and begged for his newborn son's life.

But he had failed to save Kirtiman.

Now, he had no choice but to attempt a violent assault.

He came at Kamsa when his back was turned and was poised at an angle that made it hardest for Kamsa to respond quickly. He deliberately roared to attract the rakshasa's attention towards himself, even as he then changed his approach and attacked from the other side. He raised his right hand at first, showing a bare fist ready to pound Kamsa. However, his actual attack was using a rod of wood with a sharpened metal point. Denied all weapons, he had used his cowherd's crook and part of a cooking vessel to fashion a makeshift one: a two-yard-long rod with a tapering metal point, not unlike a spear, but with the triangular edges sharpened to a fine keenness. He held it in his left hand, low and out of Kamsa's field of vision. By roaring and waving his right fist as he rushed at him, Vasudeva compelled the rakshasa to act in anticipation of a blow from his fist.

Instead, Vasudeva came from the left, wielding a spear, aimed upwards in a trajectory that, if completed, would pierce Kamsa's torso just below his ribs and enter his vital organs, either injuring him grievously, or killing him outright. It was intended to be a killing blow. Vasudeva's only hope

was to attack and kill the rakshasa before he could expand his size. If he failed, or if Kamsa found time to expand himself, then not even a hundred Vasudevas could face him, at least not without weaponry and assistance, whether human or divine.

His feint worked perfectly at first. Still laughing at the ease with which the brother of the prophesied slayer had been despatched, Kamsa was not expecting an attack, let alone one so cleverly planned and executed. When he heard Vasudeva's roar, he assumed that the Sura king had finally lost his wits and was foolishly attempting a futile assault. He swung around, intending to easily block the fist and hammer a blow at the side of Vasudeva's head that would – then he recalled that the blow would have no effect on Vasudeva. That nothing he did could harm Vasudeva directly. Well, he could still block the fist and any other blows Vasudeva threw at him. He had been strong enough to take a beating even as a human. As a rakshasa, he could take much more than Vasudeva could dish out.

But then Vasudeva changed tack. And did it so cleverly and quickly that Kamsa had no time to react. He was still turning to block the fist when Vasudeva suddenly seemed to slide a whole yard to Kamsa's right; the next instant, he was right beside Kamsa, driving what appeared to be a spear-like weapon into his body.

Under ordinary circumstances, it was a brilliant, audacious move. One that would have succeeded. Kamsa would have been mortally wounded, unable to fight effectively, perhaps even killed at the first blow. And everything would have changed right there and then.

Instead, Kamsa discovered something incredible.

The spear came straight at him, broke through his skin, and entered his body. He distinctly felt the sharp jag of pain as it pierced skin and penetrated flesh, scraping against his lowest right rib; then entered his liver, skewering it like a piece of meat to be roasted; before punching through his back and emerging again, with a small explosion of blood and gristle.

Vasudeva stepped back, already preparing his next assault. Mortal blow or no, a warrior always prepared to follow up. Too many fights were lost because one party assumed the other was downed when, in fact, it was not.

Kamsa looked down at the spear sticking out of his body. He realized that it wasn't a spear at all. It was Vasudeva's crook. The same crook that had shattered his sword, a mace, several arrows and sundry other weapons at the war camp. It was sticking out of his chest now.

He reached down and snapped it off. It broke quite easily, given his new rakshasa strength.

Then he reached behind with both hands, groped once or twice, found the spear point, grasped it, and pulled the weapon out of his back. It came free with a further burst of bodily fluids and a sucking, crackling sound. He brought it around and looked at it. The metal spearhead had bent and twisted during its progress through his body. It looked like a bad imitation of a spear rather than a real weapon.

He tossed it aside. It clattered on the polished floor, sliding a good many yards before it came to rest beneath a wall splattered with the remains of his nephew.

He looked at Vasudeva.

Then he put his hands on his hips.

And he laughed.

Vasudeva stared at him in astonishment.

Kamsa pointed down at his own chest, still laughing.

Vasudeva looked down. And saw the open wound closing of its own accord, the organ regenerating instantly to regain its form.

Kamsa turned around, showing his back to Vasudeva, showing how the exit hole in his back was closing – it had closed already – and the wound healing by itself.

Then he turned back and spread his arms wide. His chuckling reverberated through the large, white sabha hall.

‘I thought you understood,’ he said to Vasudeva. ‘When I said I was immortal, it meant I cannot be killed. Not by a mortal at least. That is why I am King *Eternal*. I will *live* forever and *rule* forever.’

In two swift strides, he was at Vasudeva’s throat, grasping it with a single hand. The hand expanded, filling with rakshasa blood to grow several times the size of Kamsa’s body, the rest of which retained its human size. Vasudeva coughed and struggled as the hand lifted him off the ground to hover a yard in mid-air, feet kicking and flailing uselessly.

‘That one I grant you as a learning experiment, brother-in-law,’ he snarled. ‘The next time, I will break our pact and kill Devaki. Do you understand? *Answer me!* DO YOU UNDERSTAND?’

With a supreme effort, Vasudeva managed to croak out a mangled ‘Yes!’

Kamsa released his grip and let Vasudeva drop to the ground. Immediately, his hand began to reduce, returning to its normal size.

‘So long as you uphold our pact and bring Devaki’s newborn children to me each time, I shall let you both live under my protection. Those are the terms of *my* peace treaty. Uphold them. Or face the consequences.’

seventeen

The human mind and heart are only equipped to feel so much pain and sorrow. Beyond that point, it is simply more pain, more sorrow. Not bigger, greater, grander, just more. Anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one knows this to be true. The tear ducts can only produce so many tears at a time. The heart can grieve for only so long. Anything beyond that is simply more of the same. After a time, the mind grows numb. The heart hardens. The spirit withers and starts to die. *This is life*, says that part of us which enables us to survive holocausts and hurricanes, war and bereavement alike, *live through this*. And so we do live. We go on. We survive. We endure the unendurable and come out the other side, blinking, dazed, shocked and stupefied, but still alive. Still breathing. The heart, hammered by grief, still beats on, pumping life through our veins, keeping us alive. The lungs expand and contract. The brain still fires sparks of thought and reflex. The eyes still see, the ears still hear, and the sun rises and sets, the earth turns and the stars shine on, and the universe proceeds the way it has always proceeded ... unhindered.

hrough the terrible years that followed, Devaki was kept alive by just two thoughts: The first was Vasudeva's entreaty at the very outset, on the very evening of the day he had been forced to make the awful pact with Kamsa. *Live through this*, he had said. And the simple power of that command struck a deep chord within her. For it was true, despite all else. If they did not live, they would already have failed, without Kamsa needing to lift even a finger against them. And if they failed by giving up, by letting themselves die, or by killing themselves, Kamsa would surely have succeeded. And then what chance would Mathura have? Or the Yadava nations? Or Aryavarta as a whole? For what Kamsa was doing to Mathura, Jarasandha and his allies were doing to the rest of the civilized world. No, whatever happened, they must endure, they must survive. After Vasudeva's attempt on Kamsa's life and his failure, they realized that their best interest lay in upholding the pact. It was the only way for them to survive, to live, to go on.

The second, and most powerful of all, was the knowledge of the eighth child. The one yet to come. The one who was prophesied. *Slayer of Kamsa*. She mouthed the words silently to herself each time she felt her womb quicken with child and during the subsequent months of pregnancy. *You will come and save us, Slayer of Kamsa*. She called him by that title for it was the only name she knew to call him. Or her. All she knew was that the eighth child she would bear would bring about the doom of Kamsa. And if Kamsa could be defeated, surely Mathura could be saved ... the Yadu race freed of its yoke of oppression ... and in time, Aryavarta rid of the evil of Jarasandha and his allies. The eighth child spelt hope. The future. Infinity.

And how could she give birth to the eighth child if she did not survive?

More than survive.

For a mother could not simply pretend. She must care. Thrive. Prosper. For what she felt, thought and experienced, her unborn child would feel, think and experience as well. So she must be strong and resilient and happy and healthy in order to produce children that were all those things, and more. She must *live*.

I am rich today, she had said once to her father, the father she had not seen in over six years now. And she was rich even now. Rich in the love of her husband and companion. Rich in hope. Rich in promise. Rich in prayer and faith and conviction.

For six years, Vasudeva took her newborn children to Kamsa.

And six times in as many years, Kamsa murdered the babies: held them by their feet, swung them overhead, and smashed out their tiny brains on the walls of his palace.

Six times. Six years. Six lives.

Innocent, beautiful, perfect, wonderful lives. Snuffed out. Destroyed.

Of all the crimes he had committed, all the injustices, all the atrocities and brutalities, surely that was Kamsa's worst offence? To kill innocent babies the very day of their birth? For no good reason.

And now, she was about to bear a seventh. The seventh. Where had the years gone? They had gone to the same place that her dead babes had gone. Into the mouth of Sesa, the serpent of infinity, its coils winding around the Samay Chakra, the great Wheel of Time upon which all Creation revolved. And once Sesa took hold of anything, it never returned. What was gone was gone, what was dead was dead, past was past.

Think only of today and of tomorrow, Devaki. The eighth child comes. Slayer of Kamsa.

But this was the seventh. The seventh, not the eighth.

Even if, somehow, the eighth was born and survived the wrath of Kamsa and lived to grow to adulthood and fulfil the prophecy, that would come later. This next one would only be the seventh. The prophecy had said nothing about the seventh killing anyone. So it would surely go the way of the first six.

Somehow, this realization broke her heart more than the grief she had lived through each year for the past six years.

Not another one, Devi. Not this one.

She prayed to the Goddess, her patron deity, with fervent ardour. Before her mind's eye flashed the several avatars and amsas of the Goddess: Durga, Bhadrakali, Vijaya, Vaisnavi, Kumuda, Candika, Krsna, Madhavi, Kanyaka, Maya, Narayani, Isani, Sarada, Ambika ... and so many more she did not even know the names of. Resplendent, omnipotent, magnificent in feminine shakti, they appeared before her one by one and seemed to meld into her own essence, like layers upon layers of thinly beaten metal joining together to form a single blade.

Something happened within her womb.
She cried out.
A great heat surged within her. It grew to an

unbearable degree, threatening to consume her alive in a single flash. White light tinged with blue at the corona exploded behind her eyes. She heard a great roaring, as of the ocean. And felt as if her stomach were being turned inside out.

She blacked out.

When she returned to consciousness, she found Vasudeva cradling her head in his lap, anxiously examining her. He had dripped water into her mouth and cooled her head and throat with a damp cloth. Her body was bathed in sweat as if after a high fever.

And her belly was as flat as it had been months earlier.

She touched it, needing to feel the truth for herself before allowing her faith to overwhelm reason. Then she knew it had not been just a hallucination.

‘He has gone,’ she said. ‘He has been taken away, carried to safety.’

Vasudeva stared at her as if wondering if she was delirious. ‘Who has gone?’

‘The seventh child. Our son. See. Feel for yourself.’

She took his hand and pressed it to her belly. He stared into her eyes as he groped to decipher what she wanted him to feel, then understanding shone in his eyes.

‘The baby is gone,’ he said in wonderment. ‘I no longer feel his shape, his legs, the edge of his heel digging out of the side of your stomach.’

She nodded. ‘He has been carried to safety,’ she said again. ‘To a place where Kamsa will not be able to seek him out.’

He stared at her. ‘How do you know this?’

She shrugged. ‘I was told ...’ She shook her head; that was not quite right. ‘It was *shown* to me. By Yogamaya.’

‘Yogamaya?’

‘Yes, one of the infinite forms of Devi. She came and spirited away our seventh child from my womb, transferring it to the womb of another woman.’

‘Who?’ he asked.

‘Rohini. Your first wife. My elder sister by way of marriage. There, he will come to term and be born without incident, safe from Kamsa. For how will Kamsa kill a child when he does not know which child to kill?’

Vasudeva stared at her, sharing her excitement, his mind racing. ‘And we shall tell him that you miscarried the seventh child. He can have his women check if he wishes. There is proof too: the child is gone from your womb.’

‘Yes!’ she said, clapping her hands together. It was the first time in years that both of them had exhibited such happiness so freely.

Vasudeva nodded. He pulled her closer, kissing her on the top of her head, and she sighed with joy. ‘But why the seventh child?’ he wondered aloud. ‘If the eighth was to be the Slayer ...’

‘Perhaps the seventh has some role to play that we are not yet aware of,’ she said.

He thought about it, then nodded. ‘Yes, that must be it. And what matters is that he will live now. We will have a son! What shall we name him?’

She thought long and hard, then said, ‘We should name him Shankarshan, for he was removed from the womb. But because he is the cause of such ramana, pleasure, to us, we shall call him Rama as well. And finally, because of the greatness of his strength, his bala, we shall name him Balabhadra.’

He chuckled. ‘Shankarshan, Ramana, Balabhadra. Three names for a little babe! Will they not be too much for him to carry?’

She smiled proudly, knowingly. ‘He can carry Creation if he wishes. Like Sesa, the infinite serpent.’

eighteen

Kamsa prowled the corridors of his palace. He now commanded the greatest Yadava standing army ever maintained; a force great enough to challenge most other kings, perhaps even great enough to challenge Jarasandha himself. The past seven years had seen him grow from strength to strength. Today, even Jarasandha’s emissaries dared not raise their eyes to look directly at him, and spoke only soft, sweet assurances and words of agreement. He still fed the occasional eunuch to the beasts in the courtyard at the back, just to ensure that they stayed humble and polite. But in *his* kingdom, none dared even speak to him unless spoken to. He ruled with an iron hand. Absolute power. He had it, he enjoyed its fruits and spoils, and he would rule forever.

Perhaps the only thing that troubled him was the change in his physical form. While at first the rakshasa elements had showed themselves only in small ways or at some times, with the human form dominating, it was the other way around now. He was almost fully a rakshasa now, and only occasionally did he lapse into human form. And even those times were not by choice; they simply happened, involuntarily, and he was never quite sure what triggered them or sustained them. The only thing he could control was his size. He had settled on a more-or-less permanent size of around one-and-a-half-times the size of a big-built human Kshatriya, which made him about ten feet in height and as thick around the chest as a bull's torso. From time to time, he would expand further, often without meaning to; but becoming smaller than his new permanent size was nigh impossible for him. He tried at times, if only because a large size often made it awkward to move through doorways and ride elephants. Even though he had had the palace redesigned to accommodate his new permanent size, if he grew several more yards in height, as he often did, even a twenty-foot-high doorway could be too low to get through comfortably. And even elephants had a limit to how much they could carry.

The more he used his rakshasa abilities, the more he became a rakshasa, and the less human he grew.

But this was not what troubled him now.

Devaki and Vasudeva had succeeded in saving their seventh child.

He knew this with perfect certainty. He had just returned from visiting his brother-in-law and sister and he had heard their account of the unfortunate mishap. They had both been visibly distraught and their performance was credible, but he had smelt through it at once. There was an odour of truth to their claims, but underlying that was a whiff of something else ... not quite a lie, but not the whole truth either. They had held something back.

He had demanded to see the remains, and had been shown a mangled mess that was convincing enough. But he knew that he had been deceived. The question was *how*. Nobody had entered or left their house, through any ingress. Anticipating treachery, he had got the house watch tripled in the

past month. He had employed spasas to infiltrate the community of daimaas who assisted Devaki during pregnancy and deliveries. The verdict was unanimous: somehow, the child had miscarried. He had even bitten off the head of one spasa – a habit he had acquired over the past year or so and resorted to when one of his own people were being inefficient or obtuse; it always produced excellent results, not from the person whose head he had bitten off, of course. (The heads made for chewy snacks as well; he enjoyed the crunchy skulls and the tasty brains inside.) But while that had elicited the anticipated reactions from the other spasas – better intelligence reports – it hadn’t brought forth any further intelligence on this particular matter.

He could find no way to prove that the child had been born in Mathura, or elsewhere.

Yet, he knew that, somehow, he had been deceived.

It is so, Prince Kamsa. You have indeed been deceived.

He turned to see Narada-muni standing in the corridor. The sage’s image looked solid and real enough, but when Kamsa tried passing a hand – he swung a fist with enough force to fell a horse – through it, the hand passed through empty air, the image remaining undisturbed. ‘You!’ he said. ‘It’s been a long time since you showed your bearded face. And I’m king now, not prince.’

It was never my intention to become your best friend or lifelong companion. As for the title you bestow upon yourself, I may call a house built with cow-dung a palace, as many do, but that would not make it so. So long as King Ugrasena lives, you shall always be Prince Kamsa. Or simply the usurper, as you are better known amongst the people.

Kamsa snarled, expanding himself till his head touched the ceiling and his arms the walls of the four- yard-wide corridor. ‘Why don’t you appear before me in your real, corporeal form, Brahmin. Then let us see if you dare to insult me.’

Narada laughed shortly.

I do not come here to bandy insults or threats with you; merely to warn you. The seventh child of Vasudeva and Devaki has slipped through your grasp.

Kamsa swore and thumped the walls to either side with his fist. Plaster crumbled and great cracks appeared in the walls, running up to the curved ceiling. Narada flinched, looking up as pieces of the ceiling clattered and fell around him in a shower of dust and debris, then seemed to recall he was in no danger.

‘I knew it! They deceived me somehow. But *how*?’

They have powerful allies. The devas themselves assist them. Brahma instructed Devi Yogamaya to spirit the child from Devaki’s womb to another location.

‘Where?’ Kamsa pounded the floor with his foot, sending a giant crack running all the way up the length of the corridor – between the saptarishi’s feet. Again, Narada almost jumped, but controlled himself. ‘Tell me where and I can go and crush it like a grape in my fist.’

That was not made known to me.

‘What do you mean, not made known? Who makes these things known to you?’

Narada hesitated, glancing over his shoulder as if concerned that someone might overhear him. Kamsa frowned. There was nobody in sight in the entire length of the corridor in both directions at this time of night. No matter what Kamsa did, or what sounds came from his chambers, none of his people would dare intrude upon his privacy until called for, unless they wanted their heads bitten off. He realized that Narada was not looking back at this corridor in Kamsa’s palace. He was looking back at the place where his physical body was right now, in some distant location.

I do not have much time, son of Padmavati. I urge you; listen to my words and heed them well.

This may be your only chance of ensuring that the eighth child never takes birth in this lifetime.

Kamsa frowned. Did that mean the child could take birth in some other lifetime? There was more to the matter than Narada was revealing to him; he had always sensed this. Now he knew it was so. ‘First tell me this: why do you help me?’

Narada looked at him.

What do you mean, Kamsa?

‘It is a simple enough question. Why help me? I am ...’ He gestured at himself, not needing to describe his own appearance or nature. ‘I am what I am. Usually, Brahmins like you, especially brahmarishis and saptarishis, would be training Kshatriyas to kill people like me. Instead, you appear mysteriously from time to time and offer me advice and warnings that have helped me prosper and gain power. Why are you so benevolent to me? Have I done something to merit your protection and blessing?’

Narada looked away, avoiding Kamsa’s eyes.

What difference does it make? I am helping you, as you yourself admit, so take my advice and use it well. There is an old saying among cattle herders, perhaps it even originated from the Yadus: do not look a gifted cow in the mouth to check its health, for that might insult the one who gifts it to you! It is advice you would do well to heed.

Kamsa nodded. ‘In that case, be gone.’ Narada blinked.

What did you say?

Kamsa waved a hand dismissively. ‘Be gone. Away. Leave us be.’ He looked at the saptarishi insolently, grinning wide enough to display his inner set of teeth, the ones that clamped down to crunch particularly hard items, skulls for instance, or human thigh bones. ‘I do not trust intelligence provided for unknown motives by one who openly says he is not my friend.’ He smiled slyly. ‘And is a known associate of the devas, who are sworn enemies of all asuras, of which race, in case you were not aware, I am a member.’

Narada glared, angry now. Saptarishis and brahmarishis were not accustomed to being told to get lost.

This is an outrage!

Kamsa turned his back on the saptarishi, stretched his arms and yawned languorously. ‘Now, either tell me what I wish to know, or turn into a cartwheel and roll away.’

Narada sulked for few seconds. Kamsa finished stretching and yawning and started walking away. He was amused when the sage called him back. Good. Now, he would get some real answers, and then he could figure out how to make sure that little slayer was never born.

nineteen

Vasudeva and Devaki were asleep when Kamsa’s men arrived. Vasudeva leaped out of his bed, heart thudding, and thought, *this is it; he has finally broken our pact and has come to have Devaki killed.* He told his frightened

wife to stay inside, went out, barred the door and stood before it. He would kill anyone who tried to harm his wife. He would rather die than stand by and watch his beloved be killed. If this was to be his last stand, so be it.

The men were led by Bana himself, clad in his resplendent robes and ornate armour proclaiming his status as saprem senapati. It offended Vasudeva's very core to see a man like Bana given charge of Mathura's armies, not merely a man without any sense of dharma or morality, but a known slaver and slave-trader even before he had allied with Kamsa. Vasudeva himself had once delegated a force to stop Bana's thriving trade in child slaves. They had crippled his operation considerably, if not quashed it altogether. He knew that Bana had always borne him a grudge for it. That showed now as the thin, tall man stood before him, slapping a free glove into the gloved palm of the other hand in a habitual rhythm as he grinned.

‘Vasu,’ he said, then added with heavy irony, ‘deva!’

He looked around. ‘I thought devas resided in swargaloka; yet, here you are, amongst us humble mortals. What have we done to deserve your presence, lord?’

He laughed. His soldiers laughed as well. There were over a dozen of them, Vasudeva noted, all armoured and armed. Clearly, they had not come just to deliver a message. He heard the sound of heavy clinking and glimpsed a length of chain in one man’s hands, attached to manacles. What was that for? Were they to be shifted to a dungeon now?

‘What are your orders this time, Bana,’ Vasudeva said calmly. ‘Did he toss a stick and ask you to go fetch it?’

Bana’s smile vanished at once. ‘You would be well advised to watch your tongue, Vrishni.’

Vasudeva didn’t retort. His first barb had struck home. That was enough.

‘Move aside,’ Bana said.

Vasudeva folded his arms comfortably. ‘These are our private quarters. None may pass.’

Bana grinned. ‘Why, Vrishni? Do you fear we might molest your wife?’

Several chuckles greeted that one.

Vasudeva would not let himself be provoked by such puerile taunts. He remained standing in their way.

Bana sighed irritably. ‘We are here on the king’s orders. It is best if you let us do what we have to and leave.’

Vasudeva shook his head. ‘Not until you tell me what you are here to do.’

Bana gestured to the man at the back. He came forward, the chains dragging on the ground with a nerve-rasping sound. ‘You are to be chained and manacled henceforth.’ He gestured to one side of the house. ‘And restricted to one half of the house.’

Bana gestured again and a pair of stonemasons came forward, their implements in hand. ‘They are to raise a wall dividing the house into two halves. You will reside in one half and your wife in the other.’ He added with evident pleasure: ‘She is to be chained and manacled as well.’

‘But why?’ Vasudeva asked. Whatever he had expected, this was not it. Violence, a direct assault, an attempt on his or Devaki’s life, he was prepared for these things. But what good would it do to chain Devaki and him and keep them in separate halves of the house? And why raise a brick wall between them? How would they ...? He stopped. Understanding swept through him.

Bana grinned, seeing his expression change. ‘When one wishes to rest the bull, one puts the cow in another pasture, and raises a fence between

them.' He took hold of the chain in his soldier's hand and shook it, making it jangle loudly. 'And to make sure the bull does not jump the fence, we chain its leg.'

He grasped Vasudeva's hand roughly and clapped the manacle on it. 'And that is how you make sure there are no calves born.'

The sound of Bana's soldiers laughing filled Vasudeva's ears.

twenty

Vasudeva sat on one side of the wall. Devaki was on the other. He could hear her but it was not possible to see her from any angle. The chains and manacles made sure of that. They were compelled to do everything within the reach of the chains, which were barely a few yards long. His heart wept at the thought of Devaki chained like a common criminal in a dungeon.

What crimes have we committed, Lord? Why do you make us suffer thus? he thought.

They talked through the wall, talked more than ever. The separation was agonizing. Only a few yards away, yet so far.

But as the days passed, he realized how brilliant Kamsa's plan had been. Without harming Vasudeva or Devaki, without breaking the pact between them, without killing his sister or brother-in-law, he had made it impossible for the eighth child to be conceived. It was a devilishly clever stratagem.

The one thing that had provided succour to them, had kept them moving forward purposefully through the terrible years and days and nights, was the knowledge that some day, the eighth child would come. Slayer of Kamsa. Now, Kamsa had ensured that the child could never be conceived, let alone be born. There would be no slayer, no end to this perpetual nightmare. And what of the future? Were they to live like this till the end of their lives? Perhaps, from time to time, Kamsa would degrade their lives further in some new way, finding new methods of harassing them, torturing them indirectly. Maybe some day he would wall them in completely, as he had done his own father and mother, neither of whom had been seen by a soul since that day seven years ago, and who were believed to be alive inside that hellish prison. A life lived thus, Vasudeva mused bleakly, was worse than a violent death. Death at least put a stop to the pain.

He turned and looked at the wall. It loomed, rising to the very ceiling, five feet thick and reinforced with rods of iron. It was as solid as a fortress wall. Even if he attempted to dig through somehow, he would be found out within a day by the guards who patrolled the house. And the attempt itself might worsen their plight.

He sat back, shoulders slumped despondently, and slept.

twenty-one

When Vasudeva awoke, the first thing he noticed was the light.

Night had fallen. The house was dark. The patch of sky visible through the open window was black as pitch. If there was a moon, he could not see it through that narrow portal, nor any stars.

But the wall glowed with light.

He blinked and looked up, certain he was dreaming.

A shape very much like a large oblong had appeared on the wall, at eye level. It seemed to be formed entirely of some kind of brilliant bluish light. He had never seen the likes of it before. It glowed rhythmically, pulsing and throbbing slowly, like ... like ... *a heartbeat?* Yes. That was exactly what that pulsing rhythm resembled, a heartbeat.

Slowly, he realized that the light was shaped like an egg. A very large egg, perhaps the size of a man's belly.

Or a woman's womb.

Yes. That was precisely it. It was not an egg, but an embryo. An unborn infant, nestled within the safety of its mother's womb, pulsating with life. And the light, this magical wondrous bluish glow he was seeing, perhaps this was how the world appeared to an embryo within the womb.

Even as he thought this, the light began to take clearer shape and form. Now, he could see the shape of the womb, the fluid-sac that acted as a vital protective shield cushioning the unborn life, and within it, the unmistakable shape of the infant child, curled in that primordial foetal pose.

He slid backwards on the ground, suddenly afraid. The chain clanked in protest. He was at its farthest limit. The manacle dug into his shin and calf, cutting open the scabs of crusted blood and making his wounds bleed again.

Do not fear me, Father, the infant exclaimed. ***I will never harm you.***

Vasudeva felt himself shudder, then fought to regain control of his senses. ‘Who ... who are you?’

I am your son.

He did not know what to say to that. His son? Which son, he was about to ask. For he had had several, all dashed to death by their brute of an uncle. Surely, this was the restless aatma of one of those poor unfortunate dead. But the voice sensed his confusion and clarified: ***Your unborn son. Your eighth child.***

Vasudeva resisted the urge to gasp aloud. With an effort, he said, ‘But you have not yet been conceived!’

That momentous event shall take place tonight, in a few moments.

‘But ... how?’

Through the power of your mind, I shall be transported into my mother’s womb. All you have to do is will me there, and it will be done.

Vasudeva remained silent. He knew what the child was saying was true. He knew this in every fibre and cell of his being. There was no doubt at all. He felt his mind grow calmer, his pulse steady, his heartbeat return to its usual pace. ‘But after that, what next? The moment Kamsa hears that his sister ... your mother ... is carrying the eighth child, he will not sit idly by and let you come to term.’

I shall tell you what you have to do. All will be well. Just do as I say, Father, and I shall take care of the rest.

Vasudeva thought a moment longer, then nodded slowly. ‘Yes. I shall.’

Then let us begin. Focus your mind on me, become one with me, and the rest shall come to pass.

Vasudeva looked deep into the blue egg of light, at the being that floated there, suspended in that ethereal sac of sacred blue illumination. And slowly, by degrees, he felt his consciousness rise up out of his body. He felt his entire spirit soar ... up, up, up, high above the ether, and down, down into the blue light ... the blue light of Brahman that the sacred verses of the Upanishads referred to ... and he experienced a great sense of peace and fulfilment sweep through him. Every anxiety wiped clean. Every worry washed away. Every pore of his body alive with energy, with shakti.

He felt that energy pass from him through the wall to the other side ...

To his beloved ... Devaki.

twenty-two

A gentle breeze rose from the Yamuna and blew through the city. It stirred the senses of even the most miserable souls in Mathura, awakening them to an awareness, a tingling sense of expectation, of something about to happen. Rivers that had grown murky, sluggish or parched, began to flow in their full strength, their waters clear as crystal, sweet and fresh as if drawn directly from a glacier. Ponds that had dried up or turned to scum-covered mosquito-breeding nests, turned clear and were filled with lotuses. Trees whose branches had withered straightened their bent boughs and turned green from the roots up to the highest leaf. Bees began to buzz and make honey again, sweeter and thicker than ever before. Sacred yagna fires burned on even without fuel needing to be added, as astonished Brahmins exclaimed, each wanting to take credit for the miracle. The minds of penitents were at ease, tapasvis felt they had achieved the goal

for which they had spent decades meditating. Chanteuses found themselves singing songs they had never heard before, and never knew they knew. Kinnaras and gandharva clans sang and danced for no particular reason. Siddhas and caranas offered oblations and prayers. Vidyadharas danced with danseuses and were happy as never before. Every sign, every omen, every portent, was auspicious.

In his palace, Kamsa had been gnawing on the thighbone of an uks while he listened to the tally of a new lagaan, a land tax he had imposed upon the Yadava nations. He was already enraged by the low tally, and the excuse given, that more and more Yadavas were choosing to migrate to other lands rather than continue to live under his reign. He ordered all those found leaving their homes to be killed on the spot. But it occurred to him that if he killed all those who *could* afford to pay the lagaan, who would be left to pay it? Only those who could *not* afford it.

That was when he smelt the breeze blowing into the chamber, and smelt as well the secret message it carried. He rose from his throne and, with one swift sweep of his hand, picked up the grand throne and threw it across the sabha hall, breaking the great door of the assembly chamber. He threw back his head and bellowed with rage.

Despite all his efforts, the day he had feared had come to pass. The eighth child had been born. It was impossible, with Vasudeva and Devaki kept apart all this while, and with Devaki displaying no signs of pregnancy until this very morning; but somehow, the impossible had been accomplished. And now the day was here at last.

He strode from the sabha hall, bellowing orders as he went. Bana and Canura scurried after him, trying to keep pace. Kamsa had expanded himself to thrice his normal size. As he walked, he banged his fist against walls, knocking out chunks of stone and brickwork, slammed his shoulder into pillars, cracking them in two and endangering the ceilings they helped hold up, shattered statuary as his hand brushed against them, and generally demolished his own palace without knowing or caring.

He emerged from the palace and bellowed for his elephant. A very frightened mahout bowed low and tried to find a way to tell him that he had killed Haddi-Hathi during his last ride – losing his temper and expanding himself suddenly, the elephant reduced to pulp beneath Kamsa. No elephant could seat him. Bana and Canura stood at a safe distance and attempted to pass on or execute his orders. From what they could follow, he wished to mobilize the entire army!

At that moment, the breeze gathered speed. The stench of flowers in full bloom seemed to assault Kamsa's senses. He froze, went limp, blazing-red eyes rolling up in his head, and he fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes ... or a small mountain of bricks, because the impact of his fall crushed the poor mahout who was bowing before him, as it did several soldiers standing nearby.

Bana and Canura stared at this extraordinary sight.

‘The king has fainted!’ Canura said, barely able to believe the words himself, although he could clearly see Kamsa lying prone, arms flung out, drool dribbling from his parted lips. Something insectile – with a thousand tiny, hairy legs – emerged from Kamsa’s mouth, then shuddered and fell back.

Bana was about to respond to Canura when, suddenly, his eyes rolled up and he collapsed as well. Canura followed. So did every single person in the palace.

Across the city, the same thing was happening. People were falling unconscious where they stood, or sat, or rode. People, animals, birds, insects ... every living creature.

Because of the curfew, most citizens were indoors at the time, and fell asleep in their chairs or beds and were safe in their homes. Kamsa’s soldiers, enforcing the curfew, patrolling, or engaged in other soldierly duties, were less fortunate. Some fell into horse troughs, others into cess pits, hundreds fell off their horses or elephants and broke their necks or arms or legs. Many died in bizarre accidents, like the captain of a

company of soldiers who was about to set fire to a house because the owner had refused to supply free milk and butter to his soldiers. The captain had taken the burning brand from one of his soldiers, wanting to set fire to the house with his own hands as the farmer and his distraught family watched and wept. The wind changed and, as sleep overtook him, he fell off his horse. While he slept, the brand caught a few stray strands of the hay stacked outside the house, immolating him on the spot.

Mathura slept.

twenty-three

Vasudeva held the bundle in his arms carefully and rose to his feet. As he did so, a great wind raged through the house, as if cheering his accomplishment, then passed as suddenly as it had risen. He smiled at Devaki, who beamed up at him happily, then turned and left.

As he reached the first of several doors, a loud clanging echoed and the bolt broke off the door and fell to the ground with a soft thud. The door flew open and stayed open as he passed through. The same thing happened with the other doors too. Outside each door, he found guards fallen unconscious at their posts, some in ludicrous postures and at least one with a severe fracture, or worse.

The city was quiet as he walked through the streets. Not a soul was stirring. Not so much as a bird flew across the night sky. Not a single insect chirred or cricketed. Not a dog or cat or even a mouse scurried in the shadows. He passed soldiers everywhere. They had fallen off horses,

elephants and the raised towers posted at every junction ... Glancing into a few houses whose doors or windows lay open, he saw the people inside sleeping as well. The entire city was asleep.

Kamsa too; for nothing else would have prevented him from being there otherwise.

As he walked, he recalled the events of the night.

Devaki and he had been awakened by the reappearance of the blue light. She saw the same thing that he saw, but from her side of the wall.

No more was the child a foetus. It appeared now within a bubble – of blue Brahman shakti – as a newborn come to full term.

The child was a boy with four arms. In his four hands he clutched a conch, a mace, a lotus and a chakra. He had a radiant jewel upon his neck. He had marks upon his chest. He was swaddled in a yellow garment which contrasted pleasantly with his fresh blue skin.

He smiled down at his father and mother and the beauty of that smile filled them both with a deep, glowing warmth and inner radiance. For the rest of their days, they had only to think of that smile to be filled with a sense of complete peace, tranquillity, and joy.

Vasudeva joined his palms in anjali and bowed. 'My son. Who are you? What are you? Pray, enlighten us. We are but simple mortals, we know nothing.'

The boy smiled.

You are Vasudeva and Devaki, my parents. Everything I know comes from you and through you. Without you, I would not have been able to set foot upon this world.

‘Yes,’ Devaki said, ‘but it is *you* who makes this possible, Lord. We are only the instruments of your miracle. Looking at your radiance, feeling your shakti, I am convinced that you are Bhagwan, God himself, the Supreme Being.’

The boy smiled enigmatically.

He looked to one side and then looked back. His gaze brought back with it a flowing river of images, sounds and sensations. With a flick of his fingers, he diverted the flow to Devaki and Vasudeva, both of whom reeled back in amazement. Their minds were filled with palpable memories of things actually seen, experienced, heard and felt.

Vasudeva gasped.‘You are Vishnu Incarnate!’

Devaki said, ‘You took an incarnation as Vaman the dwarf once. As Parshurama. As Rama Chandra. As Hamsa. As Varaha. As Narasimha. As Kurma. As Hayagriva. And as Matsya. In different ages of the world, you assume different forms for different purposes. But this alone is your Incarnate form, in this amsa.’

Not only I, you too were born before and lived other lives before these ones. Do you not recall them?

Devaki and Vasudeva shook their heads.

You, Vasudeva, were a prajapati named Sutapa. And you, my mother, were Prsni. This was during the era of Svayambhuva Manu. And I was born to you in that life as well, where I was named Prsnigarbha. Would you like to know more?

Both nodded eagerly.

Then listen. I shall show to you the entire history of our past lives together, as well as those yet to come.

Both Vasudeva and Devaki closed their eyes as a fresh flood of visions swept through them, carrying them upon the tide of time, across the oceans of eternity.

After communing with his parents for an undetermined time, the unborn child stopped and sighed.

It is now time. The hour of my birth is at hand.

Devaki reacted. The child saw her do so.

You fear your brother's wrath?

‘Yes, my son.’

Have no fear. He shall not harm you tonight. Now, I shall take my place within your womb, Mother. And you shall give birth to me as any human child. Once in human form, I shall be subject to human qualities and failings as well. For though I am incarnate in this amsa and not merely a partial avatar, there are inherent limitations of the human form that cannot be overcome completely. Therefore, I shall seem to be, for all intents and purposes, a normal newborn human baby. But do not be deceived. I am here to set things right once and for all. However long it takes and no matter what I have to do, I shall see this through. You shall be freed of the yoke of the oppressor. So shall all the Yadavas. The race of Yadu shall enjoy a time of such prosperity and satisfaction as they have never seen before since the beginning of their line. This I promise you.

‘Wait,’ said Vasudeva, palms still pressed together. ‘What shall we name you, Lord? You are no ordinary child. Surely we must grant you some special name as well?’

He smiled. And told them.

twenty-four

Now, Vasudeva stood before the Yamuna, carrying his newborn son in his arms. As he recalled the wonders that he had been shown and the knowledge and memories he had been given, he wept, and had to pause to wipe the tears of joy from his eyes.

A new challenge awaited him.

The river was in spate, flowing with a roaring rush that would sweep any and everything along. At this time of year, even elephants could not be bathed in this stretch of the river, nor bridges spanned or boats travel safely. The only way across was to go several yojanas downstream, where the river split into its tributaries, and cross using a raft anchored by an overhanging rope system.

But Vasudeva had been told by his son that he had only until dawn to deliver him to his destination and return home. The place he was to go was a fair distance away, no easy walk even without having a newborn child in one's arms. The detour downstream would make it impossible. He would not even reach his destination before daybreak, let alone return. And his son's instructions had been quite clear. The sleeping would last only until dawn, at which point, Kamsa would rouse and send every soldier in Mathura in pursuit of him.

He looked around, feeling frustration – born of years of imprisonment and abuse – swell up inside him. Then he realized how foolish he was being and smiled. ‘Lord,’ he said quietly, ‘you must surely have provided for all contingencies. Pray, allow me to cross the river.’

Certainly, Father.

The response winked in his mind like a flash of light. He thought he heard a tiny baby gurgle as well.

Thunder rumbled in the sky. Vasudeva glanced up nervously but saw only a clear night sky. Not a single cloud in sight. But he had heard the thunder distinctly.

A single bolt of lightning cracked down and struck the centre of the river.

Water rose in a geyser-like spout, rising up hundreds of yards into the air and slowly fell back. When it had settled, Vasudeva saw that a crack had appeared in the river. A thin line drawn straight across, from bank to bank. As he watched, incredulous, the line widened until it was several yards broad, revealing the very bottom of the river.

The river began to slow down. Downstream, it remained the same, gushing along at breakneck speed. But upstream of the crack, it slowed steadily, by degrees, until finally, after several moments, it ceased flowing altogether. He looked at the downstream flow – it continued unabated, though there was now a distinct gap dividing the river into two halves.

Thunder growled and grumbled overhead.

*Ours not to understand everything that happens, or how or why it happens.
Ours merely to do our given task.*

When the gap was wide enough, he stepped down the side of the riverbank, careful not to slip, and descended to the bottom of the river.

Just as he reached, the sky cracked open and a torrential rain poured down. It was like a cloudburst, the heaviest rainfall that Vasudeva had ever seen in his life. Fat, heavy drops struck the ground, splashing mud. Within moments, the world was blanketed by rain.

Yet, not a single drop fell on Vasudeva or his newborn son.

He looked around in wonderment, raising one hand and stretching it out. At its farthest extent, he could just feel the rain. He brought back his fingers, dripping wet, and looked at them. They smelt of fresh earth and rain. Yet here, where he stood, not a drop fell. He looked around, and saw that the invisible protective canopy that shielded him from the rain took a curious shape, like a tapering ... *hood*? Then he remembered his son's words, explaining this very thing, from earlier: ***The hood of Sesa, the eternal serpent. Sesa shall travel with you, protecting you from all dangers, big and small.***

Vasudeva nodded and started off across the bed of the river. Perfectly natural for the eternal serpent to appear out of mythology and protect him as he carried his newborn son, God Incarnate, across a divided river. Quite natural.

He reached the far side a while later, and trekked up to the other bank. He started off in the direction of Vrindavan. From there, he would make his way into one of the oldest of Yadava territories, Vrajbhoomi, the heart of the Vrishni nation. It was a long walk. And he had to complete it and return home before dawn. Otherwise, even his infinitely powerful son would not be able to save him from Kamsa's wrath.

He reached the tiny hamlet a few hours later. Bone- weary, yet filled with joy and anticipation. As he had been told, a light was burning in one of the modest huts. As he came to its doorway, he had a moment of anxiety. *What if...?*

But everything had been exactly as promised. Every single person he had passed between Mathura and this remote hamlet had been fast asleep. He had even seen a cowherd resting on his crook, dead asleep and snoring, as his cows lay asleep around him.

Inside the hut, he found a woman on a cot, with an infant lying beside her, suckling. It was evident that she had only just given birth before falling

asleep as everyone else had.

A man lay prone on the floor beside the cot, as if he had been taken by the sleep as he sat or stood beside his wife. As Vasudeva entered, the infant stopped suckling and turned its head to look at him. Its arms and legs began to move in the manner of all babies, kicking out excitedly. He saw that it was a girl: as he had been told it would be.

He put his son down on the cot beside the woman and picked up the infant girl. She squealed with delight as he took her in his arms, and he felt a rush of love and tenderness. It helped make it easier for him to turn his back on his own son, whom he left beside the sleeping woman.

He returned to the house in Mathura just as the first flush of dawn was creeping across the eastern sky. He put the baby down beside Devaki, who took her in her arms and cradled her with as much welcoming love as if she were greeting her own child. He looked at Devaki for a long moment, brushed the tears from her cheeks, then kissed the baby on her head – she kicked and gurgled happily – kissed his wife on her forehead as well, then returned to his side of the wall.

He put the manacle back on his foot and waited.

Moments later, as the sky reddened and the wind changed, shouts and cries of alarm and indignation began to ring out across Mathura.

The city was awake again.

Kamsa was silent.

Everybody exchanged glances, their faces giving away their fear.

Never before had he been so quiet for so long. Tantrums, ranting, rages, fury, they were accustomed to all these. They did not relish them, but they expected them. They were like earthquakes and hurricanes, floods and famines – inevitable.

But not silence.

He sat there on the royal dais, head resting on one fist, the elbow resting on his thigh. The throne lay in smithereens around him. The rumour among the men was that Kamsa could no longer control his size changes and other bodily processes and had found it difficult to fit into the ornate throne that he had specially got made once he declared himself King Eternal. Nobody had any idea what his inability to fit into the throne meant or portended. But absurd and quite amusing though it was, nobody dared laugh at it or speak of it anywhere within hearing distance of him. They remained as silent as Kamsa was now, waiting with dread in their hearts.

The eighth child had been born, as prophesied.

It had been a girl.

319

Those who had been with Kamsa, Bana and Canura when they went to Vasudeva's house, said that they saw the newborn girl themselves. It was evident that she had been born that very night, no more than a few hours earlier.

When we were all sleeping.

How a woman could deliver a perfectly healthy baby when she had not exhibited a single sign of pregnancy just the day before was a question nobody dared to ask.

How the bolts of all the doors had been broken, the chains shattered, the manacles unclasped and the wall brought down, nobody could explain.

Kamsa had roared with rage when he saw the newborn. Bana and Canura had run away from him, no doubt fearing that he would take out his wrath on them for failing to see that Devaki was pregnant – even though she had not been pregnant; they were sure of this because even the daimaas who examined her intimately had reported no sign of pregnancy, and the daimaas were spasas who worked for Kamsa.

But Kamsa had directed his anger at the child instead.

Snatching it out of Devaki's hands – she had cried out as he did so, raising her hands in a gesture of pleading – Kamsa took the girl infant by the leg, swung her around once, twice, and then a third time as he always did when killing infants. He had been seen doing the same thing hundreds of times before. He always did it the same way, with nary a single variation. He even joked about it saying that it was the most energy-saving and efficient way to do the job!

But this time, as he swung the child around the third and final time, she flew out of his hands. She didn't fly across the house, but up, into the air, above Kamsa's head. Where she floated, gurgling happily.

Kamsa turned and stared at his empty hand, then up at the floating child. Everybody stared as well. Bana and Canura stopped their hasty flight to stare too.

The baby laughed and clapped her tiny hands together. They didn't meet perfectly, because babies do not have very good coordination. But the action was unmistakable.

Then the baby transformed into a goddess.

Resplendent with beautiful blue skin, decorated with garlands, rich robes, jewellery and accoutrements, she floated in mid-air.

‘I am Yogamaya, sister of Vishnu. My brother bid me come here to give you this message.’

And then she said it, the thing that nobody dared repeat, or even speak aloud in Kamsa’s presence ... though every soldier knew that across Mathura, across the Yadava nations, the same words were being repeated with laughter, with tears of joy, with cheers and applause and celebration, with festive glee.

‘The *Slayer of Kamsa has been born. And he is safely out of your reach.*’

The devi then vanished, leaving only flower petals that fell in a shower to the ground in her wake. Her laughter echoed in the air, more like a baby’s gurgle than a woman’s laugh.

After the incident, Kamsa had returned to his palace, and sat still. Silent. He had seemed bewildered ever since the appearance of the goddess.

Finally, plucking up their courage, Bana and Canura spoke up, taking turns, as if they had decided that they should share the risk of bringing Kamsa’s wrath down on themselves.

‘My Lord,’ Bana said, ‘there is unrest in the city. The events of last night have thrown the people into a frenzy. Every hour, soldiers are bringing word that Yadavas are challenging our soldiers, defying them in small ways.’

Bana glanced at Canura who swallowed and took up the cudgels: ‘We must act now to suppress them, while they are still disorganized. If we allow time to pass, there could be an uprising. What happened this morning ...’

He trailed off, looking at his associate. Bana flinched and spoke up: ‘Word will surely spread soon. Once everyone knows, they may feel emboldened to rebel openly. We recommend that you act before it is too late.’

‘If you wish, we could send word to Lord Jarasandha to send in a few contingents to back us up. His men will kill Yadavas more readily than our soldiers,’ Canura said in a nervous rush.

Bana added hastily: ‘Not that *our* men would not do as much. We are just pointing out all the possible courses of action.’

Kamsa raised his head slowly. ‘There will be no need to send for Jarasandha’s army. We will act ourselves. Now. Before the people have a chance to gather their wits and rise.’

He stood, towering above everyone else in the large hall. His head hit the ceiling that stood twenty feet above the floor. He seemed not to notice.

‘You are right,’ he said with surprising mildness to Bana and Canura. ‘We must quell this petty defiance before it blossoms into outright rebellion. We must also quell the rumours that are bound to spread after this morning’s events.’

‘Rumour, sir?’ Canura asked, hesitantly.

Kamsa looked at them. His eyes were looking in disparate directions, they noticed; and he seemed to have difficulty locating them. But he finally managed to settle at least one eye on them, while the other one roved the far wall of the sabha hall, making the soldiers on that side grow nervous for their own lives.

‘This stupid rumour of a slayer being born,’ he said.

He laughed. A small burst of insectile forms were thrown forth to land at the feet of several men, writhing and crawling.

‘Slayer of Kamsa!’ He shook with silent amusement. ‘How absurd. How impossible. I cannot be slain. I am immortal.’

Then he was silent for another half hour. Just standing there, brooding, eyes rolling in separate directions, wildly.

Finally, Bana dared to speak up again. ‘What shall we do, sire? Shall we do a purge, round up the most obvious troublemakers and make examples of them as usual?’

Kamsa started, as if disturbed out of deep thought. ‘What? Oh yes. Of course. No, we shall dispense with the usual methods this time. This calls for something more drastic.’

‘Yes, sire?’

Kamsa toyed with something growing out of the underside of his ear. Canura looked away, unable to watch.

‘The people believe that my slayer has been born today. So we shall rid them of this notion. We shall kill the slayer wherever he might be.’

‘But, My Lord, we do not know where he is.’ ‘Exactly. Therefore we shall kill them all.’

‘All, sire?’ ‘All the newborns. Male and female. Across all the

Yadava nations.’

Bana and Canura stared at him, speechless. Kamsa’s left eye peered at them. ‘Assemble every

soldier. Every last one. We shall need them all.’ ‘Even the reserves, sire?’

‘Yes!’

They flinched. Kamsa was regaining his normal

tone and volume now. He stalked the hall, looking like a man who had reached a decision at last after long pondering.

‘They believe a slayer has been born to save them. We shall see to it that this slayer, whoever he may be, wherever he may be, will not live to see another day, let alone live long enough to slay me. We shall do this today, and quell all rebellion, all challengers, once and for all. We shall slay every newborn child in the Yadava nations today. Assemble the army, divide all the men and send them out to start work at once. Tell them to kill every newborn child ...’ He paused. ‘No, make that every child born in the past ten days, just to be sure they don’t trick us by pretending he was born last week or the week before. When in doubt, kill all the infants, even the children if you like. Cut off their heads and bring them to me. I want a full tally by tomorrow morning.’

He looked around at the hall filled with stunned faces staring up at him. ‘What are you all looking at, you fools?’

Bana looked at Canura, then back at Kamsa. ‘Sire, you don’t mean *all* of them, do you? I mean ...’ he trailed off.

Canura spoke up. ‘What Bana means, sire, is that he and his wife have just had twins ... three days ago...’ He gestured around the hall. ‘There must be hundreds of our *own* soldiers whose wives have delivered babies in the past few days as well.’

Kamsa grinned a lopsided grin. ‘Then we must start with *them* first. Setting an example. Bana, let us see these bonny twins of yours, hey?’

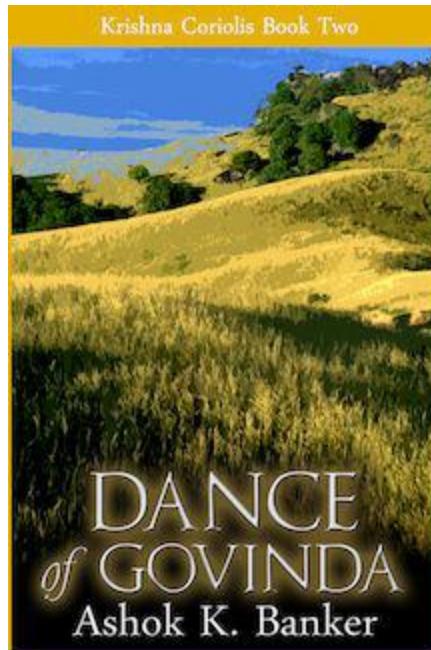
Kamsa began to expand himself, cracking open the roof of the sabha hall, growing enormous. *‘AND ANY MAN WHO ATTEMPTS TO DECEIVE ME OR SPARES A CHILD, I SHALL KILL HIM AND HIS ENTIRE FAMILY MYSELF. SLAYER OF KAMSA, IS IT? WELL, THEN LET ME BE CALLED THE SLAYER OF MATHURA TODAY. OR BETTER STILL, THE CHILDSLAYER!’*

And then he raised his head to the sky and roared his fury. The sound reverberated for yojanas around.

'VISHNU, I AM COMING FOR YOU!'

And as if in response, the sky replied with a burst of thunder that shook the palace to its foundations.

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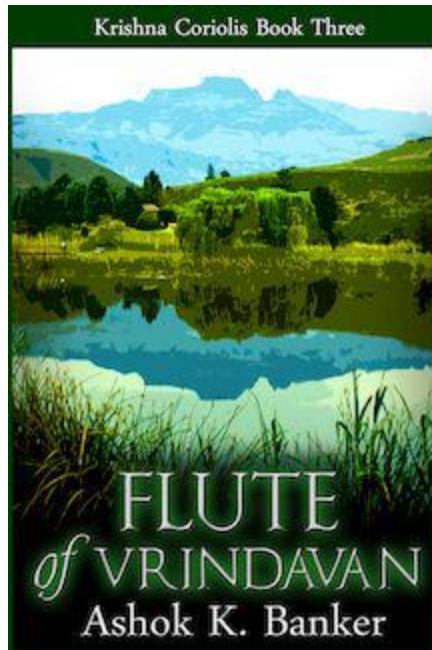
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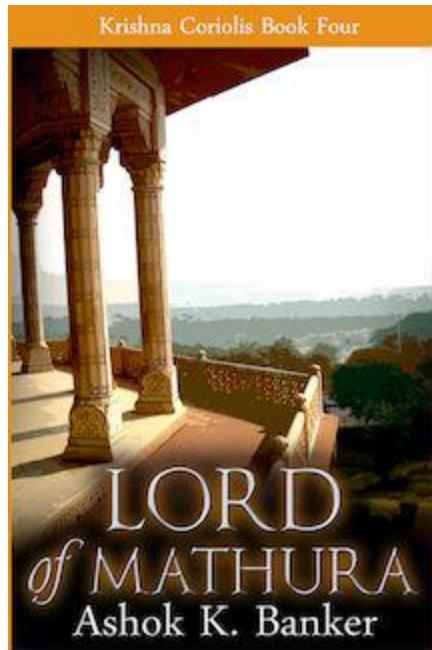
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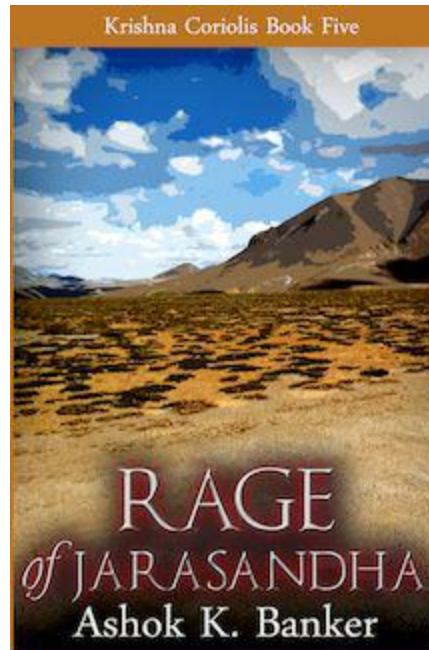
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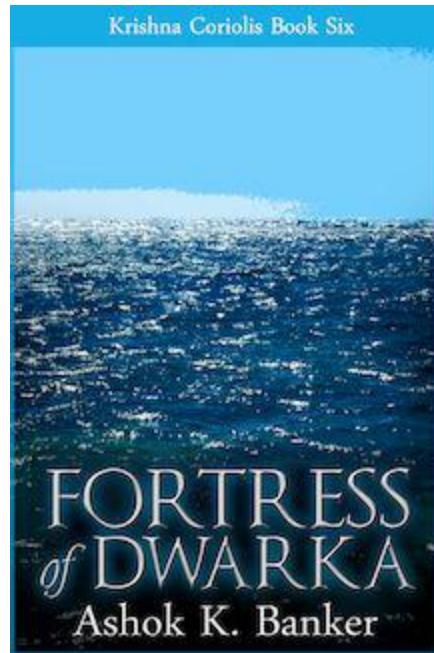
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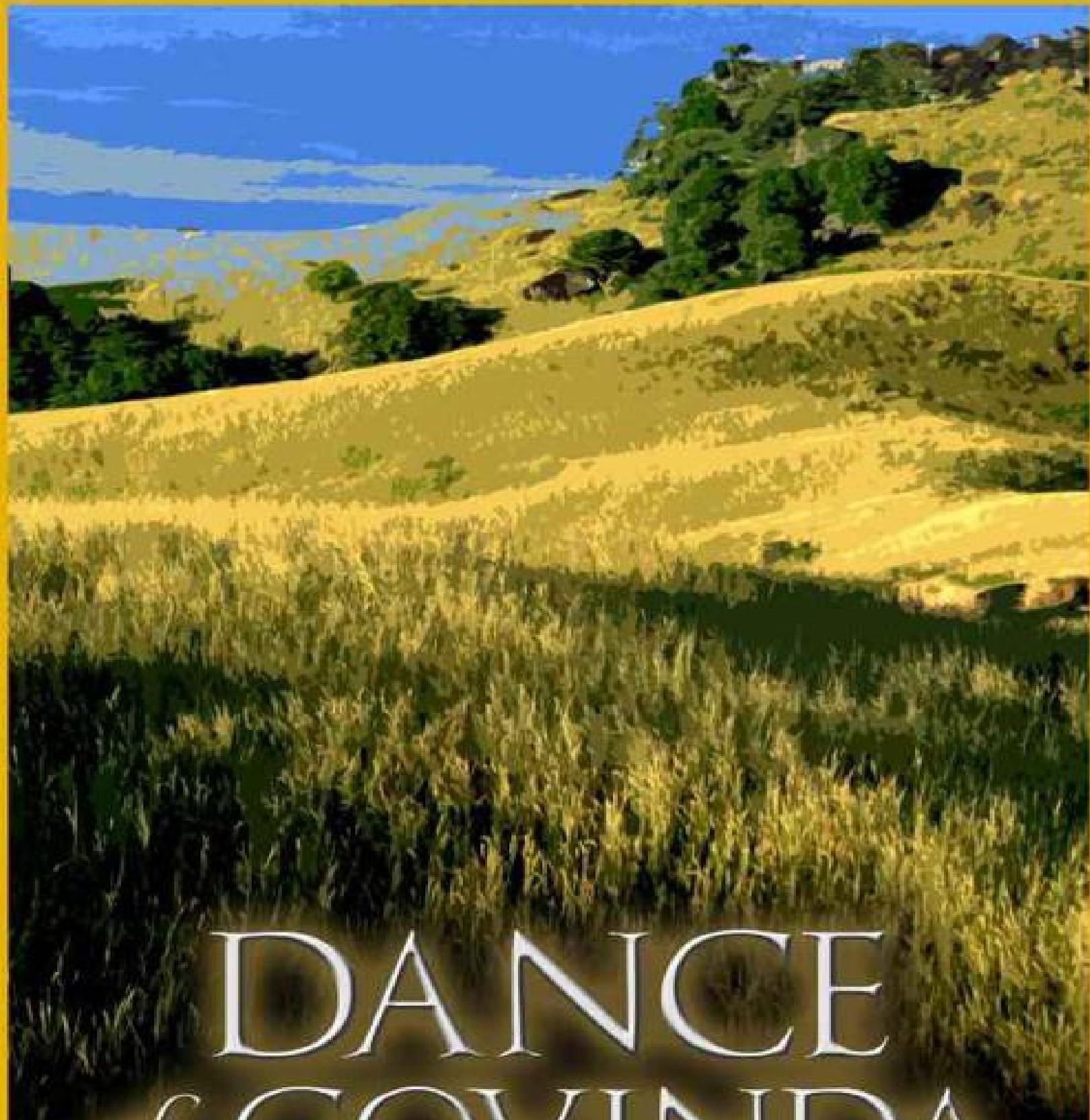
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DANCE
of GOVINDA
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Ashok K. Banker

KRISHNA CORIOLIS
Book 2



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Ashok Kumar Banker's internationally acclaimed *Ramayana Series®* has been hailed as a 'milestone' (*India Today*) and a 'magnificently rendered labour of love' (*Outlook*). It is arguably the most popular English-language retelling of the ancient Sanskrit epic. His work has been published in 56 countries, a dozen languages, several hundred reprint editions with over 1.2 million copies of his books currently in print.

Born of mixed parentage, Ashok was raised without any caste or religion, giving him a uniquely post-racial and post-religious Indian perspective. Even through successful careers in marketing, advertising, journalism and scriptwriting, Ashok retained his childhood fascination with the ancient literature of India. With the *Ramayana Series®* he embarked on a massively ambitious publishing project he calls the Epic India Library. The EI Library comprises Four Wheels: Mythology, Itihasa, History, and Future History. The *Ramayana Series®* and *Krishna Coriolis* are part of the First Wheel. The *Mahabharata Series* is part of the Second Wheel. *Ten Kings* and the subsequent novels in the Itihasa Series dealing with different periods of recorded Indian history are the Third Wheel. Novels such as *Vertigo*, *Gods of War*, *The Kali Quartet*, *Saffron White Green* are the Fourth Wheel.

He is one of the few living Indian authors whose contribution to Indian literature is acknowledged in The Picador Book of Modern Indian Writing and The Vintage Anthology of Indian Literature. His writing is used as a teaching aid in several management and educational courses worldwide and has been the subject of several dissertations and theses.

Ashok is 48 years old and lives with his family in Mumbai. He is always accessible to his readers at www.ashokbanker.com—over 35,000 have corresponded with him to date. He looks forward to hearing from you.

DANCE OF GOVINDA

*For Biki and Bithika:
My Radha and my Rukmini.*

*For Yashka and Ayush Yoda:
My Yashoda.*

*All you faithful readers
who understand
that these tales
are not about being Hindu
or even about being Indian.
They're simply about being.*

*In that spirit,
I dedicate this *gita-govinda*
to the krishnachild in all of us.
For, under these countless
separate skins, there beats
a single eternal heart.*

Author's Preface to the first Indian print edition 2010

If it takes a community to raise a child, then it surely takes a nation to build an epic.

The itihasa of the subcontinent belongs to no single person. The great epics of our culture – of any culture – may be told and retold infinite times by innumerable poets and writers; yet, no single version is the final one.

The wonderful adventures of the great Lord Krishna are greater than what any story, edition or retelling can possibly encompass. The lila of God Incarnate is beyond the complete comprehension of any one person. We may each perceive some aspects of His greatness, but, like the blind men and the elephant, none of us can ever see everything at once.

It matters not whether you are Hindu or non- Hindu, whether you believe Krishna to be God or just a great historical personage, whether you are Indian or not. The richness and wonder of these tales have outlived countless generations and will outlast many more to come.

My humble attempt here – within these pages and in the volumes to follow – is neither the best nor the last retelling of this great story. I have no extraordinary talent or ability, no special skill or knowledge, no inner sight or visionary gift. What I *do* have is a lifelong exposure to an itihasa so vast, a culture so rich, a nation so great, wise and ancient, that its influence – permeating into one like water through peat over millennia, filtering through from mind to mind, memory to memory, mother to child and to mother again – has suffused every cell of my being, every unit of my consciousness.

And when I use the word 'I', it is meant in the universal. You are 'I'. As I am she. And she is all of us. Krishna's tale lives through each and every one of us. It is yours to tell. His to tell. Hers to tell. Mine as well. For as long as this tale is told, and retold, it lives on.

I have devoted years to the telling, to the crafting of words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters, kaands and volumes. I shall devote more

years to come, decades even. Yet all my effort is not mine alone. It is the fruition of a billion Indians, and the billions who have lived before us. For each person who has known this tale and kept it alive in his heart has been a teller, a reteller, a poet, and an author. I am merely the newest name in a long, endless line of names that has had the honour and distinction of being associated with this great story.

It is my good fortune to be the newest reteller of this ancient saga. It is a distinction I share with all who tell and retell this story: from the grandmother who whispers it as a lullaby to the drowsy child, to the scholar who pores over every syllable of every shloka in an attempt to find an insight that has eluded countless scholars before him.

It is a tale told by me in this version, yet it is not my tale alone to tell. It is your story. Our story. Her story. His story.

Accept it in this spirit and with all humility and hope. Also know that I did not create this flame, nor did I light the torch that blazes. I merely bore the torch this far. Now I give it to you. Take it from my hand. Pass it on. As it has passed from hand to hand, mind to mind, voice to voice, for unknown millennia.

Turn the page. See the spark catch flame. Watch Krishna come alive.

Author's Note to the second Indian print edition 2012

All my books are long in the gestation, some conceived many as thirty-plus years earlier, none less than a decade. It takes me that long to be sure of a story's longevity and worth and to accumulate the details, notes, research, character development and other tools without which I can't put my fingers to the keyboard. This particular story, Krishna Coriolis, originated in the same 'Big Bang' that was responsible for the creation of my entire Epic India universe – a series of interlinked retellings of all the major myths, legends and itihasa of the Indian subcontinent, set against the backdrop of world history. I'm using the term 'BigBang' but in fact it was more of a series of carefully controlled delayed-time explosions over the first fifteen to eighteen years of my life.

At that time, the Krishna story was a part of the *Sword of Dharma* section of the Epic India library, which retold the 'dashavatara' storyline with an unusual twist as well as an integral part of my massively ambitious retelling of the world's greatest epic, the Mahabharata or the Mba. I began work on my Mba immediately after I completed the Ramayana Series in 2004. After about five years of working on my Mba – a period in which most actual MBA students would be firmly established in their careers! – I realized that the series was too massive to be published as it was. I saw that the Krishna storyline, in particular his individual adventures, could stand on their own as a separate series. So I separated them into a parallel series which I titled Krishna Coriolis. Naturally, since the story now had to stand on its own, rather than be a part of the larger Mba story, I had to rewrite each book to make it stand on its own, with a reasonably complete beginning, middle and end. This process took another three years, and resulted finally in the form the series now takes. You're holding the second book of this parallel series in your hands now, titled *Dance of Govinda*.

Dance of Govinda is just the second part of the Krishna Coriolis, which is interlinked with the much larger Mba series, which itself is only one section of my whole Epic India library. Yet, I've laboured to make this book stand on its own and be a satisfying read. Naturally, it's not complete in the story, since that would require not just the full Krishna storyline but

also the larger Mbā story and the larger context behind that as well. In that sense, it's just a part of the big picture; but even the longest journey must start with a single step and if you permit, *Dance of Govinda* will take you on a short but eventful trip, one packed with action and magic, terror and adventure. The reason why the book, like the remaining books in the series, are so short, almost half of the length of my earlier Ramayana Series, is because that's the best way the structure works. By that I mean the individual parts of the story and the way in which they fit together. Sure, I could make it longer – or shorter. But this felt like the perfect length. In an ideal world, the entire series would be packaged together as one massive book and published at once – but that's not only impossible in terms of paper thickness and binding and cover price affordability, it's not the right structure for the story. Stories have been split into sections, or volumes, or, in our culture, into parvas, kaands, suras, mandalas and so on, since literature was first written. You might as well ask the same question of Krishna Dweipayana-Vyasa – 'Sir, why did you split the Mahabharata into so many parvas and each parva into smaller sections and so on?' The fact is, a story needs to be structured and the story itself decides which structure works best. That was the case here and I am very pleased with the way *Dance of Govinda* and the other books in the series turned out.

The *Sword of Dharma* mini-series, as I call it now, is also written in first draft and tells us the experiences and adventures of Lord Vishnu in the heavenly realms. It is a direct sequel to the Ramayana Series as well as a bridge story to the Krishna Coriolis and Mahabharata Series. And since it deals with otherworldly events, it exists outside of 'normal' time as we know it, which means it is also a sequel to the Krishna Coriolis and also a prequel to the Ramayana Series. I won't confuse you further: once you read *Sword of Dharma*, you would understand instantly what I mean because the story itself is an action-packed adventure story where questions like 'when is this taking place?' and 'so is this happening before or after such-and-such?' become less important than seeing the curtain parted and the world beyond the curtain revealed in its full glorious detail. No matter how much I may show you in the Ramayana Series, Krishna Coriolis and Mahabharata Series, all these 'mortal' tales are ultimately being affected and altered by events taking place at the 'immortal' level, and only by seeing that story-beyond-the-story can we fully comprehend

the epic saga of gods and demons that forms the basis of Hindu mythology in our puranas.

But for now, *Dance of Govinda* marks a crucial turning point in the story of swayam Bhagwan (as the Bhagwatham calls him). Not only has he survived every attempt to destroy him at birth, he will grow and thrive. By the close of this book, he will have gained the ability to stand on his own two feet – hence the title. And even though just a babe for most of the story, he is capable of far more than most grown heroes – not just more action, but more masthi as well! For that is the beauty of Krishna, he is not just a warrior but also a lovable mischievous tyke. There are as many stories of his infantile pranks as there are tales of his derring-do in this book, for I have tried to be as thorough as possible in mining the rich vein of Shrimad Bhagwatham, the Vishnu Purana and the Harivamsha sections of the Mahabharata in seeking every known recorded incident of Krishna's infancy.

And that too is only part of the much, much larger tale of Krishna, which itself is part of the larger tale of Lord Vishnu, which is only part of the far greater saga of gods and demons. It's an epic saga but the beauty of it is that each portion is delicious and fulfilling in itself!

Enjoy!

|| yadrcchaya copapannah ||

|| svarga-dvaram apavrtam ||

|| sukhinah ksatriya partha ||

|| labhante yuddham idrsam ||

Blessed are the warriors

Who are chosen to fight justly;

For the doors to heaven

Shall be opened unto them.

Kaand 1

One

The being that had once been Prince Kamsa towered over the city.

He had expanded himself enough to be able to stand and gaze out at all Mathura. He surveyed his domain from a height of several hundred feet. Looming above the low-lying dwellings of the city, even higher than the tallest structure in the capital – his palace – he was able to see to the farthest extremities of the capital. His gargantuan form dwarfed the palace beside him. He was tempted to sit on the vaulting central dome but decided against it: the crack he had caused when he had tried merely to lean against it lightly was still there; sitting might well lead the structure to collapse altogether.

The city exhibited signs of unrest. The smoke curling skywards from sporadic fires and the sound of crowds clashing with his soldiers didn't concern him overly; what irritated him was that his official diktat was being resisted by his people.

Really, Yadavas could be very stubborn at times! Couldn't they understand that he must eliminate any possibility of his slayer still being alive?

It was galling enough that the son of Devaki and Vasudeva had escaped his grasp despite a decade of iron-handed security measures and intense scrutiny. He was still unable to comprehend how that had been accomplished. His sister and bhraatr-in-law had still been in their quarters, confined by manacles and chains, surrounded by his most reliable men, all armed to the teeth. Yet come the time of the birth of the eighth child, they, and everyone else in the entire city, appeared to have ... fallen asleep!

It was quite absurd. Vasudeva could hardly have drugged the whole city. Yet, somehow, every living soul had fallen dead asleep during the crucial hours when his nemesis had been birthed. Including himself.

Longing to smash his paw into something, he raised it, but controlled himself with an effort. He would only end up destroying half the city if he did what he really wanted to – lash out. He settled for seething silently as

he recalled the frustration he had felt when he had awoken to find that the night of the Slayer's prophesied birth had already ended and the next day begun.

To add insult to injury, by the time he and his aides arrived at Vasudeva's domicile, the true Slayer had been spirited away and replaced with another child, a female babe who, when he attempted to kill it, had slipped out of Kamsa's grasp, floated in mid-air and told him how he had been duped, before laughing and vanishing into thin air.

That was one of the things that troubled him: Why had she told him when the easier way out would have been for her to have him kill the babe, assuming it to be the one spoken of in Narada-muni's prophecy?

By telling him that she was a replacement, she had defeated the very purpose of switching the babies. Now that he knew his prophesied Slayer was still alive somewhere, he had no choice but to ensure its destruction – and his own survival.

Since he didn't know where the real Slayer had been transported, he had ordered all newborn babes to be killed at once.

To be on the safe side, he had also ordered all babes who appeared to have been born in the last ten days to be put to the sword. That was the reason for the unrest. His soldiers, led by his trusty aides Bana and Canura, had gone from house to house, running their blades through every single newborn – and a few infants too, to be absolutely certain. It was a bloody business, but it had to be done. Surely his people understood that? After all, as his subjects, they ought to have his welfare at heart, shouldn't they? Yet there they were, rioting and protesting violently, even attacking his soldiers who were only going about doing their duty. How insolent!

Now he waited for his army to regroup. The slaughter was done and he was waiting for Bana and Canura to assemble the troops so he could issue his next orders.

Bits of his body dropped off from time to time and lay writhing on the ground. Some fell on the unfortunate soldiers already assembled, and eagerly devoured them, their slithering worm-like forms turning into obscene humps as they swallowed their struggling prey alive. The larger

Kamsa got, the larger the assorted parasites in him grew, each individual vermin displaying the same characteristics as its host. Some even had the same mottled purple-faced grin. After all, if a person's pet usually resembled the owner, why not his parasites?

Kamsa lazily raised a foot and squashed a few that were getting out of hand. His supply of soldiers was plentiful but not unlimited, after all. As it is, he tended to kill or maim a fair number of his men – as well as numerous innocent bystanders at times – merely in the course of moving around, or during one of his now-legendary rages.

Which reminded him, he would need new troops soon. It was quite obvious that the present situation was beyond the capacity of normal Andhaka Kshatriyas. For one thing, he suspected that more than a few of them were reluctant to kill their countrymen. That was absurd. A Kshatriya's dharma was to do as he was told, was it not? Then why the moral qualms? Still, they often used words and warnings where the simple slash of a sword or running over by a horse brigade would work more effectively. Too soft for his purposes. He needed tough men who did what they were told without question or hesitation, men as accustomed to killing and as casual about it as a butcher. It was important to rule firmly.

He missed his Mohini Fauj. He had been so proud of that hermaphrodite army ... Not only had they been immaculate at the art of slaughter, they had been a gift from his dear friend, mentor, and pitr-in-law, King Jarasandha of Magadha. But the Mohinis were all gone now, and the damned Vasudeva had been responsible for that, whether directly or indirectly. Yes, Vasudeva had a lot to answer for and he, Kamsa, would see to it that he paid his dues. But first, he had to deal with the job at hand: rooting out and killing Vasudeva's newborn brat before the little fellow grew up to pose a threat to his maternal uncle.

Kamsa heard the tiny sound of hooves and looked down to see Bana and Canura arrive at the head of a bedraggled and weary-looking band of cavalry. His two most trusted aides looked ready to drop.

They dismounted, bowed, and waited for him to reduce himself. He did so, coming down to about thrice his human height. He glared down at them.

‘Well, is it all done?’

‘Aye, Lord Kamsa,’ Bana said. He was so subdued and miserable, he seemed capable of falling over at any moment.

Canura glanced sharply at his companion before speaking up, ‘Aye, sire. The count came to three hundred and eight.’ He added, ‘Bana’s twin sons were the first we killed.’

Kamsa grinned. ‘Good, very good.’ Then he frowned. ‘Three hundred and eight? That’s quite a number. Is that the average birthrate?’ He glanced doubtfully at the city. ‘They do multiply like rabbits, don’t they?’

Bana remained as he was, slumped like a man ready to collapse. He stared down at the ground. Canura cleared his throat. ‘Actually, my lord. The daimaas said that only twenty- three were born in the past day and night. The rest we killed just to be certain we weren’t missing any.’

‘Ah,’ Kamsa nodded. ‘Thorough as usual. Good. Now go back and get the rest.’

Canura stared up at him. ‘Get some rest, sire?’

‘The rest. Go kill the remaining children.’

‘But, my lord, we killed them all. Newborn babes, as well as those that were born in the past ten days ... even those born in the past fortnight or so, just to be sure!’

Kamsa yawned as he began to expand himself once more. ‘Yes, yes, I know that. Now go kill the remaining boys in Mathura.’

Canura craned his neck, raising his voice so that he could be heard; Kamsa rose up above the height of the palace dome and continued to grow. ‘Up to what age, my lord?’

Kamsa shrugged. ‘All the boys. Kill every son born in Mathura. Each that you consider capable of holding a sword ...’ He paused a moment, thinking. Yadava children joined their parents at work at an early age. ‘... Or a ploughshare or a crook.’

‘Every son, sire?’ Canura’s voice cracked. Kamsa wondered if Canura had sons of his own – yes, he seemed to recall him mentioning having a son or three, a few years ago. ‘Even ...’

‘OF COURSE,’ said Kamsa brusquely, his voice booming now as he towered above the palace again. ‘START WITH THE MALE OFFSPRING OF OUR OWN SOLDIERS, THEN WORK YOUR WAY THROUGH THE REST OF THE CITY. AND WHEN YOU ARE DONE WITH MATHURA, CONTINUE THROUGH THE KINGDOM.’

Even from that height, Kamsa could see the incredulity and shock on the minion’s face. The man seemed to crumple inwards like a dissolving sand sculpture. ‘The ... kingdom?’ Kamsa could barely hear Canura’s faraway, enfeebled voice.

‘YES. BE THOROUGH. DON’T COME BACK TILL YOU’RE DONE.’ Kamsa yawned and stretched, and heard his muscles pop and tendons ease. ‘I SHALL SLEEP AWHILE ... UNTIL YOU FINISH THE BUTCHERY. THERE’S MUCH WORK AHEAD. I NEED MY REST.’

He glanced down and saw Canura still standing below, staring up, his tiny face and beard barely the size of the toenail on Kamsa’s smallest toe. If he flicked his foot even slightly, he would send Canura flying to his death. Bana, it seemed, had collapsed after all. Kamsa nudged the man with the edge of his foot. Something crawled out of an open suppurating sore on his insole and leapt eagerly on Bana’s back, moist round mouth opening like a maw to swallow.

‘Better drag your friend away before he becomes dinner for that thing. Go on.’

Canura, still looking stunned, glanced down, saw the parasite about to devour Bana’s head, dropped to his knees and began beating it off. He cried a little while doing so, which was unusual for Canura. When it was dead, he put his arm around Bana’s shoulder and dragged him to his horse which had backed away several yards, nervous around Kamsa’s rakshasa stench.

Moments later, followed by the ragged lines of soldiers that comprised the remains of Mathura’s once great army, they rode away. From their

deathlike silence and the lacklustre manner in which they diminished from his sight, it was evident that their new mission was not to their liking. Deserters were already breaking off from the main column and riding away in different directions, no doubt preferring the death penalty for desertion over participating in further slaughter of their own.

Kamsa slapped at a particularly worrisome mite on his cheek. His claw came away sticky and green. Yes. This sorry-looking bunch wouldn't do any more.

It was time he acquired a new army.

Two

Nanda gazed in awe at the being in his wife's arms. She cradled it reverentially, beaming up at her husband with pride. 'Is he not magnificent?'

Nanda shook his head in disbelief. 'He is God Himself Incarnate, descended on prithviloka to grace and bless us. Let me witness his glory!'

Yashoda peeled back the corners of the swaddling garment to reveal the dusky features of her baby. He slept peacefully, the faintest shadow of an all-knowing smile turning up the corners of his mouth, a chubby fist beside his cheek.

Husband and wife marvelled at the sleeping infant.

'He is perfect in every way,' Nanda said.

'Yes. Even his colour, so dark, beyond black, almost bluish in its hue. It's the exact shade of dusk falling over Gokul on a monsoon eve.'

'Shyam-rang. The colour of dusk. That is what we shall name him.'

'Shyam?'

Nanda smiled. 'That too if you wish. But I meant to call him Krishna.'

'Krishna,' Yashoda repeated, crushing the consonants between her palate and tongue. 'I like it. It describes him beautifully. He is literally Krishna. The colour of darkness. Beautiful, beatific black.'

'Well said, beloved one. In fact, his colour and aspect bring to my mind that great Bharata ancestor of the Suryavansha Ikshwaku line.'

'You mean Rama Chandra of Ayodhya?'

'Yes. Was he not described as being gifted with this same dark-hued aspect, a complexion so dark it almost glowed bluish in a certain light?'

Yashoda nodded slowly, thinking back to the time she had heard a passing bard recite the tale of Rama and his travels. Travails, more like it, she thought, thinking of Rama's banishment with his wife Sita and those last years of sad estrangement. She prayed such sadness would not be the lot of her son. 'Yes, but let us not name him Rama, if you please.'

'No, I did not mean that we name him so, merely that something about his aspect reminded me of how the bards describe Rama Chandra at his birth.'

She smiled. 'I like the name Krishna very much.'

He beamed at her. 'Krishna he shall be, then. King of the dusk, master of twilight, commander of the world between day and night.'

She laughed. 'Nanda, you always did have a gift for bombastic pronouncements!'

She carefully covered the sleeping infant again, tucking in an errant black curl behind his ear; he had surprisingly long hair for a newborn. 'He shall be a gopa, like his father and his father before him, back to the beginning of time. A simple cowherd; and he shall find joy in it. His weapon shall be the flute, to entertain himself through the long solitary hours, and to draw his flock homewards at day's end. He shall command the finest Gokul cows, and rule the milk and butter sheds, and he shall be king of all the dung-heaps in Vraj country if he pleases!'

The couple laughed at that. Nanda put his arm on his wife's shoulder, feeling a great rush of love and affection for her. 'My beloved, you always know how to put me in my place and keep me firmly there. It shall be as you say, subject to the blessings of the Brahmins whose task it is to choose auspicious names. If they agree, this son of ours shall be Krishna the gopa, not Rama the warrior.' His eyes twinkled mischievously as he turned to leave. 'But he shall be king of Gokul, master of the gopas, and commander of the hearts of the gopis!' He winked at her and left the shed with a flourish before she could retort again.

Yashoda chuckled softly, rocking her baby gently. 'That's your father. He has delusions of grandeur and far, far too many cows for a single man!'

Nanda emerged from the shed to find a huge gathering waiting eagerly on the hillside. People were still coming, some even running out of sheer excitement, arriving from all points of the compass, shouting eagerly to one another the news that Nanda-Yashoda had had a son that morning. Nanda straightened his back and raised his hands, asking for silence. The excited murmuring and chattering died down reluctantly. Gokul's gopis and gopas were boisterous, loud, rambunctious people and the words 'quiet' and 'slow' were not part of their limited vocabulary, but they quietened down and stood still for Nanda, their respect for whom was enormous. Though a tribal republic in social structure, Vrajbhoomi did have her chieftains and lords, not in the feudal, patriarchal or zamindari sense but simply as the spokesperson and voice of the people. Nanda was the voice of Gokul and everyone listened when he spoke.

'Yashoda has given birth to a boy! We have chosen to name him Krishna, subject to the approval of the Brahmins.'

A great cheer went up. It was echoed by even those still coming at a running pace – they raised their crooks and yelled as they came.

Nanda waited for the cheers and applause to die down. 'Send for the Brahmins. I shall now retire to perform the necessary ablutions and prepare for the birth ceremonies. Go forth and spread the word across Vrajbhoomi. There shall be feasting and celebration as never before. All are welcome!'

The hail of joy that greeted this was even greater than the one before. Nanda raised his hand in acknowledgement and turned back to the house. There was much to be done and he would have to oversee it all himself. For once, Yashoda the ever-efficient, ever-perfect mistress of the house would not be able to take care of the arrangements with her customary ease.

However, Yashoda appeared at the doorway before Nanda could reach it. He started to admonish her, then broke off and simply stared.

'You look...radiant,' he said. 'But you should not be moving about just yet, my love.'

Yashoda smiled. Nanda felt his heart flutter at the sight of that winsome smile, the flash of those perfect teeth. 'I feel as if I birthed ten days ago, not this morning.' She frowned as if seeking words to describe her feelings. 'I feel ... refreshed, rejuvenated. It's quite remarkable. All I did was nurse our son and suddenly I felt energy coursing through me, as if I were years younger and stronger and healthier. I can't explain it.'

Nanda looked down at the wrapped bundle she cradled in one arm. He was still suckling at the breast, but when Nanda tugged back the cloth to gaze at him, he let the nipple pop out of his mouth and stared up brightly. Nanda felt a rush of joy as those beautiful light eyes danced up at him, catching a beam of sunlight that made the little face glow as if lit from within. He felt a surge of energy and love, such a great rush of affection as he had never felt before. He smiled, amazed at his own responses, and, as if in response, the babe gurgled and chuckled softly. 'Uh ... uh-huh!'

He glanced up at Yashoda and saw her watching her infant son as well as her husband with something bordering on awe. 'Is he not too newly made to be responding thus?' he asked uncertainly. He was no expert on babies, still ...

She was quiet for a moment, then said, 'There is something about our Krishna that is unlike any other babe, isn't there? I feel it. Do you feel it too?'

He looked down again and saw that the boy was back at the bosom, suckling greedily. But the eyes, so large in that little round face, found his

father's face again and despite his mouthful of nourishment, he gurgled happily. 'Uh...hah!'

'Yes,' Nanda said in wonderment. 'What you say is true. Our son is unique.'

three

Jarasandha surveyed the results of his campaign from the vantage of a plateau. The flat table land which had provided an effective command post for his advisors and him during the past few days stretched for almost a tenth of a yojana behind him. Before him lay a plainsland with a city in the foreground. The city had withstood his army's siege for two full moons, the longest any city had resisted him. While not overlong by usual standards of the age, the siege was unusually long for him personally – he found it hard to believe that the half-demolished, charred and smoking carcass of the once-proud capital city sprawled below was still stubborn enough to withstand his assaults. He mused why this was so even as he pondered how to break the siege once and for all.

Perhaps he had been too complacent in his first approach, sending his usual emissaries with the standard missive advising the king of the land to lay down his arms and accept Magadha's superiority. He had even sent a white ass ahead of the emissary, his own little attempt at humour and commentary on the age-old Arya practice of sending a black horse ahead of an army in the great ashwamedha ceremony. In that Vedic ceremony, the territory that the anointed black horse stepped on became part of the domain of the king who sent forth the stallion. And if the owner of the territory resisted, the king was justified in waging war against the errant king or chieftain until he conceded.

Perhaps it was simply the crusading thrill of the Vedic ritual, or the lust for empire, but every single ashwamedha yagna performed to date had resulted in total triumph for the king performing the ceremony.

Jarasandha wondered if that immaculate record of success had not been kept clean merely by failing to record the occasional instances of failure.

After all, since almost all itihasa was recorded, stored, and passed on by Brahmins, it was in their vested interest to project a one hundred per cent success rate for one of their biggest, most lavish and most profitable ceremonies, was it not? Then again, he had to admit his own bias against Brahminical practices. As the leader of the first and only kingdom made up entirely of outcastes and no-castes, he was hardly the most unbiased commentator on the ways of the priestly varna.

In any case, the white ass usually served to confound and confuse the receiving kings and their senapatis. Unable to see the rich dark humour inherent in the joke, they invariably responded with contempt, rejecting the emissary outright and laughing at the seemingly pathetic attempt of a low-caste pretender to imitate the high and mighty horse sacrifice. It was only when the screaming and the fires and the slaughter began – always starting from the back end of the city, which Jarasandha's intrepid Mohinis infiltrated discreetly even as all attention was focussed on the emissary and the ridiculous white ass with its colourful anointments – that they realized the white ass was meant to represent them. And if they failed to note the metaphorical significance, Jarasandha was always happy to point it out, emphasizing the fact that he had changed the ceremonial black of the ashwamedha stallion to a white ass to signify the highest varna of Arya society. The fact that he used an ass to represent them rather than a stallion was quite self-explanatory: the joke was on them!

But none of his usual ploys and tactics had worked on this city. Come to think of it, he didn't even know the name of the damned place. And he didn't intend to find out either. It was just another city, one of hundreds he had conquered, and one of a thousand he would command in a short while. When building an empire, one did not count the fleas on one's ass – or on one's rump either! One simply swatted them to a pulp.

He had tried a siege assault, infiltration, artillery, waves of arrows across the city wall, poisoning the fresh water supply, slaughtering children captured from neighbouring villages that were loyal to the king, and a variety of other devices. The city itself now resembled a ruin rather than the proud, beautiful siege town it had been two moons ago. But the walls still stood, and armed defence met his soldiers when they attempted

any assault, and the gates still stood. Battered, broken, bleeding ... but still not under his power.

He beckoned. His trusted aides Hansa and Dimvaka, always near, came up at once.

‘Give the order to withdraw.’

They stared at him dumbly. Accustomed as they were to obeying him unquestioningly and instantly, he had never known them to be dumbfounded even at his most bizarre or unspeakable command. Yet they stared at him speechless now.

‘Withdraw, sire?’

‘Aye. Pull out all our troops. Leave not so much as a dying man or a chopped limb behind. Take everything. Move out within the day and move on. Continue on the same route as before, until you reach the next location.’

They continued to stare at him, exchanged a brief glance, then nodded slowly, turning to go. He chuckled, giving them an excuse to look back and stare questioningly: ‘You’re wondering why.’

They stared back impassively. Like all those close to him, they spoke rarely and only as much as was needed. Jarasandha was no Brahmin to depend on words. There were more efficient ways of communication. Swords spoke louder.

‘You’re thinking that if Jarasandha of Magadha fails to breach even a single city, it will dent my unmarred reputation. Word will spread that the forces of Magadha can be resisted. They will say we are not the demons we claim to be. That we can be stood up to and bested. Then the rout will begin. Even those cities we have already subjugated will rise up against us. And those we have not yet reached will resist us with renewed vigour. We shall have to fight twice as hard and ten times as long to conquer the same territory.’

They did not have to nod to show agreement: Hansa and Dimvaka agreed with everything their lord said or did. It was implicit in their

existence. The first thing they disagreed with would be their last. Dogs to this master, there was no room in their cognition for anything other than total obedience.

Jarasandha smiled. ‘You are right in thinking these thoughts. I cannot afford to let this city go unsacked and unpillaged. In fact, I must now make an example of it. I must demonstrate to the world what happens when anyone defies me too fiercely and too long. It is one thing to put up the show of a fight or a brief siege in order for the local chief or king to maintain his honour in his people’s eyes. That I can accept and condone. But this,’ with a contemptuous arm, he indicated the city sprawled five hundred feet below like a scattering of broken toys, ‘this is unacceptable. This is open defiance. This is a challenge to the death. And so I shall give them what they ask for. They shall have death. They shall have destruction. I shall raze this city to the ground and no other shall ever take its place. This site shall forever remain barren and blood-stained as a reminder of the price of defying Jarasandha of Magadha.’

He grinned, revealing his teeth in an expression that he knew made even his most trusted generals want to step back uneasily. Rarely did they see their master this angry, this bloodthirsty, but often enough to know well enough to be wary of him, of his power, of what he was capable of unleashing.

‘But how will I do this if I command the army to move on? I shall tell you how.’

He clapped his hands around both of them, swinging them around to face the edge of the plateau, the direction he was facing. ‘In order to set an example, I have decided not to use the army for this special case. Instead, I shall accomplish this alone.’

Jarasandha sensed the men’s powerful shoulders tensing involuntarily beneath his grasp.

‘You, sire?’ Dimvaka asked. ‘You will take the city yourself ... alone?’

Jarasandha grinned. ‘Yes, I shall do it. Both I and myself.’

Four

All was in readiness for the naming ceremony. Nanda was overwhelmed with the turnout. He had barely had time to glance out at the crowds, but they seemed to extend well over the next several hillsides, and the sheer volume of sound suggested that the whole Vraj nation had gathered there.

He supposed the reason was the utter joy of having a rare occasion to celebrate after months of terror and pain, and he was not too modest to acknowledge that his non-partisan standing in the community made it possible for all factions, all tribes, all varnas – in short, everyone – to eat and drink and be merry at his festivities without worrying about the political or social ramifications. The only thing he hoped was that there would be enough food and drink to go around. Vraj Yadavas could be a lusty bunch and from the looks and bustle of the crowd, they would consume as much as any army.

A fleeting thought crossed his mind, an errant question about how much this would cost him, but it was dismissed instantly and forgotten soon. Everything he owned was the community's and everything the community had was his; that was the way it was in Vraj. The pride he felt in the air, those shining eyes and wet cheeks, they were because this child was not his alone, he was Vrajbhoomi's son.

News of the massacre had reached this remote corner of the nation from Mathura, and the sheer horror of the event had penetrated through even his shield of fatherly joy. But as the morning had drawn on, it had actually energized the proceedings. Somehow, the birth of a son to Nanda and Yashoda on this particular night seemed propitious and extraordinarily auspicious. To the thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands for all he knew, assembled here now, it must also feel like a raised fist defying the brutal Prince Kamsa – sorry, King Kamsa – and his pogrom against the newborn sons of the Yadava capital. A golden ray of hope in the dark morass of tragedy, shining on despite the odds.

Nanda suspected that many of those celebrating were doing so as an act of defiance, as a means of grieving for the little innocents who had been slaughtered in Mathura the previous night. What better way to mourn the dead newborn sons of their friends, relatives and allies in distant Mathura, crushed under the tyrant's boot heels, than to raise a cup and dance in celebration of one that yet lived, untouched by that monster's killing claws. He could understand his people's eagerness to salute his son's birth as a symbol of fresh hope and freedom from tyranny.

A flurry of excitement rose nearby, alerting him to the arrival of the very personage he had been awaiting. He bowed low before the white-bearded, white-haired yet balding preceptor who approached with halting but determined steps, leaning on two stout brahmacharya youths who more than compensated for their guru's age and gait with their cherubic robustness.

'Pundit Gargamuni!' Nanda exclaimed. 'It is an honour to receive you at my humble domicile.'

Gargamuni's wizened face creased in a thousand folds as he chortled. 'Nanda Maharaja, it is I who have the honour today. There is not a Brahmin in all Vrajbhoomi who does not long to be here.'

Nanda performed the ritual ablutions of hospitality as he listened respectfully to the old priest. Gargamuni's bony feet twitched as Nanda washed them gently with water, then milk, and then with water again, as was the custom. 'Your hands are too soft, Nanda ... that tickles!'

Nanda smiled discreetly. For an old Brahmin, Gargamuni could be quite a wit at times. He had always enjoyed listening to Gargamuni's stories of his younger days as a Brahmin and the experiences and adventures he had been through. As the guru of the Yadavas, Garga was reverentially known as 'Muni', and the honorific was now a fixed part of his name. Nanda could not recall a time in his life when Gargamuni had not been there to offer spiritual advice, succour, oversee ceremonies, or otherwise fulfil a guru's role. Vrajbhoomi was blessed to have his guidance and wisdom.

As he finished wiping the pundit's feet, he heard the sound of a baby crying and looked up, smiling indulgently. His smile faded to a look of

puzzlement as he realized the source was not his own son. It was a babe swaddled in the arms of a woman who appeared to be asking Nanda's men to let her pass so she could go to him. One of them, Nanda's younger brother Sannanda, turned to glance enquiringly at him. Nanda raised an arm, gesturing to them to let her pass.

The woman approached with the aspect of one fleeing something or someone. When she reached the spot where Nanda had knelt before Gargamuni, she crouched and bowed. And as she did so, the cloth covering the child slipped, revealing the baby's head and part of one shoulder. The boy – for it was a boy – gurgled and clenched his fist happily, turning his eyes towards Nanda. He appeared to be at least four or five despite being just a year old – it was a meaty shoulder and large fist for an infant; yet the way she carried him suggested a much younger child. He was also exceedingly fair of complexion and handsome of profile – at least that is the impression Nanda got from the little he saw of the child from the angle he was at. Nanda brushed these observations aside as the woman began speaking with great urgency.

'My lord Nanda, Pundit Gargamuni, I beg you for your protection and shelter.'

Nanda glanced at his family priest. The old man's bushy white eyebrows rose several inches, resembling a moth taking flight.

'Who are you, gracious lady? Why do you seek us out thus? And from whom do you need protection and shelter?'

The lady glanced around again, fearfully. 'My name is Rohini—' she began.

'Rohini,' the old pundit said speculatively. 'A fine name. It means one who is filled with a rising tide of bliss. Thereby also the Tall One, and by implication, the Mother of Cows.'

Nanda nodded to acknowledge the preceptor's definition though he did not entirely understand how the guru had come by the three quite different definitions from merely a single word. He then turned his attention to the lady, who – Nanda noticed now that his attention had been drawn to that

aspect of her form – was indeed quite tall. ‘Rohini-devi, I am Nanda; welcome to my land. What is your purpose here?’

She glanced at the old pundit. ‘I wish that Pundit Gargamuni perform my son’s naming ceremony.’

‘Certainly!’ said the old priest, responding so suddenly that he caught Nanda quite by surprise. ‘It would give me great pleasure!’ Nanda recovered from his surprise. ‘Well, yes, I expect Pundit Gargamuni will be pleased to do so as soon as he performs the ceremony for my son.’

The tall lady shook her head. ‘I mean that it must be done together. Both boys must be named together. That is why I have brought him here.’

Nanda was taken aback at this odd insistence but took it in his usual good humour. ‘Well ... I suppose it could be done. But why this urgency? And what does your talk of protection and shelter mean?’

The woman moved closer so she could speak softly and yet be heard above the din of the surrounding crowd. ‘Kamsa’s soldiers will come even to this remote district sooner or later. It’s imperative that both boys be named before that happens. You must clear these crowds and we must perform the naming ceremony in private, discreetly.’

Nanda wondered briefly if the woman was in her senses. Did she not see the enormous crowd? Did she not feel the spirit of jubilation in the air, a sense of celebration? ‘That would be impossible. Besides, I am not sure they ought to be named together. What do you say, Gargamuni?’

Gargamuni nodded his head sagely. ‘Together is good, yes.’

Nanda stared at him. Whatever was the matter with Gargamuni? Agreeing so readily? He looked at the lady and shrugged. ‘But why is it so important?’ he asked. ‘I didn’t quite follow your—’

Rohini moved closer, grasping the bundle in her arms tighter than before. ‘It’s a matter of life and death, Nanda Maharaja. Not just for us, but for our newborn sons as well. You see, these two boys are brothers. They must stay together always, for only in one another’s company will they find strength enough to face their enemy when the time comes.’

Nanda was speechless for a moment. He cleared his throat and said softly, gently, as if addressing a deranged person, as the woman might well be: ‘It is impossible that they are brothers, dear lady. But that aside, who is this enemy you speak of? And why would he desire to harm two infants?’

Rohini Devi leaned forward, her voice hissing as she spoke her next words softly, sibilantly: ‘Kamsa ...’ she said, ‘his army already seeks both these boys. He will resort to any means necessary to destroy them. I beg you; protect my son and your own from him.’

five

Protesting the unmitigated abuse endured over the past few years of Kamsa’s reign, the enormous palace doors groaned. The palace complex resembled a ruin rather than a king’s domicile. Under Kamsa’s father Ugrasena, the seat of the Yadava nation had been a place of pride and beauty. Designed and overseen by the great architect Vishwakarma himself on Ugrasena’s commission, it had stood as a testament to the high cultural and aesthetic standards of the Andhakas. But Ugrasena was long gone, dethroned and confined to a sunless dungeon inside his own palace, with only his repentant queen, Padmavati, to keep him rough company – and after the shocking discovery that their son Kamsa was in fact the progeny of a rakshasa who had lain with her and seeded her womb, what comfort could husband and wife have found in one another in those dark confines? Gone as well was the reign of prosperity and joy that had come with the latter half of Ugrasena’s rule, which began once he grew to repent his earlier, youthful ardour and war lust and began to dismantle the machinery of violence in favour of laying the foundation for peace. His greatest moment had come when he had crossed rajtarus with King Vasudeva in a historic ceremony after signing a peace pact, heralding a new era.

But Kamsa had demolished all his father’s work, even as he had gone about demolishing Mathura itself, and his own palace.

He had started by pulling down the peace treaty, then gone on to destroy more tangible institutions.

Now he intended to take the final step in a long progression. To ascend to the pinnacle of his reign, and build the legacy that he hoped he would be remembered for in years to come ... centuries, millennia even.

Not that historic achievements mattered much to Kamsa. He had killed the court historians a long time ago, at the commencement of his reign in Mathura. The idea of anyone watching his actions, jotting down his words and describing his every deed, then organizing it all into neat Sanskritized packages of verse – shlokas, they called them, after the metric quatrain invented by Valmiki for his adi-kavya epic – was distasteful in the extreme to him. He loathed, feared even, the idea that there were eyes and ears recording his every word and deed and recording their version of them for posterity. After hearing one particularly horrendous account of his own ascension to the throne, he had gone about the palace complex rooting out every last munshi – as the scribe sub-varna were called – and had killed them all. Eaten them alive, in fact. It seemed a fitting way to kill a poet. After all, what else was a poet but a person who ate lives and spat out his own version of them for public consumption? So Kamsa had eaten every last court scribe alive. Since then, itihasa had gone unrecorded in Mathura, which was why he could do what he was about to do now without concerning himself with how it might appear to watching eyes.

Kicking one misaligned door hard enough to splinter the yard-thick wood, he shoved the groaning doors of the sabha hall shut, then turned to face his audience.

The sabha hall was filled with Brahmins – pundits, purohits, rishis, munis, sadhus, sanyasis, gurus ... he had invited every Brahmin of note. He intended to give out guru-dakshina, the sacred ceremonial paying of compensation that all Kshatriyas, the warrior varna, owed to their teachers, the Brahmin varna. He had announced a feast such as Mathura had never seen before. That was all that was needed: every Brahmin of note in the city had come eagerly. Now he scanned the hundreds of white-clad, ochre-clad, and even sky-clad Brahmins of every shape and size, and smiled.

He had reduced himself to his human form and size for the occasion. It would not do to scare them away until he had accomplished his goal.

There was no fear on any of the waiting faces. Brahmins rarely feared anyone or anything. Brahmin-hatya, the killing of a Brahmin, was the worst crime any Arya could commit. It deprived one of any possible chance of ever attaining moksha or liberation from the eternal cycle of birth and death, for regardless of one's other actions, no Brahmin would ever perform the samskaras (religious rites necessary for the aatma's ascension to higher planes) on one who had slain a Brahmin. Whatever the provocation, none dared harm a Brahmin – except other Brahmins, of course, and even that was rare. The epic conflict of the great brahmarishis Vishwamitra and Vashishta was perhaps the only recorded instance of such an enmity, and it was an exception so rare, it bordered on mythology.

He held his smirk as he strode towards his audience. They were seated cross-legged in rows, awaiting the promised feast. Brahmins loved to eat, didn't they? And no matter how much they ate, they never seemed to get fat! Well, there were a few exceptions, but generally, Brahmins were rake-thin. He supposed it was all that self-deprivation and long meditation. What did they call it? Ghor tapasya? Why would anyone deprive oneself of the fleshly pleasures for any reason? Surely enlightenment couldn't be better than the physical pleasures of life and the body?

'Your repast shall be served shortly,' he said, and then, seeing the Brahmins craning their necks and cupping their hands theatrically behind their ears, realized that his voice was not loud enough to be heard at the far ends of the hall. 'YOU SHALL BE FED SOON!' he shouted.

Then he began to expand himself. The reaction was instantaneous. Shock. Revulsion. Sneering disapproval. He retained the grin as he grew until his head touched the thirty- foot-high ceiling of the sabha hall, but then continued as he shattered the ceiling, making plaster and debris fall all around, and broke through the roof, rising up, up, up through the air. He stopped when he was about a hundred feet high. That was sufficient for his purposes.

The chaos below amused him. While the Brahmins were agitated and upset at his lapse of protocol, a few even injured due to the falling debris

from the hole in the roof, the majority were still seated complacently, waiting to be fed. Expecting to be fed. That was what he hated about their varna. The sense of entitlement they possessed. As if all the earth and the remaining two worlds were theirs first to claim and possess and enjoy. As if they need only toss the leftovers to the other varnas.

But they always needed Kshatriyas to do their dirty work. What good were Brahmins without Kshatriyas? They could not protect themselves, could not have fought off rakshasas and other asuras back in the days when the mortal realm was still new and the eternal war between the devas and asuras raged as fiercely on earth as on the other two planes of existence. Brahmins always needed Kshatriyas, and Kshatriyas were the ones who fought, died, struggled, achieved, triumphed; yet Brahmins were the ones who wrote the itihasas, composed the epic poems, recorded the court histories, carried the knowledge of the sacred Vedic verses and rituals, and generally acted as if they were the be-all and end-all.

Well, it was time Brahmins pulled their share of the load. He had made them assemble here to make sure of that.

The growth and transformation to his rakshasa form resulted in its inevitable side-effect: growths and suppurations began at once. He began plucking the sticky and wet abominations off his body. Some squealed loudly as he tore them off. He strode down the long lines of expectant Brahmins, dropping a festering worm-like thing here, another oozing sore there, and so on, all the way down the line. There was ample food to feed every last guest.

The serving done, he turned and watched. The sabha hall had descended into mindless chaos. It pleased him to see the Brahmins finally jolted out of their smugness as they realized that this was a feast of a different kind altogether. He watched with glee as one monstrosity plucked from his body gobbled up half a Brahmin, and its oozing gummy shape merged with that of the human to form a new shape: a bizarre amalgam of man and wart, or whatever it was one called such extrusive growths. The result resembled some grotesque demon from the annals of the First Asura Wars, that age when the demoniac races had broken through from the hellish realms into the mortal plane and run amok before the first great Arya nations had taken up arms against them. A creature that was neither human

nor anything else, yet was distinctly humanoid in shape and form, and, as he knew so well by now, nearly indestructible. For how do you kill a living wart? Let alone a wart of a higher varna!

He watched the vast hall filled with writhing gooey shapes settle into a semblance of quietude. Finally, when every last one had been fed, he sighed with satisfaction.

It was always nice to have guests over for lunch and to see them well fed.

Now for dessert ...

Six

The people of the city rejoiced. It had been over four days since the invaders had departed, taking every last piece of siege machinery, weaponry and possession; not a living being stirred outside the city walls. The siege was over, the threat had ended; they had triumphed! It was an incredible success. ‘We withstood the might of Magadha and survived,’ said the maatr of the kingdom. Like many Arya nations which still rigorously followed the old Vedic ways, this was a matriarchial society. No male had ever ruled, nor ever would. It was not an issue of which sex was better or superior, simply a practical matter. Women were better at governing, running things, administrating, keeping the peace, maintaining the cities well, and doing all the things that made up the daily business of ruling a kingdom. And if anyone dared to think that men might perhaps, possibly, just maybe, be better at warcraft, the person had certainly not faced the maatrs in battle.

The citizens emerged now, resplendent in their armour, which was specially polished and cleaned for the occasion. During weeks of hard siege and withstanding brutal intrusions and assaults, there had been little time for food or rest, let alone polishing armour. But with the enemy having retreated, and a celebration called for, the maatrs were proud to adorn themselves in their finest robes. And for a maatr, no garb was more

resplendent than battle armour. Glimmering with gold, silver and flecks of coloured stone cleverly sown into the chain links of the mail, the metal garb clung becomingly to the Amazonian bodies of the hard-muscled warrior matrons who were the mainstay of the country's army. Nor were they all young specimens; there were grandmothers among them, white-haired and noble in their ageing pride, as well as women scarred and maimed from combat. They were nonetheless resplendent in that moment of glory.

The environs of the city had been scoured thoroughly over the past four days. The moment the last wagons of the last grama-train had departed, fading into a faint trail of dust on the northern horizon, the spasas had been sent forth through underground tunnels to scour the countryside. They went yojanas in every direction, up to the tableland plateau and far beyond the river which was their primary source of life. They found nothing. The enemy had truly withdrawn. It was no ruse. Not a living enemy remained in sight. Except for a few wounded, rotting corpses left in a pile right in front of the city gates. These were the stray soldiers of Magadha who had fallen to the arrows or javelins tossed by the defenders, or been slain in the skirmishes and confrontations over the past weeks.

There were barely a hundred or two of these unfortunate carcasses. As a rule, besiegers rarely suffered even a tenth as many losses as the besieged. Within the city, the toll numbered in the thousands. Those who had not been killed outright by the deadly rain of arrows and boulders hurled by siege machines, and the random javelin showers flung by the powerful shoulders of the Mohini Fauj, had been killed in the direct skirmishes and encounters. Many had been murdered by the infiltrators who managed somehow to sneak into the city on suicide missions, slaying dozens by dint of the element of surprise before being brought down. Others had died of disease from the confinement, of ailments and old age, or were crushed under disintegrating structures felled by the hurtling boulders, or burnt alive in the fires.

Nobody paid heed to the rotting pile of corpses. The maatr gave a command for the corpses to be buried in a single unmarked mass grave – but she admitted it was not a high priority. There were many thousands of their own dead to deal with first, before more serious diseases broke out

amongst the living, and these had to be cremated with all due ritual and ceremony, which would consume resources, energy and time, all of which were nearly exhausted by the siege.

The truth was, had the siege gone on, they would have been hard-pressed to last more than another fortnight. Oh, they could have held the city longer, but the cost would have been piteous. In any siege, after a certain point even the most stubborn and proud leader must weigh the cost of letting one's people die or of giving them a chance to survive, however slim that may be, by sallying forth and attacking the enemy while they still had a measure of strength and numbers to do so.

So the celebrations began, and continued even as the inevitable chores were undertaken: rebuilding, cremating the dead, sending hunting parties out for fresh supplies of meat in the nearby forests which were over a day's run away, salvaging what could be salvaged from the ruined, scorched and salted harvest fields on the lower plains beside the riverbank that had been the city's primary source of nourishment, and a hundred other odd jobs and endeavours.

A further three days passed before they got to the pile of enemy corpses.

Due to the inclement weather and cloudy skies, the corpses had not putrefied as badly as they might have. The monsoons were late in coming this year, but they were en route, and the usual cloud build-up had shielded the land from the harsh sun. Still, the dead bodies were maggot-ridden and beginning to fall apart when the delegated team of maatrs came to dispose of them.

As they approached the pile, the volunteers made various sounds of disgust, mostly imitating retching.

'Let's just throw on as much oil as we have and burn the whole lot where it lies,' said one woman warrior, her voice deeply nasal due to her pinching her nose to avoid the stench.

'Can't do that,' said another woman apologetically, wincing as the wind changed, bringing the full richness of the aroma to her nasal glands. 'Maatr's orders are to bury them. Oil supplies are short enough as it is.'

The women looked at the pile doubtfully. ‘We could bring dry brush and wood and use that to burn them.’

The maatr-in-charge snorted. ‘Do you know how much it would take to burn this lot? A hundred wagonloads! Maybe more. And without oil ... Besides, the smoke and ash would carry across the whole city.’ She gestured at the city behind them and indicated the direction of the wind. ‘And the outer ones would burn but it would be a putrefying mess on the inside.’

They were all silent for a moment, considering the idea, then, one of her companions said in disgust, ‘Oh, thank you, Suverya, for that wonderful thought. Excuse me while I go relieve the contents of my belly.’

‘Get to it, then,’ the maatr-in-charge ordered. ‘Let’s start digging a pit. And remember, we have to make it large enough and deep enough to take the whole of this sorry bunch. Maatr intends to plant an orchard over it afterwards.’

‘An orchard?’ someone asked, incredulous.

‘Yes,’ said the woman-in-charge sourly. ‘To commemorate the siege. Besides, fresh corpses underground give good fruit. Come on, get to work, you lazy bunch!’

It was the afternoon of the next day when they came across the body.

‘Maatr!’ exclaimed one of the younger women, for all women commanders and rulers were called maatr in their society, ‘come take a look at this.’

The maatr-in-charge and several of the others within hearing range came out of curiosity. They looked down at the male body split perfectly into two halves from the centre of the bald crown of its head right down to the waist. The cut was blade-smooth, perfect, as if it was an apple that had been sliced into two halves rather than a grown man.

The maatr-in-charge frowned and wiped the sweat and grime from her brow before asking irritably, ‘And what great vision am I supposed to be looking at, Narayani?’

'It's as good as new,' replied the young woman who had discovered the anomaly. 'It hasn't rotted at all. How is that possible?'

And it was true. Apart from the fact that the body was split into two halves, it was pristine. No decay had occurred as yet, nor were any maggots or putrefying flesh visible. The women examined the body curiously and all agreed that apart from the body being cut into two halves, its skin and flesh resembled that of a living man.

'It's almost as if ...' one woman said, then stopped.

'What?' asked the one beside her.

'Well, it's almost as if you could put the two halves together and they would fit perfectly, with barely a seam visible.'

'So speaks the expert seamstress!' sang out another, drawing a burst of laughter. It was good to have something to laugh about after the miseries of the past months.

Out of sheer curiosity, three or four of the women actually picked up the two halves of the severed corpse and placed them together.

'Look! They fit together like a whole body!' said the one who had thought of it.

One of the women holding the halves together felt movement beneath her fingertips. She frowned, assuming she had only felt some reverberation or other movement, and looked down.

The eyes of the severed corpse opened.

The volunteer screamed and let go of the body, backing away, scrambling away. She tripped and fell over another body. 'It's alive!' she cried out.

The erstwhile severed corpse got to its feet, causing the other women around it to back away as well. It looked around. The thin red line running down the centre of its bald head all the way down its naked chest and body glowed brightly for an instant, then faded away.

The severed body was now a whole man. A living man. With no trace of a seam, as the wit had remarked.

As they stared on in stunned incomprehension, the maatr-in-charge reached for her sword. 'Kill him!' she cried. 'Kill—'

That was as far as she got. The severed man's tongue shot out of his mouth and lashed out at her with whip-like ferocity, covering a distance of over two yards to strike her across the chest and waist at a diagonal. The maatr-in-charge felt a moment of scalding heat, as if she had been struck by a red-hot whip. Then the acid saliva from Jarasandha's tongue ate through her armour, garb, flesh and bone with instant efficacy, and her body split into two at the diagonal cut. She fell open like a ripe fruit and perished. The two halves of her body hissed and sizzled as they parted, the exposed flesh and organs corroded by the acidic saliva.

Stunned, the other warriors attacked this unexpected enemy who had risen from the dead. But Jarasandha moved amongst them with lightning speed, swinging around in a half-circle to strike cobra-like at the more than half a dozen women in rapid succession. He would be here one instant, his whip-like tongue lashing out to sever one's arm before she could slash out with her sword, then over there in the next, yards away, decapitating another woman's head, and so forth. Many died screaming with agony and without lifting their weapons; others, shocked and stunned, died before they could react.

It was an astonishing display. Within moments, the entire burial crew lay butchered, the dissected bodies of its members steaming and hissing.

Then Jarasandha moved into the city. And then began the slaughter.

He met a great deal of resistance. Relaxed though they were, taken by surprise, caught off guard, and all of that, yet the maatrs were fierce fighters and strong-willed independent Aryas.

But it made absolutely no difference. Jarasandha passed through them all like a force of nature, like a hurricane through a sugarcane field, like a tiger through a flock of geese. He mowed down the entire city within a day and part of a night. By the time he was done, there were many, many more corpses to cremate and commemorate, but nobody left to do the needful.

He left the city that way, every last citizen a rotting corpse, a place fit only for worms, flies and maggots. He left just a single horse alive, mounted it and rode to join his forces. There were many more cities to ravage and kingdoms to subdue.

This was only a sideshow.

The real game was the one unfolding in the Yadava kingdom, under the surmise of his protégé, Kamsa.

seven

From the growing volume of sound outside, Yashoda judged that a great many people were assembling to be part of the naming ceremony of her newborn. It pleased her. She felt it was important that her son be seen by as many as possible. She did not know why she felt so; she simply felt it. As for herself, the sheer joy of having a child was beyond belief. That moment she had seen the newborn life that had issued forth from her womb, the instant she first set eyes on her beautiful tiny daughter, had been the happiest one of her life. The intensity of it had been indescribable, like nothing she had ever felt before.

She frowned.

My beautiful tiny daughter?

Yes, that was what she had just thought, hadn't she? A fleeting recollection of glancing down and seeing ... a girl. Still covered in birth fluids, naked as creation ... and that was one of the first things any mother would notice.

Yashoda looked down now at the dozing tyke nestled against her. She was on her side, lying facing the entrance of the sleeping chamber. The baby was sleeping facing her, snuggled into her warmth and the folds of her sari. She could only make out a tiny clenched fist and part of a

minuscule ear. But this was a boy. She had no doubt about that. Then why had she thought she had seen a girl born to her the night before?

She smiled wryly at her own foolishness. Of course, it was a mistake; that was all. She had been so exhausted after the long labour – a full day and almost a whole night of straining and heaving – that seconds after her dear one's birth, she had passed out as completely as if she had never slept a wink all her life. In her exhaustion, she must have taken this little fellow to be a filly. Or perhaps it was her mind, which had been wishing for a girl, that had made her see him as one, if only in her tired mind's eye.

She knew that Nanda would have loved a daughter too, unlike so many other men – to be honest, unlike most men, who would much prefer a son. But she came from a line of maternalistic Yadavas, a family of strong women who stood their own against men and beside them, and never let their own daughters and granddaughters ever think, even for a moment, that a man could do all that a woman could. A man couldn't, of course. And he always knew it. But either because he couldn't or despite it, he always tried harder. All a woman need do, then, was try equally hard, and she would always win in the end. That was simply nature's way, the way of Prithvi Maa, Mother Earth, for all life on this mortal plane, and the way of Prajapati, the creator in human form. That was the reason why cruel men and despots resorted to violence – because only a sword and savagery could give a man an ephemeral sense of superiority over women, and over other men.

So perhaps she had wanted a daughter so much – had assumed, coming from a long and illustrious line of daughters of daughters of daughters, that her first-born would also surely be a daughter – that she had looked at her child already convinced that she had birthed a girl. A gopi rather than a gopa. Yes, that was surely it.

And then she had fallen dead asleep, waking only that morning. And come to think of it, when she had looked down at this little doll, there had been no surprise or consternation on seeing he was a boy. She had accepted it without question. Indeed, it was only now that, lost in her own thoughts, she had briefly thought she recalled birthing a girl. Just a mistake in memory, that was all.

She put it out of her head. This was no time to think of what- ifs and might-have-beens. This was the day of her newborn son's birth. And, from the noise of the gathering outside, she deduced that the whole of Vrajbhoomi had turned up to view him. It was a day of celebration after many, many days of darkness and grief. The crowd would have been no less if she had had a daughter. If the Vrajvasis were ecstatic that she had a son, it was not because of the usual reasons but because many Yadava sons had died in Mathura at the hands of Kamsa and his marauders. The boy lying by her side was a symbol of freedom from the tyrant's yoke, a sign that the Vrishnis of Vrajbhoomi continued to live free despite the despotic reign of the Childslayer.

Which made her wonder: What had happened to Devaki and Vasudeva's next child? There was some uncertainty about whether this one constituted the seventh or the eighth, the confusion being set off by the apparent miscarriage of their seventh child last year. Rumour had it that it had been no miscarriage, that a deliberate samkarsana procedure had been performed to remove the baby intact and alive from the womb, to be transported to an unknown destination. If that was true, Devaki's present pregnancy would be the eighth. The prophesied one. The long-awaited Slayer of Kamsa.

Yashoda knew that Devaki and her own pregnancy had proceeded apace, which meant that Devaki had either delivered by now or would deliver any day. She shuddered at the thought of the fate that awaited that unfortunate eighth child. No wonder all Vrajbhoomi had collected outside her house today; the Yadavas were here to celebrate the birth of their son—and to ensure his survival. The long arm of Kamsa reached every corner of the kingdom, as so many had learnt to their dismay; but they were determined to celebrate this and save this child.

The baby touched her arm.

Yashoda looked down.

Two dark black eyes looked up at her, as bright as shiny purple grapes. Tiny teeth flashed. It was surprising that the child had been born with a full head of hair, as well as with some teeth. And the way he looked – the way he was looking at her right now, this instant – it was quite something.

She almost believed he was actually looking at her. Seeing her. Sensing her thoughts and feelings. And that he had touched her at that precise moment to comfort her, to assure her that nothing would happen to him, that he would never suffer the fate intended for the unfortunate son of Devaki and Vasudeva.

You will never lose me, Mother.

She could almost hear his voice in her mind, speaking with a chuckling light-heartedness that indicated he knew all there was to know and had seen everything there was to see.

She smiled and caressed his tiny fist lovingly. ‘If only you could speak, my little calf. If you could only understand what I am saying. You would know that your father and I would never let any harm come to you.’

Nor would I let any harm come to both of you, Maatr.

She smiled. ‘Yes, of course, my son. Someday, you shall be big and strong and protect us all. But until then, your father shall ensure your safety. You need fear nothing and no one.’

I do not fear anything or anyone, Maatr.

‘Of course you don’t, my little gopa. Listen, all who love you are present around us, ready to defend you with their lives if need be.’

Yes, Maatr. I sense their love and fierce loyalty. It is very reassuring. I am indeed fortunate to be born into such a loyal and loving family.

Yashoda almost laughed. Here she was, talking aloud to her newborn son—and believing he was speaking to her mind! She must be really tired. Perhaps she should call out to her sisters and friends to come in now. They had volunteered to leave her alone for some respite as well as to help greet and attend to the never-ending stream of relatives and well-wishers; she had only to call out loud enough and they would come at once. Or perhaps she ought to call for her maatr and aunts, or even her maatr-in-law. She ought to change her garb before greeting the guests, after all.

Do not be concerned, Maatr. You are quite well. This is not your imagination. I am indeed speaking to you within your mind.

‘Devi, protect us!’ exclaimed Yashoda.

She stared down at the tightly wrapped bundle on the cot beside her.

He gurgled happily, kicking his feet free of the swaddling cloth, and put a tiny fist into his mouth, sucking on it.

You will pardon me but I only wish to get to know you and our family better. After all, I am now a part of the family too, am I not?

‘Yes, of course,’ she said, then thought: *Am I really having a conversation with my day-old infant son? How can that be?*

Please remain calm. I would like to use your mind to see them through your memories and senses. At the same time, you shall also be able to see them through my senses. It shall only take a moment ...

‘What—?’ she began to ask what he meant.

Then suddenly she felt him inside her mind – not just his voice, but his presence itself, like a warm glow in the centre of her brain, emanating outwards, filling her entire being with great calm and quietude, a sense that she was the universe and the universe was her and nothing and nobody could deny her anything she desired.

And then she felt her consciousness spreading, widening to encompass the room, the house itself, then moving outwards beyond the walls of the house, outside the dwelling itself, and into the crowd of assembled people waiting outside ...

eight

So many people!

‘Yes, my son, we have a big family!’ she said, then realized she wasn’t actually speaking. Her body was still inside the house, but her consciousness, somehow connected to his, was soaring free of bodily restraints, hovering above the crowd now, then swooping down, moving into ... the mind of a laughing adolescent boy with his mouth open ...

Sucaru!

‘Yes, he’s my cousin, my uncle Carumukha’s son ...’

A flurry of images, thoughts, sensations, feelings, memories, words and inchoate pieces of consciousness whipped past like odours and scents on a dancing wind. Yashoda realized that her son was reading Sucaru’s mind, absorbing his every memory, sensation, imbibing his entire life in the wink of an eye.

He is a nice fellow, said Krishna, chuckling with delight. **I like him!**

Before Yashoda could say anything, he was off again, whipping out of Sucaru’s mind and into another’s consciousness. This time it was Carumukha, Sucaru’s father, Yashoda’s uncle. The sensation was quite different: the father was naturally more mature, serious, yet the same light-hearted spirit pervaded his mind as well. And the manner in which they perceived the world was so similar, it was quite extraordinary. Yashoda laughed aloud with delight – although she suspected her laughter was silent rather than truly out loud – to see herself among her uncle’s memories, as seen through his eyes over time.

Another nice person; I like him very much. I shall learn much from him!

There was no need to speak further, and no time either, as the child whisked them both out of Uncle Carumukha’s mind and onward to the next.

Yashodevi, my aunt! Your sister! She is so like you!

The glee was so infectious that Yashoda found herself smiling, laughing, if only metaphorically, as she saw her sister through her child’s pure, innocent mind. It was almost like being inside her own consciousness but

of course with substantial differences, for the two had different experiences.

She likes to be known as Dadhisara rather than Yashodevi since too many people confuse Yashodevi with Yashoda-devi, which is what they call you out of respect.

And he gurgled with laughter as if he had discovered a wonderful secret.

The next one was Yasasvini, Yashoda's other sister. She also preferred to be known as Havihsara, but for a different reason.

I love my aunts and they love me very much – even though they have yet to know me! How wonderful!

Next came Catu and Batuka, Yashodevi and Yasasvini's husbands respectively. There were slightly embarrassing memories in their minds but her Krishna's innocence meant that he merely absorbed the overall amalgam of sensation and adjudged the essence of the person – **Good! Wonderful! I love him! Such a nice fellow! Good man!** – which, as she learned quickly, was almost always positive.

They seemed to move faster as he went along, almost as if Krishna was learning to use Yashoda's consciousness more efficiently, riffling through the metaphorical leaves of memory faster and faster, until he was literally dancing from one mind to another to yet another – hopping, skipping, laughing, gurgling – like a butterfly from flower to flower to flower. There also seemed to be a pattern to his movements; he went from one mind to the one closest to it in consciousness, then to the next relevant one, and so on.

Aindavi and Kirtida – her best friends – were followed in blurring succession by Bhogini, Sarika, Vatsala, Tarangaksi and Taralika, Medura, Masrna, Krpa, Sankini, Tusti, Anjana, Bimbini, Mitra, Subhaga, Niti, Kusala, Tali, Paksati, Pataka, Pundi, Sutunda, Subhada, Kapila, Prabha, Malika, Angada, Visala, Sallaki, Vena, Vartika, Dhamanidhara, Hingula ... all her remaining friends!

Whee!

Whee indeed. It was breathtaking in the most literal sense of the word. But there was no time to catch breath – or whatever the mental equivalent of that may be – for Krishna was off again, to another group of minds, this time riffling through a dozen at the same rate as he had rifled through a single mind at first. He was getting faster, no doubt about it. Yashoda didn't know whether to be awed by her child's ability or by the encyclopaedia of memories, images and sensations that she was being exposed to. At any rate, it was overwhelming. The child also began to learn the relationships and interrelationships with enviable ease. It seemed incredible that he could do so, but she was already far past the point of suspending disbelief and was merely riding along involuntarily, which made her an entertained spectator.

Sumuka! My grandfather, your father!

And then followed Patala-devi, her mother and his grandmother. And Sumuka's friends and colleagues: Vararoha, Karanda, Kallota, Kila, Antakela, Gonda, Tarisana, Visaroha, Varisana, Purata, Tilata and Krpita.

And then there was Patala-devi's brother Gola who was, of course, her uncle and his great-uncle. Gola's wife Jatila-devi. Gola's sons Yashodhara, Yashodeva and Sudeva. Then her mother's closest friends Danka, Damani, Dindima, Cakkini, Tundi, Sugantika, Ghanta, Ghargara, Bhela, Bharunda, Karala, Mukhara, Ghoni, Dhvankarunti, Dingima, Condika, Pundavanika, Dambi, Cundi, Manjuranika, Handi, Ghora, Karabalika, Jatila and also Patala's closest, dearest friend of all, Mukahara-gopi.

Such sweet, lovely grandaunties I have!

‘Krishna—’ she began, hoping for a respite. But he was off again, now tearing through memories like a gale-force wind through a row of ashoka trees. All she could do was marvel at his capacity to absorb.

Parjanya Maharaj, her father-in-law. Variyasi-devi, her mother-in-law. Parjanya Maharaj's brothers Urjanya and Rajanya, and sister Suverjana with her husband Gunavira, the last just arrived that minute from Suryakunja, tired but very excited.

Then Anakadundhubi himself as he was known to Yashoda and those closest to him, Nanda Mahajaraja to the world at large, Krishna's father,

her husband. Her brothers-in-law Upananda, Abhinanda, Sannanda and Nandana. Upananda's wife was the only one not present, but the other wives were: Pivari-devi, Kuvalaya-devi and Atulya-devi. Her sisters-in-law, Sananda-devi and Nandini-devi. Sananda-devi's husband Mahanila, and Nandini-devi's husband Sunila. Upananda the widower's sons Kandava and Dandava and their friend Subala who was like an adopted son to Upananda. Nanda's Kshatriya cousins Catu and Batuka, with their respective wives Dadhisara and Havihsara.

Nanda's friends by definition would include the whole of Vrajbhoomi but his closest friends were gathered close by and Krishna swooped through the gathering. Pinga, Pattisa, Bhrngaq, Saragha, Kedara, Ankura, Cakranga, Kambala, Harita, Upananda, Harikesa, Supaksa, Maskara, Dhurina, Sauabheya, Pathira, Ghrni, Sankara, Mathura, Mangala, Pingala, Pitha, Sangara, Ghatika, Dandi, Kala, Dhurva, Utpala, Saudha and Hara.

It went on that way, seemingly endlessly, until Yashoda lost sense of time and place and even self-awareness. The world became a blur of minds and memories, and Krishna's infectious gurgle seemed to fill the whole world, echoing across prithviloka and bouncing off the silvery round face of Chandamama, the moon itself, which beamed back like a doting uncle.

nine

Devaki felt as if the moon himself was mocking her. Chandamama seemed bright and cheerful this cloudy Sravan day, beaming down in broad daylight as if taking advantage of the sun's concealment behind a brooding cloudbank. She could almost hear him laughing down at her, chuckling with infantile delight. She sighed and passed a hand across her face. She was tired and heartbroken and beginning to imagine things. She wished Vasudeva were there with her.

His presence comforted her.

Mathura was in the grip of insanity. Kamsa's vendetta had

grown out of bounds. All morning, the screams of the dying had filled the city. Even in the spot that was the most secluded from the general population – the heart of the royal enclave – Devaki could hear the faint howls of anguish and cries of distress. She shuddered at the very thought. How many infants had died in place of her own son! How many other innocent fathers, mothers, and other proud Yadavas had lost their lives standing up to Kamsa's unjust diktat! It was a pogrom such as the Yadavanationshadneverwitnessedbefore. And overseeing it all, ensuring that his orders were complied with to the letter, Kamsa himself strode from time to time across the kingdom, his shadow casting a giant pall across the once-great nation. Like the shadow of Yama-deva, Lord of Death himself, she thought.

Kamsa was not about at present at least, which was something to be thankful for. He had been sequestered in his palace for hours, doing god knew what. She had heard that the senior-most Brahmins in the kingdom had been summoned by her brother that morning to attend some conference or feast. What there was to celebrate on such a grisly day, she had no idea. But Kamsa's calendar was his own; he seemed to live on a different plane than his fellow Yadavas – if they could even be called his fellow Yadavas any more, that is.' She hardly knew whether to think of him as her brother after every thing that had transpiring . It was evident that he had never truly been her brother except in name.

But thinking about him only brought the darkness back to her heart. It reminded her of her parents, locked in that sunless dungeon for so many long years. The occasional reports that came to her from time to time assured her that they were alive, but what sort of living was that, buried in a suffocating dungeon without basic facilities or even proper food? How did they survive?

She could barely stand to think of it, or of Kamsa's other atrocities over these past years, not least among which were the heartless slayings of her own offspring. Six children had she delivered from her womb into the world. Six newborn infants, precious and pure, had Vasudeva carried, weeping each time, only to see them grasped roughly by the tyrant and their brains smashed against the wall of Kamsa's chambers. Even now, the

very thought threatened to stop her heart, to blind her, to make her want to drop to the ground and never rise again.

But then had come the seventh child. And the eighth. And both had survived. Both lived. And that was what gave her hope. Gave her strength to stand now. To look out from her balcony and attempt to gaze out at the city, or what little of it she could see from her secluded palace. Now that the eighth child had been born, that part of the prophecy fulfilled, Kamsa had permitted Vasudeva and Devaki to move back to her official residence. In any case, the temporary residence where they had been incarcerated over the past decade was virtually obliterated, destroyed by Kamsa's men in that last frantic search for any trace of the Slayer. Her lips curled scornfully. As if I would have hidden my son in my own home, only to be found eventually and destroyed!

A sound akin to thunder drew her attention skywards. She glanced up and saw a dark, fearsome cloud rolling her way, seething and churning in the sky, as if about to give birth to some nameless god. She drew back instinctively. Something about the shape of the cloud, the intensity with which it rolled and seethed, attracted her gaze. She found herself unable to take her eyes off it.

As she watched, the cloud drew closer, approaching the Yamuna which she knew was just beyond that hill flanking the city's north road. It continued to roll and seethe with greater intensity than any cloud she had seen before, until she began to wonder if it was indeed a cloud or something quite different.

She glanced around. There was no wind to speak of, nor was even a leaf stirring in sight. The eastern sky was dense with clouds, blocking the sun momentarily, and those were utterly still.

Yet this cloud, the one coming from across the Yamuna – from the direction of Vrajbhoomi – was seething and boiling like a living thing!

How was that possible?

It wasn't, of course.

Even allowing for some unique wind which served to blow that single cloud in this opposing direction to the rest, there was still something highly unusual about the mass approaching her.

It wasn't white, of course. But neither was it black. Or even some shade of grey, as monsoon clouds usually were.

It was a shade of blue. So dark it was almost black, but not quite.

She could see light within its centre as it approached steadily, rolling over and over itself like a curling wave. The radiance was intense, deep blue, like a flame within a black-skinned pot.

And like a bolt of lightning out of a clear sky, it came to her.

Ghana, such clouds were called. Dense. Thick.

Shyam-rang was the shade. The colour of dusk. Not day-white, nor night-black, but twilight-blue.

Black with a heart of blue. Ghana-shyam. Dense, deep blue. Again, that gurgling sound in her mind – like a baby's.

The cloud crossed the Yamuna and approached the palace
enclave of Mathura. Coming within a kite's flying length of her own
palace.

Then, when it was positioned precisely where she could see it perfectly, it stood still in the sky, remaining motionless for several moments.

And gurgled.

Yes, gurgled.

Not thundered. Or boomed. Or gnashed. As monsoon clouds are wont to do.

This cloud gurgled. Like a babe. Like a newborn infant. And as she watched, disbelieving, yet seeing with her own eyes what she could not deny, the cloud shaped itself, like clay moulding its own contours,

assuming a figure that was unmistakable in its shape and curves and features.

The cloud took the shape of a baby.

Not just any baby. Her son. Her eighth child!

Maatr, I am well. I have found a wonderful family. They are very nice people. I shall take very good care of them, each and every one of them; you don't need to worry any more.

‘Son?’ Her voice caught on the two simple syllables, the emotion in her heart welling into her throat.

Yes, Maatr. Please don't be sad any more. I don't like to see you sad.

‘My baby!’ she sobbed, and tears spilled down her cheeks, hot and plump.

My brother will join me soon. We shall both be together, safe and sound. You can be at peace now. We shall take care of everything from now on.

Devaki had no more words to offer. What could one say to a cloud that spoke with one’s son’s voice?

Maatr, please don't cry any more. I know it has been hard for you. But the dark days are about to end. I am happy. Please be happy with me!

‘Yes!’ she cried. And cried one final tear, a tear of joy.

A tear rolled down the face of the cloud-baby as well, matching her own. It rolled off the face of the cloud-baby, and started falling down, down, until it landed on the balcony beside her, with a soft plop, and lay on the floor at her feet.

See! Now you made me cry. Now I shall cry, and cry a lot!

‘No, my son. Don’t!’

A rich gurgling chuckle. The kind only a baby can make.

I am teasing you, Maatr. I cry only because I need to do so.

Our land has been stricken by drought for far too long. It is time for the rain to return. That's all I meant!

She covered her mouth with her hand, stifling her gasp. Was it true? Was this really happening? Was this really her baby, her eighth child?

Yes, Maatr. Who else would it be? I cannot promise to come to you often, as you-know-who is watching, but you may keep my tear as a token of my love for you and Pitr. Please give him my love as well. And know that I shall do my part. Everything will change now. Be happy. Smile! Bring back the spring and summer you have kept hidden all these years; let the sunlight into your heart once more. I shall be present in every ray of sunshine, every drop of rain, every bird cry ... I am watching over you.

As he said these final words, the cloud drew away, dissipating as quickly as it had approached, unfurling, uncurling, like a wave retreating and diminishing, until, barely a moment later, it was gone, leaving nothing but a shadowy wisp in the sky. Like the ghost of a memory.

Devaki looked down and saw the cloud-tear that had fallen at her feet. She bent to pick it up – and gasped. It had turned to stone. To smooth polished marble, so dark it seemed black at first, but when it caught the light, she saw that it was in fact deep blue, the same colour as the cloud, the colour of her beloved son. It was roughly the shape and form of a newborn babe, as if naturally formed rather than shaped by the hands of man.

‘Ghanashyam,’ she said, feeling her heart lighten even as she lifted the heavy bust and carried it into the chamber. ‘I shall name you Ghanashyam.’

And she laughed aloud with genuine pleasure for what seemed like the first time in years. Outside, thunder cracked and the sweet scent of first rain came to her on a soft wind as the drought over Vrajbhoomi ended at last. It was accompanied by the faint gurgling laughter of a baby.

ten

‘Lord Kamsa?’

He awoke from a dream of being smothered by a monsoon cloud – a gigantic thundercloud, fat with rain, that glowed dark blue when lightning flashed deep within its watery depths – and thrashed wildly for a moment. Then he realized there was no cloud. He was not large enough for his head to reach the clouds. He had reduced to man-height once again and was sitting on his rear, sprawled in the debris of his palace sabha hall, angavastra stained with what seemed to be his own vomit, and lower garments soiled as well. He sat up groggily, feeling the world spin and spin again – counter-clockwise. He shook his head only to feel a sensation akin to his brain being shattered to shards and his skull rattling with the fragments. He shuddered mightily, retched, felt his vision blur to blinding whiteness, then struggled back to consciousness.

‘Mighty prince, can you rise?’

Rise? Had he not risen already? He was the king of the Andhakas, was he not? And a far greater king than his father had ever been! Who dared ask him such a bold question?

He struggled to his feet, lost his balance and fell, sprawling on his back. The ceiling above was broken and through the jagged hole he saw a cloud passing overhead. Something about the cloud caught his attention. He lay on his back, staring up, transfixed.

It seemed like a typical thundercloud at first sight, but as he continued to stare, it seemed to change shape. Not in the genial way that clouds alter their form slightly as they drift by, but instantly, like a boiling cloud erupting from a fire – except that this cloud boiled and erupted downwards, directly towards him! And the shape, it was the shape of a newborn babe – chubby, cherubic, with puffed-out cheeks and big round eyes that seemed to take up half its face, a waggling double chin, short

plump arms, torso and legs kicking out behind as it swam down towards him. Impossible! It was the very cloud from his dream. Right there, right then, in the flesh ... or in the smoke ... or whatever one called the stuff that clouds were made of.

‘Lord Kamsa? Are you well? Shall we—?’

The world around receded to a blurry buzzing in the distant background. Only the cloud existed, right above him, and it was coming down. He blinked, snorted to clear his sinuses, but the cloud was still there, still boiling down, still approaching him with naked aggression. Its colour was a dense deep blue, the colour of twilight sky. And that face, while cherubic, was also terrible in its determination and utter self-conviction. It stretched out one chubby short hand; the little fat fingers were grasping, reaching for him—

Kamsa screamed.

The sound startled him more than it startled anyone else. It broke his stupor and, hands slipping on who knew what stickiness and mushiness, he scrambled to his feet and ran across the sabha hall, leaping and skipping across bits of fallen ceiling, shattered furniture and the remnants of what appeared to be the Andhaka throne – My beautiful new throne, part of the new palace and the new Mathura that I have designed – until he was at the far end of the vast chamber, his back to the wall, in the shadiest corner available. Away from the hole in the ceiling ...

And the cloud, the cloud!

‘KEEP IT AWAY FROM ME, KEEP IT AWAY!’ he screamed.

He stood breathing heavily, gasping from time to time to take in more air.

Several moments passed.

Nothing happened.

Slowly, he began to register the presence of others around him. Soldiers clad in vaguely familiar uniforms, others in more familiar garb, faces he knew quite well but could not place at the moment – faces that were turned

to him with visible concern and incredulity. Had he not banned all coloured uniforms and garb in Mathura? How then were these people ... A shadow flitted across the floor, directly beneath the hole, and he lost his thread. After a moment or two, Kamsa glanced this way, then that – his gaze passing cursorily across those surrounding him, barely noting a single one – then his eyes swept back to the hole in the ceiling. From this angle, he could see nothing but an irregularly shaped piece of the sky.

But from the shadows passing across the debris-strewn floor beneath the hole, he could tell that clouds were still passing overhead.

Not clouds. The cloud. That one!

‘Lord Kamsa?’ The man approaching him, clad in the armour and accoutrement of a high-ranking warrior, seemed less concerned than puzzled. ‘What is it that troubles you? Why do you skulk thus in this shadowy corner? No sign of threat is to be seen anywhere. You are among your own here.’

Kamsa shook his head firmly, not taking his eyes off the hole in the ceiling. There! Shadows! Moving! His vision blurred, then swam back into focus, purple and green motes marching merrily from right to left and back again in perfectly arrayed rows.

‘Perhaps you do not recognize me. I am—’

‘Shhhh!’

Kamsa’s hissing carried across the sabha hall, silencing the whispered conversations that had sprung up among those standing around, staring at him. He reacted as well, surprised at the impact his shushing had made – he had intended to be very soft. ‘Be silent! It may hear you and attack again!’

The man standing before him stared blankly. ‘It? What is it you fear, great prince? There is nothing here that can harm you.’

Kamsa shushed the man again, fiercely, and gestured towards the ceiling, even as he tried to conceal his gesturing by turning partly away and looking the other way. ‘It’s watching. I must be careful. Must!’

The man turned and looked around, glanced back at Kamsa, then looked again. This time, he seemed to follow the direction of Kamsa's gesturing – which had become more frenetic and nervous by now – and looked up and saw the hole in the ceiling.

He strode back to the middle of the sabha hall, directly beneath the offensive hole in question. Kamsa stopped gesturing and stuffed his fist into his mouth, biting down hard enough to scrape a layer of skin off his knuckles. The fool! It will get him now!

'Careful!' he whispered hoarsely.

A few soldiers within earshot glanced at each other.

The fools, Kamsa thought, they don't know it's up there. The minute that idiot general or whoever he is looks up, it will swoop down and gobble him up alive. It's just waiting up there!

The man with the familiar face and the high-ranking warrior's uniform looked up, peering skywards. Something changed in the light streaming down from the open hole in the sky and he exclaimed.

'Look!' he said. 'I have never seen the likes of it before!'

At once, several others drew closer to him, to see for themselves what he was referring to. In a moment, most of those standing around in the ruined sabha hall were staring up through the hole of the ceiling.

'Fools!' Kamsa cried. But what he had intended to be a shout emerged only as a hoarse whisper.

'My lord Kamsa,' said another man, a familiar voice and face that he knew vaguely but could not place at the moment. 'Quick! Come and see. It's quite extraordinary!'

Kamsa suddenly realized that everyone was staring at him. Several of his men had begun whispering amongst themselves again, with expressions that suggested that he was either insane or worse. A coward, they think me to be a coward. The fools!

A sudden flash of his customary rage shot through him, shaking him out of his stupor. But the instant he began to rear up, to start roaring at them in denial, the shadows on the floor began moving frenetically, as if the cloud was waiting above, waiting and watching, and any move he made, it would match and out-match. He subsided at once, quivering.

‘Lord Kamsa?’ said the man.

Who is he anyway? What the devil is he doing here? Who are all these people? And why the hell are they still staring at me and whispering – some are even smirking discreetly now – as if I am the crazy one?

Kamsa realized he would have to show them he was sane, and they the crazy cowards. He would have to draw the cloud’s attention to himself, and when it swooped down again, he would have to run, furiously, to get away. Let them be eaten by it. Or worse. What did he care? But it was important that he disprove this absurd notion of him being a coward. Nonsense! He was the bravest Yadava that ever lived, since the days of his forebear Yadu himself.

Shivering, trembling uncontrollably, he forced himself to go forward. He stumbled slowly through the debris and sticky wet waste that lay over everything like a coating until he reached the spot below the hole again.

‘Look, my lord. Can you see it now? Is it not wonderful?’ Kamsa forced himself to look up.

Just a quick glance and then he would run like blazes again.

Just one glance.

He looked up. And gasped a deep sigh of disbelief. His legs buckled, threatening to give away with relief.

The cloud was gone.

In its place was a sky roiling over with rain clouds, passing overhead in a stately procession, pregnant with rain, even as a bright sun shone from a clear blue sky.

‘Is it not remarkable, my lord?’ said the strange warrior cheerfully. Bahuka, Kamsa remembered at once, his name was Bahuka. ‘The drought has broken and rain clouds appear out of a clear blue sunshine sky. A rare phenomenon indeed. It is a significant omen.’

eleven

The day of the naming ceremony dawned bright and clear. Nanda’s estate was a mela of celebration. The crowds that had begun to arrive to celebrate Krishna’s birth had only swollen over the past ten days. In a sense, the celebration that had begun that day had not ended yet. With the cowherd community of Gokul going all out in its pouring forth of joy and exultation at the birth of their clan-leader’s first child, the merriment reached a peak. Word of the child’s beauty and uniqueness had spread far and wide; everyone gaped at the ghanashyam colouring of the child, the deep blue smoky skin, big jewel-bright eyes, pouting mouth, dimpled cheeks, and curls that hung low over the large forehead.

Hair festooned with fresh blossoms and saffron, ears dangling jewelled ornaments, necks bedecked with jewels that clinked and hung low with the weight of the precious metal, the gopas and gopis – male and female cowherds – were dressed in their finest garb. Many played musical instruments as they came. The brilliant colours of Vrajbhoomi clothing outmatched the shades of even the rainbow arcing across the Sravan sky. It had rained every evening since the day of Krishna’s birth, and the drought that had plagued entire swathes of Yadava farmlands and grazing pastures had officially and decisively ended. Already, the cows and bulls had begun enjoying the fresh green shoots that had begun pushing their way out of the richly watered earth.

The cattle too were adorned: the bulls with gleaming nose rings and gold-capped horns, the cows in silvery streamers and braided festooning, the calves with wreaths. All were washed in the river, and then smeared with oil and turmeric; the prime ones were decorated with garlands of gold and wreaths of peacock tail feathers. Around them ran the children,

dressed like their parents and playing the part of gopas and gopis perfectly, right down to the gaily coloured turbans and polished mukuts.

Mango leaves had been strung across the courtyard of Nanda Maharaja's house; the ground and interior of the house had been swept clean and lined with freshly stacked cow-dung patties, with sandalwood paste mixed in to give off a sweet scent. Great shining brass pots were lined up in the centre of the aangan, around the altar of the sacred tulsi plant. The gateways of the estate were adorned with various ritual leaves, strips of gaily coloured fabric, banners and flags. The sound of kettledrums and conch shells filled the air for yojanas around.

Preceptor Gargacharya's arrival was heralded by a flourish of conches and the ritual greetings, exchanges, ablutions and appropriate ceremony. His mood was further enhanced by Nanda Maharaja's warm and generous greetings and adherence to all the necessary injunctions of Vedic ritual.

Nanda gifted 200,000 decorated cows to Gargacharya and the procession of Brahmins that accompanied him. In addition, seven enormous mounds of sesame, as was the custom, were gifted to the pundits, along with fantastic stores of gold cloth and rivulets of precious jewels and mineral stones. Though born of a magnanimous heart and generous spirit, Nanda's joy at his beautiful son and the propitious arrival of the best monsoon in a decade had opened the coffers of his generosity further. He had reason to celebrate, and wealth to spread. Even the Sutas – the travelling poets – and the Kusalavya bards who recorded the itihasa of such events, composed poems about them, wrote and sang songs and earned a modest living singing the tales of each occurrence, were delighted to receive lavish gifts of ornaments, garlands and cows. No distinction was made between Sutas of different varnas – Suta proper, Vandi, Kusalavya or even Magadha bards – all were treated equally, fed richly and given the same set of gifts.

'The child's name should begin with the syllable Ka!' announced the happy instructor of the clan. 'As befits his dark colouring and in keeping with the wishes of his pitr and maatr, he shall be named Krishna!'

A roar of approval greeted the announcement. Everyone already thought of the boy as Krishna, and even if the acharya had recommended a different name, the boy would have been given that nickname. Either that

or Kali – the two names that were customarily given to any Arya child who was as densely black skinned. They were in fact the most common names in the Arya world, most Aryas being subject to countless millennia of exposure to the harsh sun of their native land.

Unknown to the immense crowds celebrating Krishna's naming day, another boy had also been named at the same time. Seated only yards away from Yashoda and Krishna were Rohini and her yearling son who were discreetly but strategically placed in the shade of the aangan's awning. This arrangement had been devised by Gargacharya.

'But who is this honourable lady?' Nanda had asked, concerned, soon after her unexpected appearance and self-introduction.

'She is none other than the wife of Vasudeva, secretly wed precisely for this purpose,' said the ageing pundit with a twinkle in his eye. 'And the son she brings is none other than Vasudeva and Devaki's seventh child, spirited away by godly forces to be raised by her in secrecy, far from the evil gaze of Kamsa and his minions. I sanctified the wedding myself, under equally stern terms of secrecy. Rohini is legitimately the boy's foster mother now.'

Nanda stared at his guru, astonished. He had not known. 'So you knew about this, Gurudev?'

Gargacharya chortled. 'There are many things you are not aware of, Nanda. And that you need not trouble your mind with. It is enough that your son and her child are brothers; that is all you need to know.'

'Brothers?' Nanda asked, even more baffled.

Gargacharya scratched his balding pate and glanced around, as if wondering if he had said too much. 'You are a clan-brother to Vasudeva, are you not? In fact, you are even known as Vasudeva yourself. Vasu, because as lord of the gopas and gopis of Vrajbhoomi your spirit pervades all who live here, and Deva, because you are godlike to your people. So Rohini's son is Vasudeva's son, which means he is like your own son, therefore Rohini's son and Krishna are brothers!'

Nanda's head reeled. But he implicitly trusted his guru's judgement and wisdom; he bowed and touched the guru's feet with his forehead and asked no more questions.

So when the time to name little Krishna came, Gargacharya also performed the ritual for the other boy, Rohini's son. Except that he recited the verses for the other boy softly and his associate repeated them within the house, from his position beside Rohini and the boy, and applied the various items of the ceremony to mother and child as required. Thus did Gargacharya perform the namakarans of two boys even though the world saw him perform only one.

When he had named Krishna, and the crowd roared exultantly, Gargacharya quickly took advantage of the roar to name Rohini's son as well.

'His name must begin with the syllable Ba,' he announced.

Nanda and Yashoda turned to glance inside the shade of the awning, to see what Rohini replied. Little Krishna turned his round head and gazed inside too, his dark bright eyes gleaming as a mischievous smile played around his puckered lips. The boy sitting inside on his mother's lap leaned forward, his face leaving the shade of the awning and cutting into a beam of sunlight that had somehow found its way through the large fronds of a banana tree. His eyes found Krishna's unerringly and both infants looked at one another no less intently than two kings locking their gaze. The contrast was striking: the older boy was as milky white as Krishna was night black. Yet, beneath the veneer of the marbled whiteness that was his skin, there was a faint bluish hue. The same deep shade of blue that was Krishna's colouring, but like a blue light hidden within a white bushel instead of a black one. In that instant, as Nanda and Yashoda looked from one child to the other, there could be no doubt that they were blood brothers, from the same womb. Rohini's and Yashoda's eyes met as well, and both women smiled, sharing a happy secret. Nanda sighed and shook his head, not knowing what to make of it all, but trusting in the powers that were and the wisdom of his guru.

'Balarama,' said Rohini softly, only speaking loud enough to be heard by the Brahmin beside her. The Brahmin nodded and continued rocking to

and fro in his cross-legged position, reciting the appropriate shlokas that confirmed the name as the given appellation of the child. Gargacharya added his own benediction to the ritual and it was done.

Krishna threw his head back and laughed his rich gurgling laugh. Yashoda looked down, amazed at how soon the boy was able to hold up his head. It was much faster than any baby; most took at least a few months, and none did it in less than several weeks. Yet here was Krishna, barely ten days old and able to hold his head, turn and look any way he pleased – up, down, left, right. Truly, he was a precocious one.

Across the estate and the adjoining pasture fields, the crowds were dancing and singing with joy. Gopas played roughly and fiercely, pushing one another over, splashing buckets of water, ghee, milk, curds and buttermilk on one another, lapping up the food as well as wallowing in it! Music exploded as a thousand musicians played at once, all somehow finding the same syncopation and matching one another perfectly, in the harmony that came only of a lifetime of generational togetherness.

‘Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!’ went one refrain, announcing the auspiciousness of the occasion.

‘Krishna! Krishna! Krishna!’ sang another chorus, celebrating the birth of Vraj’s newest and most honoured son.

The feasting continued all through the day and night, with not a single being, be it animal, human or bird, turned away unfed. The poorest of the poor were welcomed with open arms, embraced, given gifts and fed lavishly. The richest of the rich were treated with rough joy, drenched in ghee, buttermilk, curd, butter or plain milk – any one of the products of the sacred gomata that was their livelihood and indeed, their life itself.

And through it all, as he lay beside his newly found brother Balarama, little Krishna laughed and clapped his chubby palms together. The older boy, able to stand and walk with halting but firm steps on strong little legs, stood watch over Krishna as intently as a sentry over a prince. When some of the gopas came closer to try and tease the newborn, Balarama stood blocking their way and glared at them so fiercely, they changed their minds and backed away.

Krishna only chortled and clapped his hands again, kicking his chubby legs merrily. His gurgling laughter seemed to fill the air, echoing from one end of the land to the other. Yashoda, tired and sleepy but happy beyond description, lay in the arms of her beloved Nanda and wondered idly if Krishna's laughter could be heard as far as Mathura.

twelve

The warrior's name was Bahuka. He was an aging veteran of more wars and conflicts than even he could count; so many that at one time or the other, he had fought for virtually every major faction in Aryavarta, with the result that it had happened quite often that he was on a certain side in one war and on the opposing side in the next. He had killed former comrades, former leaders, been hired by the scions of kings he had killed, and had enjoyed such a chequered career that he was feared by one and all. The consequence of all this battle experience and notoriety was to make him a man completely without airs. He feared nobody and nothing on earth. He said what he pleased, to whomsoever he pleased. The same applied to his behaviour and actions. For the past few years, he had aligned himself with Jarasandha, and this, he claimed, was the first alliance he had made not for wealth or power but because he believed in the cause that the king espoused. 'Which,' as he added wryly, 'is what will probably get me killed.'

He was overseeing Kamsa's toilet. After the meltdown in the sabha hall, he had insisted that Kamsa ought to look like a king in order to earn the respect of a king from his subjects and followers. So he had ordered a bath drawn and was now ensconced in a comfortable seat while Kamsa was being scrubbed, rubbed, bathed and perfumed by a host of female attendants.

He is still wearing his battle armour and sword, Kamsa noted sourly, which was explicitly against Kamsa's own long-standing orders and a breach of protocol in any king's private chambers. But he was Jarasandha's man, and Kamsa knew better than to say anything to him. He had no doubt

that the man was there to report to Jarasandha and was probably spying out everything he could possibly spot as quickly as possible. Once he had all the dirt he wanted, he would ride back on a fast horse to his master and fill his ears with poison about Kamsa being afraid of clouds and whatnot.

Kamsa felt like reaching out and yanking the man down into the bubbling hot bathing pool, where he could beat him to a bloody pulp and drown him. But he couldn't do that, of course. The sooner the man finished his spying and reported back to Jarasandha the better. That was probably why the man stayed fully dressed, Kamsa realized – because he intended to be ready to leave at any moment.

That realization brought a tiny smile to his face. He grinned involuntarily and the grizzled veteran glanced at him, cocking a bushy white brow.

‘Are the bathing beauties soaping the right spots?’

Kamsa stared at him dully for a moment, then realized the man was making a lewd comment. He scowled. ‘No. Of course not. I was just thinking, that’s all.’

‘Of your beloved wives? Your beautiful, loving, devoted wives who await you back home?’

Back home? Mathura was his home. Didn’t the old fool know that? Aloud, he had to be more diplomatic.

‘My father-in-law is very generous. He has given me a grand palace to reside in. However, pressing matters require me to stay here in Mathura.’

Bahuka nodded. Another bathing attendant entered, bringing more scented oils. The elderly man watched her scantily clad form approach with a keenness that suggested that age had not dulled his virility. ‘He is somewhat surprised that your stay has lasted this long.’

Kamsa was dipping his head into the warm, scented water at that time, to rid his scalp of the unguents the attendants had massaged into his hair, and Bahuka’s words caused him to involuntarily swallow a little water. He emerged coughing and spat out a mouthful of water, almost far enough to

land on the veteran's road-dusty boots. 'I confess ...' He hacked a few more times and watched as a bubble popped out of one nostril and drifted away nonchalantly. 'I confess it has taken a mite longer than expected. But only because there is so much more work to be done here.'

Bahuka looked at him speculatively. There was something about the old man that suggested he had looked at rabbits in the field in just the same way, moments before bringing them down with a slingshot stone to their flanks. His grey eyes gleamed in the diya-lit incandescence of the steamy air. Whorls of steam and mist drifted around him as the barely dressed attendants passed by, making him seem out of place, like a rusted lance in a cupboard of soft silks.

'It has been a decade, Kamsa,' he said quietly. 'A little more than a decade, in fact. Is that what you call a mite longer?'

Kamsa did not fail to notice the lack of an honorofic before his name. Nobody had addressed him simply by his first name in ... a long time. And the veteran's tone, while quietly polite, had a deathly steel edge to it as well. He was sending a subtext with the words – that he was speaking for Jarasandha himself, and Jarasandha wanted to know why the hell Kamsa was still in Mathura.

'I...' Kamsa flailed his arms in an attempt to pretend he was still busy bathing. Water splashed everywhere. 'I am sure Jarasandha has come across cities that have proven stubborn or resistant to him, from time to time? Surely they have taken him a mite ... somewhat longer to overcome than other cities?'

Scratching his crotch vigorously, Bahuka glanced down at the soapy wet floor between his feet and chuckled. 'Not ten years, Kamsa! I doubt Lord Jarasandha has taken more than ten weeks to overcome even the most stubborn opponent to date!' He stood slowly, pointing a gloved finger down at the bath. 'I don't think you have earned the right to even compare yourself with your illustrious father-in-law yet, boy. So it's best you answer me like a man, and stop making excuses. That way, it might go better for you.'

Kamsa stared up at the warrior. Who did this fellow think he was, speaking to him this way? ‘Mind your tongue, Bahuka. Remember you speak to the king of the Yadava nation! ’

Bahuka hawked and spat – right into the pool. Kamsa felt some of the spittle hit his bare chest and was shocked. ‘Boy, from what my spasas tell me, you aren’t king of your own house! Let alone the entire Yadu nation.’

Kamsa was so shocked, he found his anger slow in coming. How could anyone behave thus in front of him – and expect to live! ‘Be careful what you say next, general. They may be the last words you speak.’

The veteran put his hands on his hips and laughed, throwing his head back to reveal a mesh of ugly white scar tissue on his throat. Evidently, someone had tried to cut the man’s gullet with a not-too-sharp blade and had sawed the rough blade to and fro several times to achieve the desired result. And quite clearly, the victim had somehow survived the attempt. Kamsa felt his skin crawl. What sort of man survived having his throat vigorously sawed open? Definitely not a cowardly one.

Bahuka finished laughing and shook his head sympathetically as he looked at Kamsa again. ‘You have been tinpot dictator of your own little playground too long, young fellow. Lord Jarasandha was right to send me here – as he is always right. You have lost touch with reality, with the world around you, even with your own limitations. I suspected it from the reports my spasas kept bringing me, and which I passed on each time to Lord Jarasandha with my recommendations, but when I saw you this morning, lying in your own residues in that wreck of a sabha hall, surrounded by the debris of a failed regime, I knew you had completely lost it altogether.’

Kamsa growled. It was the best he could do. He did not want to speak any words that he might regret later. Expressing himself through words had never been particularly satisfying to him. Growling communicated his feelings more effectively. The bathing attendants began to scream and whimper and retreated to the far ends of the bathing pool, some clambering out to be lost instantly in the steamy mist.

‘I was merely tired and resting after a hard night’s work,’ Kamsa said, unable to control the sulk in his voice. ‘I had just finished infecting all the senior Brahmins in the city.’

Bahuka cocked a head with renewed interest. ‘Is that so? And when did you do that?’

‘Because the Brahmins hold the people together. By reassuring the people that this damn Slayer myth is true, they give them hope to continue to rebel against me. By infecting the Brahmins and turning them into my own creatures, I wanted to break that final wall of resistance.’

Kamsa climbed out of the bathing pool, careful not to let himself slip. He knew that Bahuka was watching him like a predator and would strike at any sign of weakness. Besides, if he couldn’t tell the man what he felt, he could at least show him his naked backside as he climbed out. Actions always spoke louder than words.

‘Really?’ Bahuka asked. ‘So that was your great plan? But I didn’t ask you why you did it, I asked you when you did it.’

Kamsa rubbed himself down, frowning. The attendants had all fled, no doubt afraid that he was going to erupt in another of his nearly daily rages and slaughter them all, or worse. In fact, he couldn’t understand why he was unable to expand himself. Despite growing angry several times since the interaction with Bahuka had begun, he was still the same human size. Why?

He turned around, scowling. ‘What do you mean when I did it! You mean, when did I infect the Brahmins? Why, yesterday, of course.’

Bahuka stared at him curiously, then frowned, stared some more, then finally chuckled. He shook his head, clicking his tongue sympathetically. ‘It’s worse than I thought. You are now losing time along with your mind.’

Kamsa stared at him uncomprehendingly. What was the man babbling about now? What did he mean by ‘losing time’?

Bahuka laughed. ‘Your little act with the Brahmins was months ago, immediately after the birth of the Slayer and his slippery disappearance

from right under your nose. You were lying senseless in that ruin of a sabha hall for several weeks. Nobody dared go in and wake you for fear of your wrath.'

Kamsa stared at him in disbelief. This could not be true, could it?

'Besides, your ploy with the Brahmins was useless. They all do that very day as a result of your stupid attempt. What else do you think was all that gooey mess you were lying in, splashed around the sabha hall the day I arrived? That was all that was left of them, you fool!'

Kamsa turned and hurled the contents of his morning meal, eaten just before bathing, into the scented pool.

thirteen

Soon after the namakaran of the two boys, Gargamuni visited Mathura.

An old and renowned preceptor of the Yadava nation, none dared question his comings and goings, not even Kamsa's most brutal marauders. The reason for this was more likely their own superstitious and religious beliefs rather than any lack of fear of their self-crowned king. There was also the very compelling fact that Brahmins carried no arms and never resorted to violence, even to defend themselves, and therefore posed no threat.

Gargamuni's destination was the princess' palace.

Vasudeva and Devaki greeted him with warmth and due ceremony. They assumed he was there as usual to enquire after their well-being as well as to pass on news of the Vrishni clans. Brahmins were the primary source of news and information, after all. And the older the Brahmin, the sharper his ears for the choicest titbits!

What he had to say that day was quite extraordinary and wholly unexpected.

‘The Slayer is alive and well in Gokul, deep in the heart of Vrajbhoomi.’

Vasudeva sank to the ground, his knees giving way with relief. Devaki was already seated on the ground in front of the muni. They clasped hands as tears of joy rolled down their faces. Gargacharya beamed at them.

‘I have come from the home of Nanda Maharaja, lord of the gopas and gopis of that region. He and his wife Yashoda believe the boy, Krishna, to be their own and love him passionately. They will raise him as well as you would have.’

Devaki lowered her head in sadness at the thought of never being able to watch her son grow, to watch him take his first steps, speak his first words ... but she also felt a great sense of relief and joy that he would be so well cared for. As well as Vasu and I would have raised him ourselves – were we but given the chance. She wiped her tears and nodded at the muni’s words. Vasudeva’s arm squeezed her shoulder, comforting her. The emotions coursing through both of them were the result of ten years of persecution, pain, constant stress and fear. To hear that their son was finally safe and far from Kamsa’s bloody claws was immensely liberating.

‘There is more good news,’ Gargamuni said, his eyes twinkling beneath his bushy white hooded brows. He leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial whisper for dramatic effect: ‘Your seventh child is also safe and well.’

Devaki gasped with delight. She looked at Vasudeva who was staring at Gargamuni with an equally delighted expression.

‘His name is Balarama,’ the old acharya said. ‘He is a fine strapping young boy, just over a year old. And he is being raised by Rohini, the wife you took on my advice last year.’

Vasudeva nodded, glancing at Devaki who was looking at him, then looking at Gargamuni. ‘I did as you said, Gurudev. And truly, your advice was wisely given. Or that boy would be dead now as well.’

Devaki nodded slowly, thoughtfully. ‘So this was the secret that you said you could not divulge to me at the time.’

‘Yes,’ replied Vasudeva, ‘for Gargamuni warned me that to speak of it even amongst ourselves might have led to Kamsa’s spasas latching on to the truth. Are you upset with me for not telling you that I took another wife?’

Devaki shook her head, smiling. ‘Do you even have to ask? I am happy beyond words. Our son is alive! Two of our sons! It is the happiest day of my life!’

Vasudeva smiled with relief. Although a man could have as many wives as he desired, it was customary to consult the older wife before remarrying. In fact, in Arya society, the older wife was usually the one who chose the new wife, for the new entrant into the household would spend as much or more time with her than with the husband. It was as important for the wives of a man to be able to live harmoniously – to be friends, even – as it was for the man and woman to appreciate one another. Vasudeva had had no choice in the matter, even though the marriage to Rohini was conducted by Gargamuni from afar and no actual marital interchange ever occurred between them; but he still felt responsible. There were many types of relationships, marital and otherwise, but the bond he shared with Devaki was unique. His loyalty to her was complete and uncompromised. Rohini had known this, Gargamuni had assured Vasudeva before the wedding, and was willing to undertake the task of raising a child on her own without naming the father publicly – a daunting task for any woman in any age. The mere knowledge that she was aiding in the survival of Vasudeva and Devaki’s son and ensuring that the Slayer foretold of in the prophecies would live as a result was sufficient for her.

‘Balarama,’ Devaki said, raising her head to look up at the sky visible between the pillars of her chamber. ‘It is a beautiful name. Almost as beautiful as Krishna.’

Then she remembered the figurine and felt she must show it to them.

She brought it out of its hiding place in a corner of her private chamber where she had wrapped it carefully in a red ochre cloth. She unwrapped it now, as reverentially as if it were a scroll containing the writings of the sacred Vedas, repository of all Arya learning and wisdom. Gargamuni and

Vasudeva admired the polished blue marble, wondering at its smoothness and its perfectly formed replication of a newborn babe.

‘You say this formed from a single drop of rain left by a rain cloud?’ Gargamuni said. ‘Sadhu! Sadhu! That was no rain cloud; it was your son Krishna himself, who had come to inform you that the long terrible drought had ended, and the time of seeding and harvest was back for the Yadava people. It was a sign that the reign of Kamsa will end soon.’

But Devaki was busy staring at the statue and blinking in disbelief. ‘It has changed shape since I last looked at it.’ She touched the stone gently in wonderment. ‘At first it was only a rough blob, the features barely visible. But now ...’

They looked at it closely. The piece of blue marble – a hue that none had ever seen in any sample of that particular stone – was shaped perfectly to resemble a newborn infant in every last detail. It could not have been more perfect had it been crafted by a master artisan. The baby lay on his back – legs and hands raised upwards in the classic pose, as if reaching for his mother – his cherubic face captured in a posture of laughter, an errant lock of hair fallen over his broad forehead. Unable to help herself, Devaki gently touched the forehead as she would a real child, as if to brush back the lock of hair from his eyes.

She felt real warm flesh beneath her hands and the shape of the forehead changed in front of their eyes, the lock of hair moving back and settling slowly on the hairline, resting neatly on the scalp now.

The sound of a baby’s gurgling laughter filled the palace. Even the serving girls paused in their work and looked up, wondering. And the sentries posted below, though loyal to Kamsa, glanced around and at each other fearfully, wondering what the sound meant. The news that the Slayer had been born and had escaped Kamsa’s clutches despite his best efforts had spread across the kingdom. It had adversely affected the morale of those still loyal to the usurper king. After all, if the Slayer was out there and would some day destroy their master, what might he not do to them, Kamsa’s minions?

Devaki gasped in surprise. ‘It lives!’

But when she touched the statue again, it was only smooth marble – not cold, however, as marble ought to have been, but firm and unyielding as stone nevertheless. She sighed, disappointed.

‘You speak truly, Devaki-devi,’ Garga said. ‘Krishna himself has ensured that you shall not be deprived of the joy of his presence. He is with you in every sense.’ Garga glanced around, not because he feared being overheard, but to make his point theatrically. ‘But you must be certain not to let anyone know of this token of his love, nor what it represents.’

Devaki swallowed, nodding vigorously. ‘I call it Ghanashyam for that reason.’

‘Ghanashyam,’ Gargamuni mused. ‘How apt. And in fact, the scriptures said he could be named with the syllable Ka, but Gha and Cha were permissible too! How apt indeed.’

The old preceptor rose to go. ‘Oh, one last thing,’ he said, ‘it almost slipped my ageing memory, yet it is more important than anything else I have told you until now.’

Vasudeva wondered what could be more important than knowing that two of their children were alive and had successfully survived Kamsa’s murderous clutches, but held his silence.

As if knowing Vasudeva’s thoughts, the old Brahmin wagged a bony finger with white hair growing sparsely between the knuckles at him. ‘Kamsa has failed to inform you of this but I have learnt of it through my sources. An invitation arrived for you yesterday from Hastinapura.’

‘From Hastinapura?’ Vasudeva’s heart skipped a beat. ‘My sister Pritha, is she well?’

‘Indeed. You need not worry on her account. She is quite well, though troubled, of course. There is great unrest in that fine kingdom of the Purus.’

Vasudeva nodded, relieved that nothing had befallen his sister. They had been very close before Kamsa’s madness had made even normal social

interaction impossible. ‘I have heard there is unrest there as well. And of course that Jarasandha is raging at their borders.’

Gargamuni nodded grimly. Despite his age and benevolent paternal features, at moments like these, the steel within him was clearly visible. ‘Jarasandha is one of the reasons why this meeting has been called. They have called on you formally, using the pre-agreed code to indicate extreme distress. It is certainly a crisis.’

‘Then I must go to Hastinapura!’ Vasudeva said, rising. ‘If my Puru brethren need my help ...’

‘Nay, my son, nay.’ Gargacharya put a hand on his shoulder, firmly keeping him seated. The strength in the old man’s arms surprised Vasudeva. ‘If you leave, Kamsa’s spasas will know the purpose and destination of your journey and he or his representatives shall surely race you to Hastinapura. By right, Kamsa is now king of the Yadava nation, even if self-declared. And if he goes to Hastinapura, the Purus would have no choice but to greet him formally and acknowledge him as such, and that is something they are loath to do. Through clever statecraft, Pitamah Bhishma has successfully avoided recognizing Kamsa’s sovereignty for all these years, without dishonouring the Puru nation’s ties with us Yadavas. If you go, you will render all that statecraft wasted.’

‘Then what would you advise me to do?’

Gargamuni nodded, indicating that he had given the matter some thought. ‘Lord Akrur must go in your place, as your spokesperson and friend, but not as an official envoy.’

Vasudeva was frustrated at not being able to go himself, but nodded at the old guru’s wisdom. ‘It is a wise choice. I trust Akrur to speak as if he were me personified. But if he goes to Hastinapura, might not Kamsa still attempt to outplay him by arriving there as well?’

Gargamuni’s eyes twinkled as he wagged a finger. ‘That is why I have requested that the meeting not take place in Hastinapura or Mathura but on neutral ground.’

Vasudeva nodded approvingly. ‘Where is it to be, then? I shall instruct Akrur accordingly.’

‘It is a remote fishing hamlet deep in the heart of the Yamuna’s valley, where the Dasa fisherfolk live.’

Vasudeva nodded, frowning. ‘I am vaguely aware of the place but more precise directions would help.’

‘Your friend need only follow the Yamuna. She herself shall lead him to his destination. A boat shall be waiting for him there. It shall carry him across the river to the island.’

‘An island?’

‘Yes, an island in the midst of the river. It is named Pachmani. But the local fisherfolk call it Manchodri. It is there that the meeting shall take place. None but you and Akrur should know of this meeting.’

Gargamuni told Vasudeva the date of the meeting, then said his goodbyes, shuffling away with a deceptively shambling walk. Absorbed in thought, Vasudeva watched him go.

fourteen

Kamsa’s sleep was plagued by a fevered dream of him reduced to the size of a gnat flying across a cornfield as a gigantic monsoon cloud – the same anthropomorphic deep blue cloud he had seen in the sabha hall – attempted to strike him down with bolts of lightning. The jagged bolts crashed down to the left and right of his scorched flanks, resulting in blinding white explosions. Flying in a zig-zagging motion was all he could do to stay inches away from each new assault. As one final bolt seared its way towards him, he knew this was the one that would strike him dead, blazing him into a

vaporous puff on impact. He screamed with abject terror.

He awoke thrashing on the floor of his bedchamber. He croaked, calling to his attendants, but nobody came. After several moments of struggling to regain his wits, he got to his feet and was about to throw a tantrum, perhaps bite off the heads of a few of his more recalcitrant attendants, when he heard the unmistakable sounds of marching from outside his balcony. Looking out, he saw more activity in the courtyard than ought to have been at this time of night. He didn't bother to dress, and left his chamber in just the white langot in which he slept, wishing yet again that he could expand himself as easily as he used to. Had he been able to do so, he would have simply expanded himself to five or ten times man-size and leapt off the balcony, the few dozen yards to the ground posing no more difficulty than leaping down a short flight of stairs.

But for some inscrutable reason, he just couldn't grow any further than this normal man-height, no matter how hard he tried. It was frustrating in the extreme. For one thing, throwing a tantrum was not quite as effective as it used to be: his people just weren't that scared any more. In fact, he suspected that they secretly laughed at him behind his back, as if the behaviour that had been so terrifying when he was a giant's size now seemed ridiculous and feeble. And it probably was. He felt so himself.

He emerged into the courtyard, and was struck at once by a blast of cold breeze that made him acutely aware of how little he was wearing; he wished he had taken a moment to throw on something. But this was the monsoon season, surely, and he hadn't expected the temperature to be this low outside.

'WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?' he bellowed. Or rather, attempted to bellow. What he produced instead was a squeaky croak that tapered off into a whimper as a fresh gust of icy cold breeze blew across the open courtyard. Kamsa shivered and, teeth chattering at the unexpected change in temperature, was forced to cover his bare torso with both arms crossed. He struggled to overcome his reaction and stand straight, to command respect and instil fear. The problem was, he was so accustomed to eliciting these responses through sheer force, power, size and intimidation that he had no idea how to gain them through normal means. Appearing in his langot in the early hours of the morning of a chilly day, while his soldiers

marched and stood around in immaculate uniforms and ranks, he ended up looking absurd.

‘What are you men doing?’ he demanded, wheezing. ‘I called no turning out of ranks this morning!’

‘I asked them to,’ said a laconic voice from behind him.

Kamsa turned to see the lanky form of Bahuka striding leisurely up to him. Contrasting with the darkness of the courtyard, the veteran’s hoary head of hair glowed with a penumbra of light from the palace behind him, which threw his features into shadow and lent him an air of almost supernatural menace. Kamsa shivered again, wishing like hell he had draped on an anga-vastra at least. But who could have expected a monsoon morning to be this chilly?

‘You?’ he stuttered through chattering teeth.

‘Aye,’ said Bahuka arrogantly. ‘In case you forget, Prince Kamsa, I command the army now. By your own writ.’

By my writ? Since when? ‘I am your king,’ Kamsa replied angrily, feeling some heat finally surge through his freezing body. ‘Address me with my proper title. And I recall signing no such writ. I am supreme commander of our armed forces.’

Bahuka moved slightly in the shadowy darkness of the courtyard, gravel crunching under his boots. He was only leaning over to speak softly to Kamsa but for a split second he appeared to be attacking and Kamsa involuntarily took a step back.

‘You reverted to “prince regent” when you declared Lord Jarasandha to be de facto ruler of Mathura and the other Yadava nations,’ he said softly, yet not so softly that the ranks nearest to them did not hear every word.

I did? When was that? Kamsa racked his brains furiously but could remember doing no such thing. Yet he could hardly say so aloud. It would only make him look like a fool again in case Bahuka produced a signed scroll with Kamsa’s seal on it. And in a sense, Bahuka was only saying aloud what Kamsa had always agreed to do. After all, that was the

arrangement he had had with Jarasandha: to take over his father's kingdom and rule it independently, but under fealty to Jarasandha – which could be interpreted legally as making Jarasandha the de facto ruler.

Receiving no response from Kamsa, Bahuka went on, a little louder this time: 'As for the army, you yourself announced my appointment as commander of the forces. At a very dignified martial ceremony in the new palace.'

'The new palace?' Kamsa replied idiotically. What ceremony? What appointment?

Bahuka reached out, startling Kamsa yet again, placed a heavy gloved hand on the apparently erstwhile young king's bare neck, and gripping it in exactly the kind of hold required to break a man's neck with a single twist – Kamsa had done it often enough himself – turned Kamsa's neck just enough to make him look in the other direction, diagonally. In the distance, he saw the looming shape of a structure he did not recognize having seen before, right where his old palace – which was in fact his new palace when he took over Mathura – had stood. He could see a steady flow of men carrying heavy objects coming out and depositing the load to a line of waiting uks carts.

'There,' Bahuka said in a low tone that was almost a growl. 'Oh,' Kamsa said, 'I see.'

But he did not see at all. How could a new – or a new-new – palace have risen overnight without his noticing it? And why was it that he could recall none of it?

Boot heels clicking on the flagstones, then crunching across the gravel, a man came running from the direction of his private residence. He carried a large garment of some kind and bowed low as he approached. He handed the piece of clothing to Kamsa who stared at it stupidly.

After a long moment, the man said querulously, 'My lord? Your garment? To guard you from the cold winter wind?'

Kamsa started. 'Who is that? What is your name?'

The man glanced at Bahuka who nodded. He then rose to his full height and approached a little closer. ‘Lord Kamsa, it is I, Pralamba, your chief advisor.’

Kamsa stared at the unfamiliar face. He had never seen the man before. Pralamba held out the garment again.

Kamsa attempted to laugh in derision, but it came out as a coughing fit. ‘It is only mid-monsoon. This is barely a passing rain breeze. I do not need any garment.’

Bahuka cleared his throat. ‘Prince Kamsa, being occupied with statecraft, you seem to have failed to notice the passing of the seasons. The monsoons have passed, as has autumn. It is now early winter. Perhaps you should take the garment after all. We wouldn’t want you to freeze to death.’

Kamsa stared at Bahuka’s silhouetted profile, dimly visible in the light from the distant chambers. Nearby, he thought he heard a soldier in the ranks snicker. Face burning with shame, he took the proffered garment and put it on, admitting that the clothing did provide welcome protection. He had been freezing to death; that was no monsoon wind. But when had the seasons changed? It had only been a day or two since Bahuka had arrived in Mathura. How had so much happened so soon?

Another man marched up to them, walking with the quick stride of a military man. He stopped short and saluted smartly.

‘Captain Pradyota, report,’ Bahuka said with the ease of a general giving orders to a long-serving junior.

‘Sire, we are ready to move out. Awaiting your command.’ ‘Very well, Captain, stand by a moment at your ease.’ Captain Pradyota saluted again and stood at ease, awaiting further orders.

Bahuka turned to Kamsa. ‘You do remember Pradyota, do you not? He is captain of the guard.’

Kamsa frowned, still trying to get warm, almost ecstatic at being covered by the warm woollen garment. ‘What about Bana and Canura?’

Where are they?’

‘You dismissed them. Pending further intimation.’

Not sure what to say next, Kamsa swallowed nervously. There appeared to be a whole parallel timeline in which all manner of events had taken place without his being aware of them. He no longer knew what was what. ‘I see. And Pradyota is now captain? What is the mission that requires assembling at this early hour?’

Bahuka cocked his head with an attitude of interest, as if surprised at Kamsa’s ability to make any observation of intelligence. ‘Why, it is part of your ongoing programme, my lord.’

Kamsa chose his words carefully. ‘Remind me, which programme are we speaking of?’

‘The one that you decided upon after the alleged Slayer was supposedly born and escaped your grasp.’

‘Yes, yes. But spell it out, man. Explain it to me again.’ Kamsa was struck by sudden inspiration: ‘I wish to hear you say it so I know that my plan is being followed to the letter.’

He saw Bahuka’s teeth flash in a reluctant grin. Take that, you old blade. ‘Certainly, sire. When even the pogrom of slaughter of the newborns and children did not produce results, you decided that the problem lay with the people’s faith in this mythic Slayer.’

‘Their faith?’ Kamsa repeated, thoughtfully.

‘Aye. And that faith was bolstered and encouraged by the Brahmins, of course. The keepers and teachers of dharma. You knew that the Brahmins were encouraging belief in the non-existent Slayer and giving the people confidence to rebel against you. Short of wiping out the entire population and restarting the Yadava race anew with your own seed – a possibility you did consider for a while – there was only one other option available to you to quell this defiance.’

‘Only one other option,’ Kamsa repeated. He had zero recollection of all this, of course.

‘To destroy the people’s dharma itself. As well as the Brahmins’ sense of dharma.’

‘Destroy their dharma. Yes, of course,’ was Kamsa’s dazed response. He had no idea what that meant, but it sounded promising. Not the kind of elaborate philosophical thinking he would usually indulge in, but interesting nonetheless.

‘And so you opened the coffers of Mathura.’

‘The coffers?’ he frowned. ‘Yes, the royal treasure chest, accumulated by you, your father, and the kings of Mathura before him back to the beginning of the Andhaka nation. A considerable store of wealth indeed.’

As Bahuka continued, Kamsa’s attention turned back to the quads of men he had noticed earlier. They were emerging from the palace – the new-new palace – carrying what appeared to be treasure chests, he now realized, and loading them onto the long line of waiting uks carts. There were a great many carts and a great many chests and, judging by the fact that it took four strong-backed men to carry each one and all four men were bent over and straining to carry the weight, they seemed very heavy.

‘And by giving all that wealth away to the people, starting with the Brahmins and then onto the other varnas in proportion ...’

‘You did say “giving it away”, did you not?’ Kamsa asked.

‘Aye, Prince Kamsa. By showing such unparalleled generosity, you would not only win back the hearts of the entire populace, and make them feel well and thoroughly compensated for any hardships they might have endured during the long difficult years of drought which unfortunately coincided with your own regime, but you would also give them an opportunity to afford such pleasures as they had only dreamt of before.’

Kamsa was silent. He was too stunned to say anything. Bahuka went on, barely able to disguise the smugness in his voice.

‘And so you ushered in a new age of hedonism in Mathura. You gave away so much wealth that not a single citizen needs to work another day in his life. Farmers have stopped tilling their fields, cowherds care about

their flock no more, women don't make butter or ghee to sell in the market any more and children have stopped learning. Everyone has been too busy enjoying the new-found wealth. Drinking, eating and pleasure have become the new way of life. Wine has begun to flow as readily as the first good monsoon which coincided with your surge of generosity. Basically, over the past several months, your plan has begun to show results.'

'It has?' Kamsa croaked.

'Indeed! It worked brilliantly. The people of Mathura are like fattened calves now. They are too busy indulging themselves to bother with resistance. Even Brahmins have taken to ungodly indulgences! All talk of dharma has died out, for when there are such rich spoils to be enjoyed, nobody wants to listen to the voice of one's conscience. Every citizen has become your confidant. The flow of information is free and rich; cooperation is absolute; rebellion is non-existent.'

And Bahuka clapped a powerful hand on Kamsa's shoulder, almost breaking his clavicle. 'Truly, your plan was brilliant, Prince Kamsa. You have changed the entire character of Mathura in a few short months! And all it took was the bulk of your ancestral wealth. Splendidly done, my lord. Splendidly done!'

fifteen

Akrur emerged from the darkness of the forest into the clear, cold light of a winter evening. He gazed with relief at the river coursing under the overhang, reflecting the light of the setting sun. 'Yamuna-maa, to see you is always a blessing. Today, it is also a relief.'

He made his way carefully down to the riverside, following the pebbled shale bank further. He had started out following the river as instructed, but when he had reached a point where the bank rose too high and was too densely forested to follow, he had had no choice but to go around. It was a great relief to finally be in sight of the river again, for these were unfamiliar woods and he did not know what dangers lurked within them.

He smiled again, with great pleasure this time, when he came around a bend and saw the boat moored to the bank up ahead. He quickened his pace as best as he could.

A dark form unfolded its limbs and rose to meet him as he approached the boat.

‘Lord Akrur?’ asked a voice with the inflection of the fisherfolk of the river.

‘Yes,’ Akrur replied.

‘Pray, step aboard,’ the man responded, busying himself with untying the boat’s mooring. ‘It is almost night and they are all assembled and waiting. You are the last to arrive.’

The man was silent as he pushed the boat free of the shore using a long pole. Akrur thought it best not to disturb the boatman. The river was flowing at a goodly speed and the fisherman was poling them upriver, a task that demanded all of the man’s considerable strength and dexterity. Akrur would have been glad to help but there was only the one pole and he was not sure he knew how to pole a boat in that manner. He watched the man work, powerful back muscles heaving as the light dimmed and a silvery sheen – rippling like the tendons of the fisherman’s arms and thighs – lay on the river’s surface. The man was much older than he had seemed at first glance. It was hard to tell in this faint light, but Akrur thought he spied a shock of white hair under the cloth that the boatman had tied around his head. Other than that, and the whites of his eyes and teeth, the man was blackness itself, a shadow lost among the shadows of the growing darkness.

‘Where are we going?’ Akrur asked out of curiosity. He could see now that their destination was not the far side of the river as he had assumed at first.

The man jerked his head once, never missing a beat in his rhythmic poling.

Akrur peered in that direction but saw nothing at first. He waited patiently, and as they worked their way steadily upstream, he began to

discern a place where the faint gleam of the river was absent – a roughly oblong patch in the middle of the river's course. Finally, they were close enough for him to make out that the patch was an island. Of course, he had been told that the meeting was on an island.

‘Pachmani, is it not?’ he asked tentatively.

‘We call it Manchodri,’ the man answered shortly. ‘It is my home.’

As they approached, Akrur realized the brilliance of the choice of rendezvous. Not only was the island not easily visible from the riverbank, it was nearly impossible to reach. From the way the water roared a little way upstream, he could tell that there were large rocks that would make a downriver approach extremely treacherous if not impossible. And the effort and skill it would take to pole a boat upstream in this fashion ... well, it would prove daunting to almost any enemy.

As they reached the island proper, his sharp, alert gaze saw the unmistakeable shadows of men moving about on the shore, carrying long stick-like objects that he knew at once to be longbows of the kind favoured by riverfolk. An enemy that did manage to pole its way upstream would have to contend with a hail of deadly greetings. As secure as any fortress.

He leapt out on shore, then turned to thank the boatman. To his surprise, he found that the man had handed over the boat to one of the waiting bow men and was following him.

‘This way,’ said the fisherman, passing him and showing him the way. ‘The lights are guarded to avoid alerting anyone who might be watching. Even fish have eyes, after all.’

Akrur was led up a winding path that he would never have been able to navigate unguided in the dark. When they finally arrived at the cottage, he was able to discern the faint glow of shielded lamp light. It had not been visible even a few dozen yards back.

The door of the cabin creaked as the fisherman opened it. ‘He is here,’ he said softly to those within, then stood by to let Akrur pass.

Vasudeva's trusted aide entered the cabin, glad for the warmth of the fire, even though it was shielded and banked to avoid producing too much light and smoke. The fisherman shut the door behind him, and they stood, looking around at the occupants already there and awaiting them both.

The first person he recognized by sight was a tall stately form. 'Pritha!' he said warmly, offering the appropriate greetings and gestures, 'it is so good to see you again!'

Vasudeva's sister greeted him with matching warmth. 'Well met, good Akrur. You are truly a sight for sore eyes.'

'And you,' he said, although he was disturbed to see how thin and wan she looked. Perhaps it was just the dim light? No, there was a distinctly haggard look about her beautiful features. He asked quietly, 'Is all well with you?'

She sighed. 'I have my health. It is more than most can say.' She turned to include the others. 'Allow me to introduce you.' She led him around the small group of figures seated or standing around the cabin.

She paused in front of a tall imposing giant of a man with a shock of white hair and ageing features that did nothing to diminish his sheer power and personality. 'This is Pitamah Bhishma, he is like a father to us all. His given name is Gangeya, after his mother Ganga-devi, but we call him Bhishma on account of the terrible vow he took.'

'A vow he took on my behalf,' said a woman's voice from across the room. Akrur turned to see a woman about the age of his own mother but possessed of such striking beauty that the instant he laid eyes on her, he was riveted. The fisherman who had brought him to the island had gone to stand by her, and seeing them together, side by side, the resemblance was unmistakable. From the difference in their ages, he discerned that they must be father and daughter. 'And on the insistence of my father here,' the woman continued bitterly, 'who made Bhishma swear that he would never sire a child as long as he lived in order to preclude his offspring from claiming a right to the throne of Hastinapura and depriving my own children of that privilege.' She laughed bitterly. 'And what good did it do?

Both my sons are dead. And Hastinapura languishes on the brink of disaster, with no one to carry the Puru legacy onward.'

'This is Satyavati,' Kunti said, introducing Akrur with due formality. 'She is foster-mother to Bhishma and widow to the late Shantanu, king of the Purus. Shantanu had already sired Gangeya when he met Satyavati and desired to marry her. But her adoptive father Dasaraja,' here Kunti introduced the fisherman who nodded curtly in greeting, 'insisted that they could wed only if Shantanu swore that only Satyavati's children would have the right to claim the Puru throne.'

Dasaraja shrugged. 'Kings often desire beautiful fisherwomen or other women of lower stature. They rarely wed them, and even when they do, they rarely give their other children the right to kingship. It is the way of the world since time immemorial. I was only ensuring that my daughter would not be loved and then forgotten like so many other women of our community. The vow he took was entirely Gangeya's choice. I did not ask for it. Nor did I impose it as rigidly as he himself does even now.'

Kunti turned back to Akrur. 'Shantanu had countered Dasaraja's condition saying that he could not deprive his lawful son of his rightful place in succession and had returned home to Hastinapura in great sorrow, for he truly loved Satyavati and desired her more than anything else. But Gangeya came to know of his father's sadness and came to meet Dasaraja himself.'

The ageing fisherman shrugged. 'He swore to me in sight of the river – his mother's sister – and in the gaze of all the devas that he would not spill his seed so long as he lived. If he never sired a child, there could be no question of anyone but Satyavati's children ascending to the throne.'

Marvelling at the sheer audacity of the vow, Akrur turned his gaze back to the proud aquiline profile of Bhishma Pitamah who stood impassively staring ahead. To never know the touch of a woman or the pleasure of coition for his entire life! No wonder he was known as He Of The Terrible Vow ... Bhishma indeed!

Kunti went on: 'Satyavati's sons were Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. They were schooled by Bhishma Pitamah himself, and were great princes

and legendary warriors. But their lives were cut short prematurely through circumstance. Shantanu was already long dead by that time. This left only Bhishma Pitamah to father more children in order to further the Puru race —,

‘Which of course, he would not do on pain of death,’ Satyavati cut in sorrowfully, and Akrur saw that her bitterness was directed not at Bhishma personally but at the strange turn of fortune that had brought them to this juncture. ‘So I called upon a son I had birthed from an earlier encounter with the great Sage Parashara ...’

‘Which story I shall tell you at some other time,’ Kunti went on, ‘for it is a strange and lovely tale in itself. But for now, meet Satyavati’s son that she speaks of, the great mind that separated and organized the sacred verses of the Vedas, and who was known thenceforth as Ved Vyasa for this achievement, but whom we all know by his given birth name, Krishna Dweipayana, or simply Krishna for short.’

Akrur turned to look at the man who had, all this while, been staring out of the window at the dark night. He was struck by the intense, piercing gaze of the tall, pitch-dark man with formidable features. He swallowed and performed the necessary formalities of greeting a great sage, for there were few greater than this one. ‘Pranaam, Gurudev.’

Ved Vyasa, as he was known by legend and reputation, simply nodded in greeting.

Kunti continued, ‘Krishna Dweipayana, as Satyavati’s son, albeit by an earlier union, was legitimately her heir. And so, after Bhishma refused to break his vow and sire an heir to the Kuru dynasty, she called upon Krishna Dweipayana to do so. He agreed on certain conditions. Satyavati agreed to all his conditions, but her daughters-in-law were unprepared and unable to accept a personality so striking as the great sage. As a result, one bore a child who was born blind.’

‘Dhritarashtra,’ added Satyavati sadly.

‘And the other bore a son who was born devoid of skin pigmentation and with all the attendant complications caused by that condition.’

‘Pandu – the white one,’ Satyavati added. ‘Ved Vyasa had a third son, named Vidura. A wonderful, perfect boy, but sired upon a maid and therefore ineligible to ascend to the throne.’

Akrur nodded slowly. ‘You are married to Pandu,’ he said to Kunti.

‘Yes, and my husband is capable of producing an heir,’ she said with a trace of bitter sadness in her voice, ‘but he has been cursed. I will go into the details of that tale as well. Suffice it to say that he cannot sire a child on me or upon my sister queen Madri without dying instantly.’

Akrur rubbed his forehead. ‘So if Pandu cannot sire an heir upon his wives due to the curse, Dhritarashtra must do so.’

Kunti sighed. ‘Yes. But Dhritarashtra’s wife Gandhari has been pregnant for well over a year now and hasn’t given birth.

All the elders are agreed that her child has withered away in her womb.’

Bhishma Pitamah spoke up. ‘Now tell the good Lord Akrur what all this has to do with him and his people. For while the tales and tragedies of the Kuru race are no doubt compelling, he was not called all this way at such great risk simply to hear the unfortunate story of our inability to further our great dynasty.’

Kunti inclined her head respectfully in agreement. She turned to Akrur: ‘As in any Arya dynasty, when an heir is lacking, it creates a void. In this case, the void is a great one, for the Kuru dynasty has built a great and powerful kingdom, possessed of unmatched wealth and prime resources. We are the direct heirs of the great Bharata and his forebear Sudas, after all, who fought the legendary Dasarajna war that first established our line upon this subcontinent. To rule Hastinapura is to dominate all Aryavarta, for our kingdom’s borders mark the point of ingress into this part of the world and enclose the richest rivers and lands. The king who sits on the throne of Hastinapura, capital of Hastinapura and the seat of the Kuru dynasty, is undoubtedly the most powerful in this part of the world, if not the world entire.’

Akrur nodded. ‘I cannot argue with that. But how does the lack of heirs figure into the present political situation, unless you mean ...’ He trailed

off, gazing at the fireplace as he accessed his own store of knowledge and came to the inevitable conclusion. ‘Jarasandha,’ he said at last.

‘Yes,’ Kunti said, tensing at the name. ‘His campaign of acquisition has ravaged the length and breadth of the land. The only kingdom large enough to oppose him now, as well as the choicest jewel in his crown of conquest, is Hastinapura. And in a scenario where we are without a legitimate heir to the throne, if Jarasandha were to stake a claim to our great holdings, even our most docile neighbours might well be tempted into joining him and waging all-out war against us.’

Akrur slammed his left fist into his right palm. ‘The Yadava nations shall not stand by meekly and let that happen. We shall stand by the Puru nation against Jarasandha and his allies.’

At these words, the great white-haired sage turned away from his window and looked at the visitor. His eyes bore into Akrur with such intensity that the young man had to make an effort not to step back in consternation. ‘Bravely spoken, but naively said. For the Yadava nations are no longer their own master. They are in the grip of Kamsa the Usurper. And he is nothing more than Jarasandha’s tool, placed in Mathura merely to ensure that the joining of Yadava forces does not come to pass.’

sixteen

Kamsa found himself riding a horse. He had no recollection of getting on the horse, or even of getting out of bed that morning. By now, he had become unhappily accustomed to the abrupt ‘jumps’ in consciousness. In the past few days he appeared to have leapt forward by several months, sometimes losing mere days at a time, at other times losing entire weeks or months. He had no explanation to offer, nor did anyone else. Indeed, the few times he had attempted to explain his malady to Pralamba, the advisor visibly balked or stared blankly at him. He had deduced by now that he did not simply disappear from existence during these long absences. Indeed, to those around him, he apparently continued living and working and eating

and talking and continuing the everyday business of his life, but to himself, it was as if he had gone to sleep, and woken up days, weeks, or months later, each time without any recollection of what had transpired during the intervening period. To describe it as unsettling would be a euphemism; it made him feel vomitous and nervous all the time.

He had lost all confidence. The fact that he appeared to have lost his supernatural abilities only compounded his misery. Not only was he unable to expand himself, he had lost his superhuman strength as well. Reduced to the stature of just a normal mortal man – or as normal as he could be – hemmed in on every side by Jarasandha's henchmen and spasas, and unable to even live consciously through every day, he felt as if he had become a foot-soldier in some elaborate game of chaupat, the dice-game of military strategy favoured by kings and generals.

He had never cared for the game, partly because anything that required concentrating too hard and too long frustrated him as a boy, but also because his father enjoyed it a lot and was very good at it; so of course he had had to hate it intensely. He had broken his father's most prized chaupat set once, grinning with malicious joy as he shattered the ivory pieces and dice to fragments under his boot heels. He still remembered how happy that made him at the time – thinking of how upset his father would be when he found the destroyed game – happy enough to not care about the thrashing he was sure to receive from Ugrasena later.

Now, he shuddered as he rode round a large field towards the royal stables, and couldn't help glancing up at the sky – he almost expected to see a giant boot heel coming down to smash him to pulp.

There was no boot heel in the sky but from the clear cerulean blue upturned bowl above him and the warmth of the sun on his face and neck, he deduced that it was late spring or early summer now. How much time had he lost this time? A few weeks? More than that? He dreaded finding out, just as he dreaded knowing what had happened in the 'lost time'.

Handing his mount to a syce, he re-entered the palace precincts through the stable gate. Construction was still in progress in some parts, but he was struck by how much Bahuka had been able to rebuild during his blackouts. On the long walk to the palace proper, he was confronted at every turn by

new statuary, shrubbery, gardens, temples – temples! – and other artistic and cultural flourishes that had been absent during the decade of his rule. It angered him to see all the very things he had ordered destroyed, or had demolished himself, reconstructed in even grander finery than had existed before he, Kamsa, took the reins of power in his granite fists.

Once within the palace, he was struck by the architectural and interior changes. Gone were the alterations and amendments he had made to extinguish his father's Mathura. Of course, he was partly responsible for destroying his own renovations – he did recall being somewhat out of control during the past year or four, or perhaps even all through the decade. And why not? He had been liberated from the yoke of his father's tyranny. The domestic despot had been unseated, the captive prince released at last. It had been a decade of celebration.

He almost smiled, recalling the havoc he had wreaked, the wanton destruction he had unleashed, the sheer scale of demolition! Ah, but they were great years. He would do anything to continue that celebration – forever! Damn that Bahuka and the master he served. Jarasandha might be emperor of the mortal realm or even of all three realms for all he cared, but here in Mathura, Kamsa was still king. And it was time he demonstrated that. What else was Bahuka but Jarasandha's glorified spasa, stationed to spy on Kamsa and exercise control over him? The same went for the new cronies that Bahuka had carefully placed around him – all spasas of Jarasandha, no question about it. Today he would put that spasa and his cronies in their place once and for all. He would show them who was king of the Andhaka nation.

He entered the royal enclave and stopped short at once. The three courtyards – each of which was high-walled and accessed by only a single lowered gate, Bahuka's newfangled design again – were packed to the brim with soldiers.

Not mere soldiers. These were members of the Mohini Fauj. Prime specimens of Jarasandha's eunuch gladiators, birthed, castrated, bred and trained for havoc. It had been a while since he had confronted them, and coming upon them unexpectedly brought home the extent to which he had changed since that fateful day many moons past when he had gone into the heart of Magadha, in search of Jarasandha, and had wrestled and slain that

marauding king's choicest champions without working up much of a sweat.

A hundred pairs of eyes turned to look at him – eyes that seemed as distant as the stars that were coldly fixed in their firmament and as unseeing of anything that might occur on earth. Blood spilled, muscle rent to shreds, bones cracked and marrow drawn, sinew and gristle bared, glistening and gristly innards strung out , babies speared and mothers butchered ... nothing would draw a response from these cold eyes. They were merely windows through which machine-like minds viewed the world in two stark extremes: Enemy and Potential Enemy. Black and Not-yet Black. Everything and everyone was black or a shade of grey.

Examined, identified and assessed, he was dismissed as roundly as if he were a stray cur that had wandered into the grazing grounds of a pride of lions – lions that yawned and carried on with their existence and did not deem it fit to dignify his entrance with their attention. That was how he was spurned by the Hijras now. They simply turned away, even those closest to him showing their backs to him, and continued whatever it was they were doing, which, judging by the eerie silence that pervaded the enclave and the relatively relaxed postures in which they stood around, appeared to be simply waiting. Even when resting or waiting idly, Jarasandha's Mohinis did not simply lounge or sprawl sloppily; they remained at ease but in positions of preparedness, ready for any threat or command. This discipline of eternal readiness was partly what made them such formidable opponents.

Kamsa began moving through the close-packed press. It was hard going. Clad as they were in leather skirts and vests, with chain-link armour sown into the leather, Kamsa did not wish to brush against their garb and risk scraping the skin of his arms or legs. Yet they did not offer to move aside or even budge an inch from where they stood. Indeed, after that initial inspection, it was as if he had ceased to exist. The lions couldn't care less what the cur did next: slunk away or stayed and risked his mangy life further.

He could have raised his voice and commanded them to move aside and make way for him. After all, he was Jarasandha's son-in-law and as good as his heir and second-in-command. Or so he had believed. But that would

have seemed unmanly to these half-men, who compensated for their lack of sexual identity by sheer willpower, discipline, training and mastery of martial skills.

Had he possessed his own supernatural powers, he would simply have batted, swatted, kicked and shunted them aside like so many clay puppets and barged through. But his powers were gone – he had reluctantly and with great frustration come to accept that fact – and all he had were his normal human strength and skill. He used them as best as he could, shouldering the Hijras aside and moving through slender gaps. The going was not easy, and often a casually distended javelin, or sword hilt, or even a leg or an arm, would be in his way and he would have to physically push it aside – yet not too forcefully for fear of starting a fight he could not possibly hope to finish successfully. By the time he reached the second courtyard, his shoulders were bruised, the backs of his forearms skinned and bleeding in several places, and his legs felt as if they had been rubbed raw on the outside.

He was hugely relieved to see a familiar face.

‘Pradyota!’ he croaked, seeing the captain of the guards in conversation with the chief of the Hijra Fauj battalion.

Neither the captain nor the Hijra paid heed to him; they were engrossed in their talk.

Someone snickered and a whisper as soft as wind rustled nearby, with a distinctly mocking tone that he knew well from the time he had spent with Jarasandha’s army and with his own Mohini Fauj contingent.

He cleared his throat and said in a louder, more commanding tone: ‘Captain Pradyota?’

The captain frowned and looked around, forehead creased with irritation at being interrupted.

Kamsa was forced to wave a hand. He had to stand on tiptoe to be sure he was seen, because the Hijras around him were all at least a foot or more taller than him.

‘Over here, Captain.’

Captain Pradyota saw him and reacted with a peculiar mixture of scorn and derision. Then he strode forward, somehow walking easily and without impediment through the same crush of Hijra soldiers. Kamsa knew then that the crowd of Mohinis he had passed through had deliberately obstructed him in subtle ways, just enough to skin and bruise him but not enough to provoke an all-out fight. He swallowed, glad that they hadn’t pressed for a skirmish. In his present state, there was no doubt who would have ended up the victor.

‘Prince Regent Kamsa,’ said the new captain of the guards, the one that Kamsa did not remember appointing yet Bahuka insisted he had. ‘What are you doing here, sire? You were expected in the sabha hall several hours earlier.’

He said it in the tone one would use when addressing a child who returns late from play: Where have you been? Didn’t you hear your maatr calling you? Supper was hours ago!

Kamsa tried hard to ignore Pradyota’s insulting tone and manner. ‘In that case, do your damned job. Kindly escort me to the sabha hall!’

If I had my powers, I would have crushed you between my thumb and forefinger like a little rodent, you fool! How dare you speak to me thus?

Captain Pradyota nodded laconically, the sneer still lingering on his face. ‘Certainly, sire.’ He glanced at Kamsa’s shoulders and arms. ‘Did you have difficulty making your way on your own through the courtyard?’

Kamsa resisted the impulse to smash his fist into the man’s face.

‘You did say I was expected, did you not? Let us waste no more time then.’ He wanted that to come out fierce and threatening, and was somewhat disappointed that it merely sounded curt.

The captain chuckled brazenly. He inclined his head towards the Mohini chief who nodded back. Kamsa recognized the chief. He had ridden with him and they had slaughtered together, burnt homes, eaten in each other’s company, bedded beside one another, and the Hijra had treated him with

utmost respect as was warranted by one so close to Emperor Jarasandha himself, even before Kamsa married Jarasandha's daughters. But now, when Kamsa was at a position where he ought to be saluted, bowed to and indeed be given a formal salutation from the whole contingent, he was being treated like some mlechcha! It was infuriating and humiliating but there was little he could do about it.

The Hijra chief glanced at him coldly as he passed by. Not so much as a flicker of recognition or acknowledgement on the lout's face! Kamsa trembled with suppressed fury but walked on. He had almost reached the façade of the royal entrance when a particularly large Mohini strolled casually across his path, jostling him without even glancing aside. The giant was over seven feet tall and bulky enough to weigh two hundred kilos with a third more weight from his armour and sheathed weapons; the jolt was hard enough to send Kamsa sprawling, but he was anticipating some further mischief and took it on his shoulder, gritting his teeth. His shoulder was wrenched agonizingly with the force but he did not cry out or let the pain show. He merely walked on without even a backward glance, went up the marbled stairs and entered the palace of his ancestors where he now ruled as king in name only.

The crowd in the sabha hall surprised him. This was a full- session court! Only he as king could summon such an assembly and preside over it. Kamsa caught sight of Bahuka on the royal dais and strode forward, determined to put the man in his place once and for all. This was going too far! It was one thing to undermine his authority on a daily basis and to virtually use him as a puppet crown-figure, but to exclude him from the administration of his own kingdom was unacceptable!

He was almost at the dais when he noticed that a figure was seated on the Andhaka throne as well. That was treason! No one was permitted to even approach the empty throne! Who dared actually sit on it in full assembly? Whoever it was, the person had made a fatal error. Kamsa had taken enough humiliation for one day – for an entire lifetime, in fact – and he knew that this transgression needed no soldierly display of manliness. He had but to command and the fool who had sat on the seat of Andhaka governance would be food for the kitchen dogs.

He raised his arm and opened his mouth to shout, to bellow, to set the entire sabha ablaze with fear and intimidation, as he had done so often before. He needed no giant form, nor supernatural strength to do this, merely his authority as king of the Andhaka Sura nation.

Then he saw who it was that sat on the throne.

And all his bluster, anger and frustration were capped as quickly as the flame of a candle is extinguished by a brass snuffing cap.

And were replaced by stark, naked terror.

seventeen

After the last man arrived, was discreetly checked by the diligent sentries and permitted to enter the barn, the enormous wooden door was shut and bolted, and uks carts rolled before it. A few bales of hay, an uks or two put to munching on soft green shoots, and it appeared as if the barn had never been opened or entered that day. The sentries pretended to lounge on the hay and the cart, chatting endlessly in the loquacious way of Yadavas, while secretly alert and watchful of any stranger's approach.

The last man to enter heard the bolting of the barn doors and knew that the place was now secure. He undid the turban cloth he had wound tightly around his head and which covered most of his face as well, ostensibly to keep him warm from the chilly spring breeze on the journey by uks cart. The others gathered around the large hay-strewn barn did likewise, untying scarves and headcloths to reveal their faces. In turn, each one nodded to the last arrival, greeting him with the respect and awe reserved for the very great or very noble. To use the Sanskrit word, arya. The highest of the high. Truly, the dark complexioned, gracefully maturing man who stood inside the barn doors was arya indeed.

Vasudeva nodded back, glad to see those familiar faces. It had been so long since he had been able to set eyes on them, he had almost feared he might never do so. He inhaled the odours of stale feed and fresh cow

manure and sighed. His days of being a simple cowherd were far back in the past now, yet he sometimes wished he had never been called to do anything but tend to cows. He knew that Devaki felt the same way. Nothing would give them both greater joy than to leave behind the luxury and comfort of palace and city living and reside in rustic quietude. I'm no king, he thought, nor do I want to be one. Let my sons rule. I am content to be let out to pasture even now.

But as some great ancient Kusalavya bard had once sung, life was what happened to you when you were busy making other plans.

And so here he was again. Presiding over the Yadava Sangha.

'Well met, old friends,' he said quietly. 'You cannot imagine how much it pleases me to see each one of your faces today. Simply to be alive and to inhale this sweet scent of cow patties.'

Uddhava chuckled softly. Vasudeva noted that his old friend had streaks of grey in his hair and a beard that had not been there the last time they had met. Then again, that occasion had been over a decade ago.

'Would you like to sniff them a little closer, Vasu? That can be arranged!' Uddhava's eyes twinkled mischievously. The others laughed softly. Gopas were known to have cow patty fights at times, and each of them had flung and received his share of freshly patted cow dung in his youth.

Vasudeva laughed loudly, the sound surprising him as it echoed among the high rafters. 'I think our age for supping on such things has passed, would you not agree, old Kratha?' He addressed the question to an ageing man who leaned on a shepherd's crook as if his life depended on it: which it probably did.

Kratha surprised him by raising his bald head and wagging a shaky forefinger in the air. 'Speak for yourself, Vasu. Old you may be. I'm ready to take on any man in a cow patty fight. Right here. Right now!'

That brought laughter to everyone's lips. Even serious Chitraketu's mouth cracked open to reveal his teeth. It made Vasudeva realize how long it had been since he had jested and shared such rough good-natured

humour with his fellow Yadavas and caused him to curse the reign of Kamsa for the umpteenth time.

At least today we shall finally be able to do something to end that reign, he thought grimly as he went around embracing his clansmen in turn. Tears filled his eyes by the time he was done and he had to swipe at his face more than once. The strongest emotion came when he faced a young man whom he recognized at once owing to the strong resemblance he bore to his father.

‘Brihadbala the Younger,’ he said, gripping the young man’s shoulders.

Brihadbala nodded slowly and bowed his head to Vasudeva. ‘Bhagwan, show us the way. For too long have I told myself that my father did not die in vain. That Kamsa the Usurper did not murder my sire and so many other blameless Vrishnis for no cause at all. Now lead us forward to our salvation from this menace, lord.’

Vasudeva wiped the tears from his eyes. ‘Would that I could, my child. But that honour does not fall on me. It falls on the Slayer.’

Many heads nodded. Several exclaimed quietly, reverentially. The legend of the Slayer was a formidable one, albeit not spoken of aloud in public. It was the sole source of hope and inspiration to a troubled nation. Many lived only for the day when the Slayer would finally destroy the Usurper and not merely restore the Yadavas to their once-proud glory but take them beyond into a new age of milk and honey wine, as the prophecy claimed.

‘Bhraatr, we understand your plight,’ said Chitraketu. ‘You and your goddess-like wife Devaki have suffered immeasurably. We are proud and honoured to be graced even by your presence at this sangha.’

Vasudeva shook his head. ‘Do not speak to me as if I am some visiting lord or purohit, Chitra. I am just a gopa at heart, like all of you. I endure because that has been our way since the days of our great forebear Yadu himself. We learned this from the most beautiful and sacred creature of all on Sri’s holy prithviloka, goumata. As the humble cow endures through all seasons and all climes, so do we.’

‘True,’ said the chief of the Kannars. ‘True indeed. But there comes a time when we, as mere mortals, can endure no more. Some would even say we passed that point long ago. What good will enduring do now? It will only enable Kamsa’s soldiers to continue slaughtering our newborn babes unopposed.’

Uddhava raised a hand in a calming gesture. ‘The slaughter has ceased. Things have changed greatly in Mathura. The army itself has been reorganized. Those two butchers of Kamsa, Bana and Canura, have disappeared to places unknown. The new guard that now runs Mathura is a different beast altogether. It is nowhere near as bloodthirsty and mindless as the White Marauders.’

‘Or that awful Hijra Fauj,’ said another councillor, shuddering at the memory. ‘What Uddhava says is true. Things do appear to be changing. For one thing, instead of sword blades and lance points, Mathura seems to be attempting to win us over with gold and silver!’

‘Beware,’ said old Kratha shakily, leaning on his crook. ‘Gold and silver can cut a man as sharply as bronze and iron. Kamsa’s new advisors are shrewd as yaksas. They seek to buy our loyalty with coins. But where do you think those riches come from? From the coffers of Ugrasena! They are depleting the stored wealth of generations of Yadava kings.’

‘Perhaps they are only seeking to make reparation for all the damage and killing of the past ten years,’ suggested someone. It was instantly shouted down with noises of friendly disagreement.

‘Nothing like that! Their goal is to weaken the Yadava people by spreading wealth and luxury around. When you beat a dog for days and then suddenly begin feeding and petting it lovingly, it becomes willing to do anything to earn your affection. That is the tactic they are employing!’

Kratha pointed a shaking finger. ‘The Kannar chief speaks wisely. Everything Mathura does is but a tactic or a part of some larger plan. Beware!’

Satvata shook his head, looking confused and angry. ‘None of this can be disputed. But the question still remains, what are we to do? For now, the giant sleeps, or is listening to different advisors who have convinced him

to try new tactics that are apparently peaceful but are in fact devious. So be it. But we cannot wait for another cycle of slaughter and genocide to begin. We must take action now, while Mathura is still quiet and non-combative. This is the time to raise an army and march towards the capital! And who better to lead us than Lord Vasudeva himself !'

Cheers and yells of approval met this last comment.

With an effort, Vasudeva shushed and silenced them so that he could be heard. 'We have a plan of our own.'

The murmurs died down at once, and every pair of eyes turned to him, attentive.

'All of you are right in saying that it is time to act. What is more, I agree that the present lull is little more than a ploy on the part of Mathura. There are strange rumours afloat in the royal enclave. Rumours too frequent and similar to be mere gossip. These have been confirmed by my own observations over a period of time.' He paused, looking around at each one. He had their complete attention now. 'For one thing, Kamsa has changed.'

'How?' asked the Kannar chieftain whose farmlands were too distant for accurate reports from Mathura to reach often.

'He appears to have lost his demoniac powers,' Vasudeva said.

The peace of the barn was disrupted at once.

'Please,' Vasudeva said patiently, 'hear me out. I know what all of you are thinking, that if Kamsa is no longer capable of supernatural feats such as expanding himself to the size of a giant or rampaging across entire cities, what better time to attack? But there is a story behind his newfound vulnerability and that story is of great concern to us.'

The gathered Yadavas listened without interrupting Vasudeva.

'I suspect his food and drink are being doctored. Or perhaps some potent mixture or compound is being fed to him without his knowledge. Perhaps in his food, or drink, or some other way ... it does not matter what method is being used. But this diminution of his powers is deliberate.'

‘Who do you think is doing it?’ asked Chitraketu, with open-mouthed wonderment. None of them had as close a view of the inner workings of Mathura’s administration as Vasudeva.

Apart from the godlike adulation they had for him, he also had the best ringside view of the inner circle. What they heard as rumours or gossip weeks, even months after, he saw occurring before his very eyes every day.

‘Jarasandha,’ Vasudeva replied simply. ‘For it is an open secret now that he controls Kamsa and that my brother-in-law is but a tool in the hands of the Magadhan king.’

‘He calls himself emperor of Bharat-varsha now,’ Uddhava said derisively.

Satvata made a rude gesture and sound. ‘He isn’t fit to be emperor of my toilet.’

‘Even so,’ Vasudeva continued, ‘his control over Kamsa is now complete. I suspect that for too many years, he was busy with his other campaigns of conquest and it is only now that he has found the time to take a personal interest in the affairs of the Yadava nations.’

‘Why doesn’t he simply march in and invade us as he has so many other nations?’ asked Brihadbala.

They all grew sombre at this. Each one of them had heard the horrific stories of Jarasandha’s campaigns of conquest across the Aryavarta subcontinent. The thought of him unleashing his brand of devilry was a sobering one; more frightening than even the worst excesses of Kamsa and his White Marauders a decade earlier.

‘Because he wants the Yadavas intact,’ Vasudeva said simply. ‘We are great in number and strong in spirit. Our combined armies are a formidable force in the world. If we were not facing these internal strifes, or even despite these strifes, we could very well resist Jarasandha’s forces to the point where they get decimated trying to defeat us, or we might even win out over them altogether.’

There was no response to this explanation. It made sense as a well-thought-out strategy of the Magadhan emperor, or any emperor for that matter. Destroying the biggest workforce and military force in a region did not exactly make sense from a strategic point of view. Even the most rapacious emperor wanted to leave something to rule over when he was done conquering. And the Yadavas, despite being peace-loving, cowherding people who were more fond of music and dance and laughter and honey wine than anything else, were fierce when provoked.

‘But if he thinks he can set Kamsa up to subjugate us, he is wrong,’ said Chitraketu, his red-rimmed eyes – not reddened by drink or emotion, but by a condition he had had since childhood – flashing. ‘We shall rebel against the Usurper until the end of our days.’

‘Exactly,’ responded Vasudeva. ‘But the question is, how should we rebel? For the greatest number of able warriors are engaged as cowherds and farmers. If every gopa and gopi leaves aside his or her work, drops the crook and the plough and takes up the sword and the bow instead, all of Vrajbhoomi shall be turned into a battlefield. All the Yadava kingdoms shall be set ablaze in the subsequent conflict. Our lands, our herds, our families, our future ... it shall all be forfeited in the madness of war.’

The gathering fell silent again, considering this equally unpalatable vision.

Old Kratha, who had been listening to the discussion with closed eyes, now opened them and shook his crook at Vasudeva querulously: ‘You say that Jarasandha will not invade us. And that we ought not to rebel against his stool pigeon Kamsa. Then what should we do? Nothing?’

Vasudeva went over to the old man, lowered his crook gently and placed the wrinkled bony hands upon it again. ‘No, old father. The time for waiting and watching and doing nothing is long past. The hour is grown late and the wolf is already in the herd. We must act before Jarasandha does. And we must have a long-term plan and strategy. That is the only way to win this war.’

He turned to the others. ‘We cannot fight here on our lands for fear of destroying our entire livelihood. And I do not believe Jarasandha will

bring his armies here to invade us and risk everything he has gained over the past decade. This leaves only one final option if we are to fight this menace and root it out from the heart of our nation.'

The congregation waited, listening with a rapt expression.

'We must go into exile,' Vasudeva said, 'and draw the enemy to us, so that we may fight him on our own terms and at places and times of our choosing, not his. If we cannot chase the wolf out of the herd, we must move the herd itself to another pasture, forcing the wolf to expose himself to our attack. And when he is exposed, we shall attack him in unexpected and unthought-of ways, with the help of our new allies.'

'Allies?' interjected Uddhava. 'What allies do you speak of? Which Arya nation dares challenge the might of Jarasandha's Magadhan Empire today? And even if there are some stray recalcitrants, why would they support us if we go into exile and rebel against the seat of our own nation?'

Vasudeva smiled. 'These are all excellent questions. But I am not the one to answer them.' He gestured to a dark figure standing in the shadows. Everyone gasped as the new face emerged into the light. None had realized that one man had arrived long before the others and waited silently through the sangha's discussions for the moment when he would be called out by Vasudeva.

'Akrur!' they said, recognizing their countryman at once, clapping hands on his shoulders and back as he joined them.

'Akrur will tell you of these allies and how our plan of exile and rebellion also ties into their long-term strategy of keeping Jarasandha at bay.' He gestured to Akrur to take up the thread of the discussion.

Akrur nodded and turned to the sangha. 'In one word, Hastinapura. The seat of Hastinapura itself wishes to align with us and aid us in our rebellion against Jarasandha. Taking into consideration Hastinapura's offer of cooperation and by taking a long-term view, I too believe as Vasudeva does, that we shall eventually achieve our goal – of ridding the Yadava nations of the menace of Kamsa the Usurper as well as his puppet-master, the so-called "Emperor" Jarasandha himself.'

eighteen

Jarasandha coolly occupied the throne of Mathura. He looked relaxed, calm, as if he belonged there and had been sitting upon this very seat of power for years. Arrayed around him were several other familiar faces that Kamsa recognized. Hansa and Dimvaka were on either side, as always, like pillars framing the royal personage. Bana and Canura were there as well, standing behind the throne and off to one side. They avoided meeting Kamsa's gaze though Hansa and Dimvaka had no compunctions about staring arrogantly back at him. A few others he knew were Trnavarta, Agha, Vatsa, Baka, Dhenu, his own chief advisor Pralamba, a woman he recognized as the wife of the captain of the guards Pradyota, and of course, the recent thorn in his backside, Bahuka.

Bahuka did exactly what he had been doing these past several months – he told Kamsa what to do.

‘Prince Regent Kamsa,’ he said in a voice loud enough to carry across the sabha hall and to be heard by every one of the most powerful and wealthy nobles of not just Mathura, but of the entire Yadava race assembled there, ‘will you not show your allegiance to your benefactor and mentor, who also happens to be your illustrious father-in-law, the honourable god emperor of all Bharat-varsha, Aryavarta and prithviloka?’

God emperor? Bharat-varsha, Aryavarta and prithviloka? The subcontinent, the Bharata nations who resided on that subcontinent and the entire mortal realm as well? It would need a ‘god emperor’ indeed to govern that ambitious a principality!

By exhorting him in front of every last person whose opinion – and power – mattered in this part of the world, the shrewd old tactician had outwitted him once again. He had compelled Kamsa to adhere to protocol since not doing so would be seen as being churlish and rebellious, if not outright insulting. Kamsa knew Jarasandha’s methods too well; tolerating

insubordination or insults was not part of the Magadhan lord's world view. He had seen him kill men closer to him than Kamsa for lesser infractions.

Seething inwardly with pent-up frustration and fury, he bowed and bent his knee in obeisance. Bowing before my own throne, here's a royal irony!

'My lord,' he said. That was as much as he was willing to do. If Jarasandha expected any more, he could come kiss his royal seat.

Instead, Jarasandha surprised him by leaving the throne and coming down the dais steps with arms outstretched in an attitude of dramatic majesty.

'My son!' he cried with redoubtable sincerity. 'Kamsa, my eyes have ached to look upon you these past years. Too long have you kept yourself from me. My heart languishes without your youthful exuberance and energy. Come, embrace me.'

Kamsa let his former friend enfold him in the same lean yet whip-taut arms that he recalled from a decade ago. Jarasandha looked as if he hadn't aged a day since. The grip that held him was powerful enough to snap his back easily, and the squeeze Kamsa received was clearly a reminder of that. He half expected Jarasandha to pull him close and whisper some snarling threat that could not be caught by the rest of the sabha. But the 'god emperor' did no such thing. He behaved as if he were genuinely pleased to see Kamsa again after their long separation. Kamsa recalled his wives, Jarasandha's daughters, with a vague twinge of not-quite-guilt. It had been a fair time since he had seen them last. Perhaps there was as much of the father-in-law's sentiments of wrath and reluctant tolerance in Jarasandha's attitude to him as that of a conqueror seeking new territories. It also gave Kamsa a sense of righteous indignation: Jarasandha should be treating him with more respect than he was at present!

Jarasandha regained his seat upon the throne, gesturing to Kamsa to be seated on another silk-cushioned gold-limned stool that was quickly brought forward by attendants and placed close to Jarasandha's – yet slightly behind it and much lower in height. He gestured to other waiting serving staff.

‘Come, partake of refreshment with me. You must be tired after your tax-collecting trip. If you will excuse me, I shall finish dealing with some minor administrative matters.’

Tax collecting? Was that where he was to have been? Perhaps he had been expected to collect the manure the horse had dropped on the field – was that the ‘tax’ Jarasandha had in mind? Horse droppings?

Kamsa sat with a goblet of honey wine in his hand as Jarasandha issued a few formal proclamations, signed several agreements, armistices, trade deals and other such ‘minor administrative matters’ with efficient ease.

Go on, thought Kamsa sourly as he watched over the rim of his brass goblet, be comfortable, dearest father-in-law. Consider this your own kingdom. It was also clear that all these deals and agreements were the culmination of months of diplomacy, negotiations and tough talk. He glanced at Bahuka who was supervising the formalization of each scroll, instructing the munshis and generally overseeing the whole process. Bahuka sensed him looking in his direction and glanced up, grinning broadly. Kamsa looked down, disgusted.

At one point, Jarasandha looked over at him with a shrewd, knowing glance. He turned to look at Bahuka, then Hansa and Dimvaka and finally included his other cronies and associates in his cryptic glance. Some silent communication passed between them as all of them turned to look at Kamsa. Then, as one man, they all burst out laughing. Jarasandha looked at Kamsa again, his thin lips pursed, eyes half-lidded, a faint shadow of a smile sketched on his sharply malevolent features.

Kamsa fought mightily the desire to dash the goblet of wine at the ‘god emperor’ and throw himself at the man who had reduced him from a king of kings to a mere puppet figure and a laughing stock in his own court.

Jarasandha saw the change come across his features and read Kamsa’s mood accurately.

‘Does something trouble you overmuch, my son?’ he asked, taking a sip from his goblet. ‘I trust you will not mind my calling you son? After all, a son-in-law is like a second son in our culture.’

'Not at all, father dearest,' Kamsa said, seething within but smiling pleasantly. 'I was merely wondering what our plans are?'

Jarasandha nodded in response to some query whispered in his ear by Pralamba before glancing casually at Kamsa again. 'What plans do you refer to, Kamsa?'

'For Mathura, of course,' said Kamsa, using every ounce of his willpower to keep himself from shouting and throwing things. He wanted to, but with merely mortal strength and body, he knew that he would be crushed in a moment. But there were other weapons in his armoury. So if it's talk and public displays you want, let's do it your way, mighty 'god emperor'!

'Mathura is your kingdom, Kamsa,' Jarasandha said condescendingly. 'Surely you know what your own plans are?'

'Of course,' Kamsa agreed. 'But your overview and grasp of the entire socio-political climate is so much superior to my own, I would be foolish not to ask you to lend your expertise to the welfare of my people.'

Jarasandha looked out across the lake of upturned faces. The backchat in the sabha hall had risen to a gentle lulling background noise while Jarasandha was sealing the treaties and attending to other formalities, but now it had died out altogether. Clearly, the court sensed some animosity between father- and son-in-law and was eager to see what transpired. There was also the fact that Kamsa's reign of terror had not yet been completely forgotten and from the looks he received daily, he knew that everyone was expecting him to return to that old demoniac form at any moment. Perhaps they even thought that this human and vulnerable Kamsa was but a ploy, some tactic designed to appease and lull the citizenry. They were rich and powerful, lazy and self-indulgent, but not fools. And Jarasandha's own reputation preceded him across the length and breadth of the civilized world – and beyond; his cruelty was renowned, his own demoniac origins legendary. A clash between these two titans would be a sight to see, and the rich always enjoyed spectacles, especially the gory, brutally violent kind. Here we are now, said the rapt silence of the hallful of nobles, entertain us!

Kamsa saw from Jarasandha's face that he too had read tension in the room, and come to the same conclusion. The cool grey eyes remained placid, the attitude stayed nonchalant.

'Perhaps it may be more pertinent if you were to ask me specific questions, so I could answer to the point.' Jarasandha gestured to the chamber at large. 'One would not wish to bore the entire nobility of the kingdom, after all.'

'Of course,' Kamsa responded, carefully mirroring rather than mimicking Jarasandha's polite coolness. The game was on.

Kamsa rose to his feet and stepped a few yards ahead. Jarasandha's coterie instantly grew suspicious and alert: from the corners of his eyes, Kamsa glimpsed hands reaching for sword hilts, feet muscles clenching, eyes narrowing. He kept his movements casual and relaxed, even as he walked to and fro in front of the throne as he spoke. It was unorthodox in the extreme, could even be considered an affront to the throne, but after all he was the prince regent, was he not? And he was speaking not only to the 'god emperor' but also to his father-in-law. The informality could hardly be constructed as an insult when Jarasandha himself had encouraged the casual attitude and emphasized their personal tie!

'What steps do you intend to take to find this so-called Slayer?' Kamsa asked. It was important to start with a hard-hitting question, to gain the upper hand from the very outset. The collective nobility of the kingdom was watching, after all. He would ram question after question up Jarasandha's slender throat, until the so-called god emperor's gullet was too full for him to even take a breath! Then he would go in for the kill and tear the man's innards out with a single slashing accusation. So much for dear loving father-in-law. Before this sabha session ended, he, Kamsa, the rightful king, would be on the throne of the Andhaka nation once more.

However, a faint niggling doubt reared its head in his conscience, suggesting that perhaps he ought to tread carefully.

After all, irrespective of his arrogant treatment of him, Jarasandha was one of the most powerful warlords in the world at present, as well as a

harsh and unforgiving enemy. It might perhaps be wise not to antagonize him completely.

But he had already dealt the first punch and now waited to see his opponent reel and rock.

Jarasandha smiled and spread his hands, frowning as he did so. ‘What slayer?’ he asked with convincing perplexity.

Kamsa resisted the urge to snort. Somehow, without living beings dropping from one’s nostrils, snorting and sneezing were no longer as much fun. ‘The prophesied Slayer of Kamsa, of course! The one told of by Sage Narada so many years past, and whose coming has been awaited by his people for over a decade.’

Jarasandha chuckled. ‘Rumours. Gossip. Idle chatter. Nothing more.’

Kamsa stared at him, dumbfounded. ‘You would question the prophecy of a deva-rishi? Brahmarishi Narada himself stated that—’

‘Stated to whom?’

Kamsa blinked, unused to being interrupted. ‘What?’ Jarasandha smiled indulgently, as if addressing a feeble friend.

‘You say this Narada stated this alleged prophecy. To whom did he state it?’

Kamsa looked around, wondering what was happening. ‘What do you mean to whom he stated it! Everyone knows about the prophecy. The whole kingdom has been clamouring for the “Deliverer” to be born and now they say he has been born and that my days on earth are numbered! Everyone knows this! Where have you been, Jarasandha? How do you not know of the Slayer? I thought you knew everything!’

Careful, don’t get carried away. Winning petty points here won’t help your score in the final quarter of this game. This was Kamsa’s inner voice of conscience and good sense, advising him again. He ignored it. It felt far too good to be slapping the great ‘god emperor’ around. His larger, dominating, demoniac side might not have been able to display itself

through the use of power and force, but it could still unleash some much-needed anger: Take that, Jarasandha! Yes!

Jarasandha looked as calm as Kamsa felt angry. ‘Where have I been? Consolidating a hundred divided tribal principalities and minor kingdoms into a cohesive collective. Building an empire, in other words. Possibly the greatest empire ever assembled in this subcontinent, if not the world.’ Then he smiled disarmingly, as if embarrassed at the sheer scale of his own achievement. ‘But let’s stick to the point, shall we? This Slayer you speak of, am I to understand that only you heard this alleged prophecy being pronounced? Didn’t anyone else see this Narada-muni when he is said to have made this outrageous claim of a deliverer being born, etc, etc? A serving girl, perhaps? Or a sarathi on his way to the stables? A cook, a thief, his wife, her lover? None of the above? How odd!’

Titters of amusement rippled through the sabha hall.

Kamsa looked around, furious. ‘Silence when the king speaks!’ he roared.

He turned back to Jarasandha, arm outstretched, finger pointing accusingly. ‘Stop trying to twist this around. What difference does it make whether Narada-muni made the prophecy to one man or a hundred thousand? The point is, he prophesied that the Slayer would be born, that he would be the eighth son of my sister Devaki by her husband Vasudeva. And that prophecy has in fact come to pass! The Slayer has been born! What I want to know is what the bleeding hell you intend to do about it! Answer me, Father-in-law dearest!’

The last title was emphasized with more than a little contempt. In fact, Kamsa said it with a sneer so pronounced, it was almost nasally intoned.

Jarasandha sat back on the throne, crossed one leg over the other, and rested his elbows on his thighs, then put the tips of his fingers together. It was the posture of a man in complete control of his faculties, calmly contemplating before speaking his mind.

Utter silence prevailed in the sabha hall.

Kamsa realized that he had openly confronted Jarasandha now. That last outburst had verged dangerously close to a challenge. He felt sweat pop from the crown of his head and trickle down copiously from his skull. The nape of his neck prickled with a sense of impending threat. You've pushed him too far now, you fool, warned his sensible side. So be it, laughed the demoniac side scornfully. Let's have it out right here and now!

There was little doubt about which side ruled Jarasandha. The Magadhan replied with unctuous calm: 'I intend to do absolutely nothing, Son-in-law.'

Kamsa laughed. The sound rang shockingly hollow in the vastness of the sabha hall. 'Nothing? That's all I expected of you!'

'But I expected far more of you, Kamsa,' Jarasandha went on. Now he stood, slowly and with great dignity, moved with fluid grace to the end of his dais, then paused to face outwards towards the spellbound audience. 'When I sent you here to Mathura ten years ago, I expected you to take a very different course of action. Instead, what did you do?'

Kamsa stared up at him, puzzled. What was the man talking about? What was this new ploy? Kamsa had just outwitted him by making him admit he could do nothing to stop the Slayer! He had won, dammit! Why wouldn't Jarasandha shut up, or at least apologize and offer his regrets to him now? Why couldn't he just lose gracefully?

'You usurped your father's throne, imprisoning the great King Ugrasena, perhaps the greatest ruler of this nation since the great Yadu himself.'

Excited murmurs coursed through the court at this unexpected praise of the nation's rightful king. 'Then, under the pretext of an alleged "Slayer" that you claimed had been prophesied, you embarked on a mindless rampage of death and destruction for over a decade. But who was this Slayer intended to kill? You, of course! Because as an immature, thoughtless, patricidal and matricidal boy, you assumed that you were the most important person in the whole universe! So you created this myth of a fictional Slayer who would rise one day from your sister's womb and destroy you, and through the perpetuation of this myth, you brought this proud kingdom almost to its knees.'

Jarasandha gestured to the audience with one hand, as if asking, is it not so? Kamsa glanced around with startled eyes and saw several heads bobbing, faces rapt with admiration for Jarasandha's brilliant politicking and shrewd calculation. The erstwhile king and supreme commander of Mathura could not believe this was actually happening. Yet it must be, for there were several hundred witnesses to it!

Jarasandha acknowledged his audience's response and stepped down from the dais. For a moment, Kamsa saw his intent set eyes and felt sure that this was the moment in which his father-in-law would attack and kill him without compunction. But Jarasandha opened his arms in a clear gesture of peace and conciliation as he descended each successive step, choosing his words carefully and delivering them to match his actions in rhythm and pace: 'Now it is time for you to put this mad delusion out of your head, my son. There is no Slayer of Kamsa! It is a product of your fevered imagination. You were in the grip of demoniac forces all these years and they worked their will through you. But I have released you from their grip. You have been exorcised by Bahuka and his powerful ayurveda. The results are there for all to see.'

Jarasandha reached the bottom of the dais and gestured at Kamsa, showing him off to the court. 'What was once monstrous and bestial is a man once more. Celebrate your return to humanity, Kamsa! Once I have fulfilled my promise to your late pitr and completed my work here, I shall leave Mathura to continue my imperial expansions and consolidation. As it is, I am neglecting my own empire to aid my friends, the Yadava nations here. I am an outsider and will soon be gone. You, however, are a son of this nation, a lord of this great court, master of the Yadus. You are the rightful heir to the Andhaka throne and a potential ruler of all the Yadava kingdoms. History is yours for the making. Give up these foolish delusions, these fruitless quests for this mythical Slayer. There is no Slayer! The people desire a deliverer, that is true. They are weary of the constant rebellions and uprisings by various Yadava factions. It is time to breathe life back to and complete the great initiative to which your father devoted his last years before his unfortunate demise, and to consolidate this great race into a united coalition. The very republic that Yadu envisaged! You can be king of that nation, Kamsa. You can be the deliverer

they desire. Be a man, step up and grasp your future with both hands. The world awaits you.'

And in a gesture that Kamsa could never have expected or foreseen had he lived a thousand lifetimes, Jarasandha gripped Kamsa's shoulder tightly with an iron fist and pointed the lean fingers of the other towards the dais, at the Andhaka throne itself. 'Go on, my son. Seat yourself in your rightful place. Yesterday, you were cursed as a demon. Today, you are a man again. It is time you became the king you are destined to be.'

The roar of approval that met the end of Jarasandha's speech drowned out everything else for the next several minutes.

Jarasandha smiled at Kamsa, his brow lowered in that peculiar way he had of looking down while looking up at the same time; between his slightly parted lips, the tip of a divided tongue flickered and snapped as tautly as a whip.

Kamsa stared into the translucent grey eyes of his father-in-law and realized with awe and more than a little admiration that he had just been outwitted brilliantly by the cleverest politician on earth.

He also realized that he had only two choices left now: to bow gracefully to Jarasandha, acknowledge him as the superior man and accept his magnanimous 'gift' of Kamsa's own throne and crown; or attack, attempt to kill Jarasandha, and most likely die in the attempt. He had only a split second to make the choice, but in a sense that had already been made the day he left Mathura in search of the man who would become his guru and his guide. The events of today and of the past several months were merely a seal of authority placed upon that choice he had made. A formalization. It was only his own seething rebelliousness that insisted he could still choose between the two options available to him: bow. Or die.

He bowed.

Kaand 1

one

Yashoda admired each tiny well-oiled limb as she massaged it firmly but gently, pulling and exerting just the right amount of force needed to strengthen the baby's muscles without straining the tender flesh. Krishna giggled and squirmed as she massaged his belly and moved her hands up and down against his sides, and squealed uncontrollably when she touched his underarms.

Tickles you, does it? she thought, smiling. She had realized that there was no need to speak the words aloud, and that the bond between them went far deeper than words could express.

Yes, Maatr. But it also feels very nice. Please don't stop.

She smiled and continued.

Beside her, Gargamuni and his entourage of Brahmins continued the padapad recitation of the mantras appropriate to the occasion of the bathing ceremony. Around her were the women of the family. Rohini and Balarama were not present of course, for the pretence of the two boys being just friends rather than brothers had to be maintained. Just because Mathura had changed its political approach of late did not mean that everything was well again. The Usurper still sat upon the Andhaka throne. Word was that Jarasandha the Magadhan controlled Kamsa's every word, action and decree, and that he and his allies had some elaborate game plan that was yet to be revealed. The year of peace had lulled most of the aristocracy and nobility into believing that the worst was past, and being rich and powerful and therefore detached from the woes of the common people, they had formed alliances and bartered deals with the Magadhan and his demon dog in human form, as Kamsa was often called.

But the people continued to resist Mathura's overtures, and of all the Yadavas, the Vrishnis were the most stubborn. They could simply not forget the atrocities that Kamsa and his marauders had visited upon them and their fellow Yadava tribes and clans in the past decades, nor could they forgive those horrors. As far as they were concerned, there could be no real peace until Kamsa was removed and Ugrasena restored to the throne

and, managed by Akrur in Vasudeva's name, the rebellion continued to grow secretly. Nanda supported the rebels covertly as best as he could, but was hampered by the knowledge that he harboured the Deliverer in his own house. As Yashoda had often reminded him, he could not afford to do anything that might draw attention to Gokul. As it is, he had been trying to convince her to go with him to Mathura and let Devaki and Vasudeva meet their sons, if only for a brief moment. She had been horrified by the very thought. To take their infant child into the lair of the beast itself? Never! What sacrifices had been made, what terrible slaughter unleashed, how many innocent babes butchered, all so this one child, the one she was now massaging so lovingly, could survive. How could they risk all that? Much as she understood the longing of a mother and father separated from their own flesh, she was not willing to risk Krishna's life in order to give them that pleasure.

If you do not will it, I shall not go, Maatr.

She almost laughed aloud. *Of course you shall not go, my impudent son. You have not yet learnt to walk! I don't expect you to go strolling off to Mathura on your own!*

His cherubic dark face, glistening with the massage oil, wrinkled briefly. He touched one chubby finger to his chin, considering seriously.

It is true I cannot walk yet in this form, Maatr. But I can always fly if I desire.

She turned him over briskly, setting him on her outstretched legs, and slapped him lightly on his buttocks. They jiggled.

'Whether you desire or not is not the question. I am your maatr and I forbid it expressly.'

Behind her, her sisters Dadhisara and Yasasvini glanced curiously at one another, wondering what Yashoda was up to. She heard Yasasvini lean over and whisper to Dadhisara, 'There she goes again, talking to Krishna.'

'As if he can understand her,' Dadhisara replied.

They giggled. Yashoda smiled. If only she could enlighten her sisters about how wrong they were! But of course, none must know of the true identity of her beloved son. The moment word spread that the Slayer was in Yashoda-devi's house, the whole world would beat a pathway to her threshold.

Yes, Maatr, her child's voice replied sombrely in her head. **It shall be as you will. But you do understand that sooner or later, I shall have to go to Mathura.**

She sighed, her heart leaping inside her breast at the thought of this little bundle of life facing the demon of Mathura. *Not for a good many years yet, I pray. You must grow up to be a man before you face him.*

I do not mean my confrontation with Kams-mama. That is not due for a few more years. I mean going to meet Vasudeva-pitr and Devaki-maatr. I shall have to go soon, and Balarama shall also have to come with me.

She stopped massaging the tiny body. 'What?' she said aloud. Hearing her voice rise above the litany of the Brahmins, she corrected herself. Continuing to massage his back and shoulders, she articulated the rest of her communication silently. *What do you mean, go soon? Why would you need to go to Mathura?*

For the same reason Nanda-pitr wishes us to go. To see Vasudeva-pitr and Devaki-maatr.

Yashoda glanced around, wishing she was alone with her child so that she could speak to him aloud instead of framing each word in her mind. It was difficult to control the outrush of emotions that flooded her mind along with the words this way, and she feared what she might communicate without meaning to by using this method. After all, he was but a babe.

Not just a babe, Maatr. I have a larger purpose here on prithviloka. You of all people must know that.

Yes, yes, of course, she responded. But her heart said, *No, no, no, never.*

Do not fret, Maatr. Remember, because of who I am, you need never fear any harm. Even while I am gone to Mathura, no one dare harm you in any way.

‘Me?’ she said. Then continued mentally: *It is not I who fear I might come to harm, my little gopa! It is you I am concerned about. You as well as your brother Balarama.*

He chuckled. **Balarama is quite capable of looking after himself as well as me, his kid brother. After all, he is Shesha, you know.**

She had no idea what he meant. Shesha? Wasn’t that the great serpent in the ocean of milk upon which sat some great deva ... was it Vishnu?

Krishna gurgled and burped noisily beneath her working hands. And he followed it up with a sharp exudation that made her wrinkle her nose. She slapped his oiled bottoms again, affectionately. *Don’t get cheeky with me, little fellow. You may be the Slayer of Kamsa, but you’re still my little Krishna.*

Yes, Maatr, he said in a suspiciously serious tone.

The ceremony ended soon after, and Yashoda had to see to the rest of the ritual formalities. Her sisters told her to lay Krishna down and assured her that they would watch over him. She didn’t want to put the babe down in the open because the sun was too strong, and so decided to place him with his blanket and toys beneath an un-yoked uks cart that was resting nearby. She positioned him securely in the shadow of the cart and surrounded him with cushions on all sides so that he would not roll over and bang his head or injure himself in any way. Fortunately, he had not begun to sit up yet, so there was no question of him hitting the underside of the cart. She tucked him in firmly so that he would not kick out and hurt his feet on the wagon wheels. The cart was loaded down with metal pots containing various liquid items of nourishment needed for the feast, and its wheels had been chocked with stones to prevent it from budging even an inch. So she didn’t have to worry about the vehicle moving while Krishna was under it. She finished tucking him in and kissed him gently on the cheek.

Too tight, he complained. But his voice was already sleepy.

‘Tight is safe,’ she said, leaning over and kissing him on his forehead. He smelt of oil and milk and something else that she could not put a name to – a smell he always had and which she had never smelt on any babe before. Nobody was around just then, and so she could speak to him normally. ‘I will be right here in this field. I will check on you at all times. Don’t worry. And don’t go anywhere.’

I might decide to take a walk to Mathura, he replied cheekily.

‘I doubt that very much,’ she said, looking at him solemnly. ‘You haven’t had your late morning feed of milk yet.’

He chuckled sleepily, then sighed, yawned big and wide, and turned his head away, into the cosy darkness of the underside of the cart.

She smiled and left him.

It was a while later, when she was busy ensuring that every last Brahmin, guest and relative had been fed full to bursting, that she heard the sound. It was customary among Yadavas to not simply feed their guests on formal occasions but to ensure that they were incapable of ingesting a single morsel more or taking a single sip of water for several hours. Nobody knew how this tradition had begun, but it had its origins in some ancient puranic tale of the pitrs, the mythic ancestors about whom there always seemed to be an appropriate story to illustrate every moral and regale every gathering. No doubt some ancient pitr had once eaten his fill at a ceremonial feast, but not more than his fill, and not long after, on his way home, he had met a friend on the road and that friend had invited him to come to his home to celebrate some occasion. And when he had done so, and returned home much later that same day or night, his wife or brother or mother or uncle had asked him if he had eaten yet and he had replied, ‘Yes, twice, in fact. Once at so-and-so’s feast, the second time at such-and-such’s celebration.’ And the wife (or brother, mother, uncle, etc.) had thought, So-and-so’s feast can’t have been very good if he was still hungry enough to eat afterwards! And soon, word got around that so-and-so’s feast hadn’t been enough to fill that pitr’s belly, so much so that he had to go to a friend’s house later to satiate his hunger. And of course, the

story had then grown swiftly into an entire legend about how little food there was at so-and-so's feast and how people went home hungry and had to knock at their friends' doors to ask to be fed since they hadn't prepared any food at home that day on account of the feast. And over time, nobody would deign it wise to attend a feast at so-and-so's place, of course!

Whatever the reason, the fact was that Yadavas had to be fed to the gills. It was even considered preferable that a guest throw up from overindulgence – provided that he be fed yet again before leaving!

Yashoda was handing out the sweet dish herself to make sure that every Brahmin got more than enough. She knew how much Brahmins loved their sweets, and had prepared the ones to be served at the feast herself. They were sweet potatoes, cooked in her special preparation designed to bring out the flavour of the yam, soften the tender flesh, and enhance the sweetness. As each Brahmin unwrapped his portion of sweet potato from its enclosing banana leaf and popped it in his mouth, she had the satisfaction of seeing his face alter dramatically in response. She glanced down the row and saw a whole range of similar expressions as each purohit rolled his eyes and head as he mashed the delectable sweet between his palate and tongue. Even her own mouth watered at the sight. As the maatr of the boy whose bathing ritual was being conducted, she had had to fast since the previous night. She would eat only after the last guest had departed after being fed to bursting.

It was then that she heard the sound. It resonated in the field like a loud THWACK!

For a moment, she mistook it for the sound of children playing the danda game. The one where they took a short, thick cudgel-like stick and a smaller piece of wood, laid the small piece on the ground and rapped it hard in such a way that it rose up in the air – and then they hit it sideways, sending it flying to the point of their choice. The aim was to hit the piece into a certain spot each time. It tended to be played mostly by boys, who seemed to love cracking and hitting sticks, and she had seen a group of them playing on the south end of the field. The thought that the sound might have something to do with her Krishna didn't even occur to her. But she did look up and marvel at the loudness of the sound. That must be a very big stick, or a very powerful hitter.

Then she remembered that some of the men had finished eating and they loved playing danda just as much as the boys. No doubt they had started a game of their own and someone had just cracked the thickest danda in half, causing that sound. She saw her sisters and friends looking around quizzically too. Nobody seemed to know what had caused the loud report, but none seemed too worried either. They went back to doing what they were doing.

Eager to be done and to eat her own food, Yashoda bent to place another portion of sweet potato upon the last purohit's banana-leaf plate. Krishna would awaken any time and want to be fed, if he wasn't already awake, that is. And it would be nice if she could eat before feeding him. It enriched the milk, she knew.

A moment later, another sound echoed across the field. This one was even louder than the first, and wholly different. Not merely wood striking wood, but a distinctly metallic thud, as if some firm metal object was being crumpled under a great impact. Then a screaming, screeching metallic sound as if the same metal object were being struck again and again, on an anvil. There were other sounds mingled in this as well, wet sounds, wooden cracking sounds and a third kind of noise that she could not easily decipher, but which made her heart race and her eyes widen.

Everyone was looking around, alert and afraid. The noise was loud enough to be heard through the length and breadth of the field, and hundreds of people had stopped whatever they had been doing to look in the direction ... of the south field!

That's where I left my Krishna!

And with that thought, Yashoda needed to hear no further sounds, noises or urging.

She dropped the metal platter of sweet potatoes, letting the precious sweets tumble into the dirt and not caring, and raced towards the place where she had left her sleeping son.

two

Yashoda reached the south end of the field to find a great commotion. Most of the guests who had finished eating were lounging about there, sitting around in groups and talking, some singing folk songs, others playing games, a few flirting and romancing in the time-honoured way of light-hearted Yadavas. When she came running from the north end, the crowd had taken to its feet and was peering in the direction of the sound – The place where I left my baby under the cart! – and the invitees to the feast were chattering anxiously amongst themselves as if some calamity had befallen.

She had to push her way through the crowd, requesting to be let through. ‘Please let me pass; my Krishna is there.’

But as the crowd grew denser and the babble louder, she had to resort to shouting, ‘Let me through, please!’

Once the gathering saw that it was Yashoda-devi, the hostess herself, it parted at once, but it still took several agonizing moments for her to pass through the throng, moments during which all sorts of awful images flashed through her mind. Her anxiety made her take in her breath at a faster rate and she felt herself growing light-headed with fear.

Finally, she broke through and stumbled into the open patch at the southern end of the field. The crowd had formed a rough semicircle there, as if held back behind an invisible line. Her sisters were among the crowd, looking as dazed as everyone else.

Yashoda looked around and saw that there was a reason why they were reluctant to go beyond that point. There were things lying around in the way: pieces of wood, shattered blocks, what looked like a mangled piece of metal, and other odd objects that she gradually began to associate as parts of what had once been ...

‘The cart!’ she shrieked, clapping her hands to her cheeks.

She looked at the spot where she had left Krishna, where the uks cart had been stationed, near the sala tree.

There was no cart there any more.

She ran the last few yards, passing the unmistakeable remains of the cart's axle, apparently shattered to fragments, two half- broken wheels, and other assorted debris.

In the midst of the wreckage, scattered about were the garments in which she had wrapped Krishna and tucked him in so carefully.

Of Krishna himself, there was no sight at all.

Her heart threatened to freeze with fear.

Her first and only thought was that Kamsa or his demoniacal minions had somehow found her boy – had learnt that one newborn boy who had begun life that fateful night of the prophecy had somehow escaped the spear points of his soldiers – and he or his child-murdering men had come and killed her baby. She didn't understand how the cart had been shattered, or why; only that such destruction could only be the work of a malevolent agent. And who else would attack a child so viciously but the Childslayer himself? Yes, it had to have been Kamsa! And from the appearance of the debris strewn all around her and Krishna's garments, it was evident that he had slain her beloved infant.

‘No!’ she whispered. ‘Not my baby. Please, Lord!’

Maatr.

The single word was a drop of water into a calm pool. It rippled in her consciousness, spreading outwards. As it spread, it quenched the fires of fear and doubt and anger that were brewing in her mind and senses, and replaced those fiery emotions with soothing calm assurance. But she was very troubled and resisted.

I am well. Why do you cry? You have no reason to fear for my well-being. Calm thyself.

‘Krishna?’ she cried out, in her mind as well as with her lips. ‘Where are you, my son? Show yourself!’

Here, Maatr.

She spun around. The watching crowd stepped back, uncertain of what was possessing Yashoda in this moment of anguish. The people had leapt to the same inevitable conclusion: that somehow the agents of Kamsa had found the infant and had killed him in some demoniacal fashion. They didn't need to know or guess at anything further – Kamsa's men had killed children regardless of their birthdate at times, and though the killings had ceased a while ago, nobody trusted the apparent period of peace that had followed the season of mayhem and slaughter. Kamsa was capable of anything.

‘Where?’ she all but screamed. ‘I cannot see you, my son!’

As she uttered this, she saw the expressions on the faces of the watching guests who were staring at her with a mixture of pity, sorrow and sympathy. Several even offered their hands to her, asking her to come to them, speaking words of solace for her loss.

‘No, you don’t understand,’ she said in agitation, ‘my Krishna is fine. I just have to find him. Where are you, my son! Show yourself!’

At this, the looks of sympathy intensified and several in the gathering began shaking their heads and clicking their tongues in commiseration. She saw her sisters, mother and friends all approaching, concern writ large on their faces. And off to the other side, she glimpsed Nanda’s head bobbing as he made his way through the crowd, his brothers and other associates following him as well.

Krishna giggled. The sound echoed in Yashoda’s ears, as clear as a brass temple bell. But she still could not spot him anywhere. There was nothing but debris to be seen for several dozen yards in every direction.

‘Krishna! Stop teasing me and show yourself this very minute!’ she said sternly, not caring that everyone could hear her. She was growing desperate with anxiety.

I am right here, in front of you, Maatr, keep walking this way ...

‘Here?’ she asked, moving carefully through the bits and pieces of the cart and its contents lying around, stepping with extra caution as she scoured every square inch. She could see no sign of her boy.

A little to your right, further this way, now turn partly to your left. Yes, look down now ... no, under the big cross-shaped piece of wood stuck in the ground. Yes, Maatr. Can you see me now?

She knelt down on the ground which was churned up a bit in that area as if worked over unevenly by a plough. A ragged block of wood and metal was embedded in the ground. She realized that it was part of the cart's axle, broken off by some great impact and stuck in the ground at a tilt. She could not imagine what force could have shattered something that sturdy, for she knew something about carts and ploughs herself, but she did not care about that just now. It was what lay behind it that concerned her. She peered carefully over the jagged metal-and-wood shard sticking out of the ground and her heart leapt with joy as she saw the familiar cherubic face of her baby.

'Krishna!'

He was sitting on a remnant of the blanket in which she had wrapped him, playing with a toy cart with a plough fixed behind it. Studying the way the plough churned up the ground with rapt interest, the infant was bending over and pushing it back and forth in the ground. Nanda had made the toy with his own hands; he had a talent for whittling wood and making toys and decorative objects. Their house was filled with such curiosities, some quite elaborate and ingenious.

Yashoda scooped her baby in her arms, clenching him to her breast tightly enough to stop her own breath.

Maatr! You spoiled the field I was ploughing!

Tears spilled copiously from her eyes as she hugged and kissed and stroked and caressed her child, reassuring herself that he was indeed alive and well. She could not believe it, so frightening the sight of the strewn debris had been, and so certain had she been that something awful had happened to him.

Do not cry, Maatr. It makes me feel like crying as well. And if I cry, it will bring rain and spoil your lovely feast.

She almost laughed out loud. Spoil the feast? She didn't care about the feast. It was only a ritual ceremonial feeding to celebrate his bathing ceremony. It was he that she cared about. 'You, and only you, my beloved son!'

I understand, Maatr. But you are crushing me! Kindly let go of me and put me down.

She heard sounds and voices behind her, approaching cautiously. Nanda's voice was among them. She could hear the puzzlement in his tone.

'What happened here, my little Shyam-rang? How was the cart broken? Did someone come and do this? Did they have elephants with them?'

Elephants? Ah, I would like to have elephants to play with, Maatr. May I? Please say yes!

'Krishna, answer my question. How did all this destruction happen? What was that terrible cracking sound I heard earlier?'

I like elephants, Maatr. They remind me of Vakratunda. I wish I could see Vakratunda as well. I recall visiting him to bless him – at his naming ceremony on Mount Kailasa and on other such occasions. I could not frolic with him as it would seem unseemly at my age. But he would make a fine playmate for me now! I wish I could summon him here.

'Krishna! Answer me!'

It is nothing, really. The cart broke, that's all. I didn't mean for it to break. But it did.

Yashoda heard Nanda's voice say from close by: 'Oh, thank the devas, he is alive and well! It is a miracle.'

'But how did it break, Krishna? Who broke it?'

If I tell you who did it, Maatr, will you be cross with me?

'No, my baby, I just want to know who did this to you. Was it Kamsa and his men?'

Kams-mama? No, he has nothing to do with this! It was just me, Maatr. I kicked the cart.

‘You?’ She stared at the child, holding him a little away from her body so she could see him better.

Yes, Maatr. I only meant to push it away a little, that’s all. But it cracked and broke and everything started to fall down and all those pots would have spilled on me and I didn’t want that, so the second time I kicked it a little harder to push the whole thing away, and everything went flying. I didn’t mean to destroy anything, Maatr. I just wanted a little more space so I could sit up to play with my little plough-cart.

Unable to take in the full import of what he was saying, she blinked rapidly. ‘I don’t understand. How could you have broken the whole cart? That’s impossible!’

Behind her, she heard Nanda speak gently: ‘Yashoda, my dearest, is he quite well, our little Krishna?’

‘Yes, he is, praise be to Devi,’ she said, turning to glance over her shoulder.

I didn’t mean to break it, Maatr. Please don’t be upset with me.

‘I’m not upset, Son,’ she said, then remembered that Nanda was within hearing range, as were his companions. *I just can’t understand it. Surely your little foot could not have kicked over the whole cart and shattered it to bits in this manner?*

I just wanted to sit up, that’s all! I wanted to sit up and play with my little plough. I like ploughing. Some day I shall do it with a big plough as Pitr does.

So you shall. But I still cannot understand how you broke the big cart. Are you sure that was all that happened? You can tell me the truth, my son.

I only tell you the truth, Maatr. What else would I tell you?

‘Yashoda?’ Nanda asked again, concern audible in his voice. ‘What has happened here? Has there been an attempt on Krishna’s life? Or was it a strike of lightning?’

Can you explain it to your father as well? So he can know from your own mind what happened?

I wish I could, Maatr. But it would not be wise of me to talk to Pitr the way I do to you. It would make him vulnerable if he encounters certain demons who may be able to read his mind.

She balked at the thought of Nanda encountering mind- reading demons, but put her fears aside to be dealt with later. *And you are sure this is exactly what happened?*

Yes, Maatr. There was a trace of weariness in the child’s tone now.

She turned to face Nanda. He looked more concerned than she had seen him in a long time. Behind him, their anxious and curious relatives and friends as well as the larger crowd of other guests looked on expectantly, pointing happily at little Krishna in her arms even as they muttered and whispered amongst themselves.

‘He is well,’ she said.‘There is nothing to fear. I admit I was anxious too. But it was a false alarm. Our son is quite safe and hale and hearty.’

Nanda sighed audibly. He turned and raised both hands to the crowd:‘He is well!’

A great murmur of relief rippled across the guests. As the news reached the ones at the far end, a smattering of applause and cries of commiseration broke out, breaking the mood of tension that had engulfed them.

Nanda turned back to Yashoda.‘What happened here? Was it an elephant in masti?’

‘We have no elephants in this part of the country, Nanda. You know that,’ she said.‘No, it was simply our little Krishna. He kicked out too hard and broke the cart. That is all.’

Nanda looked at her for a long moment, the muscles on his face flickering as they tried to summon up the right expression. ‘It was lightning then, was it? It isn’t altogether unheard-of, after all, for lightning to strike down unexpectedly at times.’ He glanced up at the clear azure sky.‘Although it isn’t the monsoon season and there isn’t a cloud in sight ...’

She smiled, shaking her head gently.‘No, dear husband. As I said earlier, it was just our little Krishna.’

Nanda stared at her again. Then he looked around at the wreckage, at the large block of jaggedly splintered wood embedded in the ground.‘I don’t understand,’ he said.‘Is this a jest of some sort? How could our baby son break a whole cart laden with heavy metal vessels? It is simply not possible!’

She sighed. *What do I do? He does not believe me.*

There is nothing you can do, Maatr. Such things must be taken on faith alone. Besides, you are telling the truth. Nothing else matters.

If only it were that simple, my son. Aloud she said: ‘That is what happened. Our son is quite extraordinary, you know. He possesses abilities beyond his age.’

Nanda smiled quizzically.‘Beyond his age? At what age does any human – man, woman or child – possess the strength to demolish a laden uks cart with a single kick? Not even after a hundred years of training and exercise, I would say!’

‘Yet he did, my beloved. Please, just accept it and let us continue our lives.’

Nanda shook his head gently.‘Why are you insisting on this absurd explanation, Yashode? You were not here when the incident occurred. You cannot possibly know what happened!’

‘I know, because Krishna told me.’

Now he stared at her with renewed surprise.‘He told you? Yashoda, our son cannot sit up or stand, let alone speak whole words!’ ‘He

communicates with me through the mind. He projects his thoughts into my mind where only I can hear his voice. I can do the same with him.'

Nanda laughed. Then he shook his head and sighed again.

'You have been fasting and working too hard, my love. Come, be seated and rest a while.'

Is Pitr upset with me for breaking the cart? I don't want him to be upset with me.

Pitr is merely ... confused, she tried to explain. He cannot understand how the cart could have been broken by a human child as young as you.

Is that all? I can remedy that quite easily.

She frowned. How—? then stopped.

Around her, the field exploded with cries of consternation, shock, disbelief and other sundry expressions of amazement.

'Devas protect us!' Nanda exclaimed, staring at something behind Yashoda.

In her arms, Krishna giggled happily, bringing his chubby palms together.

There! Is that better? I made it all well again. Now Pitr and you can be happy again!

Yashoda turned and looked.

All the debris strewn across the field had vanished. From everyone's reaction, she guessed that it had all disappeared in the wink of an eye – Krishna's eye!

Not a trace remained of the scattered pieces of broken wood and mangled metal.

Instead, the uks cart with its entire load of metal vessels had been reassembled exactly as it had been before, untouched, unbroken. Perfectly whole.

It was as if the cart had never been broken.

See? I put it back the way it was. Are you happy now, Maatr? I want you and Pitr to always be happy!

And little Krishna grabbed her sari tight, drooling all over her in his apparent attempt to raise himself and kiss his mother.

Please, Maatr. Can I have my milk now? I'm very very hungry! Playing is such thirsty work.

three

Kamsa was in a state of shocked bemusement. Shocked because he could not begin to fathom the machinations of Jarasandha's politicking – his mind was not built to comprehend such things. Bemused since he didn't know what to expect next from his father-in-law. The confrontation in the sabha hall and Jarasandha's masterful handling of the event had turned his head around and spun it like a top until his entire world view was blurry.

The time leaps he experienced further addled his brain. He never knew if he would be able to complete a conversation or finish eating a mouthful of food before he was overtaken by the lack of consciousness. The irregular pattern confused him even more. Sometimes he lost months, and just a week or three on other occasions. But some leaps were only a few minutes or even a few hours long, leaving him in a constant state of disorientation and readjustment. He went through his days feeling as if he had not slept or eaten or rested properly, meeting palace staff who greeted him with condescending familiarity while he had no recollection of ever having met them before. Even the stable dogs who had always feared and respected him now barked and bared their teeth to threaten him; one even attacked him viciously, mauling his arm as the watching guards only looked on and laughed as he cried out for them to put the damn beast down.

Within hours of the end of the sabha session in which Jarasandha had so graciously granted Kamsa his own throne back, the sham of that show had been obvious. The real power was still wielded by Jarasandha and his cronies, and Kamsa was barely tolerated as the pale silhouette of a king. Through Chief Minister Pralamba, and using Captain Pradyota to maintain law and order, it was Bahuka who ran the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom now. There was an elaborate hierarchy filled entirely by new faces loyal only to Jarasandha. And Bahuka was little more than a spare tongue and pair of hands for Jarasandha.

The only faint flicker of hope was the public announcement by the ‘god emperor’ that he would be departing shortly, coupled with the messages that arrived each day, usually requiring Jarasandha’s urgent attention. Kamsa realized that sooner or later, Jarasandha would have to leave Mathura to join his armies and continue his campaign or risk losing the valuable ground he had gained. But until such time, each day was sheer agony to Kamsa. The manner in which the Magadhan king wilfully excluded Kamsa from any discussion or decision of importance, while continuing to be patronizing and demonstrating his fatherly affections was infuriating.

Nights and nights he lay awake on his silken sheets, ripping them apart with frustration as he tried to think of a way out of his predicament. How had he lost so much power so quickly? Or perhaps he had never had the power. Perhaps he had always been just Jarasandha’s stooge, but hadn’t realized it. He had heard of puppet kings and child-emperors whose kingdoms were actually run by shrewd ministers, mothers or preceptors. But a father-in-law? Well, why not. One backroom kingmaker was as likely as any other.

What truly maddened him was his lack of power.

Rather than tolerate this treatment, the old Kamsa would have simply torn apart buildings, even taken on the whole Hijra Fauj, or Jarasandha’s entire army. But this Kamsa couldn’t even face Bahuka or Agha or any one of Jarasandha’s lieutenants or allies, let alone risk incurring the wrath of Jarasandha himself in an all-out physical confrontation.

He had no friends or supporters who could foment and stoke a revolt or coup of some kind either. His decade of debauchery and butchery had made him the most reviled ruler of Mathura – and the most disregarded now. Imprisoning his father and mother, placing his sister and her husband under house arrest, murdering their first seven children and slaughtering countless other infants in the kingdom, and making even his most trusted aides and soldiers kill their own newborns had rendered his alienation complete. His campaign against the Slayer had resulted in his trusting nobody and allowing no one to come close to him. His desperate quest to prevent the birth of the Slayer had cost him everything.

And ultimately, as he fretted and fumed and tossed and turned, one thought came to him over and over again: the Slayer was the one responsible for his plight.

If not for the prophecy, he would have ruled Mathura with an iron hand, had a great time indulging each of his lusts as well as his love of violence, and eventually won the grudging and fearful respect of the Yadavas. A dictator was better befriended than antagonized; even he knew that much about politics. And he would have made a great dictator.

In due course, once the Yadavas were united and in his grasp, he would have allied openly with Jarasandha and aided his father-in-law in his campaign of conquest. Together, they could have ravaged not just the subcontinent but other parts of the world as well. If Jarasandha sought to be ‘god emperor’, Kamsa could certainly have been ‘demi-god emperor’ alongside him. Like father-in-law, like son-in-law.

But that damned prophecy had forced him to change his list of priorities.

Because of his fear of the Slayer – a fear that wretched Narada had instilled in his heart – he had devoted most of his reign to the persecution of his sister and bhraatr-in-law and their supporters, leaving him with little time for or awareness of anything else. And what had he accomplished in the end? Nothing! The Slayer had still been born and was out there somewhere. Jarasandha could say anything he pleased, but Kamsa knew the Slayer existed, was real, and was growing in strength and manhood. One day he would be strong enough and powerful enough to come and

destroy Kamsa. And in this all-too-pitiful mortal state, Kamsa would not stand a chance of survival.

At times, he even wondered whether Jarasandha had wanted the Slayer to be born, and to escape unharmed. Then he dismissed that possibility as absurd. Whatever else Jarasandha might be, he was no fool.

The Slayer was responsible for everything. Kamsa's decline had begun the very day he had been born. He was also the Deliverer. That meant he would champion the rights of the people. And if the people did not want Kamsa to rule them, they desired Jarasandha even less. Kamsa knew he was not very shrewd or politic, but of this much he was certain: the Slayer was as much Jarasandha's enemy as he was Kamsa's nemesis. And once he was done with Kamsa, he would go after Jarasandha. And if he was powerful enough to escape Kamsa even while yet a newborn, how much more powerful would he be once fully grown?

Kamsa did not know how long he had before the Slayer came for him. But he was certain it would not be very long.

He had to act soon. Somehow, he had to find and assassinate the Slayer while he was still an infant, before he gained his full power.

But how? He had no power himself!

There is a way. But it shall require Jarasandha's assistance.

Kamsa started from his bed. 'Who's that?'

A shadowy figure moved through his darkened chamber. He could see it only by the way it cut the faint moonlight that came in through the verandah, but he could not see the person.

It is I, Narada.

'You!' He almost lunged across the chamber in anger. 'You ruined my life! Your prophecy—'

—saved your life. Had I not forewarned you of the coming of the Slayer, you would have been destroyed by now.

Kamsa had reached for a weapon. He had lost confidence to such an extent that he no longer bothered with a sword or even a dagger. Now, as his fear mounted, he found nothing on the bed or chair and had to grope around on the floor. In the darkness, he could find only a long wooden object of some kind. He wielded it but did not attack.

‘What do you mean, would have been destroyed? Your prophecy is the reason why I am in this state! Stopping the Slayer became my obsession, costing me my throne, my powers, everything. Now I’m little more than Jarasandha the Magadhan’s pawn!’

You are wrong. Had you not been so fierce in your efforts those many years, the Slayer would have been able to slay you the very day he was born. You have no reckoning of his powers.

Kamsa rubbed his eyes, trying to see in the darkness. All he could make out was a faint vertical shadow against the patch of indigo blue sky visible outside the verandah. ‘Really?’ he asked.

Have no doubt about it. I am a seer of the future and the past, I can track the movements of the great Samay Chakra itself, the primordial Wheel of Time. Everything you did served a purpose.

‘But the Slayer escaped anyway!’ Kamsa cried. ‘He is out there ... somewhere! Waiting to kill me.’

That is why you must act now to stop him.

Kamsa put down the length of wood which appeared to be a broom of some kind, left under his bed by the cleaners. ‘How?’ he asked miserably, sitting on his bed again. ‘I have no powers left. I cannot even expand myself any more. And this wretched loss of time I experience ... even if I plan to do something, I can never be sure of seeing it through to the end. My life is a living hell!’ He buried his face in his hands, on the verge of tears.

It is all Jarasandha’s doing.

Kamsa jerked his head up. ‘What?’

He has a special compound that his henchman Bahuka puts in your food and drink. It causes the effects of which you speak.

Kamsa got to his feet, his hands clenched into fists, fingernails digging into his palms hard enough to draw blood. ‘I WILL KILL HIM!’

That is quite impossible. Jarasandha is beyond your ability to kill. Even the Slayer himself could not harm him if he desired. But I can show you how to regain your powers and control of your life once again.

Kamsa thought about this briefly. There was something peculiar about the brahmarishi’s offer. ‘Why?’ he asked at last, tilting his head suspiciously. ‘Why do you assist me thus? What possible purpose does it serve you? What do you desire from all this?’

That is not important. All that matters is that I help you. And I do not see anyone else willing or able to do that at the moment. Am I correct?

Kamsa’s shoulders slumped. ‘No,’ he said miserably.

Then sit quietly and listen while I instruct you.

Kamsa sat. And listened.

four

Putana frowned when she received the message brought by an old stable hand who had been in service to the throne since the days of Ugrasena’s youth. She nodded brusquely at him, acknowledging the message, but the old Kshatriya still remained standing, ramrod straight despite his frail form and corona of white hair. ‘What are you waiting for?’ she asked sharply. She knew that the Yadavas, though wise enough not to say so openly, resented her and others who served Jarasandha. She had seen the way some of the men looked at her in passing, and the women too.

The old syce's eyes were dark but clear – a young man's eyes in an old man's face. The man within that grizzled face had no fear of her or of her husband's position. She respected that. She was weary of being kowtowed to and bowed to only because she was the spouse of Pradyota, captain of the famed Mathura Guard. This was the first man she had encountered this closely since arriving in Mathura who looked at her as Putana, a person, not someone's wife or daughter or sister.

'I was told to await a reply,' he answered. There was no insolence or affront in his tone; nor any humility or obeisance. She examined him sceptically. He did not flinch or back down, merely stood and watched her, waiting. She suspected he would wait thus for the rest of the day if required. She grudgingly admitted to herself that this was the kind of Yadavas she had heard of in the old legends and war poems. This man had been a warrior once – the fact was writ large in his every action and word, and also in the silences when he did not act or speak a word. He had stared danger in the face countless times and learnt the essential fact of life: death comes. One can fight it, one may resist it, one could amass skill and art and weaponry and defences, but eventually it comes and takes you. The day you understand and accept that fact, everything becomes clear. The world makes perfect sense. We live, we fight, we die. Everything else we do is just part of passing the time. What was that word the Yadavas liked to use? Leela. Play. Everything else was just leela.

'What is your name?'

The man was silent a moment, gaze locked on her. 'Yadu,' he said.

She raised an eyebrow. 'Like the ancestor?'

He did not reply.

'The great progenitor of the Yadava race? The pitr? Forebear of your entire race?'

He said nothing.

She was about to reprimand him for his insolence, then realized there was no need for him to speak – her question had been rhetorical. There could hardly be any doubt that Yadu was the name of the forebear of the

Yadava race. It was no different from saying ‘Brahma? Oh, like the four-faced deva?’ One did not need to speak to confirm it. She knew his kind. They were accustomed to facing real threat, real danger, the kind that slithered and crawled and flew and ate man-flesh. They were not intimidated by mere mortal threats.

‘Did you fight in the Last Asura Wars?’ she asked.

He almost smiled. ‘I would have to be centuries old if I had.’

She shrugged. She had met men and women who were centuries old, had heard of rishis who were millennia old. ‘I asked you a question.’

He smiled openly now, and let the smile stay on his face as his only response – the smile of a boy who was asked whether he was a boy.

She sighed, shook her head and waved a hand dismissively. ‘Tell your master I shall attend to his request when I am able.’

He remained standing. ‘He desired to know a specific day and time.’

She frowned. In most other men, she would have deemed this insubordination. Pradyota might not be slaughtering Yadavas left, right and centre but he did not run a loose ship either. But she was not Pradyota’s wife to this man, or to his master. Merely Putana for both. To call her husband’s rank and power down on him would reduce her to the position of Pradyota’s wife again. She would deal with this man on her own terms.

‘Tell him I shall come to his chambers. Tonight at moonrise.’

He turned and began to walk away without another word, without so much as a by-your-leave-lady. Then again, she had already dismissed him.

She watched him walk across the courtyard, past a group of Mohini warriors, saw the subtle way his walk grew shuffling, his posture bowed and bent. His dishevelled appearance and ragged garb all served to give him the appearance of a servant, in charge of some nameless menial task. None of the Hijras so much as graced him with a first glance, let alone a second look. Yet she suspected that were he to face them in combat, he

would do more damage than they would expect, let alone believe. Even at this great age.

She shook her head, grinning to herself. As long as Mathura still had Yadavas like that around, it would remain a formidable force in the Arya world.

The moon was well risen and halfway across the night sky when she made her way to the annexe of the prince's palace. From the lights still glowing in the residential complex of the main place and the fact that Pradyota had not yet returned home, she knew that Jarasandha was still sitting with his flunkeys. There had been a time when Pradyota had been far more than a mere tool of another man; he had desired a command of his own, to be a landowner, and to rule and live free. It was one of the things that had attracted Putana to him at the time. Now he thought the earth and sky and sun and moon of Jarasandha, and all thoughts of his own ambitions had been long forgotten. She had tired of even discussing it with him. There was no point any more.

She paused outside the high wall. No lights gleamed or flickered on the top floor of Kamsa's annexe. The sentries who ought to be on duty were nowhere to be seen; there were no guards patrolling the grounds either. She frowned. She was aware of the change in Kamsa's power and stature since Bahuka and his entourage had arrived – which entourage included Pradyota and herself; she knew that Kamsa was considered an impotent figurehead now, merely the limp hand that held the royal seal that sanctioned Jarasandha's decisions and orders, but she had not thought he was this neglected. To leave a ruler's private quarters thus unguarded – this was beyond negligence. But she knew that Jarasandha did not make mistakes of this nature. If he had left Kamsa unguarded, it was because he genuinely wished him dead. And what better way to have it done than by one of his own disgruntled or disaffected citizens! If Kamsa had not yet faced any assassination attempts – or at least, no successful ones – it was probably only because the very presence of the Magadhan and his legendary and fearful associates was enough to make any Mathuran want to keep his distance from the royal quarter of the city. But it was only a matter of time before Jarasandha left and Kamsa's many enemies realized that he was improperly guarded at night.

She wondered if Kamsa himself realized it. He must.

She was mildly disappointed. She had hoped to meet some resistance on the way in. It had been several weeks since her last active mission and she was itching to engage again. There was also something curiously thrilling about killing her own husband's guards, no doubt handpicked by him to work in this undoubtedly prestigious royal quarter.

But nobody challenged her, called out or barred her way as she scaled the wall easily, dropped over the side and strolled towards the darkened portal. Somewhere in the shadows along the wall, a feline meow rose plaintively and she saw the shadow of a tail flicking back and forth; but apart from that, nothing. And judging from the insolent way the cat called out and roved the grounds freely, there were no guard dogs around either.

She made her way up the stairs and sensed the emptiness of the house. Not a soul stirred, not a sound disturbed the night. This new annexe had been built far, far back from the main palace. It was almost an outhouse in terms of the overall layout. She knew that itself to be a sign of Jarasandha's obvious campaign of Kamsa's humiliation. But its spacious interiors were lavishly decorated and furnished – as befitted a prince regent, if not a king – far more lavishly than the official residence of the captain of the guards.

The bedchamber was larger than her whole house, for one thing. And the verandahs – surrounding the room on two sides in a semi-circular curve that belied the angular corner of the building – were huge. Gossamer drapes rose and fell with every gust of night wind. Moonlight was the only illumination, silvering anything that reflected, shone or glittered. The sleeping area was a dark morass of shadows. She could not tell if anyone sat or lay there, but she could smell him unmistakably. He was here all right.

‘You said moonrise,’ the voice said out of the darkness.

She shrugged, then realized he may not see the action in this shadowy dimness. ‘I am here, am I not? What urgent business do you have that you needed to see me alone in your private chambers at night?’ She put a foot out and leaned on one hip to emphasize the undertone of her query.

A shadow stirred among the many shadows around the bed. ‘You chose the place and time, remember? I merely wished to speak with you. You could have elected to meet in the middle of the riding grounds at high noon. You chose here and now instead. I should be the one asking why.’

She smirked. ‘So you’re not as stupid as they say you are – and as you look.’

‘I’m very stupid. But I learn something new every day.’

‘What have you learnt about me?’ she asked, challenging him.

The shadow moved again, and this time she was certain he was standing beside the bedpost closest to her. It was still several yards away, but she found herself wondering idly if he was clothed or if, in this warm weather, he slept without his garments on. He was an attractive man.

‘I have a proposition for you.’

She smiled lazily, and using both hands, swept her hair off her face. ‘There is nothing you have to offer that interests me.’

He was silent for a moment. The moonlight streaming through the open verandahs altered slightly. Her eyes had adjusted further to the darkness and she could now make out his silhouette. He was standing by the bed. She could not tell if he was clothed or not, but he was definitely not armed. There was a certain way he would have to stand if he was carrying a weapon, any weapon. She could tell.

‘Yet you came,’ he said after the pause.

She stroked her hair back, running her fingers through it. She had washed and scented it that afternoon, and it felt sensuous. ‘I am bored. There is nothing for me to do here in your great city. I was happy for the diversion.’

‘What I have to offer is a great diversion. If you choose to see it that way.’

She walked slowly across the chamber. The floor was cool to her bare feet. She stood in front of the verandah, enjoying the soft breeze that

gusted in waves. Moonlight lit the lower half of her body. It made her fair skin seem milky white. She thought she could feel the moonlight and that it felt cool, but of course moonlight had no temperature.

‘I think you are mistaking me for my husband,’ she said, her back to him, to the whole chamber. ‘He is the captain of your guard. He is under your command, not I.’

‘Your husband cannot accomplish the task I require done. Only you can.’

She glanced back over her shoulder, a smile of contemptuous irony playing on her lips. Who did this fellow think he was? What a fool! ‘Flattery will get you nowhere. Certainly not me in your bed. Not if I do not choose to play along. I am my own woman. Ask anyone; they will tell you. Ask Pradyota.’

‘What I seek is far more than the pleasures of your body, woman. Will you not understand that?’

Her smile widened. ‘The great prince grows impatient. Will you have me bound in chains and whipped now? Decapitated? Thrown into your dungeon and tortured? What terrible punishment will you inflict on me if I turn down your proposition?’

‘None. You are free to leave at any time. I will not ask you to aid me out of compulsion or force. I respect you too greatly for that.’

She turned around, surprised. ‘Respect me? You? The legendary marauder? The tyrant of Mathura? You are a legend, Kamsa! Your atrocities, brutalities, slaughter, massacres, genocides ... even for one of Jarasandha’s minions, you are quite extraordinary in your reputation for cruelty. What do you know of respecting women!’

‘I respect a matrika. Especially a maha-matrika such as yourself.’

She fell silent. Of all the things she might have expected, this was not one of them. She looked around, alert, but there was no danger, no threat. Only Kamsa, alone. And she did not fear him. The only one she feared was Jarasandha and he was not there; she would have smelt him from a mile

away – in fact, she could smell him, and he was not quite a mile away, but about half a mile away, in the main palace complex. This was not some ploy on his part. Whatever game Kamsa was playing, he was playing it alone.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ she said stiffly. He’s bluffing. He doesn’t know anything, has somehow got hold of some lopsided rumour or idle piece of gossip and is pretending that it means more than it does.

‘I think you do,’ said Kamsa.

He stepped away from the bed, emerging from the shadows, coming towards the light very slowly, one step every two or three sentences, like a wolf moving towards its prey.

‘You are a maha-matrika,’ he said. ‘Specifically, you are the one named Chamunda. But you have also been known by other names. Vaimitra. Halebidu. Krittika. Shakti. Brahmi. Maheshwari. Kumari. Vaishnavi. Varah. Indrani. Kaki. Halima. Malini. Brhali. Palala. Vaimitra. Mahalakshmi. These are only some of your names, some of your forms. Some say you have ninety-two in all. Some say there are more. Sometimes you take the form of seven, aligned together: saptamatrika. Sometimes it is eight: ashtamatrika. Sometimes you pose as the wives of six of the saptarishis, the seven great seer-mages of Creation. Whatever your form or your number – you are many who may appear as one if you will it, or one who appears as many – the choice is yours, as are the forms you choose. On occasion you have been the womb-mother to Skanda, bearing him to life on behalf of his spirit-parents, Shiva and Parvati. Sometimes, you have been Skanda’s adoptive mothers, hence your given title, matrika. Betimes, you have been cursed for posing as his mother. Betimes, you have begged him to adopt you as his mother. In one instance, you emerged from Skanda himself when he was struck by Indra’s thunderbolt weapon, the omnipotent Vajra. You are the embodiment of the feminine force in its purest, most potent form, Shakta Mahadeva’s Shakti. You have many gifts, many powers, many accomplishments. But the one thing you can never be is a mother. A maatr. The one thing you can never have is motherhood. The one feat you can never accomplish is birthing a child. That is why you are ironically called matrika or maatr – because it is the one thing you are not,

have never been, and can never be. That is your curse, your identity, your destiny, your true nature. Do you deny any or all these things that I say?’

He had reached her now, and stopped a hand’s breadth from where she stood. The swathe of moonlight had moved again, rising as the moon dipped towards the horizon as its time ended, and it illuminated him partly, his lower body. His thighs were muscular and powerful as sala tree trunks. Layered with slabs of muscle and taut sinew, his torso was bare and hairless. He was as attractive as she had thought, and then some. He reached out and touched her shoulder. It was a gentle touch. His fingers lingered there as his eyes looked deep into her own, asking for permission.

‘What is it you want of me?’ she asked, and heard the breathless excitement in her own voice. Gone was her posturing sarcasm, the preening irony, the caustic wit. She was intrigued, aroused, seething with something she had not felt for a very long time – long before Pradyota, long before any man, back when she had shunned the race of men entirely, and had been a creature of the forest and the earth, burning ghats and crossroads, springs and riverbanks, caves and mountain crags. Back when she had been simply maatr. When all women had been maatr and there were no other women but maatr.

He lowered his hand upon her chest. ‘To begin with, I wish to see for myself if the legend is true.’

‘Which one is that?’ she whispered.

A cloud was passing over the moon. She could see the shape and body of the cloud eating away the patch of moonlight that illuminated him and the floor around him. It was moving quickly, consuming him with darkness.

‘The legend that you carry a cache of poisoned milk within your body, the milk of the Churning itself. The Halahala.’

She swallowed. There was no way he could know about that. Someone far superior must have told him. But she would play along for now, partly to see what happened next, partly because she found the prince attractive. She had never felt this nervous, this excited, with any mortal man before. ‘How will you know that for sure?’

The cloud began to cover him completely but in the last patch of moonlight, she could see the white of his teeth gleaming as he smiled. ‘There is only one way for me to be sure.’

The cloud consumed the moon and the darkness consumed them both.

five

Once as a child, Kamsa had tasted a potion being mixed by the royal vaid. He did not know what it was until much later – it was snake venom in the process of being turned into anti-venom. A noxious concoction. He had deliberately consumed it to attract attention to himself. His father had been away at another of his endless campaigns of conquest, and had returned three days ago, only to sequester himself within the queen’s private chambers. Kamsa did not know exactly what they were doing in there for so many days and nights, but he had an idea and it infuriated him.

He was even more incensed by the fact that his father had not yet come to him. He felt ignored, unwanted, fatherless. It brought back some ancient memory from his birth when he arrived into the mortal world aware of his true nature and of the true nature of the creature that had sired him upon his mother. Coupled with that awareness had been the knowledge, terrible in its immutability, that his true father would never spend a single moment with him for as long as he lived. He knew this because that father, the rakshasa who had actually fathered him, had told him so, taking cruel pleasure in imparting this heart-breaking piece of information to his just-born son.

‘You will never see me again, mortal-spawn,’ he had sneered derisively. ‘Live your wretched life in the prison of your mortal flesh!’ And he had roared away like the wind, leaving only a dust-whirl that spun in the empty courtyard, frightening horses and passing courtiers.

So when Ugrasena returned yet again from another battle, or war, or campaign of conquest, or whatever the hell he had gone for that time, and

ignored his son yet again, Kamsa had decided that if even his mortal father did not acknowledge or care for him, he would show him. He would show him! He had seen the concoction the royal vaid, his father's own physician, had prepared to administer to some unfortunate courtier who had stepped on a cobra, and had picked it up and drunk it whole.

He remembered the unspeakable sensation to this day: the noxious mixture had the consistency of raw egg white and the taste of ... a taste like nothing else he had ever tasted before or since to compare it to. And it had scorched his insides like pure rage distilled in liquid form. It had taken him a week to recover from its effects. But to everyone's surprise but his own, it had not killed him. The thrashing he received from his father when he was fully recovered almost did, though, because back then, Ugrasena was a very different man, a hard king for hard times, to quote his own favourite phrase. Kamsa had forgotten the thrashing – one of several he received in his childhood and youth, worsening in intensity and frequency as he grew, until his father's transmogrification into a proponent of ahimsa and non-aggressive governance, his new favourite phrases – but remembered drinking the snake anti-venom till today. And he remembered how it had made him feel after he drank it.

But this, this was far beyond that potency!

This was poison in its highest form possible. The Halahala itself, if the legend was true. And he had no reason to disbelieve the legend. Narada had no reason to lie, and even if he had lied, what was the worst that could happen? This fluid that Kamsa was now suckling and swallowing could be mere milk. In which case, he was merely being a good boy and would grow up to be big and strong some day!

He had expected it to be noxious, nauseating, toxic, like the cobra venom.

It was the very opposite – it was the sweetest, most intoxicatingly delectable thing he had ever consumed in liquid form.

And the instant it touched his lips, tongue and palate, its potency was undeniable. This was not mere milk. This was magic, sorcery, asura maya

...

It was like drinking liquid power. And as it flowed through his body, he felt himself electrified and seared – as if struck by a bolt of lightning.

He cried out, tearing his mouth away and falling back on the floor. The cloud that had come across the moon, leaving them both in darkness, had passed on, and he could see Putana, still standing with her back to the verandah, silhouetted by moonlight.

He felt his senses warp and burn, his nerve endings flare and fire, his veins and arteries roar as the Halahala coursed through them, entering his heart, his lungs, his brain, his vital organs ... He felt the divine poison infiltrate his very bones, his flesh, the cells of his body, felt it wash through him like a flash flood through a long-dried river bed. His consciousness exploded and altered, and the world around him blurred into nothingness as he transcended to a different plane of awareness.

Kamsa returned to his senses to find Putana standing in the verandah, leaning on the balustrade and staring at the horizon. The faint light of a new day was visible in the eastern sky, which told him that he had been lost to the world for the latter half of the night. He lifted himself on his arms and was surprised at the ease with which he was able to get to his feet. Not merely the ease born of well-exercised muscles and a magnificently chiselled body, but something else. He felt himself fuelled by the power of the Halahala as it continued to work its way within his body, catalysing enzymes and engendering new growth. This was not like his earlier power. He felt more powerful, yet in a completely different way.

He decided to try and expand himself and strained for several moments, without success. Damn it! He tried again. And again.

Putana heard his grunting and straining and turned. She came to the doorway and stood leaning against the jamb, watching him. A faint expression flickered around her mouth. Not quite a smile. Not quite anything.

‘The compound Jarasandha has had you consume these past months will have altered your metabolism drastically,’ she said. ‘I doubt you will ever be able to regain your powers. Apart from everything else, he is a

formidable vaid and knows his herbs and mixtures well. He once gave a pregnant woman—'

Kamsa raised a hand. 'Spare me.'

She shrugged. 'Also, the Halahala is a poison. You did know that before you chose to consume it, didn't you? And the quantity you consumed ...' She shook her head deprecatingly. 'I have killed entire tribes with less than half as much, simply by mixing it in the well from which they drew their drinking supply. They were wiped out within the day.'

He grunted in response, dropped to the floor and began doing push-ups. He was frustrated by his inability to expand and had energy to burn. Two hands proved too easy, so he switched to one, then to a fist, then to the tips of four fingers, three, two, and finally, he was pushing himself on the tip of a single finger, using the pressure caused by the awkward angle to work his abdominal and back muscles as well. He pushed past a hundred-count and kept going, and felt he could continue doing it all day and still not be tired.

She watched him speculatively. 'On the other hand ...'

He looked up at her from the floor. 'What?' Speaking seemed no harder than it would have had he been seated and talking. He continued pushing. 'Three hundred ...'

'The very fact that you are still alive and clearly not harmed by its effect ...'

'Yes? Three hundred and forty-four ... forty-five ... forty-six ...' He was moving faster now, switching to a different finger with every ten-count, barely an effort.

'Suggests that there is something else going on inside you that even I cannot wholly understand. What exactly was it that you desired when you called me here last night?'

'To consume the Halahala, regain my powers,' he said. Four hundred and two, three, four ... Faster, now, must go faster ...

She gestured at him. 'Looking at you, I'd say you've gained something.'

He grunted in frustration and pushed himself off the floor, hard. He rose up but instead of being pushed to a standing posture as he had desired, he found himself rising up, up, until his upper back and head struck the ceiling, ten yards overhead, and broke the plaster coating, sending a shower of white powder and chunks raining down. Returning to the ground, he landed on his feet as easily as if he had jumped just an inch. But the marble slab underfoot cracked with a deafening groan and the vibrations seemed to ripple through the entire chamber.

Putana looked around, then at the ceiling which now bore the shape of Kamsa's skull, then down at the cracked marble floor. 'Interesting. There has clearly been some effect.' She walked towards the entrance of the chamber. 'I shall be taking your leave now, Prince Kamsa. It has been an enlightening and interesting experience, which is more than I expected. And in case you fail to comprehend the subtext, that is a compliment I rarely pay men.'

And even though the distance between them was over fifteen yards, he was at her side and grasping her shoulder before one could blink an eye. She raised her eyebrows, reacting to his speed but not commenting on it.

'What does it mean, these changes occurring to me? Where will they end? Will I be restored to my former powers or ...? Give me some answers before you go.'

She shrugged his hand off with surprising ease. He was startled by the power in her limbs, which was even greater than his newfound (and growing) strength. 'I don't know how you learnt the truth about me but I suspect you are not intelligent or worldly-wise enough to have gained such knowledge on your own. No man is. Therefore, it must have been imparted to you by someone of a far superior stature. A deva or a devi perhaps, for reasons best known to them. Or a saptarishi, for it is their job to know such things and they do have reasons to resent us.'

She looked at him closely, watching for his reaction. He was careful not to reveal any trace of an expression. Finally, she shrugged.

'It doesn't matter who it was, or what the purpose. I think it has to do with you rather than me. I was merely a tool serving your purpose in this

matter. I've served that purpose. Now I shall take your leave.'

She began to move away.

He began to reach for her again but she said sharply, 'Touch me again and I'll break your hand. You may think you're strong but don't forget where that new strength came from!'

'I only wish to know more about my condition,' he said in as non-threatening a tone as he could manage. The old Kamsa would not have been able to carry off that pretence; the new Kamsa achieved it, by a hair. 'What other changes can I expect?'

She looked back at him. 'Ask the person who advised you to call on me. If you do not know, that person surely does. That's why he or she advised you to do this, isn't it?'

And she left.

six

After Putana had left, Kamsa prowled the corridors of his private quarters, growing steadily more agitated. Like a heavy meal eaten late at night, he could still feel the Halahala being processed inside his body, working its way through a series of transformations. He had no idea what the eventual result would be, and that simultaneously excited and frightened him. His frustration, fear and impatience found expression in sudden bursts of energy. Striding up and down the empty corridors, deserted at the early hour since his personal staff was accustomed to his waking around mid-morning or even after noon, he suddenly found himself leaping several yards at a time, then flying through the air fast enough to land feet-first on the opposing wall, propelling himself back and bouncing off one wall to the other, until he lost his balance and crashed into a pillar, shattering it almost in half and landing in the debris,

grinning stupidly at his own newfound strength and vigour. He was suddenly overcome by a great thirst and felt as if a great fire raged within his veins and he must quench it at once. He sought out the pot of water in his bedchamber and lifted it with one hand, emptying it down his mouth, spilling much of it on himself. When it was drained, he tossed it aside to smash against the far wall, then went in search of more water. He ended up at the drinking trough by the stables, freshly mucked out and filled with clean water. Well, almost clean. Or water as clean as one could expect horses to drink. He emptied most of the contents of the trough, then paused. He looked down at himself. His belly wasn't distended, nor did he feel the normal full feeling that accompanied the consumption of so much fluid. He patted his abdomen; it felt as flat as ever, he could feel the ridged muscles moving beneath his palm. Where had all that water gone?

He sat on the edge of the trough and thought about what to do next. Narada's advice had been more effective than he had expected. Certainly, Putana had provided the much-needed catalyst he had been desperately seeking. Suddenly, he was eager to see if the rest of the sage's advice would prove as fruitful.

He needed a place to try out his new abilities. To learn for himself what they entailed. Could he actually fly? Or merely leap higher and higher, only to land with successively more destructive force? He had to find out! And his strength. How would he measure it, test it to its limit?

He thought of going to the palace akhada, a huge semi- enclosed space where the palace guard and most of the senior military officers exercised between shifts. But he did not wish word of his new powers to spread. He had to keep this a secret from Jarasandha. At any cost. And since Jarasandha had eyes and ears everywhere in Mathura ...

He took a horse from the stables. The old syce, Yadu, looked at him with his usual unnerving expression when he asked for a mount, but somehow had the wits to bring him the biggest and strongest in the stable, a massive battle charger accustomed to carrying men with full battle armour, shield and weaponry. It was a choice Kamsa would be glad for by the time he returned, though he did not know it then. He took the horse, mounted it in a single leap, and rode off at an instant canter, breaking into a full-fledged gallop in a few dozen paces. The horse seemed glad for the exercise and

did not complain or turn its head when he rode it off the training field and up the hill bordering the palace complex, and onward through the woods.

He took himself a good three yojanas out of Mathura, far from prying eyes or ears, and found a box canyon deep in the woods where he had once been as a boy. It had only one point of ingress and due to the high walls and peculiar acoustics, any rider or pedestrian entering the canyon would be heard easily long before he came into sight. The forest above the canyon was dense and the overhang too sloping and slippery from the recent rains for anyone to watch from above. Here, he could do as he pleased with nobody to witness or report back to Jarasandha. Not without him spying the spasa himself, in which case, he would make sure that the only thing he would find worth reporting was an alarming descent into annihilation.

Kamsa began with some brisk running, warming up to leaping off the walls of the canyon. He bounced from one rocky wall to the other, a distance of a hundred feet or more, dislodging rocks at first, then punching holes as his speed and intensity increased. He experienced a great exhilaration as he flew from wall to wall, bouncing like a wooden stick in the danda game. As his feet hit the canyon walls, he found the impact to be greater with each step, as if he was growing heavier. When he finally stopped, the high sloping walls, rising a hundred and fifty feet above ground, were pockmarked with holes left by his pounding feet, some a yard or two deep. Rocks and rock dust lay everywhere; it looked like the aftermath of a landslide.

He tried punching the wall next, and found that he could punch his way through solid granite rock without harming himself. Again, as his efforts and concentration intensified, he felt the same sensation of growing heavier. But each time he checked himself, he found he was still the same size as before.

It took him the better part of the morning to understand: his ability to expand had not returned. But the corresponding increase in weight as he expanded had come back.

Earlier, if he grew from his normal six feet height to, say, sixty feet, his weight would grow proportionately as well. Now, it seemed, his weight

increased if he concentrated hard, and with that, he gained the ability to pack much more power in each punch, kick or blow. But he stayed the same height and size.

He examined his fist after punching a large boulder to smithereens. Apart from the red dust of the boulder, it had no other marks, not even a scratch.

Apparently, he could increase his weight by concentrating, but not his size. He guessed this was a side effect of the compound Jarasandha had had him fed daily for the past several months.

As the day wore on, he felt the Halahala continue working, changing him from within in ways he could not fathom, but he could see no other visible signs of his transformation. He looked the same, remained the same size, and was much the same apart from the considerably increased muscular strength and density.

But it was enough to start. Yes, more than enough.

In the days that followed, he continued to explore the extent and nature of his newfound abilities. He was somewhat disappointed to learn that he could not actually fly, that in fact, one his body grew denser, it grew harder to leap too high or too far. Initially, he had been using more strength without increasing his body's density. Now he realized that his increased density turned his flesh and bone and skin harder, heavier, denser to the point where bone became iron hard and heavy, flesh grew as solid as stone, blood and muscle and tissue and tendon grew as tough as ironwood, and even his skin became impenetrable as oak. He practised turning from normal flesh, blood and bone to this new state until he could achieve full transformation in moments.

Once transformed, he could not only punch a granite boulder to smithereens, he could drill through it with precision if he desired, or pound an entire hill into dust. The proportional increase in weight that came with this gain in density was remarkable. It was difficult to estimate exactly how heavy he turned after these transformations. There were no weighing scales designed to weigh such heavy loads, after all! But after several successively higher leaps, he tried jumping off the top of the

canyon's highest ridge and found himself boring several yards into the ground, through solid packed earth and rock!

He had never been very good at numbers, but as he clambered out of the hole, he thought that he must surely weigh as much as several elephants – perhaps even several dozen. He had once seen a dozen-odd war elephants driven off the edge of a cliff and when they landed below, they did not make a crater this deep or large, merely a wide depression in the ground. He suspected that his greater density and smaller size made the impact greater. His ability to focus his power increased and over time he was able to punch neat fist-sized holes in even the hardest boulders, all the way to the end of his shoulder. Then when he slowly pulled his arm out of the hole, the boulder remained intact. One particular rock was left looking like a large fruit into which numerous worms had bored holes.

After each practice session, he was left with the same desperate thirst. Even two or three water-bags, enough to slake a company's thirst for days, was merely a few gulps to him in his new avatar. He went in search of a more plentiful source and on the second day, found it – an old well, its mouth half- covered by overgrown brambles and bushes, probably fallen into disuse when some trade route changed in the past. The bucket was cracked and leaked out half its load before he could winch it up. Frustrated after three or four such half-bucket-loads, he leapt into the well, his thirst making him too desperate to think beyond the immediate need. The water was wonderfully cool and refreshing, if somewhat heavy with minerals. The last suited him perfectly, because mere river water seemed unable to quench his new epic thirst. He drank to his heart's content, then found himself easily able to climb up the moss-lined brick walls by the simple expediency of punching his fingers into the brick and creating handholds and footholds for himself.

This became his routine each day after his training session in the canyon. Each time, no matter how much he drank, his body seemed to miraculously absorb every drop of the water, leaving him as lean and empty-bellied as when he had leapt into the well. He thought it had something to do with the new way his body's muscles and cells had grown denser and heavier. Although not growing larger in size, he was nevertheless growing denser, perhaps even as dense as the giant he used to

become earlier, and the water he consumed was absorbed into the denser body mass somehow.

He did not understand the philosophy or science behind such things and did not really care. All that mattered was that he was strong again. Strong enough to fight the Mohini Fauj, or even Jarasandha's champions. And soon, some day, he would be strong enough to face the Slayer without fear and destroy his nemesis. But first, of course, he had to find that elusive foe.

Despite his newfound confidence in his abilities and his burning desire to avenge his humiliation, Kamsa was careful to keep his practice secret. What success had been unable to teach him, failure had schooled him in quite diligently. He knew better than to show his hand too soon or at the wrong time and place. Even if he no longer feared confrontations with the Mohini Fauj or the minions of the Magadhan, he still knew better than to think he was strong enough to take on Jarasandha himself. The martial skills of his father-in-law were more greatly feared because they were largely unknown. The effects of his great massacres had been witnessed several times, but nobody had actually seen him in full battle mode during one of those legendary slaughters. The reason was that Jarasandha rarely if ever permitted any survivors to remain to tell the tale.

Because he was so studiously ignored and neglected, it was easy for Kamsa to enter the city and leave as he pleased. Rarely did anyone actually ask after him or bother about his whereabouts. He suspected that Jarasandha's spasas watched him closely enough to know he rode out and back each day, but he was shrewd enough to float a rumour that he was visiting a woman. Another man's wife. From the old syce, Yadu, he learned that they had bought the rumour without question, even laughing at the foolish prince wasting his time on dalliances while Jarasandha ruled Mathura as he pleased. Kamsa gritted his teeth as the old man told him these things in his laconic devil-may-care way, but knew that so long as they laughed at him, they would not suspect him.

The old man knew, though. Kamsa could see it in his eyes.

'Will there be anything further, my lord?' he asked as he took the frothing horse by the bit. Kamsa had practised increasing his weight while

riding the horse today, to judge from the horse's reactions how heavy he became. When the beast began to snort and whinny in panic, he had stopped, but the animal had never trusted after that, especially since he tried the same thing several more times. Now, it reared white-eyed as Kamsa walked past, pulling away from him.

Kamsa paused and glanced at the horse which was still bucking in the syce's hands. Yadu seemed unperturbed by the beast. Most men would have been at least a little nervous when a half-ton animal grew thus agitated and began lashing out with those deadly hooves. The syce appeared as calm as ever, and not for the first time, Kamsa wondered just how old the man really was, and what role he had played in his father's coterie before he retired to this menial job.

'A fresh horse tomorrow,' he said and turned away without waiting for a response. There would be none in any case. Yadu only spoke when absolutely necessary. It was one of the reasons Kamsa trusted the old man to keep his part of the secret.

He was startled to see Mohini sentries at the perimeter of his palace. They did not deign to give him even the dignity of a sideward glance and merely continued their inscrutable watchfulness of their area of scrutiny, but he sensed their derision and scorn and felt the urge to lash out and crush them like flies. That would get them to notice him again! But he reminded himself how hard it had been to regain even this measure of strength, and what Narada had said when he told him how to achieve it, and knew he must keep his strength a secret until the right time and day.

There were Hijras lined up along his corridors too, a full force. That could mean only one thing: someone very important had come to see him in his private chambers. Uninvited.

He brushed past the Hijras and strode up to his chambers with deliberate ease. He was pulling off his gloves and whistling when he entered his private bedchamber.

Jarasandha was waiting. And with him were his usual cronies: Hansa and Dimvaka on either side; Bana and Canura off in the corners, skulking and still avoiding Kamsa's gaze; Bahuka, Agha, Baka, Dhenu, Trnavarta,

Vatsa, and with them Putana as well. Pralamba and Pradyota were there too, but from their positions relative to Jarasandha, it was evident that they did not enjoy the same favour as the others within the cherished circle of trust. And finally, there were four of the familiar Hijra Fauj, the toughest and most ruthless of the lot. Kamsa knew them from his days with Jarasandha. They had always been the first to go into battle and the last to leave a field; their death count was greater than that of entire regiments. The very fact that they were still alive, despite their many years of service, was testimony to their ability to kill and survive against all odds. They barely glanced at Kamsa; he was nothing to them, not even a hint of a possible future threat. That infuriated him more than anything else, but he kept his self-control. He had gained too much ground with too much effort to lose it only because of his temper.

Leaning back like an emperor upon his throne, legs crossed casually, Jarasandha was seated on Kamsa's bed. Hansa and Dimvaka lounged on either side, as still as bedposts.

'Come, come, Kamsa. We have much to discuss.'

And behind him, Kamsa heard the sound of the chamber doors being shut and bolted.

seven

'Kamsa, dear Kamsa,' said Jarasandha, then clicked his tongue sympathetically several times. 'It seems there is a revolution brewing behind your back that you are blissfully unaware of, my son.'

He paused and glanced at his cronies. 'Although, judging from the way you have been these past months, almost anything could be brewing behind your back and you would hardly know it!' A round of derisive laughter greeted this quip. Even Putana twitched in a sardonic imitation of a smile.

Kamsa stood impassively, not reacting in any way. Jarasandha looked at him, chin lowered in his usual way so that his eyes and brow seemed to merge. Like all natural predators, his eyes were close set and intense, and were most accustomed to focussing on the middle distance. His lips were slightly parted and the tips of his split tongue rested on his lower teeth, barely visible. He flicked it out, licked at his left cheek, then withdrew it into his mouth. ‘My spasas tell me that your Yadavas are trying to forge an alliance with the Kurus as well as other nations. They will not succeed, of course. The Kurus are far too wise to align themselves with the wrong faction, but the very fact that they make this attempt is an affront to my sovereignty. This kind of rebelliousness cannot be permitted to continue. It undermines the Yadava republic and the power of Mathura.’

Kamsa asked quietly, so quietly that Jarasandha heard only part of what he said, ‘What do you propose to do?’

Jarasandha frowned.

Kamsa knew Jarasandha could not have heard him clearly, but he also knew that the ‘god emperor’ was too proud to ask Kamsa to repeat himself. As he had intended, the Magadhan heard enough to presume to have understood him.

Jarasandha shrugged. ‘I propose that you quell this rebellion at once, of course! Find the guilty parties, bring them to book, and mete out such punishment as seems—’

Kamsa held up his hand, palm outwards, fingers splayed, interrupting Jarasandha. In a slightly louder but still calm tone, he said, ‘I did not ask you what I should do. I hardly need advice on how to manage my kingdom. I asked you what you propose to do.’

There was a moment of shocked silence. For a brief instant, even Jarasandha seemed at a loss for words. Out of the corner of his eyes, Kamsa saw Putana turn her head a fraction and look directly at him. He did not return her gaze or look at anyone else, but kept his eyes fixed on Jarasandha.

The Magadhan leaned forward on Kamsa’s bed, slowly uncrossing his legs. ‘I see. So you think you know how to manage your kingdom, do you?’

Interesting.'

Jarasandha stood up, now facing Kamsa directly. He came forward one step at a time, pacing his movement with his words as precisely as ever to produce the exact effect he desired. 'In that case, could you explain to me how these rebels have taken matters this far already? Why haven't you done anything about it yet? Instead of standing here and asking me – me – what I propose to do to help you! Why must you always look to me for help and advice? You are not the young green-eared boy who came to me a decade ago, Kamsa. You are a prince regent now. It's time you started learning to behave like one!'

He stopped less than two yards short of Kamsa.

Kamsa chuckled. He permitted himself merely to make the sound, but not to hold the chuckle more than a second. It was for effect too.

'I do not seem to be able to make you understand me, Jarasandha,' he said. 'I am neither asking for advice nor for help. I need neither from you. I was asking what you intend to do personally! About your own problems! As I said before, I can handle my matters on my own. You're right in saying that I'm not the young boy who came to you a decade ago seeking alliance and military backing to implement the coup which I felt was needed to replace my father's senile administration with a more robust and hard-dealing one of my own. I'm a man now. A king, in fact. I was a prince regent, it's true. But I have already made the necessary declarations to proclaim myself king officially at the tribal councils as is the age-old custom. With my father still absent, there will be no opposition. I expect your support, of course, as you have already offered it. And your military resources and aid, which you have officially placed at Mathura's disposal as per the treaties we have signed. But other than those things, I was merely asking about you personally, Jarasandha. Since your presence here is brewing restlessness and rebellion amongst my people, surely you do realize that it's time you moved on from here. After all, it's you they want to depose, not me. The Yadavas have never accepted an outsider governing them and never will. So what I was asking, to put it quite clearly this time in order to avoid any further confusion on your part—'

‘How dare you!’ said Bahuka, stepping forward, whip in hand, ready to lash out, his face red with anger. ‘Nobody speaks to our lord in such a manner!’

Jarasandha’s hand shot out, surprising Bahuka. Jarasandha waved Bahuka back, without taking his eyes off Kamsa.

‘But my lord, he—’

Jarasandha gestured a second time. Everyone who knew him knew there would not be a third time. Bahuka restrained himself with a visible effort and stepped back, lowering his whip but keeping it in hand, ready to use again, and his eyes glowered at Kamsa.

‘—to repeat it one final time,’ Kamsa went on, as if he had never been interrupted, ‘is when do you plan to remove your imperial presence from my capital city and kingdom? That is the question I asked you.’

Jarasandha put his hands behind his back and continued to examine Kamsa. His head tilted slightly, his gaze unwavering, he remained as still as a coiled cobra, but this very absence of motion was fraught with violence. There was powerful threat and aggression in the very lowering of his brows, the narrowing of his eyes, the pursing of his thin lips. Nobody else in the chamber moved either, and the gathering was frozen in time and space, awaiting the next course of action of its leader. The air held the promise of bloodshed and brutality, unmitigated cruelty meted out without hesitation or mercy.

‘So,’ Jarasandha said at last, ‘Kumbhakarna awakes.’

From the frowns on the faces of the others, Kamsa gathered that none of them understood the reference. He might have missed it too, had he not overheard the old stablehand Yadu telling the other stable boys the story of Rama and his epic tragedy just the night before. Kamsa had put his horse into its box as usual and was leaving the stables when he heard the old Yadava’s voice, cracked and rough with age and living, speaking over the chirring of crickets and cicadas in the dusk. Kamsa had paused, leaning against the worn wooden boards of the stable wall, sweat drying on his body, and listened with a fascination he could not explain.

‘To awaken,’ he said slowly, ‘one has to first be asleep.’

Eyes narrowing to pinpoints in his straight, perfectly symmetrical face, Jarasandha stared at Kamsa intently. Then he suddenly relaxed his scrutiny. ‘Indeed,’ he said, then flashed an unexpected smile. ‘Indeed!’

He barked orders in a foreign tongue at his men, prompting them into action with startling speed.

The language was Magadhan. Kamsa had learnt enough of it during his time with Jarasandha to know that it was a command to attack and kill him, Kamsa, at once. Or else he, Jarasandha, would kill each one of them and then proceed to kill Kamsa himself.

The last part was totally unnecessary. Bahuka was the first to move. Trnavarta, Baka, Agha, Vatsa and Dhenu spread out to avoid conflict with each other’s lines of attack. Even Pralamba and Pradyota moved forward, eyes flicking apologetically at Kamsa. Hansa and Dimvaka stayed back, smiling openly now: they hardly expected their services to be required. Bana and Canura glowered, their faces revealing the long-festered resentment and pent-up hatred they had kept hidden this past year, but waited their turn. Putana hung back to one side, neither committing to action nor avoiding it. She kept her eyes studiously averted from Kamsa, though he knew better than to look at her directly anyway.

But the first to attack were the four Hijras who were closest to Kamsa.

Kamsa had known that would be the case from the very beginning. And every step he had taken while speaking, every gesture he had made, apart from serving its purpose as part of his delivery of speech, also served to position himself most favourably to counter their attack.

He had also been focussing his attention on increasing his body’s density as he spoke, extending his words to give himself time.

And now, when the four Hijras moved in to kill him, he was ready to take them on.

Not moving or turning an inch, he remained where he was and was exactly where he wished to be. If they wanted him, they would have to

come to him.

He was standing with the closed door to the bedchamber behind him and the verandah to his right. To approach him, they would have to come from his left, his fore, and his right, and that is exactly what they did.

One Mohini slipped out onto the verandah, around a pillar, approaching from the extreme right, his blind spot. Two others came at him from the front and left, with the fourth staying just between and behind them both, but approaching at the same pace.

He had seen quads of Hijras work in the battlefield using similar formations. The first two would attack together, just wide apart enough to make it hard for the target to defend against both attacks simultaneously. Their movements were characterized by perfect coordination and devastating speed of attack. The first duo would strike a blow that would force the target to leap back, or miss a step, bend, twist, turn or otherwise deflect. That was when the Mohini on the extreme right (or, in an open field attack, the one coming from behind the target) would lunge forward, strike a single blow, then fall back instantly, and the first two would move aside unexpectedly, leaving room for the fourth Hijra to come forward and deal the death blow.

The entire manoeuvre barely lasted more than a few moments, and it was rare for the Hijra quad to need more than two strikes to kill the target. Even as the first two Hijras (front and left) finished their action, they would move on to the next target. And so on. Kamsa had witnessed such quads cutting a swathe through entire armies, slaughtering with such precision that the enemy camp often dropped its weapons and ran helter-skelter in panic. Armies or forces that attempted to fight were slaughtered to the last man.

There was a brief pause as the other men watching the Hijras move in glanced at one another knowingly. Kamsa was using his peripheral vision to watch all four Hijras at once, and his frontal vision happened to be looking at the space that Bahuka occupied. In a lupine threat, the grizzled veteran snarled and showed his teeth.

Kamsa offered no response. Later, he was proud of that single action more than anything else he did in that chamber that day. The fact that he had not let Bahuka provoke him at that crucial moment – which, of course, was precisely what the old dog had intended to do.

When he didn't respond, Bahuka instantly lost his snarl and frowned. This was not on his list of possible reactions from Kamsa and it disturbed him. He turned to look in Jarasandha's direction.

Kamsa did not see how Jarasandha responded to Bahuka's look, because Jarasandha was out of his frame of view and he was now focussing his entire body and being on one thing and one thing only: arming himself.

As everyone else in the bedchamber assumed, Kamsa was unarmed.

But there was a bigger truth about which only Kamsa was aware.

He didn't need a weapon.

He was the weapon.

The first two Hijras made their move, their short, curved swords blurring through the air with numbing speed as they yelled their high-pitched shrieks, blood-curdling cries that unnerved and startled most opponents when they issued forth from throats that had been deathly silent until that instant.

eight

The most dangerous thing about the Hijras was not their speed, or their unnerving high-pitched shrieks – shrieks which no mature man could duplicate – or even their razor-sharp, short, curved swords. It was their footwork. The reason why most battlefield combat broke up into small units was because warriors attacking together could easily get tangled up with one another. Even a regiment seeking to slaughter a single man would need to come at him one or two at a time, and the moment there were two

attacking at the same time, they were more likely to get in each other's way rather than finish off the solitary man. This was the reason why most gurus of combat cautioned their overzealous shishyas: two against one means double the chance of success – for the solo warrior! Unless the attackers worked in perfect tandem, like dancers in an elaborately rehearsed performance, pairs, trios and quads against a single man rarely had any significant advantage to offer. As the same wise gurus also cautioned: the only way to best a

single champion is to send a superior champion against him. But the Hijras had turned this basic notion of Arya warcraft upon its head. Bonded together since birth in a way that ordinary Kshatriyas never could be, these wilfully emasculated eunuchs followed only the code of the comrade. When two Hijras were put together, both succeeded or failed. There was no third option; Jarasandha made sure of that. If your partner was cut down, you were cut down as well, end of story. The same applied if you were put in a trimurti: three for one, and one for all. And so on through quads, pentads, sextets, and more. Until finally, the entire Mohini Fauj functioned as one organic unit, an army that breathed and lived and died as a single man.

While the logistics of defeating such an army were mind-boggling, the chances of facing even a pair, trimurti or quad and simply surviving were almost nil.

And in Kamsa's case, with not just the quad of Hijras but so many other champions also poised against him, he had only one chance. He had to take the upper hand from the outset, or the fight would be over in a moment, with him the loser.

Kamsa watched their feet as the first two Hijras came at him, shrieking and whirling like dust-devils. As always, their attack was designed to disorient, confuse, misdirect and maim a standing opponent who was whipping around to try and be able to see both his attackers at once. Their entire strategy was based on that. The shrieks were coordinated in a rising and falling pattern so that the opponent was unconsciously compelled to look at the one on the left, then the one in the centre, then back again, until he was so confused and misdirected that his weapon was poised neither to attack nor defend against either one.

Even if he stayed with one Hijra, the other would be able to slip in past his guard and deal the single maiming blow which the Hijras desired to inflict. Just one blow. Sever the bicep muscle, disabling one arm. Hack at the collarbone, disabling one arm and making it impossible to use the other without excruciating pain. Cut at the upper brow – deep enough to hurt badly as face wounds always did – making blood pour into the eyes of the opponent, blinding him. Pierce the armpit, slice the tricep muscles ... there were a dozen other points. None critical or mortal in themselves, but when faced with two men attacking at once and two more following close on their heels, that one disabling cut or piercing was all it took to make a man open to a lethal strike.

But their entire first attack strategy depended on the upper body. On striking at the head, shoulders and upper arms. Hence the leaping and dancing and shrieking to make the opponent look up, swing around, and keep his guard high, enabling them to come in under his guard and inflict that one strike. Their chaotic and wild animalistic approach was in fact perfectly rehearsed, choreographed and coordinated. As one Hijra leapt high, his scream rising at that precise moment to force the opponent to raise his weapon and line of sight, the other one slid in to deal the vital blow.

So accustomed were they to this strategy, so habituated to finding success with it that they knew all possible reactions and counter-attacks intimately.

So Kamsa did the one thing they were not prepared for, or expecting.

He ignored them completely.

Even as they came spinning and leaping at him, shrieking like death criers at a king's cremation, he turned around and dropped to the floor in one swift motion, thumping on his buttocks, jarring his spine hard enough to feel the impact all the way up his neck and in his skull. And then he dropped his upper body back, lying flat on the floor as the Mohinis leapt and slashed above him. Several feet above him, in fact. There was a fraction of an instant when the Hijras realized that something extraordinary had occurred. Their opponent had not only failed to react in any of the usual ways adversaries usually reacted, he had done something

they had never encountered before in any one of several hundred encounters to date. He had turned his back to them, then fallen down at their feet while they were still leaping in the air, their weapons slashing through empty space where he had been, where he ought to still be!

By doing so, not only had he removed his entire body from their field of attack in a single instant, he had also effectively put himself below their own high line of defence. He didn't even need to slip in; the Hijras' headlong forward movement brought him within reach of their defenceless bodies which were vulnerable even if only for that one fraction of an instant before they adjusted and changed their angle of attack. They were fast. But even the fastest warrior needs a fraction of an instant to adapt to a completely new development.

In the fire of battle, such moment is all the advantage a man needs. It is all he gets, and often he doesn't get even that much. To any warrior, it is a gift. To a champion, it is a gift from the gods themselves.

To Kamsa, operating at the highest level of skill he had ever accomplished in his entire life, it was a great field of opportunity crying out to be ploughed with a blood-axe!

In that fraction of a second, his hands shot out and grasped a single ankle of the Hijra who had been on his left. His new densely packed body strength made the leaping warrior seem no heavier than a straw in his fist. In the same action, Kamsa slammed the Hijra down, onto his fellow Hijra, the one who had been facing Kamsa directly.

The two Mohinis crashed into one another and then onto the marble floor hard enough for the sound of breaking bones and shattering cartilage to be loudly audible, crunching and crackling. Their shrieks ceased abruptly, and where two superb dealers of death had been leaping through the air in a balletic display of warcraft mastery, two crushed and dazed cripples now lay upon the marble floor.

From the position in which he lay, on his back, looking backwards at the chamber, Kamsa could see the twin coals of Jarasandha's eyes glowing from across the room. He took another brief instant to flash a grin and drop a lewd wink at the Magadhan.

Then, without waiting to see the response of the ‘god emperor’, he regained his feet with a single leap. He had been practicing this move as well, and was pleased at his body’s response. He landed with a jarring thud and caused the chamber to shake, and due to his body having gained density, left spider webs of cracks beneath each foot. He was growing in density even now, and was yet to reach his full potential; but he had other things to concentrate on for the moment. Such as staying alive a few minutes longer.

The third and fourth Hijras were already moving in for the attack. Stunned though they were by the unexpected manoeuvre and by the downing of their comrades, they were now deadlier than ever. Before, they had been part of a quad that had been emasculated, raised, groomed, trained, punished and rewarded together since birth. Now, with two of their comrades crippled, perhaps dying, they were doomed. Even if Kamsa did not kill them now, Jarasandha would. They had nothing to lose or gain, except for one thing.

Jarasandha barked a single word across the room.

Kamsa knew its meaning well, it was so commonly yelled among Magadhans that it might well be considered their battle cry: ‘Avenge!’

The Mohini on the verandah touched one short sword to the marble floor, raking it across sharply enough to cleave the soft decorative stone visibly by a half centimetre. He held out the other sword in an unusual backhand that Kamsa knew would spring back to pierce at the least expected moment. Partly due to the sword held to the floor, he came at Kamsa in a low loping stride. Sparks flew from the point where the deadly sharp blade met the polished stone floor. The other Mohini, the one who had been on Kamsa’s right but still inside the chamber proper, somersaulted forward once, twice, then kept coming in that fashion. The bedchamber was palatial, but Kamsa knew that a fighter somersaulting in a closed space always held an advantage over one standing still. For one thing, the somersaulting fighter could change his trajectory at any time and still strike with considerable force – too much force for a standing man to easily fend off without being thrown off balance. The two Hijras were coming at him from the front centre and the extreme right, in two very different yet extremely rapid and forceful attacks that no ordinary

mortal soldier would have been able to resist. Coming at him from two different directions, they had turned Kamsa's geographical advantages against him: pinning him against the closed door and wall, and covering both the upper as well as the lower field of attack.

There was no shrieking this time. Just the soft thuds of the somersaulting Hijra making brief contact with the ground each time, and the shirring sound of metal scraping and cutting stone as the other Hijra's sword threw up a shower of golden flaring sparks as he came loping at Kamsa.

Kamsa stood his ground.

Had he been any normal warrior, that would have been a mortal error.

The impact of the somersaulting Mohini striking him with such momentum would have slammed him back against the wall, even as the somersaulting eunuch reversed his movement and bounced off, leaving Kamsa, slumped against the wall and momentarily stunned, an easy target for the second Hijra who would have swung sideways, slicing upwards with the lowered short sword, then stabbed deep and hard with the backheld short sword. Kamsa would have died impaled against the wall.

But he was not the Kamsa of yore. His weight was several times that of a normal mortal warrior. He could not be certain how dense he had been able to make himself right now, but he was certainly at least nine or ten times denser, and weighed proportionately that much more than his usual weight.

For a somersaulting attacker to strike a man weighing a hundred kilos was one thing; but to strike a man weighing a ton or more, with skin like steel, flesh like iron and bones like alloy ...

The Hijra somersaulted right at Kamsa, twisting his body with expert grace in mid-air to bring himself into striking position, his feet landing squarely on Kamsa's chest.

There should have been a loud thud, perhaps the cracking of a few ribs, and then the thump of Kamsa's body hitting the wall.

Instead, like dried sticks under a heavily laden wagon's wheels, the Hijra's feet shattered beneath him due to his own momentum and force. It was as if he had crashed into a stone wall, but since he had not been expecting a stone wall, the force he used worked against him, breaking his feet. They bent and bent again grotesquely, and the Hijra fell in a broken heap on the floor, silent even in his terrible condition, but only because Jarasandha's ruthless discipline had conditioned him not to express pain through sound. His face screamed his terror and pain instead.

A fraction of a moment later, the second Mohini struck. In a manoeuvre designed to accomplish terrible, irreparable damage, his sword rose up from the marble floor and slashed viciously at Kamsa's upper thigh, groin and lower abdomen at a diagonal. Without waiting to see the effect of this first strike, the warrior swung around, dancing in a diagonal turnaround move that took him from one foot to the other, and stabbed his other short sword directly into Kamsa's solar plexus, aimed at punching through the softest part in the torso to penetrate right through.

Both swords snapped and broke.

The Mohini's action left him at a sideways angle to Kamsa. He turned, expecting to see Kamsa vomiting blood and dying. Instead, he saw the Mathuran standing exactly as he had stood before, and his own short swords broken and useless. He raised them and stared, unable to believe his eyes, then snarled and attacked again, stabbing out with the edges of the broken blades. They were still dangerous enough to cut through normal human flesh.

But when they struck Kamsa's skin, they simply broke again with the impact.

The Hijra stared at Kamsa in disbelief.

Kamsa smiled, reached out, and caught hold of the Hijra's bald pate in his left hand. He took hold of it in a grip so tight, the Hijra was suspended an inch or two in mid-air.

The astounded fighter lashed out with the broken swords, his feet, and every ounce of strength and skill he had left.

Kamsa squeezed, barely exerting more effort than if he had been squeezing a ripe grape.

The effect on the Hijra's skull was much the same. Kamsa tossed him aside, then waggled his eyebrows at the others.

'So let's see if you men fare better than your Hijra comrades,' he said.

Everyone stared at him. There was hatred in their eyes now, not the superior smug contempt that had been there before. Even Jarasandha had lowered his chin further, his eyes barely visible beneath his heavy forehead and brow, and was examining the slaughter with a mind expert in strategy and tactics. His tongue flicked out and back inside.

Nobody said anything.

Kamsa sighed wearily.

'Come on then, get a move on. I've got a kingdom to run and things to do.'

nine

Even through his surprise and rage, Jarasandha could not help but feel a certain astonished pride at his protégé. Some nameless rakshasa might have sired Kamsa, and Ugrasena might have fostered him to adulthood, but it was Jarasandha who had turned Kamsa into a warrior. Until he met the Magadhan, the Yadava had been little more than a rough-houser, winning fights through brute strength, and with a disdain for fighting protocol as well as sheer arrogance. It was Jarasandha's mentorship that had transformed the lad into a carefully honed weapon of war.

But now, it seemed that weapon had grown beyond

Jarasandha's own ability to hold or wield.

Initially, he had assumed that Kamsa's cocky arrogance and high-handed attitude was the final stage of the breakdown of the Mathuran's damaged mind. Now he saw that it was in fact the opposite. Somehow, Kamsa had outsmarted him, if only briefly. He did not know how the Yadava had managed to gain such formidable powers or what exactly those powers entailed, nor could he comprehend how the man had managed to overcome the effect of his daily potions. Those potions were enough to drive Kamsa insane by now, or at the very least, make him the same irritable, frustrated but otherwise quite malleable idiot he had been of late. But somehow, Kamsa had dodged the arrow and slipped the noose. Then again, perhaps that was the essence of Kamsa's life story. Jarasandha recalled his spasa's report on how Kamsa had been under the executioner's axe when his rakshasa blood first heralded itself in an astonishing display. Jarasandha had played some part in that as well, secretly feeding Kamsa certain potions which enhanced his rakshasa qualities; it was only a matter of time before nature took its course then. But the fact that it had taken a near-death experience to make Kamsa finally transform suggested that perhaps the Yadava needed that ultimate level of threat to finally effect his change.

And now again, it seemed, he had done the unthinkable, transforming when faced with certain death once more. Except that this time he had accomplished it without Jarasandha's knowledge or understanding, and that intrigued the Magadhan. Like any purveyor of violence and power, he was fascinated by any use of these that he could not comprehend.

'Are we going to stand around all day and stare at each other?' Kamsa asked with just the right touch of irony.

That was another thing that surprised Jarasandha. Until not long ago, Kamsa was little more than a loutish, selfish, pleasure-seeking dolt. This was something new. This was not the result of a potion or even training, it was a change from within. How it had been achieved greatly intrigued Jarasandha.

Bahuka and the others looked at him again, waiting eagerly for him to give the command to attack. The fate of the Mohinis had only angered them, not scared them in the least. Superb fighters though the Hijras were, they were still subject to the vagaries and weaknesses of mortal physic. The others, however, had powers which were rarely displayed in public,

and about which few even knew. On Jarasandha's instructions, they were to be used only in the battlefield and only on his orders. Unauthorized use would lead to the same penalty as any other form of disobedience to Jarasandha: instant death at the Magadhan's hands. Now, each wanted desperately to be given the opportunity to put his powers to use, to teach the impudent Yadava a lesson. His last lesson.

Jarasandha had no doubt they could do it. Well, perhaps one or three of them might fall too, not quite as quickly as the Hijras had, but fall nevertheless. Whatever transformation Kamsa had wrought upon himself, it was no mere muscle-building or special training. There was real power there. Power that fascinated Jarasandha, made him want to know more, study it further. Whether or not the combined power of his accomplices in the chamber could overcome Kamsa's power could only be determined by an all-out fight to the death. And that would leave either Jarasandha's men or Kamsa dead or damaged beyond use.

He did not want either to happen. Not now at any rate.

For one thing, he wished to examine and understand Kamsa better. To know what had wrought his transformation and whether it could be repeated.

But more importantly, he sensed a greater opportunity. The earlier Kamsa, the giant rakshasa who had all but destroyed his own capital city single-handedly and driven his people to revolt, that Kamsa had been useless as an ally. That was why Jarasandha had had to come to Mathura himself, step in and take charge of matters. He had plans for Mathura and the Yadava nation. Long-term plans. And Kamsa the rakshasa was disrupting them with his reckless abuse of power. It had taken Jarasandha the better part of the year past to repair some of the damage, rebuild the city and palace enclave, build ties with the populace, seed future alliances and trade deals, and generally set Mathura back on the path of prosperity and growth that he needed it to stay on. A Mathura at war with itself, destroyed from within by its own mad ruler, was of no use to him in the long run. A strong Mathura with a king who would do his bidding – for a price, of course – and who would rule the powerful and prosperous nation as a proxy for him ... well, such a king would be of great use to him.

This Kamsa just might be capable of being that king. His transformed manner, and mental and physical powers added up to a man who was a far cry from the insane rampaging rakshasa of a year ago, or even the adolescent marauder who enjoyed slaughter too much to even care who he was killing or why. Neither of those were fit to be kings, let alone rule Mathura.

This man, on the other hand, this Kamsa, facing a chamber full of some of Jarasandha's most lethal fighters, yes, he could rule as Jarasandha's proxy.

There was a third, crucial reason why Jarasandha did not give the order to attack Kamsa.

All said and done, Kamsa was his son-in-law. And Jarasandha loved his daughters dearly. He wanted them to bear him heirs. And heirs who would inherit the Yadava nation as well would be invaluable in future. Like any truly wise emperor, Jarasandha knew his itihasa. No liege, however strong or empowered with the greatest army, can rule indefinitely by force alone. Statecraft, kingship, diplomacy, or call the blend simply politics, were essential to long-term governance.

Kamsa, as the blood heir to the throne, would ensure that. As would Kamsa's offspring from Jarasandha's daughters.

And if Kamsa had regained his senses indeed, acquired formidable new powers, and even gained a modicum of wisdom and maturity in the process somehow, well, in that case, he had suddenly removed all possible reasons for extermination and made himself an extremely desirable son-in-law and ally once more.

It was with this in mind that Jarasandha shook his head, refusing to give the order that his men craved. They stared at him in disbelief, unable to take in the turn of events.

'No,' he said aloud, ending any doubt they might have. Bahuka snarled. 'My lord, he has insulted you!'

Jarasandha strode across the chamber to where Bahuka stood, and slapped the man backhanded across the cheek. Though just a casually dealt

blow, it was hard enough to split Bahuka's lip and draw blood. 'That is for me to decide. Now, stand down!'

He turned to the others as well, meeting each of their gazes in turn, and said loudly, 'Stand down!'

They lowered their gazes, knowing better than to challenge him.

Beside him, Bahuka glowered at Kamsa even as he wiped the trickle of blood from his lip. 'It is a bad precedent,' he said very softly, just enough for Jarasandha to hear. 'The dog that gets away with a finger may some day bite our hand off.'

Jarasandha looked up at the ceiling. There was an interesting dent there where something had struck the ceiling hard enough to break a piece of the stone overbeam. It would have taken considerable force and velocity to do that. He wondered if it was somehow connected to Kamsa's recent transformation; he thought it did.

'Leave us,' he said quietly for Bahuka's benefit. Firmly but not like a command. The old veteran had been with the Magadhan plunderer too long and fought too many wars and conflicts alongside him to be easily cowed. Beating him down would only end up in another unnecessary death. Some flies were more easily drawn with honey than slapped with sticks.

Bahuka left slowly, reluctantly. The others went too, glowering at Kamsa as they passed him by, but none making a move towards him. Once the doors were opened, other Mohinis came in to drag out their comrades. The faint sounds of necks being cracked outside were audible to Jarasandha's sharp ears; there was no room for the physically challenged in his army. Being a soldier for Magadha was in itself a challenge, physically and in every other way. On the battlefield, he himself went around finishing off damaged soldiers. He called it 'relieving them of their duties'.

When everyone had left and the doors had been shut once more, but not bolted this time, Jarasandha turned to look at Kamsa shrewdly.

'Tell me everything,' he said.

Kamsa looked at him laconically for a moment. ‘What does that mean, “everything”?’

‘How did this happen? When did it happen?’

Kamsa tore off a silk sheet and used it to wipe himself clean of the Hijras’ blood. He also felt the great thirst that overcame him every time he used his powers but he controlled the urge. He wanted nothing more than to pick up the oversized water pot he now kept in his chamber, up-end it and drink until it was completely drained. But he didn’t do that. Any need was a potential weakness, and he did not want Jarasandha to know his weakness. Instead, he picked up the pot and merely sipped at it, more as an affectation rather than an expression of need. ‘Could you be more specific, Father dear? At least give me some hint as to what you might be referring to?’

Jarasandha smiled wryly. ‘You have changed completely. I’m tempted to say “overnight” but of course that can’t be true. This has taken time, effort.’ Something occurred to him. ‘And training! I see now. The question I should be asking is, who has effected this transformation. Who was it, Kamsa?’

Aching to empty the contents of the pot into his belly, let the cold water splash onto his face and shoulders and head, drench him completely, Kamsa took another sip. He could almost feel the water splashing on his sweaty overheated head and torso as he imagined it. But to Jarasandha he showed only indifference. ‘What transformation?’

Jarasandha shook his head. ‘Come now, Kamsa. You are a different man. A new man. With extraordinary new abilities. That does not come on its own; it is acquired somehow. All I wish to know is, how and when and from whom.’

Kamsa took a third sip, weighed the pot in his hand a moment, thinking. It weighed at least a hundred kilos, he knew, because it contained one hundred litres of water. He knew he could drink five of those right then and still want more. He forced the need to the back of his mind and focussed on the matter at hand. It was important he make Jarasandha understand that the first time, otherwise the process would take weeks or

months, instead of days to accomplish. And something told him that he could not afford it to take weeks or months. Each day that he dallied in Mathura with Jarasandha, the Slayer would be out there somewhere, growing up, growing stronger, getting ready to attack him. He had to be ready when the time came. He had to choose the place and manner of the confrontation. It was the only hope he had.

‘You are right about the rebellion,’ he said quietly, being sure to couch his words in calm indifference. Any sign of urgency would only make Jarasandha suspicious. ‘It is led by Akrur, acting on behalf of Vasudeva himself.’

Jarasandha immediately dropped his sardonic smile and came several steps forward. ‘I knew it! Did you learn this from your spasas? What else did they tell you?’

Kamsa raised his other hand, waving away the questions. ‘It does not matter how I came to know about this. All that matters is that it is true. You can verify it with the help of your spasas in time – but if you do, you will run out of time.’

Jarasandha frowned, lowering his chin again as he was wont to do when he grew suspicious or aggressive. ‘Is that some kind of threat?’

Kamsa responded, ‘Yes, but not a threat by me. By the Yadavas. If you do not heed them now, your entire empire may be lost to you forever. Already, they have begun to chip away at the edifice; and given time and your continued indifference, they will surely bring you down into the dust sooner than you might think possible.’

Jarasandha stared at him, then seemed to grow aware of the fact that Kamsa still held the pot of water in one hand, with his elbow crooked, as easily as any man might hold a mug of wine. ‘You have gained great strength somehow. There are potions that can give you such strength for brief periods, taxing your body to its limits. What they give you in strength, they cost you in years of your life.’

Kamsa chuckled. ‘You think my strength is gained from a potion?’ He raised the pot higher, bringing it to Jarasandha’s attention. ‘Can a potion

give any man the ability to absorb a hundred litres of water without it showing anywhere on his body?’

And touching the rim of the pot to his lips, he upended and drained it entirely. It took several moments and he was careful not to spill even a drop. He was trying to make it seem as if he was drinking the water to prove a point – not because of a side-effect that made him inordinately thirsty. When Kamsa had emptied the pot, he tossed it across the room. It flew out of the verandah and landed on the ground below, smashing with a loud crash. A few voices could be heard, Bahuka’s unmistakable among them, expressing their disapproval of such careless littering.

Kamsa raised his anga-vastra to reveal his flat, taut belly and ridged abdomen muscles. For Jarasandha’s benefit, he thumped his stomach and groin with his fist, revealing it to be hard enough to make it sound like an elephant driving its head against a heavy tree trunk. ‘You see now? Is this the work of a potion, you think?’

Jarasandha’s eyes glittered. He approached Kamsa slowly, hand outstretched as if longing to touch and see for himself. Kamsa raised a hand in warning, restraining him. Jarasandha’s tongues flickered and disappeared again.

‘No,’ he said finally. ‘This is something else entirely. Something I have never heard of or encountered before. It intrigues me.’

Good. For as long as it intrigues you, you will not try to kill me, I trust. Aloud, Kamsa said, ‘About the rebellion, then. The rebels have mounted an army and are attacking your outposts. Those nearest to Mathura have already fallen. Now they make their way northwards and westwards.’

Jarasandha frowned. ‘North and west? But that would take them beyond the borders of the Yadava nation!’

Kamsa nodded slowly, waiting for Jarasandha to reason it out by himself.

‘Exactly. There is an old saying among us Yadavas, when you pour hot daal onto a plate of rice, never try to eat the middle.’

Jarasandha blinked. ‘What?’

Kamsa gestured to indicate an imaginary plate of rice onto which he poured steaming hot daal as he repeated himself slowly, ‘Never try to eat the hot rice and daal from the middle of the plate. You will burn yourself. Instead, start from the outside and work your way in.’

Jarasandha shook his head, looking irritated now. ‘Rustic sayings were never my strong suit, Son-in-law. If there is some wisdom there, it eludes me.’

Kamsa sighed. ‘They want you out of Mathura, but rather than defy you here and risk destroying their own capital city and kingdom, they have taken the fight to your territories. That’s why they have headed north and west. They have allied with the kingdoms you have taken over and intend to liberate them, one by one.’

Jarasandha now gaped openly at Kamsa, light dawning in his eyes. ‘Eating the dish from the outside, working their way inwards. Mathura is the hot centre of the plate. I see it now! How quaint, and quite apt indeed. So they think they can unite my principalities against me, do they? How ridiculous!’

‘And yet how dangerous. With a few other allies as strong as Hastinapura ...’

‘Did you say Hastinapura? The Kurus would never align with these foolish rebel factions!’

‘Not officially. But much can be done unofficially. And the Kurus are very powerful indeed. As are the Drupads. And the Bhojas. And the Gandaharis. And who knows who else?’

Lips pursed in the spiteful stubborn way he had when contradicted, Jarasandha shook his head. ‘Impossible. Not the Drupads and the Gandaharis! It’s true that Pritha, also known as Kunti, is sister to Vasudeva, so the Kurus have some reason to sympathize with the Yadava rebel cause, but these others ...’ His voice trailed off as he thought for a moment. ‘Pritha was adopted by Kuntibhoja, king of the Bhojas, and renamed Kunti by him. Drupad is a close ally of the Kurus. And Shakuni,

son of King Subala of the Gandaharis is brother to Gandhari, who is married to Dhritarashtra, the blind king of Hastinapura. They are all connected in some way to the Kurus then.'

'Not some way; by blood and by marriage. And by sympathy they are united against your expansionary ambitions. Many more will join them. This is not a rebellion against me or the throne of Mathura. It is a rebellion against you and your empire-building. Everything you have worked for is in danger of being lost, Jarasandha. Heed my advice. Go now. Leave Mathura. Consolidate your empire outside this nation. Leave Mathura and the Yadavas to me to manage, as was our original understanding, and I shall remain allied with you always. I shall also visit your daughters, my wives, and sire children on them. But if you stay, you risk losing everything.'

Jarasandha remained silent for a very long time.

Kamsa waited patiently. From below, he could hear the voices and murmurs of men, the clinking of weapons and snorting of horses. He guessed that riders had arrived, bearing the news he had intercepted the previous day and the information they brought was causing consternation among Jarasandha's advisors.

Finally, Jarasandha nodded once, decisively. 'Everything you have said can be easily proven or disproved. I am expecting riders with news from the outposts even now. If what you say is true, I shall do exactly as you advise and leave Mathura to you. But if you fail me in any way – whether as an ally, a king, or a son-in-law, I shall return. And the next time I come to Mathura, I shall make her mine forever. Do you understand?'

Kamsa smiled. 'She is already yours. She merely happens to be wedded to me, Father-in-law.'

As he drove the uks cart through the gates of Mathura city, Nanda kept his features composed and his manner as natural as possible. Behind him, in the covered wagon, along with the infantile sounds of Krishna and Balarama babbling excitedly as they spied the high walls and imposing structures of the great city, he could hear the voices of their mothers Yashoda and Rohini admonishing them to be quiet and behave themselves.

He grinned as he clicked his tongue to encourage the uks team to move along faster. Accustomed to the sedate pace of life in Gokul, they too were intimidated by the hustle and bustle of the city and were clip-clopping past at a trot and a canter. Nanda could still remember his siblings and he first coming to Mathura, years ago when he had been a few years older than Krishna–Balarama, and how excited they had all been at the time. Krishna and Balarama were just healthy normal boys, filled with all the excitement and vigour of little children everywhere.

He wished Yashoda would give up her ridiculous theory that their son was possessed of miraculous powers and capable of achieving impossible feats. It was true that Krishna was not ordinary in the common sense of the word; he was their son, and he was extremely special in every way. But he was no superboy or wonderchild as Yashoda made him out to be. That incident with the shattered cart had been so embarrassing. Yashoda had insisted stubbornly – in front of all their relatives and closest friends and neighbours too! – that it had been Krishna who had kicked the cart to pieces! How could such a thing be conceivable? Even if the infant was strong and robust and would grow up some day to be a great warrior, the idea of a babe kicking a heavily laden cart hard enough to smash it to smithereens was too incredible to even consider.

He did not have any alternative explanation for the cart's destruction, or for its remarkable reassembly, almost before their very eyes. But stranger, more miraculous things had happened before, and like all rustic Yadavas, Nanda did not feel a pressing need to question and understand every single thing that occurred beneath the sheltering sky. There were things in this world that could not be easily explained or understood by mortal minds; he knew and accepted this without resistance. So what was the point debating or questioning such events? The only reasonable question might be if the event was of a naturalistic nature or a numinous one. He had

already ruled out the event being caused by a sacerdotal act since all the Brahmins present were busy eating at the time and he did not think it was possible that a Brahmin could be feasting and performing wondrous feats using Brahman shakti at the same time!

Personally, he believed, as did all the others present that day, that some calamity beyond their understanding had threatened their infant son on that field, and that the great Protector Lord Vishnu Himself had intervened to preserve his life.

How and by what means these things had been accomplished, he did not know, nor did he think it was comprehensible. But only the devas could do such things as smash a cart and those heavy, laden metal pots to fragments and then reassemble it all in the blink of an eye.

As the cart trundled lazily through the wide avenues of Mathura, Nanda was pleased to see the change in the city since he had visited it last. Just a year before, days prior to Krishna's birth, he had come to pay the taxes to the king, and he recalled how terrified he had been. A pall of fear had hung over the entire city, and the kingdom. That cloud of fear and uncertainty seemed to have lifted at last. He had heard of Jarasandha the Magadhan's departure along with his feared Hijra Fauj. Everyone had been relieved to see them leave. There had been rumours that Jarasandha would use his position as Kamsa's father-in-law to rule the Yadavas with Kamsa as a proxy king. Such an arrangement could be legally justified by Kamsa's own condition, which verged on near-insanity.

But in the past weeks, the political situation had changed dramatically. Kamsa had regained his senses, it was said, and taken charge of his kingdom's affairs once again. And if the word from the palace enclave was accurate, this time he actually seemed to be playing the part of a king in truth, not merely in name.

At around the same time, Jarasandha had received word of trouble at his outposts and an uprising from the kingdoms he had most recently annexed. He had taken his army and left at once, and the rumour was that he would be occupied for a fair while now, struggling to crush the uprising, regain the territory he had fought so hard for, as well as to consolidate the rest of his ill-gotten empire. It was presumed that Jarasandha would not be

returning to Mathura for a long time, if ever, and all were glad to have seen the last of him, except perhaps for a few hundred aristocratic families who were said to have formed trade and other alliances with the Magadhan.

Now, as he and his fellow passengers trundled through the city, Nanda could see for himself the air of festivity and gaiety across all Mathura. Buildings and structures and roads and artefacts that had been in near-ruins or disarray the previous year had been rebuilt or demolished and replaced by newer, sturdier structures. Several of these new artefacts, such as the bridges and underpasses, were foreign to Yadava architecture, and were the work of Magadhan engineers and architects. The natural Yadava scepticism of such foreign workmanship had been quickly overcome due to the convenience offered by such devices, and already his kinsfolk from far and wide had begun visiting the capital to study these structures and attempt to imitate them in their own fashion back in their home towns. It was a common misconception that Yadavas resisted progress. The fact was that they welcomed and embraced progress warmly. They merely wanted it to occur at their own pace and in their own style.

All in all, as they leisurely wound their way towards the royal enclave, he thought that the capital had not seemed this inviting in a long time, ever since the day of King Ugrasena and King Vasudeva's peace accord. That had been a fine day, Nanda recalled, smiling and patting his growing paternal belly. Such good feasting, and what excellent conversation and music and dance and company! Ah, truly was it said: Give a Yadava enough wine, music, dance and chatter, and you don't need to use force to take his house – he will invite you to stay permanently!

He prayed that this time, peace was here to stay permanently too. There had been too much killing, too much anger and hatred and reprisals. Violence in any form was reprehensible, a violation of Sanatana Dharma, the unified system of collected beliefs that was shared by the denizens of Aryavarta, the land of the high thinking and right acting. But while all violence was indefensible, Yadavas killing Yadavas was the worst form of violence possible. He still recalled how hopeful and happy the day of the historic peace accord had been, how much it had meant to everyone he knew. When Kamsa and his marauders had begun violating the terms of

the treaty even before the wax seal on the parchment was dry, it had come as a shock to Nanda and to all other peace-loving Yadavas. Yet even in the darkest of days, he had never been one of those who exchanged their cowherd's crook for a blade; he had always believed that peace would triumph in the end.

And now, seeing the relaxed, smiling faces of passers-by on the avenue, the uks carts trundling to and fro, horse riders and pedestrians coming and going with a bustling energy that was infectious and reassuring, he felt vindicated. Peace had won out in the end. Fragile though it was, it was the only way to ensure a future for their children and their children to come.

The royal enclave had changed too since he had last been there. Security was stricter than ever, but gone were the loutish oafs who had been too quick with their weapons and too sharp with their tongues. In their place were tough but straightforward men whose queries were terse but to the point and who let them pass without any fuss. Nanda was relieved when he drew the uks cart to a halt in front of Devaki's palace. He had had nightmarish visions of sentries poking spears through the sides and underside of the uks cart, searching for the Slayer. Even now, he had only brought the women and boys there because Yashoda had insisted firmly, and when she set her mind to do something, he had no hope of convincing her to do otherwise. It was odd, though: Yashoda was the one who had wanted to visit Mathura with Rohini and both boys. But she was also the one who seemed most concerned about the risks of taking two infants to a city where infants their age had been indiscriminately slaughtered without mercy not long ago. He sighed as he handed the reins of the uks to one of Vasudeva's men, a distant clansman of Nanda's own brother-in-law, and put the worries out of his mind. He was seeing his old friends after too long to waste precious time with anxieties and fears.

A familiar voice made him break out of his reverie.

'Nanda Maharaja!' Akrur said, greeting him with a roar and hearty back-slapping. 'You look thin, old friend. Has Yashoda- devi not been feeding you well?'

'She has, she has,' Nanda said, patting his belly. 'Here is proof. If I look leaner, it's on account of all the additional running around and work that

fatherhood entails!'

Akrur glanced over at the women and boys, then whispered into Nanda's ear, 'Vasudeva and Devaki have been awaiting this day with more excitement than you can imagine. It is a very vital day in the itihasa of the Yadavas, old friend.'

Nanda frowned, wondering what Akrur meant by that. He finally assumed it had something to do with his clansman's other rumoured activities. As they walked up the luxurious but elegantly understated corridors and halls of Devaki's princely residence, he asked Akrur quietly: 'Is it true, then? You lead the Yadu rebellion against Jarasandha?'

Akrur glanced at him, his teeth flashing in a wry grin. 'Don't you know? I am a wanted man. Wanted for questioning at least, if not treason. I am to be apprehended on sight, and killed if I resist. There are soldiers scouring the outposts of the nation in search of me.'

Nanda stopped dead in his tracks. The women and boys, walking ahead, went on without realizing that he had stopped. 'And you are here? In the very heart of Kamsa's garrison? In the royal enclave? There must be an entire akshohini stationed within shouting distance!'

Akrur grinned again, raking a hand through his hair, which he had allowed to grow out, Nanda noted. 'Three akshohinis, actually. Two are stationed in the new military cantonment outside the city. Also, Jarasandha left behind some of his most trusted and feared champions. Officially, they are here to ensure that his trade agreements and other interests are looked after well, but in fact, they are all demons in human form, asuras possessed of terrible powers, each capable of taking on an akshohini himself. I would be more afraid of any one of them finding me here than I would be if all three akshohinis arrived at once!'

Nanda stared at him, nonplussed. 'And yet you are here?'

Akrur clapped a hand on Nanda's shoulder. 'I am here to persuade Vasudeva to leave Mathura. He is in as much danger as I am. I hope your visit will help us convince him of the necessity of going into exile at once. I know he cannot stomach the notion, but it is the only way left. That is

why, when I heard you were coming, I made it a point to double back and slip in. If your visit does not convince him, nothing will.'

Nanda frowned, raising his hands in protest. 'But, Bhraatr, I have no great influence over Vasudeva. I can speak to him, of course, and will be happy to do so. But my knowledge of politics is too limited for me to fully understand the complexities involved here, let alone persuade anyone else.'

Akrur laughed, throwing his head back and giving Nanda a fleeting glimpse of his uvula. 'Ah, Nanda Maharaja, ever the simple gopa! My friend, I didn't mean you personally. I meant your son Krishna. He is the one I hope will persuade Vasudeva to leave Mathura and go into exile. Now go meet your old friends. I shall remain at the entrance to this part of the palace and ensure that nobody who wishes any of you harm comes to disturb you.'

And he clapped his hand on Nanda's back once again, turning back to go down the corridor to the last doorway, leaving Nanda wondering what in the world he meant: How could a one-year-old infant who could not yet speak more than a word or three persuade the king of the Vrishnis to go into exile?

eleven

Devaki sensed Krishna's presence long before he entered her chambers.

Maatr, I am coming to see you!

Yes, my son, I am waiting eagerly.

Bhraatr Balarama is coming with me as well. Remember, every kiss and hug you give him, you must give me two in return!

And he had gurgled mischievously.

All the while, as he had approached, she had grown increasingly tense and excited in anticipation. Vasudeva had paced the room endlessly, as anxious as a would-be father awaiting a message from the daimaas tending his wife in delivery. In a sense, she thought, the comparison was apt. Vasudeva would be meeting his sons for the very first time. If not quite a day of birthing, it was a day of rebirth—for the house of Vasudeva, and for all the Yadava people. The day would herald a new beginning. Devaki could not recall being this excited even on the day of her nuptials; but perhaps that was due to that day turning out so badly. She hoped and prayed that this day would not turn out as badly. She could not bear further pain or misery. As it was, the very thought of having her infant son – the very eighth child mentioned in the prophecy – within shouting distance of the very man who sought his destruction was shredding her nerves. What if Kamsa somehow found out about Krishna's visit? What if he suspected that this was in fact Devaki and Vasudeva's son? What if he arrived at any moment?

Do not fret so, Maatr. All will be well. Kamsa-mama knows nothing of our visit here. He will not know a thing until it is time for him to know.

What does that mean, she wondered. Until it is time. Did Krishna mean ...

But then the time for anxiety and worries was past. Krishna was here – she sensed his imminent entrance as strongly as she felt the fear and anxiety leave her mind, leaving only an all-pervasive sense of calm and joy.

When Krishna entered the room, still carried tenderly by Yashoda, Devaki gasped and sprang to her feet. Vasudeva stopped pacing and swung around, eyes wide, mouth open. Whatever they had both thought, dreamt of, felt until now, was irrelevant. The past was past, the future was unknown, and there was only the present moment – one in which everything was perfect and their hearts and minds filled with infinite love and understanding and acceptance and patience and tolerance. Nothing was worth worrying about, nothing worth fearing. There was only love, and it was infinite and it filled their consciousness.

A Tulsi plant in the courtyard of Devaki's palace, withered and rotting since the past ten years, unresponsive to every effort to make it grow, turned green and soft and grew prodigiously until its faint but distinct scent filled the courtyard and made everyone in the outer household pause and look up. It would grow evergreen for decades now, even if not watered or cared for.

A female dog who had given a litter of pups in the backyard, and who was in danger of losing half the litter as well as her own life due to complications resulting from the birth, suddenly felt her bleeding cease and her entire being fill with a sense of vigour and good health, as if she herself had just been born anew.

Every last one of her pups survived and lived a long healthy life. She herself lived an incredibly long life, eventually birthing an unheard-of number of litters, every last one of which survived to the last pup, causing the locals to dub her Sarama, after the celestial Maatr of dog-kind.

A large bell – intended for a Brahma temple that was to be built upon a hill, and which rested on the ground and had been kept there only the day before – began pealing steadily upon a hill nearby. The bell-maker's apprentice, frightened out of his wits, went racing downhill to fetch his master, who returned shortly and scratched his head in wonderment as a crowd gathered to view the miracle. What baffled the bell-maker and his apprentice, as well as all the other witnesses, was the fact that the bell was merely a bowl of metal still – the striking rod had not yet been installed inside it, nor had the bell been hung. It was sitting on the ground, with nobody within yards of it. So how did it ring? The preceptor of the gotra sub-caste that was building the temple advised his people to dedicate the temple to Adhoksaja, a form of Vishnu, instead of Brahma. They did so, and for centuries thereafter, the bell would ring every day at that exact time, even without a striker inside it or anyone touching so much as a finger to it.

All those within the household who were ill, ailing, or subjected to any condition, felt themselves glowing from within; as if a beneficial heat blossomed within their bodies, a not unpleasant sensation, and when it passed, leaving a light sheen of perspiration on their skin, they found their coughs and backaches and indigestion and broken legs and irregular heart

rhythm and straining kidneys and other ailments healed and their bodies healthier than ever before.

Many similar miracles that have been forgotten by the recorders and editors of itihasa occurred that day.

Within the private chambers of Vasudeva and Devaki, no less a miracle was unfolding.

Yashoda had come in bearing Krishna in her arms. Yet within moments, she felt him grow heavier and heavier, as if some immense weight was dragging him down, until finally she could not possibly bear him aloft any longer. She sought to put him down, but to her surprise he leapt out of her arms. She cried out, fearing that he would fall and come to harm, but instead he remained where he had leapt, in mid-air, floating. He gurgled happily, spreading his arms and legs; a blinding blue glow emanated from him, filling the entire chamber and shutting out all other light, rendering pale even the bright sunlight streaming in through the windows into the background.

It was as if the entire chamber had turned black as night, the walls and furnishings disappearing, to leave only a black void in which floated Krishna, naked as the day he was born, and adorned with the tikka and other accoutrements and jewellery that Yashoda had put upon him as was her wont. He chuckled and turned to look at his brother Balarama, who stood on the floor, legs apart, as if guarding against anything or anyone that might approach. A similar glow emanated from Balarama too, but it was impossible to tell where Balarama's blue corona ended and Krishna's began. They blended one into the other, producing a pervasive light that was one and the same.

Unable to contain herself, Devaki fell to her feet, sobbing with joy and relief.

'Krishna! My son!' she cried.

She wanted to embrace and kiss him, but knew that she would get her chance later. She had waited this long; she could wait a few moments longer. She was just happy to be in the young one's presence.

Vasudeva lowered himself to his knees as well, beside his wife. He joined his hands together in a namaskar. ‘Great and blessed child. You do us proud by this visit. It gives us immense joy to behold you with our own eyes at last. You do not know how we have longed for this moment.’

Krishna’s baby voice chuckled. Echoing off the very walls of the room, it filled the minds of all four adults present in those chambers.

I do know, Pitr. I have felt every mite of pain you have experienced and I regret you and Maatr having to feel such emotions at all. But being human means feeling pain as well as joy, loss along with love, grief as well as celebration. Even I cannot remove such emotions permanently.

Vasudeva bowed his head in acknowledgement of his son’s infinite wisdom. ‘What welcome sorrow it was when we parted, that it enabled me to feel this joy of reunion.’

How wise you are. No wonder you fathered me in this avatar. I could not have hoped for a better pitr upon this mortal realm. Only Nanda Maharaja here, who is also my pitr, can compare with you. For what you possess in wisdom and quietude, he possesses in vitality and rustic good sense.

Nanda started at this mention of his name, and dropped to his knees as well, staring at the incredible sight of his son floating in mid-air in a halo of blazing blue light. Beside him, Yashoda exchanged a secret smile with Rohini.

‘Let me hold you, my son! I have been waiting to embrace you and your bhraatr for so long!’ Devaki said passionately, holding out her arms, tears flowing down her cheeks.

Krishna’s voice turned sombre now, and his change of mood was matched by a corresponding shift in the hue of the blue light emanating from him. The light grew darker somehow, a deeper, graver blue.

In a moment, I shall embrace you and you may hug and kiss and bestow as much affection upon me as you wish, Pitr and Maatr. But

first, there are things I must say to you and that you must heed well. My visit here is not merely to be reunited with you, my biological parents in this lifetime. I have another purpose. I have come here to warn you that your lives are in grave danger. Kamsa has decided to have you secretly assassinated in a manner that will leave no finger of suspicion pointing at him.

Vasudeva and Devaki looked at one another.

‘Akrur has been saying the same thing,’ Vasudeva said sombrely. ‘Yet what can I do? I will not take up arms and plunge Mathura into civil strife yet again.’

There is only one way. You must leave Mathura.

Vasudeva shook his head firmly. ‘I will not go into exile and leave my kinsmen here to suffer the yoke of Kamsa’s unjust rule. So long as Kamsa stays in power, I must stay. The people look up to me as a symbol of hope, as someone who would lead the charge in overthrowing the Usurper and restoring King Ugrasena to the throne. If I go, it will break their hearts and crush their hopes. I cannot do such a thing.’

I did not say you should go into exile. I am merely suggesting that you leave Mathura for a while. Travel. Take Maatr and go on a long journey. I sense that both of you have passionately desired to visit several pilgrimage sites, to offer gratitude and appreciation for my bhraatr’s birth and mine, and our continued survival despite the Childslayer’s cruel campaign. Now is the time to set forth upon that pilgrimage. Visit Badrikashrama, which Maatr has longed to visit for years. Go to every site your heart desires to take you. Offer thanks to your deities. You have accomplished a great task. Now you must take a back seat and preserve yourselves until you are required once again to play your parts upon this great stage of life. When the time comes, I shall summon you back to Mathura. And that is when you shall achieve all your dreams of setting Mathura free of the tyrant’s yoke and restoring this great land to her former glory. All your dreams shall come true, my beloved pitr and maatr, but all in their own time.

Do as I say and you shall have no cause to regret it. You know I speak the truth as it was spoken in Satya Yuga.

Vasudeva and Devaki were silent. They looked at one another, faces revealing expressions of wonderment and even joy.

‘It is true,’ Devaki said. ‘I do desire greatly to visit Badrikashrama. And many other holy sites.’

Vasudeva nodded gravely. ‘A pilgrimage is righteously deserved and called for at this time. We have succeeded in doing the impossible. We have brought the Slayer of Kamsa into this world as well as his brother who will aid him. Krishna is right. Until Kamsa is disposed of, there is nothing much I can do. Akrur is managing the rebellion and the talks with other allies quite well and I can continue to do my part even from abroad. Each day we remain here, we are only an affront to Kamsa and a challenge to his authority. If indeed he has found a way to bring about our deaths without drawing suspicion to himself, we would die without fulfilling our dreams.’

Mathura needs you both alive tomorrow. Not dead today.

Vasudeva sighed and nodded. ‘It shall be as you say, Krishna. We shall go this very day. Akrur had suggested that we use your visit as a cover for our own departure. When you leave this palace, Devaki and I shall stow away in the same uks cart. Once outside the city, Akrur and our allies will arrange transport for us for our onward journey. I should have seen the logic of his advice earlier, for he is constantly in touch with the goings-on of the nation and is better informed of the shifting tides of politics, while I have been too long removed from these things. But I was being stubborn and foolish. You have made me see clearly again, my son.’

Krishna chuckled loudly, clapping his hands in joy. His blue aura grew lighter, brightening with his happier mood. It increased in intensity and lightness, warming the spirits of everyone present.

Even Akrur, stationed at the entrance to the private chambers and ever vigilant, felt his heart, burdened with the pressures and stresses of rebellion and politics, lighten.

Now, come embrace and kiss me as much as you please.

After that, there was much hugging and kissing. Perhaps more than was warranted. Then again, how does one decide how much hugging and kissing is too much or just enough? In such matters, it's always advisable to err on the side of generosity rather than on the side of caution. Smack. Kiss. Hug. Repeat as often as needed or until too tired to continue further.

twelve

Kamsa had almost finished his exercises when he saw Putana approaching. She walked in a leisurely way and appeared to have just been strolling by. She paused by the wooden stable wall and pretended to watch him as he worked out, as if interested only casually and in a professional way.

He knew better.

He had been with her just the previous night, and when he had looked out of his verandah and seen her approaching, she had walked quite differently then. There had been an urgency in her step as well as a certain diffidence that he had not known she could possibly feel. Her head had been lowered as if she felt embarrassed at visiting him secretly.

Later, once he had drawn on her store of Halahala, concluding their peculiar transaction, when he was filled with the insight that came of such intimacy, he had known that she was not ashamed or embarrassed because she was a married woman coming to another man's quarters in secret at night. She was ashamed of her own great need to come to him, the hunger that she felt and which he sensed so powerfully within her each time he fed on her poisoned milk.

He had learned her itihassa from Narada – not all of it, but enough to know that after she had been made an outcast from her tribe of Maatrs, she had never found anyone who desired her for her true power and abilities,

for the being she truly was inside. Everyone saw only the woman on the outside, a beautiful, desirable, scintillating personality, and only incidentally a great warrior too. Nobody even knew her secret any more, for it had been very long since she had been a Maatr. For Kamsa to know and to desire her for what she truly was, was a great compliment. It had awakened the greatest need of her inner woman, the need to be a Maatr again. Not merely in the simple ‘mother’ sense of the title, but a Maatr in the most primordial sense. Creator, Protector, Provider ... and Destroyer, if need be.

He finished his routine in moments, crushing the last wooden tree trunks that were set up with the use of elephants for this express purpose each day. He punched the very last one so hard, it was pulverized into a cloud of wood dust, a few chips and pieces falling across the acres-large field. His power had grown steadily with use, and the techniques he had picked up from Yadu were amazingly effective when used with his newfound ability. A normal man, no matter how strong or heavily muscled, would have broken every limb in his body by now, but for Kamsa, it was the perfect technique and exercise. He felt as if he could take on Jarasandha himself. And in a way, he wished that the last encounter, the one in his bedchamber, had gone on a while longer. He would have relished the chance to test his strength and skill on those minions of his. For that matter, he would enjoy testing it on them even today, when he knew for certain that he would win easily.

‘So?’ he said as he came up to the fence against which Putana leaned with exaggerated casualness. ‘How is the wife of the captain of my guard?’

She didn’t respond to the jibe. He knew she felt no guilt at being a married woman. What she shared with Kamsa was no mere illicit dalliance. It was a matter of her power being useful. And many people underestimated the simple human need to be of use. Entire continents and cultures had been taken without a single arrow loosed because of it. To be of use, to have one’s talents utilized, appreciated, given due credit ... it has been a driving force of human society.

She said nothing so long as Yadu was within earshot. The old man finished rubbing salt into Kamsa’s body as he had taken to doing after

every practice session. The salt seemed to help him cope with the increasing density of his flesh and bone. Already, he was able to increase his weight by a hundredfold. That entailed other side effects, such as the epic thirst and longing for cold water in great quantities – and a corresponding need for salt. It was the old stablehand and now trainer of Kamsa who had suggested that sometimes salt rubbed into a sweaty body could replenish more effectively than when consumed orally. And like every other bit of advice given by the old stalwart, it proved effective.

‘What is it?’ he asked, after Yadu had left them alone in the empty stable.

She looked at him in the fading dusk, and he saw something in her eyes that he had not seen until now. A kind of hunger. It was not pleasant to see. It was a glimpse of what she had once been, and might be again. ‘I have found the Slayer.’

He sprang to his feet, toppling over a barrel of cold water the size of a man. The water gurgled out, splashed and spread across the entire stable. Horses neighed and whinnied in complaint in their boxes. He grabbed Putana’s shoulders, forgetting that he had not yet reduced his density to normal human proportions.

‘Where is he? Take me to him at once!’ He spoke the words through gritted teeth and as he ground his molars, the sound was loud enough to be heard across the stables. Elephants a hundred yards away trumpeted in protest, disturbed by the unusual yet distinctly animal sound.

Putana put out her hands, grasped his shoulders, and pushed him off her. He was surprised at her strength. It took her some effort, but not much. Yet he knew he had grasped her with enough strength to crush an oak trunk held sideways between his palms. He crushed fifty of those daily, and it was only one of a full regime of exercises. Yet Putana had pushed him off as if he was merely a normal man and she a normal woman.

‘He is outside your reach. If you go to him now, it will be too soon. He is already strong and gaining strength each day.’

Kamsa roared with fury, losing his temper for the first time in almost a year.

‘I AM STRONG!’ he said, and smashed a fist onto the side of the fallen barrel, which splintered into fragments.

‘Not strong enough. Not yet.’ She was calm, unafraid. She had power of her own. She did not fear his strength or his temper.

That calmed him down. What use was it getting angry with a woman who could destroy you in a moment if she lost her temper?

He sat down on the stone bench, basically just a solid iron block. It creaked, and he felt a tiny crack or two appear beneath his thighs. He had unconsciously begun to increase his weight again. ‘Tell me everything you know.’

‘He is living with a cowherd named Nanda Maharaja and his wife Yashoda-devi in a hamlet called Gokul. It is in—’

‘Vrajbhoomi, I know,’ he said. ‘I know of Nanda Maharaja. He is the chief of Gokul. A popular and powerful local leader. How could his child have escaped my grasp last year? My soldiers slaughtered every last newborn and then so many more as well.’ A thought struck him. ‘His delegation came to my court this very morning, to pay Gokul’s taxes for the past year. He stood there before me; he even spoke to me! How could this have escaped my knowledge?’

She shrugged. ‘The Slayer is no fool. He has ways and means to trick you at every turn. Don’t forget, he was born to Devaki while she was under your soldiers’ watch, and yet your sister was able to give birth to him, and Vasudeva was able to spirit him out of Mathura and carry him all the way to Vraj where he exchanged him for Nanda and Yashoda’s actual child, the girl. It was that girl that you then attempted to destroy but who flew out of your grasp, floated in mid-air and then revealed herself to be Yogamaya _____,

‘Yes, yes,’ he said impatiently. ‘I know all that, Putana. But if what you say is true, I shall go to Gokul at once. I must destroy the Slayer while he is still an infant, before he grows strong enough to fulfil the prophecy.’

She laughed, throwing her head back and flicking her long hair over her shoulders. He scowled at her, gripping the corners of the iron slab. It

yielded beneath his fingers like warm butter. ‘He is already strong enough, Kamsa. Why, he was in Devaki and Vasudeva’s palace only this morning! He came with Nanda and Yashoda to visit his biological parents. That is how I got to know of his identity. I was watching Devaki’s palace, suspecting that he might visit sooner or later. Aren’t you glad I was right?’

He pointed a finger at her in warning, and ignored the iron chips that fell to the ground. ‘Don’t mock me. You may be a Maatr, but I am no mere mortal either.’

She lost her grin and nodded. ‘That is so. And in a few more years, you shall be very powerful indeed. Perhaps even more powerful than I am, at least in sheer physical strength. I have never seen nor heard of even a deva who was gifted with the particular power you possess, or the ability to use it in such unusual ways. I suspect that this is all preparation for you to eventually face the Slayer in a manner that would give you the superior advantage.’

Even as Kamsa opened his mouth, Putana held up a hand. ‘Do not ask me how or when that confrontation will occur. I am not omniscient, merely prescient. But this much I can assure you: if you go to the Slayer now, you will lose, you will die. In a sense, that is what he wants and that is the reason why he taunted you by coming into your lair today, hoping to tempt you to take this rash step.’

Kamsa thought about this for a long moment, calming himself using the yogic breathing methods that Yadu had taught him. The old stablehand was a storehouse of great Vedic lore and knowledge and it was amazing just how much Kamsa had learnt from him. When Narada had said that he would provide a guru to guide him through the process of rebuilding his powers so he could face the Slayer, Kamsa had been sceptical. Now, he was ready to touch the syce’s feet but for the fact that it would appear laughable to the world and also because Yadu himself had warned him that the day he acknowledged him publicly as his guru, Yadu would vanish from his life forever.

Finally, he said, ‘Then what do you propose I do? Wait another year for the Slayer to grow even stronger and come back to destroy me?’

She smiled. ‘No. You must act. And act now. You are right about doing something while he is still relatively young and somewhat vulnerable. But rather than go yourself, you must send assassins to kill him.’

He nodded slowly. ‘Slayers to slay the Slayer. I like it.’ He cocked an eyebrow, feeling relaxed enough now to jest about it. ‘Did you have someone in mind, or were you going to ask your husband to send his best men?’ The last suggestion was a joke, of course. Kamsa himself was capable of taking on an entire army if need be. No matter how many mortal warriors Pradyota might muster, or how skilful they were as Kshatriyas, if Kamsa could not defeat the Slayer, they stood no chance at all.

‘I do, actually,’ she said. And she explained her plan.

thirteen

It was a peaceful day in Gokul when the assassins arrived. Gopas and gopis in the pasture fields paused and leaned on their crooks to watch as the entourage of gaily festooned wagon carts trundled by. The construction of the wagons and their decoration, as well as the royal sigil of the House of Yadu and the Andhaka Yadava banner, clearly proclaimed the procession to be an official one from Mathura. Royal processions from Mathura hardly passed by every day, and the life of a cowherd being a quiet, placid one, any news or visitor was akin to a social occasion. Royal visitors meant that a feast would certainly be in the offing, and everyone loved a feast. Word passed from hillside to hillside, racing across the lush pastures and fields of Vrajbhoomi faster than a quad of uks pulling a wagon. Even though the procession seemed to be ceremonial rather than martial, the news still travelled quickly.

Just in case.

By the time the convoy came up the hillside atop which Nanda Maharaja’s estate was perched, everyone in Gokul already knew of the

visitors' arrival.

There were oohs and aahs from the watching crowd as a tall, stately lady of indiscernible age alighted from the largest, most luxurious wagon they had ever set their eyes on. Dressed in rich silks and brocades worn in a manner that most of these simple rustics had never seen before, she was clearly a lady of high birth and great wealth. Those few who had seen such finery and accoutrements passed on the knowledge that this was the current fashion at the court of Kamsa and that only a lady of the king's court could afford such luxury. Gold, diamonds, pearls dripped from her ears and fingers and nestled around her throat, complementing her striking beauty and flawless features. To the older gopas watching, she reminded them of the ancient ideals of Arya beauty: dark dusky skin, sharp, piercing features, frizzy yet flowing hair, and a tall, erect stance that lent an air of nobility regardless of the person's actual stature. She could have been the model for one of the cluster of statues – depicting the eight Maatrs – in the ancient rock temples cut into the side of Mount Govardhana, said to date back to the earliest days of SatyaYuga.

This vision of ancient Arya beauty glanced around at the mooing cows, looing bulls, chattering children and whispering women and men, and smiled an odd sardonic smile that could be interpreted to mean almost anything – and it would be debated and discussed for months and years to come, long after the purpose for which Putana had visited had been fulfilled.

She made her way to the threshold of Nanda Maharaja's dwelling where she was greeted with due pomp and ritual by the chief. When the customary formalities were completed, she disappeared into the residence and remained there for a spell. Thanks to a pair of obliging cousins of Gopanath Mahadeva – as Nanda was also known respectfully – the crowd of curious watchers received a more or less continuous series of updates on the discussion taking place within the walls. Much to their disappointment, it was much less dramatic than anything they had imagined.

The lady was indeed a mistress of the court of Mathura, that much was true enough. She was the wife of Pradyota, captain of the guard, and was independently wealthy in her own right. She was merely passing through

Gokul on her way to another unnamed destination, and had heard so much about their festivities on the night of the Ashwin full moon that she had decided to stop by and join them, if they had no objection. Naturally, Nanda Maharaja had no objection at all. That was all there was to it. In fact, Nanda being Nanda was compelled to invite the guests to stay at his own dwelling for the duration of their visit. The visitors accepted happily, praising his generosity and hospitality.

Some of those watching observed the other members of the entourage disembark from the wagons. Even if rich courtiers from Mathura, they were certainly an odd-looking bunch. Apparently, they were all former aides of Jarasandha the Magadhan, stationed in Mathura after their ‘god emperor’ had departed to ensure that his interests and trade agreements were upheld. One was named Agha, another Baka, a third Trnavarta ... strange names and even stranger men. None of the other courtiers mingled with the locals, preferring to keep to themselves, and they rarely spoke even when they were alone together. If this was how rich Mathurans set out to holiday and attend festivities, what might they be like when they were going through a difficult time or visiting someone for a sad occasion! Even Kshatriyas sent on a mission from which they might not return alive celebrated before they went into battle. These Magadhans, or Mathurans, or whoever they were, seemed not to have learnt how to smile or laugh, let alone feast and celebrate.

After a few rebuffed attempts at friendliness, the outsiders were left alone. The gopas and gopis of Vrajbhoomi did not know how to deal with rude or socially distant people. To them, being alive meant being alive. Silence and sobriety were for corpses!

Nobody knew quite what to make of this visit, or of the individuals themselves. But so long as they behaved civilly and had a legitimate reason to visit, Yadava hospitality and Arya culture demanded that they be treated as lavishly as any other guest, invited or uninvited. Atithi Devo Bhava as the old Sanskrit saying went: A guest is as a god.

Perhaps some wise ancient ought to have thought of a contrary saying: Sometimes a guest can turn out to be a Demon.

Putana could smell the presence and proximity of any mortal within a reasonable range. It was easier when they were upwind and she downwind, of course. But in an enclosed domicile, where the air was reasonably still, it was simple enough to know who was where at all times. She could sniff out the Slayer by his distinctive odour alone. Not that it was a bad odour. On the contrary. It was like nothing she had ever smelt before, except perhaps ... ah, but that was a long time ago and another realm. Not the mortal one. She might be mistaken.

She had waited for a moment when Krishna would be left alone. Just a moment, she needed no more than that.

It was not long in coming. Due in part to the night festivities, the household had decided to rest for a while during the late afternoon. Not long after their heads touched their cots, every member of the family was fast asleep. This was no coincidence. Putana's accomplices had dropped a little potion into the pot of drinking water before the meal. Not enough to put everyone to sleep for too long, for that would alert the entire neighbourhood's suspicions, but just enough to make sure they did fall asleep.

Now, the house was still and silent at last, which itself was rare for any Yadava house, let alone Nanda's house.

Putana rose from her cot in the section of the house where all the ladies had assembled. Yashoda's sisters, mother, sisters-in-law, cousins, friends and god knew who else, were all asleep, some even snoring. She hoped Baka hadn't put more than a drop in the water. While she didn't care if the whole of Vrajbhoomi rose up in arms once their precious Slayer was dead, the point of her mission was to kill the child without arousing suspicion of a murder. An entire household lying dead asleep and missing an annual festival could hardly be considered not suspicious.

She had kept Yashoda beside her on the pretext of getting some information from her. That was so that the child would be entirely alone when the time came. Yashoda had even admitted that Krishna was a rare child whom she could leave alone without constantly having to worry about; she had smiled shyly when she said this, as if admitting to some

great secret. Putana had no idea what she meant, but she assumed it was something to do with the Slayer being who he was.

We'll see just how well you can do on your own when I'm done with you, little tyke, she thought now as she moved through the empty house. She had told the others to stay with Nanda and the men no matter what happened, and to pretend to be asleep as well. The thought of Baka, Trnavarta, Agha and the others pretending to sleep amused her. She suppressed a laugh as she found the door of the room.

The child was a tiny lump on a large cot.

She stood over the cot, looking down at the little bundle of flesh, dark as the darkest shadows in the room, yet still visible since his skin seemed to catch the faintest motes of light in a curious manner, almost seeming as if he was bluish-black in hue.

He was wide awake and looking up at her.

'Slayer,' she said softly.

He gurgled and struck his forehead with a tiny fist. It curiously resembled a military salute.

She smiled. 'I see you know who I am. But I'll introduce myself anyway, just to be polite. My name is Putana.'

Putana-maasi!

The words popped into her head unbidden. She resisted the temptation to look around to see who had spoken. Nobody human had spoken, of course. It was just the Slayer, using an old mind trick, a favourite of the devas and their cronies.

'Why not?' She shrugged, not bothering to keep her tone low. 'Call me Putana-maasi if you like. I would be like an aunt to you, if you were human, and I was too!'

Naughty aunty!

She laughed. ‘Yes. Naughty aunty indeed. And I’m about to do something very naughty now. Perhaps the naughtiest thing I’ve ever done.’

Bad stree. Unfit to be a Maatr. Unable to be mortal. Pity you, Putana-maasi!

She lost her smile. It snapped off like a dry twig. ‘What? How dare you, you impudent little brat! You have no right to judge me.’

I don’t judge you. I merely assess your past deeds. You have already been judged and found guilty of your crimes. That is why you are here on earth, as punishment for those wrongs. It was thought that once on this mortal realm, you would realize the consequences of your past misdeeds. You would see that here among humans, every action has a consequence and must be weighed carefully. Immortality can go to your head at times, as can great power. The humility of living like a mortal being ought to have taught you to amend yourself. And yet you did not mend your ways. You continued abusing your powers. And once again, here you are, seeking to do the bidding of an adharmic rakshasa and commit the most heinous crime any Maatr can commit.

Through the conversation, he was absolutely still. Putana couldn’t even see him breathing. Only once he had finished ‘speaking’ to her mind did he resume kicking and waving his arms and stuffing his fist in his mouth to suck on it.

‘Enough!’ she said. ‘I have no wish to be reprimanded by one whose only purpose is to take birth on this mortal realm in order to commit murder. Slayer, they call you, and that is all you are, a slayer! But I will stop you before you can commit your crime, you smug superior creature. I shall slay the Slayer before he can slay the one prophesied to be slain!’

Putana had bent over as she said this, to direct the words with greatest intensity at Krishna. Now, he gurgled and spat, spittle dotting her face and causing her to blink. She snarled a deep animal snarl, snatched him up from the cot on which he lay, and sat down on the cot herself. Tearing open her blouse, she put his puckered toothless mouth to her chest, and pressed him so hard, he could be smothered for want of breath. She expected him to struggle or flail pathetically, but he did nothing of the kind. In fact, he

raised his little fist and clung enthusiastically to her chest, suckling on her greedily as he did so. She felt the Halahala poison work through her maternal organs and pour into his little mouth, the poison whose single drop could wipe out an entire city. He was drinking it like mother's milk now. She was surprised at how easy this had been, after all.

'Really,' she said, 'I'm very disappointed. I expected much more of a fight from you. If you really are Vishnu's avatar as the prophecy claims, this must surely be your weakest one yet. You didn't even put up a struggle! And now, in moments, you'll be dead and your mission here a complete and utter failure.'

fourteen

Yashoda came awake with a start. Her mouth felt dry, her tongue the consistency of sand, and her throat parched. Her head felt heavy, as if she had overslept and forgotten something vital.

It came to her at once: *Krishna!*

She bolted upright, looking around at the room full of her sleeping sisters, sisters-in-law and other relatives.

Everyone was still asleep. That was not unusual. The womenfolk had been up late the night before, preparing savouries for the Ashwin festival.

But the way she felt suggested that there was something abnormal about their deep sleep. She felt certain that she had been drugged somehow. She had sensed trouble the instant word of the approaching entourage from Mathura had reached her. She did not trust anyone from Mathura, least of all high-ranking aristocrats from Kamsa's court. They were up to no good; she was certain of it.

Even Nanda did not deny her doubts or try to persuade her otherwise; instead, his brow had puckered in that familiar wrinkling pattern and he

had nodded sagely.

‘It may be some kind of trick,’ he had admitted. ‘After Devaki and Vasudeva’s departure and their inability to locate them thereafter, I hear they have grown desperate to find some trace of the Slayer.’

He glanced at her with the same expression he had first shown her when speaking about Krishna and Balarama’s reunion with Vasudeva and Devaki. That expression that said, Yes, yes, I do understand that something extraordinary is under way and that we are an integral part of it. But let us not speak of it openly or casually. I am struggling simply to accept what I have seen already, leave alone wrap my mind around what will be in the days to come.

She had only taken his hand and kissed it gently in response. That was Nanda. A gopa, a king of gopas, and happy to be just that much. He had no desire to get involved with slayers and prophecies and divine interventions. Perhaps that was precisely why he had been chosen to foster the avatar, because he was so unlikely a prospect and so simple and level headed a man.

Now she rushed through the house, towards her bedchamber where she had left Krishna sleeping peacefully before joining the visitor lady named Putana in the other room.

She entered the room, bracing herself for anything ...

But there was nobody there.

She touched the cot where Krishna had been lying. It was still warm. And wet. She felt the damp patch with her fingers and lifted the fingertip to her nose, sniffing. She grimaced. It smelt like milk, but not any milk she had ever smelt before. Certainly not her own milk. She knew quite well what that smelt like.

She was about to touch her fingertip to her tongue to taste it when a scream jolted her. She looked around, but there was nobody and nothing to be seen. The house was still asleep, although she thought she heard sounds from the men’s section.

The scream rattled her again, louder this time, and more blood-curdling than the first time. She sensed that it was

coming from outside the house, not within. She ran out, and a third scream came to her as she ran, and this time, just as she was exiting the threshold, she heard the unmistakable sounds of her family and Nanda's family stirring, rising, awoken by the screams.

'Krishna!' she cried out as she stepped out of the house.

Nanda heard his wife crying out, her voice barely audible through the terrible, heart-rending screams that filled the air. It seemed that everyone in Vrajbhoomi would hear those screams. Perhaps they could be heard as far away as Mathura itself!

His skin crawled and his head ached with each new wave of screaming, and he left his house to see the source that was polluting the pristine calm of Gokul with such ear-bursting violence.

An astonishing sight met his eyes.

It was late afternoon, getting on towards evening. The sun was low on the western side, which was straight ahead, the hill directly opposite his house. Below, in the depression between the hill nearest to him and the one beside it, were green pastures where his cows – the ones that were used for his family's personal consumption – grazed. His other herds were much farther away, of course, spread across Gokul over a yojana or two. These cows in this little valley were barely a few hundred head, just enough to keep his large household fed.

He spied a being in the valley, staggering about drunkenly. It took him a moment to recognize it as Lady Putana, the visitor who had arrived from Mathura with her entourage only hours earlier. At least the being looked like her in feature and aspect.

But there was one significant difference between the aristocratic and very beautiful Lady Putana he had met earlier in the afternoon and the being staggering about in the valley.

The being was a giantess.

She was at least twenty yards tall, if not more. The sala trees that grew by the little pond below were about ten to twelve yards tall, and she was at least double that height.

And, if he was indeed seeing right, she was growing taller by the minute. Now she appeared to be another yard or two taller ... and she was still growing.

He watched, bemused, as she continued to grow, even as she staggered about like a person who has had too much wine and has grown hysterically drunk.

She bumped against one of the sala trees and it cracked with a loud report, the sound carrying easily to where he stood. The top half of the tree fell into the pond with a loud splash. Startled cows, already nervous from the giantess screaming and staggering about, mooed loudly in protest and began chugging their way uphill, heading homewards to safety. The giant Putana flailed her arms around, beating at her own chest, or at least that was what it seemed like to Nanda from where he stood.

Then she turned around, swinging in a drunken lurch, to face him for the first time.

And he saw that there was something clinging to her chest. Not something, someone.

Krishna. His Krishna.

Except that his beautiful, dark little infant boy had also grown as Putana had. He was several times larger in size now. Large enough to be at least twice the size of Nanda himself, if he was judging correctly. Certainly larger than the cow jogging nervously past the lurching giantess's feet.

Krishna was clinging to Putana's chest. He appeared to be feeding on her milk.

People had come out of his house and were standing beside Nanda now, some bleary eyed and holding their heads. But they forgot their discomfort the moment they saw what was happening in the valley below. And as they

tried to make sense of what they were seeing, their voices rose in a chorus of queries and exclamations.

Nanda saw figures pouring from all directions. The screams were drawing gopas and gopis from all across Gokul. As it is, speculation had been rife about the visitors. Now he was sure that every Yadava in Gokul would be there within the half hour. Armed, possibly.

In the valley below, the giantess continued to grow, as if she was consciously expanding herself. She was now easily thrice the height of the sala trees and still growing at the same prodigious rate.

Nanda could not fathom how such a thing was possible, but one cannot deny such happenings if they take place in front of one's eyes. He shushed the people around him, ignoring their excited questions, and watched the extraordinary show unfold.

Krishna was now thrice the size of a grown man, and due to the increased size of the duo caught in an uneasy duel, uneasy at least for one of the participants, the happenings were clearly visible. Krishna was feeding on Putana's breast, drinking her milk. His cheeks could be seen working greedily, sucking hard. Milk poured into his mouth and spilled down his cheeks, though curiously enough, Nanda noted, not a drop spilled on the ground – neither on the grassy pasture, nor in the pond, on the trees, or even on the cows lumbering past mooing in disapproval at this invasion of their home pastures.

And from the dwindling screams, harried look and staggering drunken lurching of the woman, it was evident that she was suffering terribly.

Somehow, Krishna was sucking the life out of Putana. How, why, wherefore, Nanda did not know.

All he knew was what he was seeing.

Then he noticed something else, something he had not observed before. So striking was the sight of a giant woman with a giant baby clinging to her chest staggering through his pasture, that Nanda had failed to notice his wife a little way down the hillside. She was watching the giantess and the enormous baby with an expression that Nanda guessed mirrored his

own. He presumed she had run out at the sound of the screams, fearing that Krishna was in distress, but had stopped midway when she realized that it was the other way around.

‘Stay where you are, all of you!’ he shouted to his and his wife’s family, then ran down the hillside. He half-slid, half-ran to where Yashoda stood. She started when she heard him coming, then relaxed when she saw who it was. He stood beside her, putting his arm around her shoulder comfortingly.

‘What is this?’ he asked her. ‘What is happening?’

Yashoda answered in a tone so grim, he had to glance at her several times to make sure it really was the same gentle, loving Yashoda he knew. ‘That woman ... that creature of the night ... Putana-maasi, he calls her ... came here on Kamsa’s behalf to kill our Krishna. Her body contains a deadly poison. She sought to suckle our baby, to poison him to death. Apparently, she has done this before ...’ She paused and spat to one side. ‘Often before. But she was not counting on our Krishna’s divinity being beyond her powers. Now, he is sucking every last drop of poison from her body so that she cannot do it to any other child ever again, whether in this mortal realm or any other plane she goes to hereafter.’

By now, Putana was at least fifty yards tall, and though Yashoda and Nanda were on the side of the hill, they were forced to look upwards. She had stopped trying to run away or was unable to move any further, and simply stood in one place, swaying from side to side. Her face was withering, cheeks sinking like sand into a hole, hair wilting, eyes turning opaque, the entire body losing its lush, womanly contours.

Nanda swallowed nervously.

He is sucking every last drop of poison from her body.

It appeared as if Krishna was sucking more than poison, he was sucking out Putana’s life itself. The giantess was dying. He saw now that she had finally stopped growing and was now swaying faster, threatening to topple over. Krishna, about five or six times a man’s size now, yet still a baby in every way, kicked his legs and squeezed Putana’s body harder with his bunched fists.

Putana let out one final groan. It was more a gasp. A final feeble attempt to breathe. Then she fell heavily to the ground, crashing down on the side of the facing hill and making the ground tremble in the process. Her body covered almost half the width of the pasture field.

Krishna released her body and began to reduce in size. Within moments, he was the size of a normal human baby.

‘Come on,’ Nanda said, taking Yashoda by the hand. They went down the hill together, and he could hear shouts and cries as others followed suit. He guessed that several hundred residents of Gokul would gather in a few moments.

They reached the body of the fallen giantess and ran around it, seeking their child. The body appeared emaciated, as if all the life-blood had been sucked out of it, and the marrow as well. It was a horrible sight. They came around the head of the creature and Yashoda balked. Nanda resisted the urge to turn his face away. The giantess’s face was awful to behold. She looked gaunt and skeletal, unbearable to look at closely. And her sheer size made her disfigurement frightening. Nanda could not imagine a whole army of men facing this giant being and besting it, let alone a single yearling. Yet he himself, along with many other Gokuls, had witnessed it with his own eyes.

He stopped short as they came across another remarkable sight.

Krishna.

He was standing.

Nanda had seen his child creeping about, crawling, and even attempting to stand up by holding onto things or people, mainly his own mother, but he had not actually begun to stand yet.

But here he was now.

Standing. Upon the dead giantess’s chest.

Waving his chubby arms up in the air in a gesture that undeniably resembled a victory wave.

And gurgling as usual. Laughing. Chuckling. Giggling.

Chortling.

Nanda stood transfixed, watching baby Krishna. He heard and felt people come up behind him and saw them across the field, watching, calling out to one another in amazement and disbelief, some even laughing and crying, for they were simple people and given to expressing their emotions freely.

They watched as Krishna took one step, then another, and then yet another.

‘Nanda,’ Yashoda said with a mother’s tone of unmistakable pride. ‘Look! Our son is walking! His first steps!’

Then, as they watched, Krishna clapped his hands in glee, leapt once in the air, landed on both feet, tottered briefly for a moment – the watching crowd went ‘Aaah!’ intrepidation – and then began to move in a way that could be interpreted as only one action.

He was dancing.

Upon the corpse of the giant demoness who had come to kill him.

As he danced, the Gokuls began to clap, encouraging him. He picked up the rhythm of their clapping and danced to it, delighting them further. They laughed and pointed to one another, the crisis forgotten.

And then, slowly, the chant began to rise. It began with a single voice, then another joined in, then yet another, and so on, until finally everyone present – all the hundreds of Gokuls standing around and watching, including Nanda and Yashoda – was chanting, clapping to keep the beat.

They sang a single word, over and over again. It simply means cowherd, and was a common nickname given to most young gopas in Vraj.

‘Govinda!’ they sang. ‘Govinda! Govinda! GOVINDA!’

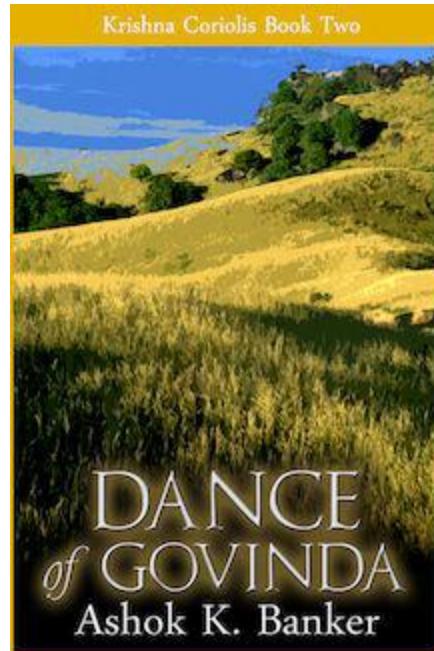
And their singing reached a crescendo and filled the entire valley, as the infant Krishna danced and danced merrily, until the entire world seemed to

echo with the refrain.

‘GOVINDA!’

And above the chanting, the sound of Krishna chortling as he danced on.

Also in the Krishna Coriolis Series



The prophesied Slayer of Kamsa has been born and smuggled out of Mathura in the dead of night. Kamsa finds that his nephew has escaped and flies into a demoniac rage. Meanwhile, Jarasandha of Magadha arrives in Mathura with his coterie of powerful supporters to ensure that Kamsa stays loyal to him. But Kamsa is not to be crushed. With the help of Putana, a powerful demoness living incognito among humans, he slowly regains his strength and acquires new powers. Packed with surprising insights into the characters of Kamsa and Putana, Dance of Govinda is a brilliant interpretation of the nature of evil in a world that teeters on the edge of violence.

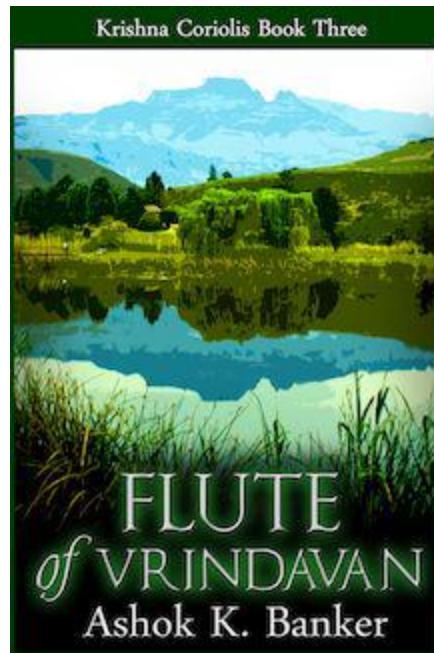
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Infant Krishna and his half-brother Balarama are the most mischievous children in all of Gokuldham, getting up to all sorts of pranks, raiding neighbours' dahi handis and letting the calves run free. But disciplining God Incarnate is no easy task. It slowly dawns on Mother Yashoda that the babe she is trying to protect is in fact the protector of the entire world! As Krishna survives one horrific asura attack after the other, she comes to terms with the true identity of her adopted son. Meanwhile, Kamsa despatches a team of otherworldly assassins to slay his nemesis. Harried by Kamsa's forces, Krishna's adoptive father, the peace-loving Nanda Maharaja, is forced to lead his people into exile. They find safe haven in idyllic Vrindavan. But even in this paradise, deadly demons lurk...

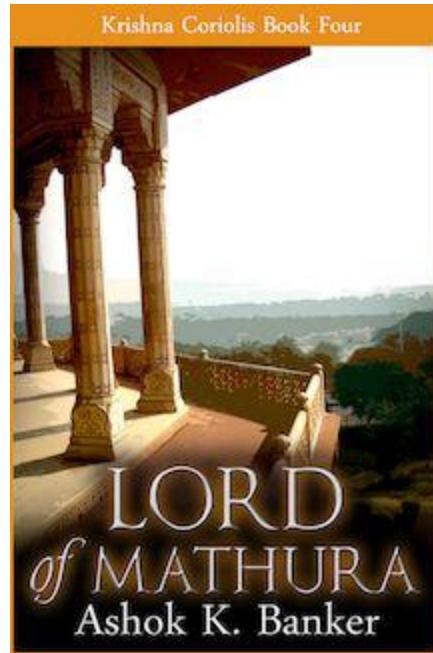
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As Krishna grows into youthful manhood, Kamsa grows ever more desperate to kill his nemesis. With Jarasandha's aid, the rakshasa-king launches a relentless campaign of demonic assault against Krishna—and his fellow Vrishnis. Young gopi Radha learns to her sadness that Krishna cannot return her love when he has the fate of all humankind in his hands. Finally the day of the prophecy arrives and the stage is set for the final showdown between Krishna the boy-god and Kamsa, lord of Mathura.

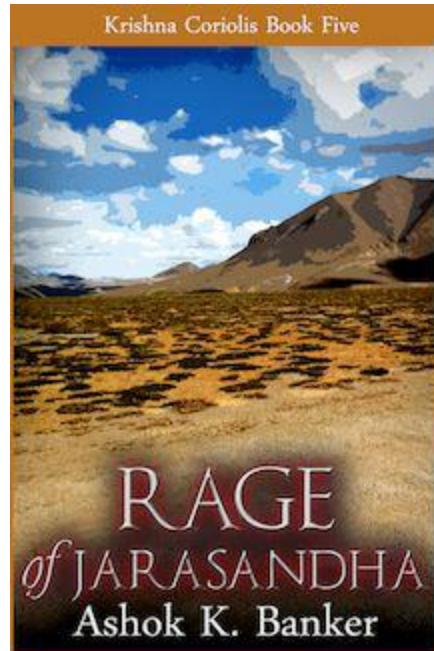
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Kamsa the Usurper has been slain. Krishna has fulfilled the prophecy. But barely has he restored old King Ugrasena to the throne of Mathura when a new threat rears its head. Jarasandha of Magadha encircles Mathura with a great army. Even if Krishna and Balarama fight like superheroes, they cannot possibly save the citizens of Mathura. Or can they? The Krishna Coriolis series ramps up to an epic new level of thrills and excitement in this 5th and most exciting installment of the bestselling series.

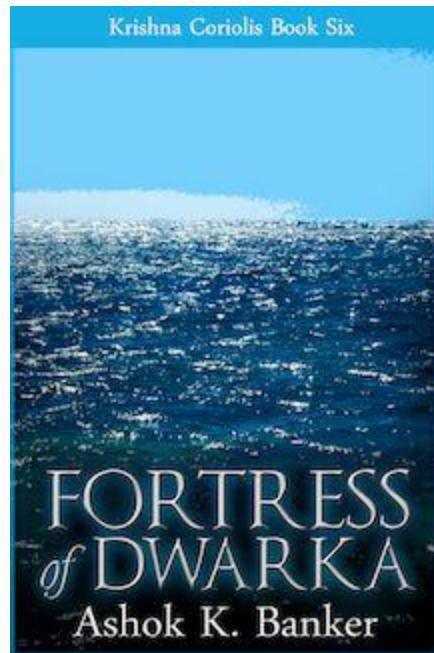
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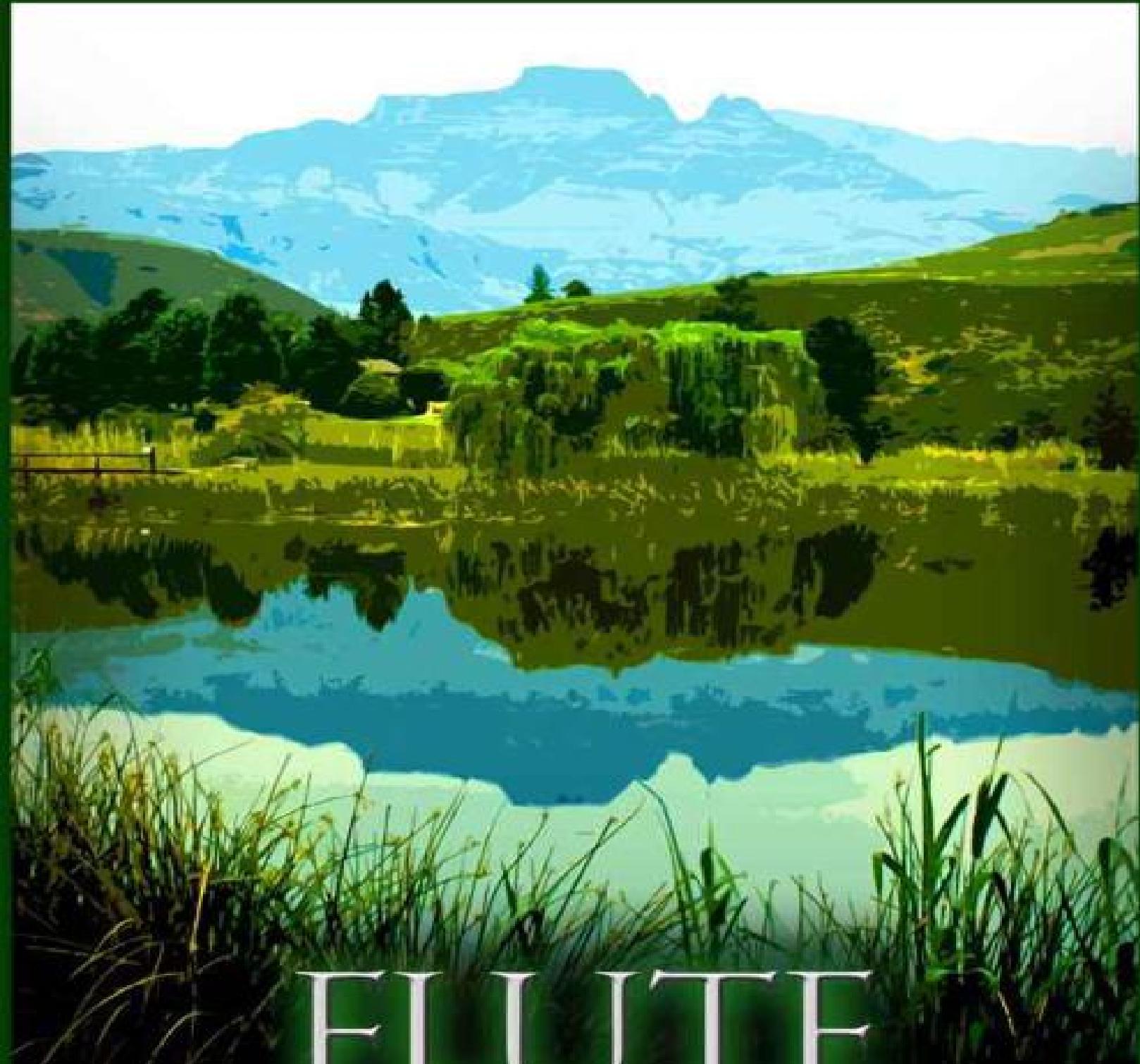
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FLUTE
of VRINDAVAN

Ashok K. Banker

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About Ashok

Ashok Kumar Banker's internationally acclaimed *Ramayana Series®* has been hailed as a 'milestone' (*India Today*) and a 'magnificently rendered labour of love' (*Outlook*). It is arguably the most popular English-language retelling of the ancient Sanskrit epic. His work has been published in 56 countries, a dozen languages, several hundred reprint editions with over 1.2 million copies of his books currently in print.

Born of mixed parentage, Ashok was raised without any caste or religion, giving him a uniquely post-racial and post-religious Indian perspective. Even through successful careers in marketing, advertising, journalism and scriptwriting, Ashok retained his childhood fascination with the ancient literature of India. With the *Ramayana Series®* he embarked on a massively ambitious publishing project he calls the Epic India Library. The EI Library comprises Four Wheels: Mythology, Itihasa, History, and Future History. The *Ramayana Series®* and *Krishna Coriolis* are part of the First Wheel. The *Mahabharata Series* is part of the Second Wheel. *Ten Kings* and the subsequent novels in the Itihasa Series dealing with different periods of recorded Indian history are the Third Wheel. Novels such as *Vertigo*, *Gods of War*, *The Kali Quartet*, *Saffron White Green* are the Fourth Wheel.

He is one of the few living Indian authors whose contribution to Indian literature is acknowledged in The Picador Book of Modern Indian Writing and The Vintage Anthology of Indian Literature. His writing is used as a teaching aid in several management and educational courses worldwide and has been the subject of several dissertations and theses.

Ashok is 48 years old and lives with his family in Mumbai. He is always accessible to his readers at www.ashokbanker.com—over 35,000 have corresponded with him to date. He looks forward to hearing from you.

FLUTE OF VRINDAVAN

Ashok K. Banker

KRISHNA CORIOLIS
Book 3



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*For Biki and Bithika:
My Radha and my Rukmini.*

*For Yashka and Ayush Yoda:
My Yashoda.*

*All you faithful readers
who understand
that these tales
are not about being Hindu
or even about being Indian.
They're simply about being.*

*In that spirit,
I dedicate this *gita-govinda*
to the krishnachild in all of us.
For, under these countless
separate skins, there beats
a single eternal heart.*

Author's Preface to the first Indian print edition 2010

If it takes a community to raise a child, then it surely takes a nation to build an epic.

The itihasa of the subcontinent belongs to no single person. The great epics of our culture – of any culture – may be told and retold infinite times by innumerable poets and writers; yet, no single version is the final one.

The wonderful adventures of the great Lord Krishna are greater than what any story, edition or retelling can possibly encompass. The lila of God Incarnate is beyond the complete comprehension of any one person. We may each perceive some aspects of His greatness, but, like the blind men and the elephant, none of us can ever see everything at once.

It matters not whether you are Hindu or non- Hindu, whether you believe Krishna to be God or just a great historical personage, whether you are Indian or not. The richness and wonder of these tales have outlived countless generations and will outlast many more to come.

My humble attempt here – within these pages and in the volumes to follow – is neither the best nor the last retelling of this great story. I have no extraordinary talent or ability, no special skill or knowledge, no inner sight or visionary gift. What I *do* have is a lifelong exposure to an itihasa so vast, a culture so rich, a nation so great, wise and ancient, that its influence – permeating into one like water through peat over millennia, filtering through from mind to mind, memory to memory, mother to child and to mother again – has suffused every cell of my being, every unit of my consciousness.

And when I use the word ‘I’, it is meant in the universal. You are ‘I’. As I am she. And she is all of us. Krishna’s tale lives through each and every one of us. It is yours to tell. His to tell. Hers to tell. Mine as well. For as long as this tale is told, and retold, it lives on.

I have devoted years to the telling, to the crafting of words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters, kaands and volumes. I shall devote more years to come, decades even. Yet all my effort is not mine alone. It is the fruition of a billion Indians, and the billions who have lived before us. For each person who has known this tale and kept it alive in his heart has been a teller, a reteller, a poet, and an author. I am merely the newest name in a long, endless line of names that has had the honour and distinction of being associated with this great story.

It is my good fortune to be the newest reteller of this ancient saga. It is a distinction I share with all who tell and retell this story: from the grandmother who whispers it as a lullaby to the drowsy child, to the scholar who pores over every syllable of every shloka in an attempt to find an insight that has eluded countless scholars before him.

It is a tale told by me in this version, yet it is not my tale alone to tell. It is your story. Our story. Her story. His story.

Accept it in this spirit and with all humility and hope. Also know that I did not create this flame, nor did I light the torch that blazes. I merely bore the torch this far. Now I give it to you. Take it from my hand. Pass it on. As it has passed from hand to hand, mind to mind, voice to voice, for unknown millennia.

Turn the page. See the spark catch flame. Watch Krishna come alive.

Author's Note to the second Indian print edition 2012

All my books are long in the gestation, some conceived many as thirty-plus years earlier, none less than a decade. It takes me that long to be sure of a story's longevity and worth and to accumulate the details, notes, research, character development and other tools without which I can't put my fingers to the keyboard. This particular story, Krishna Coriolis, originated in the same 'Big Bang' that was responsible for the creation of my entire Epic India universe – a series of interlinked retellings of all the major myths, legends and itihasa of the Indian subcontinent, set against the backdrop of world history. I'm using the term 'BigBang' but in fact it was more of a series of carefully controlled delayed-time explosions over the first fifteen to eighteen years of my life.

At that time, the Krishna story was a part of the *Sword of Dharma* section of the Epic India library, which retold the 'dashavatara' storyline with an unusual twist as well as an integral part of my massively ambitious retelling of the world's greatest epic, the Mahabharata or the Mba. I began work on my Mba immediately after I completed the Ramayana Series in 2004. After about five years of working on my Mba – a period in which most actual MBA students would be firmly established in their careers! – I realized that the series was too massive to be published as it was. I saw that the Krishna storyline, in particular his individual adventures, could stand on their own as a separate series. So I separated them into a parallel series which I titled Krishna Coriolis. Naturally, since the story now had to stand on its own, rather than be a part of the larger Mba story, I had to rewrite each book to make it stand on its own, with a reasonably complete beginning, middle and end. This process took another three years, and resulted finally in the form the series now takes.

You're holding the second book of this parallel series in your hands now, titled *Dance of Govinda*.

Dance of Govinda is just the second part of the Krishna Coriolis, which is interlinked with the much larger Mbā series, which itself is only one section of my whole Epic India library. Yet, I've laboured to make this book stand on its own and be a satisfying read. Naturally, it's not complete in the story, since that would require not just the full Krishna storyline but also the larger Mbā story and the larger context behind that as well. In that sense, it's just a part of the big picture; but even the longest journey must start with a single step and if you permit, *Dance of Govinda* will take you on a short but eventful trip, one packed with action and magic, terror and adventure. The reason why the book, like the remaining books in the series, are so short, almost half of the length of my earlier Ramayana Series, is because that's the best way the structure works. By that I mean the individual parts of the story and the way in which they fit together. Sure, I could make it longer – or shorter. But this felt like the perfect length. In an ideal world, the entire series would be packaged together as one massive book and published at once – but that's not only impossible in terms of paper thickness and binding and cover price affordability, it's not the right structure for the story. Stories have been split into sections, or volumes, or, in our culture, into parvas, kaands, suras, mandalas and so on, since literature was first written. You might as well ask the same question of Krishna Dweipayana-Vyasa – ‘Sir, why did you split the Mahabharata into so many parvas and each parva into smaller sections and so on?’ The fact is, a story needs to be structured and the story itself decides which structure works best. That was the case here and I am very pleased with the way *Dance of Govinda* and the other books in the series turned out.

The *Sword of Dharma* mini-series, as I call it now, is also written in first draft and tells us the experiences and adventures of Lord Vishnu in the heavenly realms. It is a direct sequel to the Ramayana Series as well as a bridge story to the Krishna Coriolis and Mahabharata Series. And since it deals with otherworldly events, it exists outside of ‘normal’ time as we know it, which means it is also a sequel to the Krishna Coriolis and also a prequel to the Ramayana Series. I won’t confuse you further: once you read *Sword of Dharma*, you would understand instantly what I mean because the story itself is an action-packed adventure story where questions like ‘when is this taking place?’ and ‘so is this happening before or after such-and-such?’ become less important than seeing the curtain parted and the world beyond the curtain revealed in its full glorious detail. No matter how much I may show you in the Ramayana Series, Krishna Coriolis and Mahabharata Series, all these ‘mortal’ tales are ultimately being affected and altered by events taking place at the ‘immortal’ level, and only by seeing that story-beyond-the-story can we fully comprehend the epic saga of gods and demons that forms the basis of Hindu mythology in our puranas.

But for now, *Dance of Govinda* marks a crucial turning point in the story of swayam Bhagwan (as the Bhagwatham calls him). Not only has he survived every attempt to destroy him at birth, he will grow and thrive. By the close of this book, he will have gained the ability to stand on his own two feet – hence the title. And even though just a babe for most of the story, he is capable of far more than most grown heroes – not just more action, but more masthi as well! For that is the beauty of Krishna, he is not just a warrior but also a lovable mischievous tyke. There are as many stories of his infantile pranks as there are tales of his derring-do in this book, for I have tried to be as thorough as

possible in mining the rich vein of Shrimad Bhagwatham, the Vishnu Purana and the Harivamsha sections of the Mahabharata in seeking every known recorded incident of Krishna's infancy.

And that too is only part of the much, much larger tale of Krishna, which itself is part of the larger tale of Lord Vishnu, which is only part of the far greater saga of gods and demons. It's an epic saga but the beauty of it is that each portion is delicious and fulfilling in itself!

Enjoy!

	yadrcchaya copapannah	
	svarga-dvaram apavrtam	
	sukhinah ksatriya partha	
	labhante yuddham idrsam	

*Blessed are the warriors
Who are chosen to fight justly;
For the doors to heaven
Shall be opened unto them.*

KAAND 1

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From far and wide they came. From every region of Vrajbhoomi the Vrishnis arrived by uks cart, riding astride bullocks, or travelling on foot. Clad in their gaily coloured rustic apparel, driving their favourite kine along, chatting and singing and chanting aloud as was their custom. Word of the amazing feat had spread within hours and before the day's end, great numbers of gopas and gopis came to see for themselves if the amazing story contained any shred of truth. There were varying accounts of the incident, some barely resembling reality. Even the most honest descriptions sound ludicrously exaggerated. A giantess? A demon of some kind? Slain by Nanda and Yashoda's infant son? How could such a thing be possible? What was a giant demoness doing in Vrajbhoomi in the first place? How could a mere babe have killed her? By lengths and degrees the story grew until, by sunset, it had developed strands and twists to rival any epic. By nightfall the sutas were singing elaborate compositions describing the battle of the babe and the giantess!

'This is the blessing of Lord Vishnu,' said Sumuka to his daughter and son-in-law. 'He is pleased with you for resisting the tyranny of the Usurper.' Like many Vrishnis, Yashoda's father preferred to refer to the King of Mathura by that derogatory term rather than speak his vile name.

Yashoda and Nanda exchanged a meaningful glance. She raised her eyebrows questioningly. Barely perceptibly, he shook his head to answer in the negative. They had debated whether or not to reveal their infant son's extraordinary nature to their family and friends. But in the end, they had decided against it. Whatever he did openly, they could not cover up. There was no need to cover it up: people would invariably attribute every miraculous action to the blessings of some deity or other. But once they said aloud that they believed their son was something more than human, perhaps even touched with a trace of divinity himself, that would change people's perception completely. Word would spread like wildfire and soon enough everyone across the kingdom would know about it. Including the Usurper. And while they already knew their little tyke was possessed of great power, they had no wish to test the limits of his abilities and invite the terror of Mathura to come and attempt to slay him. Whatever he might be, he was but a boy. And he was *their* boy.

Empowered or no, there would be time enough for him to reveal the full extent of his abilities to the world, or not, as he pleased. It was not wise for them to boast about it here and now, not when Mathura's spasas were everywhere, watching, listening, still seeking the prophesied Slayer. Putana had been one such spasa, they knew that now. And what a creature she had been! Seemingly quite normal, she had turned out to be a giant demoness of some sort. Something out of puranic tales and legends, a rakshasi perhaps. Who knew what other demons were lurking nearby, seeking their chance to attack the child of the prophecy. No, they had both agreed in the moments following the death of Putana, when they had regrouped and consulted with each other

before their clansmen began arriving in force, it was wiser to simply pretend to know nothing and let people draw their own conclusions.

And the conclusion drawn was the inevitable one: God's grace.

'Vishnu has protected this child!' said dddddd, and she was echoed in turn by a hundred others. Everyone repeated the same thought. And that was so much better. Better that they believed that the Great Preserver had protected their child in his moment of crisis than that he himself was some form of superior being.

Now followed the inevitable rituals of the Vrishni after such an event. Rare though such events were, attacks by demons upon mortals were not unheard of. Whether in corporeal or ethereal form, it was believed that asuras were everywhere in some form or other, attempting ceaselessly to attack and destroy the righteous. The Vrishnis, like all other Sura Yadava clans, had specific rituals designed to ward against such attacks.

First all the gopis of Gokul formed a protective circle around little Krishna. He giggled and turned around to look at the pretty young girls and women standing around him, regarding it as some kind of game. Still unsteady on his chubby feet, he swayed constantly, and Yashoda kept wanting to dart out her hands to grab him before he fell, but somehow he always managed to retain his balance. He danced around, looking at the faces of all the gopis, pointing at the prettier ones as if approving of them, then stuffing the back of his fist into his mouth and sucking on it noisily. His antics amused them all and the gopis were entranced by the way he moved and danced.

They took up the same chant they had sung earlier, when he had danced upon the corpse of the giantess. Because everyone else had arrived too late to fully comprehend what had happened, it was assumed that somehow the demoness had been stricken down by Vishnu's power and fallen down dead, and the infant Krishna, saved by God's grace, then took his first steps upon her corpse. Nobody knew that it was Krishna himself who had slain her, and Yashoda was glad that Nanda and she had decided to keep that crucial fact to themselves. For who would believe that an infant could slay a great demoness? For that matter, how *had* Krishna killed her? All she had seen was him clinging to the demoness's breast, suckling. It had appeared as if he was sucking the very life out of her. But was that what had happened? She had no way of knowing for certain. So it was best to remain silent and let people believe what they did: that Vishnu himself had looked down and intervened to save the son of Yashoda-Devi and Nanda-Maharaj.

'Govinda! Govinda! Govinda' chanted the gopis. The word simply meant 'cowherd', but it was also a title of sorts, accorded to a young boy when he proved himself able enough to herd the cows of his family or clan, protect them from inclement weather or wild beasts, and bring them home safe. Govinda was also the universal term for the Celestial Cowherd who herded all cattle and kine everywhere, and therefore was a deity to cowherds everywhere. The term also had a playful connotation, for among the Vrishni, Govindas played as they worked, flirting, making music, dancing, feasting and doing as they willed. To apply the title to an infant who had barely

learned to walk was high praise indeed. Yashoda felt herself flush with pride at the sight of her son being called by the title of Govinda, as the whole community watched and sang along.

‘Govinda! Govinda! Govinda!’ sang the gopis and little Krishna laughed and danced round and round, clapping his hands unsteadily, sometimes missing and almost losing his balance – but quickly regaining it and resuming his lurching dance.

One of the gopis, an attractive woman named Shyamolie, came forward holding a cow’s tail. She waved it around Krishna as he danced, encircling him. The tips of the cowtail tickled Krishna’s ears and neck and he giggled and reacted, squirming. Looking up at the object that had stimulated him, he tried to grasp it, but Shyamolie kept it out of his reach. He laughed, trying to spin faster to grab it. Yashoda saw that he could spin as rapidly as a top if he desired – as rapidly as the wind itself – and she caught her breath, afraid that the gopis would witness the superhuman side of her little tyke. But Shyamolie finished the cowtail waving and retired and Krishna slowed. Yashoda heaved a small sigh, smiling with relief.

Then came the bathing of the child in cow’s urine. This part Krishna ought not to have enjoyed as much as the chanting and dancing but he endured it stoically, even slapping himself and splashing the urine on the faces of the gopis who were bathing him. They laughed, undeterred. All products of GoMaata were sacred and to be revered; there was no shame in being splashed with cow urine.

Next came the sprinkling of cow dust, literally the dust from the dried cowdung. This left Krishna’s dark bluish-black skin powdery brown for a while. He beamed brightly at his mother as if to say, Not to worry, I’m fine, Maatr. She was glad he did not speak to her mind just then; she might not have been able to avoid reacting in front of so many people.

Then came the writing of the names of God. Using fingertips dipped in wet cow dung, twelve different names of Vishnu were written on twelve different parts of Krishna’s body – the forehead, throat, chest, belly, left and right sides, left and right shoulders, left and right biceps, top of the back and bottom of the back.

As Yashoda watched from behind the circle of busy gopis, she saw each name glow from within as it was written, as if her Krishna’s skin itself reacted to the shape of the letters. The glow was very faint and only visible if you were staring directly at that spot at that instant: the gopis were too busy writing the next name to notice. So only she saw this subtle effect. But it was unmistakeable in its power and meaning. Each name glowed briefly, its colour a distinct deep blue, then dissipated inwards. It was as if the names were being absorbed into the bloodstream of her son, leaving only the shapeless crusted cowdung on the skin. She swallowed and looked around, wishing she could share this new evidence of her son’s extraordinary nature with someone; then subsided and reminded herself it was for the best that his true nature be kept a secret.

It was ironical though, she mused silently, that the gopis were invoking the protection of Vishnu upon one who was empowered as Vishnu himself!

The gopis then sprinkled sacred water – brought from the Yamuna – and over their bodies, then applied the bija seed mantra to themselves, invoking the first syllable of the deity's name followed by the nasal 'nam' sound. Then they applied the same bija seed mantra to Krishna who gurgled happily and raised his arms in the air.

The gopis chanted:

|The Unborn One protect your feet|
|Maniman, protect your knees|
|Yajna, protect your thighs|
|Achyuta, protect your loins|
|Hayasa, protect your belly|
|Kesava, protect your heart|
|Isa, protect your chest|
|Ina, protect your throat|
|Vishnu, protect your arms|
|Urukrama, protect your mouth|
|Isvara, protect your head|
|The wielder of the chakra, protect your forebody|
|Hari who wields the bala, protect your rearbody|
|Madhu-slayer and the Unborn One|
|Bearer of the bow and the sword|
|Protect your sides|
|Urugaya, conch-blower, protect your corners|
|Upendra, protect you from above|
|Tarksya, protect you on the ground|
|The Supreme One, plough-pusher, protect you on all sides|
|Hrishikesha, protect your senses|
|Narayana, protect your life force|
|The Lord of Shvetadvipa, protect your consciousness|
|Lord of yoga, protect your mind|
|Prshnigarbha, protect your intelligence|

|Bhagwan Supreme, protect your soul|
|Govinda, protect you at play|
|Madhava, protect you while you sleep|
|Vaikunta, protect you when you travel|
|Lord of the goddess of good fortune, protect you while you are seated still|
|Enjoyer of sacrifices and terror of all evil spirits, protect you while you eat|

In conclusion they chanted verses designed to chase away any of the evil beings known for abducting or harming infants, such as the dakinis, yatudhanis, kusmandas, bhoot-preyth, pisacas, yaksas, rakshasas, vinayakas, Kotara, Revati, Jyestha, Putana, the Maatrakas, insane persons, those who have lost their senses or memories, they who seek to harm humans, the old enemies of humankind, snatchers of children and every other imaginable being that might cause harm to little Krishna.

By the time the gopis were done, even Krishna had tired. Sucking the back of his fist, he curled up and slept and had to be carried by his mother indoors. She fed him from her breast till he was sated enough that he fell asleep with the teat still in his puckered wet lips.

He slept soundly then for a full night and all the next morning.

Perhaps, Yashoda thought to herself, even a mortal imbued with divinity is still subject to weaknesses and limitations of mortal flesh. He may be empowered beyond imagining but he is still a human babe. He still tires, needs sleep, nourishment, rest, and all the bodily functions and needs of the mortal beings whose form he has chosen to adopt. If a deva resides in a tree, he must grow roots and leaves and needs sunlight and water. If a deva resides in a babe, he needs milk and sleep and laughter and love!

She slept with him cradled in the warmth of her embrace. Mother and son slept soundly and peacefully. Nanda came often to check on them and a constant guard was maintained around the clock to ensure nobody came within harming distance of the mother and infant.

Kamsa listened to the report of the spasa. When the spy had finished, he dismissed him and sat brooding for a while. His ministers approached him several times, saw him sitting in that familiar brooding posture, chin resting on his fist, arm supported by his thigh, and retreated quickly. As the minutes dragged on, they began whispering in the corridors of the palace, speculating on the news that had disturbed their king so deeply. ‘Putana,’ was the consensus. ‘He has taken the news of her loss to heart.’ And the spasa, when waylaid and questioned, agreed readily: his news had been mainly of Putana’s death in distant Gokul-dham. Nobody knew exactly what Putana had been to Kamsa – friend, advisor, training partner, lover, mistress, all of the above, none of the above? Nobody knew enough to speak confidently, and those who knew something, had perhaps glimpsed the king and the captain’s wife speaking with odd passion and intense gestures in the stables and training field, knew better than to spread idle gossip about the king of Mathura. Thousands had been slaughtered for little or no reason under the young lord’s reign. To be hauled up for gossipping about his indiscretions would surely merit torture of unimaginable cruelty. So they whispered and speculated, in corners and corridors, in half-sentences and incomplete queries, nobody saying much at all, leaving almost everything to the imagination and to curiosity. But one thing was certain and undeniable: Kamsa was stricken by the news of Putana’s death. Stricken to the core.

After perhaps an hour of sitting and brooding alone in the throne room, Kamsa rose and left the chamber. Voices hushed at once in the corridors as the imposing young liege swept past, his gold-brocaded robes swirling in his wake. His handsome clean and smooth face was a porcelain mask without expression. His fair features and handsome light eyes were fixed in an aspect none had seen before. These were all members of the inner circle of power. Ministers and courtiers and munshis who had survived the past ten terrible years since Ugrasena’s unseating. They were well-weathered veterans who had seen the young king in every mood, through

every change. Usually they could recognize his tells, his moods and his likely reactions. As a rakshasa, during his awful gargantuan puss-suppurating phase, and as a violent rage-prone youth during his years of cruel and mindless slaughter. But this new Kamsa was an inscrutable being. He was normal and human in all aspects, behaved and spoke normally, even conducted himself with rare self-control and aplomb in the most provocative situations. It was commonly accepted that Jarasandha's prolonged stay had something to do with the transformation. The Emperor of the burgeoning Magadhan Empire had hammered some sense of good conduct into the thick skull of his son-in-law, everyone believed. Yet even after Jarasandha's departure, Kamsa's good behavior continued. And at times like this, if he felt or thought anything intensely, he did not show or share it with anyone. For an Arya king, especially a Yadava, such extreme self-control was unnatural, almost inhuman. It was one thing to control oneself from flying into a rage and mindlessly slaughtering thousands for no good reason. It was another thing to withhold *all* one's emotions from public scrutiny. Yadavas were passionate, open-hearted people. Even their kings displayed emotion freely, laughing and crying in public if the occasion warranted. In this context, Kamsa's porcelain-masked inscrutability was no less unnerving than his earlier rakshasa rages. If too much emotional reaction was demoniac, then too little was inhuman.

Kamsa swept past all the curious and concerned of his court without a word or indication of what he was feeling or planning.

He left the main palace and walked across the courtyard to his own quarters, watched by a hundred pairs of eyes. Even after Jarasandha's departure, he had elected to remain in the relatively modest and remotely situated apartments at the far end of the palace complex, unguarded and within scent of the stables and pens. In fact, on his own instructions, no palace personnel were permitted to come within a hundred yards of his private quarters, on pain of death. If nobody had been arrested or executed for transgressing this instruction, it was only because nobody dared try. Besides, who would want to go near Kamsa's quarters? People wanted to go far away from him! He was, after all, the king under whose reign a mass exodus of Yadavas had taken place. The largest outward emigration in the history of the Yadava nation. Apart from the old warrior Bahuka and

the captain of the guards Pradyota, nobody else had even been inside those private apartments, nor did anyone desire to go there. Except Putana, of course. Or so it was rumoured.

Kamsa did not stop at his residence. He continued walking past the entrance, past the pens where all manner and species of livestock chattered and clucked and thrashed and howled and bayed and lunged as he strode past. He went straight to the stables, took hold of the first horse he saw and climbed astride it. The horse was one of the large Bhoja giants that were specially bred for him. Enormous in comparison to the pony-sized horses usually used by Yadavas, he was well over two yards high at the withers, and the tips of his ears were three full yards from the ground. Like the others in this section of the stables, he had been bred for bone density and strength, fed on a special diet, put through a special training regime usually used to train elephants to carry heavy timber loads. It was assumed by the other trainers that this stable of horses were being trained to carry some new fangled kind of Magadhan armour, one that was so strong it could withstand even a flung javelin. What other reason could there be to breed such enormous unruly giants and prepare them to carry loads of a half ton or more? None of the other trainers would venture near this stable because the horses here were un gelded and so ferocious at times, it was beyond the ability of any man to control them and survive. Only the ancient trainer, the one who had been here since before anyone else could remember, and who was rumoured to be one of the oldest living Mathurans, manned the stable on his own. Aptly enough, he was named Yadu, after the founding father of the Yadava race.

Yadu was in the stables when Kamsa entered and took hold of a horse. The old syce stopped mucking out the stables and lowered his rake to watch as the young king led the rearing snorting horse outside. Then he put down the rake and went out as well, through the other entrance at the far end of the stables.

Yadu watched as Kamsa manipulated the reluctant stallion upto the fenced enclosure that bordered the stable yard. The horse was bucking and pulling away from the king even though Kamsa had him by a rope through his

nostrils, clearly making his displeasure known. Kamsa managed him with apparent ease until he turned his back for a moment to untie and push open the gate of the enclosure. The horse saw his opportunity and struck: rearing up to a height of perhaps four yards or more, towering above even the tall and powerfully built king of Mathura, the stallion lashed out viciously with his fore feet. Yadu had seen the same horse smash those same fore feet through an inch thick siding of wood a fortnight ago but the old Yadava's deeply wrinkled face did not flinch as the stallion struck Kamsa on his back and shoulders. Had it been any man at all, however muscular or strong, he would have been thrown several yards away with shattered bones and serious contusions.

The horse's feet landed on Kamsa's back and shoulders – the right fore foot actually struck directly on his collarbone – with a sound that reminded old Yadu of a mace striking a tree. Mace warriors sometimes practised that way, striking their weapons into the trunks of massive trees to prepare themselves for the impact of combat. The living wood absorbed enough of the impact so as not to dislocate their shoulders or harm their joints and bones, yet withstood it strongly enough to provide good conditioning. A dull metallic thud. Not the cracking of bone or the slapping sound of flesh being traumatized.

Kamsa remained standing.

He barely lurched a little, perhaps an inch or two forward, not even enough to consider a jolt or a jostle.

Then he turned and looked at the horse. The stallion was still rearing, eyes showing white, nostrils flared, whinnying in that triumphant tone that male horses used when they had proven their superiority over a fellow equine or a two-legged human.

Kamsa tugged down the rope with which he held the horse.

The stallion's forepaws crashed down on the ground, as if yanked by a ton-weight. The horse's eyes rolled and he almost buckled from the impact.

Kamsa had barely used any force to pull at the horse, he had tugged a finger's length perhaps, casually. He seemed to bear no malice at the horse for having struck at him.

He kicked open the untied gate. It shattered into fragments.

Then he led the horse into the enclosure.

He turned, grasped hold of the horse's neck, and leaped astride it.

The horse lurched, shuddering as if a man twice Kamsa's size and bearing the heaviest armour had leaped onto his back from a height.

Kamsa steadied it, used the slender length of rope to turn its head, then pressed in his heels to urge it forward.

The horse began to ride around the enclosure.

Kamsa slapped it on the rump, urging it to go faster, still faster.

The horse shook his head from side to side, protesting, eyes still showing their whites, clearly still unable to understand how the human had survived that blow from his powerful fore paws. Most other men – indeed, *any* other man – would be lying on the ground with a shattered collarbone and a smashed shoulder blade, not to mean collapsed lungs and perhaps even a damaged spine. It was a killing blow and intended as such. Yet Kamsa had barely felt it.

The horse on the other hand had definitely felt Kamsa when he leaped astride. And the slap on the rump. And the heels he was now digging into its flanks to urge it to go faster, always faster.

Yadu saw the furrows.

The horse was riding around the large enclosure. He had just completed one circle and was about to go over his own hoof prints again.

The ungulate footprints in the ground ought not to have been particularly noticeable. The ground was fairly solid and dry for the most part and where it was softer, it had been churned up by the hooves of any number of horses. The stallion's prints should have been mixed up in the general pattern.

Instead, they stood out as clearly as a furrow drawn by a plough.

They were shallow and almost normal at the beginning, where Kamsa had begun his ride. But as Yadu glanced quickly around the enclosure, he saw the prints grow steadily deeper and wider until finally, by the time the stallion came around to complete the first circle, the hoofprints were inches deep, so deep that the ground was being furrowed by his passage. And as he thundered past, Yadu could feel the impact through the ground. It felt like a half score horses carrying as many heavy men riding hard and fast.

Yet even a half score mounted horses could not make a furrow this deep.

Because even a half score mounted horses probably did not weigh as much as this one, with only Kamsa on his back.

Yadu watched as the stallion carried Kamsa around for the second time. This time the horse's hooves were sinking so deeply into the ground, the old syce could see them buried upto the fetlocks before they emerged and ploughed ahead. The horse was straining impossibly to carry its unbearable load, its youth, virility and inbred pride enhancing its natural obduracy to the point of folly. Its head jerked upwards with each forward movement, its nostrils flared, eyes rolled up to reveal almost all white, and its hooves were furrowing through the ground like a plough-blade, throwing up a wake of sods. Kamsa sat calmly on its back, doing nothing more than urging it forward. The horse made one final tremendous effort then collapsed. The sound of it falling to the ground beneath Kamsa was

exactly like the sound of a young sapling cracked by a powerful mace blow and on hearing this sound Yadu did wince; for while he cared little about what happened to Kamsa himself, he cared greatly about the animals under his care. The horse collapsed like a deflated leather bladder, its legs snapping like twigs immediately after its great back broke, and lay crumpled in a defeated heap.

It had taken only one and a half round of the enclosure and a few minutes for Kamsa to destroy a horse that could carry almost as much weight as a young cow elephant.

All he had done was ride it.

Kamsa leaped off the back of the horse. The impact of his feet hitting the ground was audible all the way across the enclosure to where Yadu stood. It was a thumping sound. And when he strode away, Yadu could make out the imprints of his feet even at this distance. Those footprints were inches deep in the hard-packed ground.

Kamsa strode away without a glance at Yadu. But the old syce knew he was aware of his presence. He had seen Kamsa in this state before although never this enraged. For despite the porcelain faced inscrutability and lack of ranting, shouting or other typical signs of anger, Yadu knew it was pure rage that fuelled Kamsa. Ever since his secret training under Putana's guidance, the son of Ugrasena had changed his very personality; gone was the Kamsa of yore who threw people out windows or slaughtered infants, in his place was this Kamsa, a being that distilled all his rage into a cold relentless unstoppable juggernaut of rage and went on rampages that would have left swathes of bloody enemy dead in large numbers had this been a battlefield of war.

At such times, Yadu knew, the young king seemed to withdraw into himself, compacting his consciousness until he appeared to be aware of nothing but his own existence, seeing, hearing, feeling nothing but what transpired within his inscrutable mind. But he was guarded by a survival instinct so powerful, not so much as an ant could attempt to nip at his toe

without him being aware of the attempt before it could occur. Yadu knew that Kamsa knew he was standing there, watching. He knew also that he was the only human being alive that Kamsa permitted to witness him at such a time, doing such things, and still let live.

Apart from Putana, of course.

Kamsa strode away from the dead horse, towards the far fence of the enclosure. The gate on that side was several score yards away. Kamsa did not bother to walk towards the gate, untie it, open it, and walk through. Instead, he simply strode through the fence itself. The inch-thick wooden planks, designed to withstand the powerful kicks of rebellious stallions and strong mares in heat, shattered into splinters. Kamsa walked through half a dozen fences in similar manner, striding across the length of the training field, and by the time he had reached the far end, the trail of his footprints resembled the wake of a plough.

Kamsa began running as he approached the woods at the far side of the training field, running with the heavy gait of an overly muscled man even though he was fairly slender and well-shaped. He moved as if he was running through wet sand, his feet churning as much as a foot's depth of earth as he gained pace.

He brushed against the trunk of a sala tree just before he disappeared into the woods, and a chunk of the tree was torn out of its body to land woodenly on the ground. The tops of trees shuddered visibly, and great clumps of birds rose up in alarm and flew wheeling over the woods, crying out in dismay, then the woods settled back to normal, and Kamsa was gone from sight.

Nanda and the gopas undertook the task of disposing of Putana's body. They used wood axes to chop up the body into pieces. The task was unpleasant but not as much as they had expected: the body exuded no fluids, blood or otherwise, and instead of the usual stench of dead flesh, it gave off a pleasant aroma. This confounded the Vrishnis until Guru Gargamuni said that it was a sign that the demoness had attained moksha in death and ascended. This elicited further looks of wonderment from all present for it confirmed their conviction that God had played a direct hand in saving little Krishna's life. Being slain by a god was itself one way of achieving salvation from the eternal cycle of birth and death, freedom from karma, and the perfumed odour and bloodless body of the giantess indicated that she had not merely perished but had been released.

This made their task less onerous. They went about the grisly work with grim satisfaction. Piling the pieces onto wagons, they carted the remains to a distant ghat where they piled them with wood and burned it piece by piece, ensuring that not a scrap was left for carrier birds or vermin to feed on. Even the smoke rising from the remains smelled pleasantly. It was Nanda's elder brother Upanandna who identified the odour. 'Aloe!' he said, 'it smells like aloe.' And so it did, Sannanda, their younger brother agreed, and even Nandana, the youngest of the four brothers, concurred. They had been concerned about the ash and smoke travelling to fields and being inhaled by cattle but now they knew that there was not a trace of demon left on earth. Vishnu had ensured that the act of death was also an act of purification.

When every last vestige of Putana was consigned to flame, ash and smoke, they returned to Nanda's house. Yashoda was caught up in the usual hustle and bustle of catering and caring for the needs of so many guests and barely had time to think about the horrendous event. It was only much later, when she was alone in her cot with little Krishna by her side, sleeping on his back, limbs sprawled in that unique way only the very young can manage, that she was overcome briefly by a surge of anxiety.

What if there are others? If Kamsa sent one assassin, surely he will send more! What if the next one is too powerful to overcome? What if harm

comes to my little one?

This time, there was no mind voice from her little Krishna speaking to her and reassuring her as before. He seemed to be sleeping more soundly than usual. That itself indicated that he must be exhausted from the encounter with Putana. It suggested there were limits to his abilities or to his endurance. After all, he was still a little babe. What if the next monster was beyond his ability to overcome? More than anything else, she knew that so long as Kamsa lived, there would be no real peace for her or her little son. The ruthless Usurper would never cease in his attempts.

She fell asleep in a miasma of anxiety. For the first time, she wished – nay, she *longed* – for her little one to speak to her and calm her anxieties.

But Krishna slept on soundly, even starting to snore a little.

It was with a troubled heart that Yashoda finally lulled herself to sleep.

Kamsa increased his pace as he emerged from the woods north west of Mathura. This region was dry unforested land, too barren to farm and too hostile to inhabit. The dry ground suddenly gave way to plunging dry gulches here, many of them dangerously steep and narrow. The streams at the bottom of those steep gulches were barely muddy trickles and most were bone dry, carpetted with the bones of animals that had fallen to their deaths. They only filled up during the monsoon season and a few weeks thereafter. The area was too uncertain for inhabitation and as a result it had been overrun by predators. Kamsa came here to practice his newfound abilities daily, testing the limits of his transformed body, exploring the possibilities, developing his unusual skills further, finding new ways to use them for combat. There was one particular box canyon he had favoured at first. But he had long since demolished that canyon, reducing it to a heap of collapsed rubble. Later under Putana's supervision, he had developed a regime that catered to his particular abilities and strengths. But today, following a daily regime was the last thing on his mind.

He simply ran, feet pounding up chunks of earth, stomping noisily, leaving a dust trail bigger than that left by a herd of stampeding elephants. The ground shuddered beneath his increasing weight. The rage and anguish that filled his heart was unbearable. He could not resist expressing it any longer.

Putana was dead.

His first friend in years, his only female companion, his only genuine advisor, the one person he had come to rely on, to seek solace in, who comforted him and made him feel...almost human. The only one who had understood him, his strange urges and impulses, his newfound abilities and enormous power, his rakshasa lusts and his human longings. Gone. And only after she was gone did he realize how much she had truly meant to him.

She had loved him and he had loved her, in a manner of speaking. As much as a being such as she and a rakshasa-mortal hybrid such as he could actually love anyone.

She had accepted him as he was, whatever he was, and had befriended him, coming closer to him than anyone else he had ever known. She was a Maatr: one of a great ancient coven of Mother-Creators, demi-gods who had been present at the origins of the world, she had taken shelter among mortals and disguised her true form and power in order to survive and to atone for past transgressions. She had fed Kamsa the Halala milk from her own body, a deadly toxin capable of slaying humans with a single drop yet to him, with his newly reconstituted biology, an elixir and tonic. This itself bonded them powerfully.

Now he would no longer have her milk to give him new strength each day.

But more importantly, he would no longer have her strength of character, her great ancient wisdom and insight, her knowledge of so many things he could barely comprehend. It was she who had refused to let him go to confront the Slayer. He had wanted to go the instant she brought him word that the Slayer had been located at last, and was found to be residing in rural Gokula-dham. He had wanted to go at once and face his nemesis. The child of his sister who had miraculously survived his decade-long campaign. The prophesied one who would someday kill him, Kamsa, and take his place upon the throne of Mathura. He had wanted to go and crush that little tyke with a single blow of his mighty fist. But Putana had stopped him, had told him he was not yet ready, not strong enough to face the Slayer.

Not strong enough! Hah!

She could be very persuasive. She had chosen to go instead, and to use her deadly toxic milk to kill the Slayer. She said it was the best way. He had agreed then because it did seem ingenious. The Slayer was but an infant. Were he, Kamsa, to go and kill him, it would outrage the people again. No longer were they quiet and subordinate to his atrocities as they had been at first. The stench of rebellion was in the air. Such an act of outright murder might bring all the Vrishnis and Suras against him in one massive civil action. Puatana's way was more sensible, he had to admit. She would simply go and nurse the infant, feeding him the most toxic substance in Creation. Nobody would suspect him, Kamsa. His hands would be clean.

But now Putana herself was dead!

Her own plan had failed. Kamsa did not know all the details. What he did know was what the dhoot, the spasa courier, had told him: a giant demoness of some kind had been killed by an infant in Gokula-dham. The infant had danced on her corpse after killing her. Danced! It was believed that the giantess was named Putana. The spy had not even known it was Kamsa's Putana, the wife of the captain of his guard, he had merely reported what he had learned in Gokul-dham. But Kamsa had known at once. Putana was dead. She had attempted to slay the Slayer and had herself been slain. Now she was gone. And he was alone once more. And he could not bear it.

He was approaching the edge of a gulch. He was running too fast to stop. Even if he slowed, his weight and momentum would carry him off the edge anyway. So instead of bothering to stop or slow, he ran faster. He launched himself off the edge of a ravine several hundred feet high. The far side was a good fifty yards away. He flew up into the air, wreathed in a dust cloud, and as he hung suspended over certain death for any mortal flesh, he beat his chest and roared his anguish to the skies.

The sound echoed through the gulch below his flailing feet.

His momentum carried him all the way across to the far ridge. He landed in an explosion of dust and shale, cracking the stony back of the ledge. A small avalanche's worth of debris collapsed behind him into the ravine. But he was already racing away, across dry almost desert-bare terrain, his body so heavy now that his feet were imbedded a whole yard deep in the surface of the ground. He tore up earth and rocks and roots and stones the way a chariot's wheels might throw up clods of supple soil. He barely felt his thighs ploughing through solid ground and stone with greater ease than a metal plough blade could churn through sodden earth. He felt his power, his strength, his invulnerability. It was a palpable thing, as real as the air pumping in and out of his lungs, the sunlight on his face, the scent of freshly broken earth in his nostrils. He felt the very cells of his body resist the onslaught of stone and earth as he tore through the ground, and at that moment he knew that there were no limits to his power. He only needed to learn how to control his body, to focus long and hard enough to increase his density to the point he desired, and he could become strong enough to punch through stone if he desired, or withstand any force and survive unharmed. The only problem was, focussing that intensely, and holding his

concentration long enough. But he would master that as well. He would grow stronger than ever before, stronger than anything else or anyone else upon this earth. He would do it for Putana. To avenge her. By slaying the Slayer who had slain her.

He roared his fury to the skies. Then slowed as he saw something ahead. Something alive and mobile.

He came to a halt. The dustcloud settling slowly around him, the long winding trail of furrowed ground stretching for a mile or more in his wake.

He stared at the moving shapes ahead, milling about in confusion and hostility as they sensed the strange being that had approached so unexpectedly.

It was a herd of rhinocerous.

There were at least a dozen of them. It was unusual for them to be seen together in such numbers; they were mostly solitary creatures. But he did not question or think about the why or wherefore. He looked at them and they stared at him suspiciously, lowering their horns and stamping their feet and snorting threateningly, warning him to stay away. They had younguns. That meant they would fight to the death to protect them.

Kamsa did not care about the why or wherefore.

All he cared about was the fact that they provided an outlet.

He was angry.

He desired something or someone on which to vent his rage.

Humans were insufficient: there was no sport in being able to smash soft bags of pulpy flesh and brittle bone. It was like a boy mashing insects between his thumb and forefinger – as he himself had done when he was a boy.

He needed some real sport. Something that would offer opposition. That could withstand his iron blows and stone flesh.

Rhinocerous. What could be more perfect?

He grinned, baring an inane smile in a reddened face.

Then he began running straight towards the rhino herd. They snorted in surprise, lowering their horns and charging him. He charged back. There were four of them charging him at the same time, all large adult rhinoceroses. The two smaller ones stayed back, making sounds of distress, and a large one stayed with them – probably a mother or aunt.

Man-rakshasa and rhinos thundered at each other with the fury of creatures that were supremely confident that nothing could withstand their onslaught.

Kamsa had seen rhinos charge at solid wooden walls inches thick and drive their horns through them like nails through soft wood. He had seen them smash human bodies to mangled pulp in Jarasandha's sports arenas. He had seen them knock down elephants and pound stone walls until they cracked and shook. He knew the damage these creatures could inflict when enraged or challenged. By charging straight at them he was invoking their maximum fury. They would not rest now until he was dead.

Unfortunately for them, the rhinos had no idea of the damage he could inflict.

Two-legged being and four-legged creatures met in a thumping impact.

When the dust cleared, two rhinos were lying on their sides in the dirt, their horns shattered and bleeding profusely. The other two milled about in confusion, unable to fathom what had happened. Never before in their lives had they encountered any living creature that could withstand their direct charge.

Kamsa stood facing them, arms on his hips, grinning. He was happy now. Still enraged at Putana's loss. But happier than he had been some moments ago. He had killed – or at the very least inflicted mortal wounds – upon living beings. That was the one thing that could always lift his mood. Happiness was an opponent best served dead.

He charged the rhinos again.

And again.

And again.

When all four adults were dead, their armour-plated bodies lying broken and bleeding from a dozen wounds, heads and horns torn and ripped and mangled from the terrible impacts, he turned to the surviving adult female

and the two younguns. They were bleating in distress but still lowering their horns and stamping their feet, ready to defend themselves to the death. That was the thing about rhinos: they were stubborn to the point of death.

He was happy to oblige them.

He charged again. And again. Until there was not a living rhino left.

After that, he felt happier.

That was how he mourned the death of Putana.

Nanda too was anxious. If he failed to express his anxieties to his wife, it was because he did not want to alarm Yashoda any further. But he had received word from Akrur to beware of assassins from Mathura. And the group of travellers that had accompanied Lady Putana to Gokul-dham had mysteriously disappeared around the time of her death. Their belongings were gone from the quarters he had assigned to them, and nobody in Gokul had seen them leaving. It was extremely worrying. For now it was evident that all of them had been sent here on a nefarious mission. What were their names? Agha was one of them. And the others were...Trnavarta...and Baka. He felt little satisfaction in recalling their names. No doubt they had gone underground by now, altering their appearance and garb, pretending to be someone else. For all he knew, they could be mingling with the Vrishnis, pretending to be gopas!

But what truly made him anxious was the sight of Putana's enormous body. That elegant noblewoman, wife of the captain of the Mathura guard, no less, a high-birth woman who had been known in Mathura aristocracy even before Kamsa had dethroned his father and installed himself as king, if she could turn out to be such a terrible demoness, then who knew what other demons might lurk in Mathura or across the Yadava nation? It was a frightening thought, to accept that there demons living among them, seemingly human in every respect, until the day they set forth on a particular mission. In this case, to assassinate an infant child! And the three other visitors had been former aides of the God Emperor Jarasandha of Magadha, who was himself rumoured to be the most powerful demon of all; there was no doubt they were empowered with asura maya as well. He could not begin to comprehend where or how they might strike at his little son.

How to protect Krishna? That was the most daunting question of all. He could hardly surround Nanda and their son with lathi-armed guards all night and day. It would look preposterous and would invade her privacy. She would never have a moment alone and the presence of the men itself would make her anxious and nervous. He knew his beloved wife well. She

believed that carrying a sword was itself an invitation to violence. The presence of armed men would rob her of all peace of mind.

So he set several of his most trusted gopas and gopis to watch discreetly from a distance. There were family among this number: he recruited her own brothers and sisters as well as his own. This way, she would see familiar beloved faces surround her and take comfort in their presence, while their mission would be to watch over her and send for the real guards the instant they sensed danger. The armed guards would be kept at bay, out of Yashoda's sight, but within quick hailing distance. They would operate in shifts and be on alert at every moment of the day or night. Nanda received more volunteers for this duty than he required. Then again, how many were too many? If a giantess attacked again, would it take ten armed men to bring her down? Or forty? Or a hundred? Who knew what powers the other assassins might possess? Who knew how they would attack?

Still, all he could do was prepare and anticipate, and he did so.

He offered to pay the volunteers for the time spent away from their own herds but they would not hear of it. They readily agreed to drink his famous Gokul milk and consume its products though! That was payment enough, they said, brushing milk off their elaborate moustaches with the backs of their hands, grinning.

So began a routine of Yashoda and Nanda pretending that all was normal, smiling, laughing, talking, going about their daily chores, meeting and receiving people, doing everything they had before. But with a pallour of anticipation hanging over them that dampened everything they did. Nanda would see it clearly Yashoda would be talking with her sisters and friends and notice some stranger approach Krishna, and her smile would vanish, then she would start moving towards Krishna with a lurching gait that betrayed her alarm, only to stop short abruptly when the man turned and she saw he was her friend Tarangaksi's fiancee, coming to greet the little hero for the first time. Her face would relax again but the creases remained and Nanda knew exactly how she felt because he felt the same way.

He prayed daily that this anxiety would be removed from their lives. In a way, the warrior spirit within him wished that the assassins would show

themselves sooner rather than later, so that this ordeal could end once and for all. It was the waiting and anticipation that caused the greatest distress.

When Kamsa felt he was somewhat calmer and ready for conversation, he sent for Pralambha. The old minister arrived, visibly nervous. He had probably had wind of the rumours of Kamsa's unusual mood following the news of Putana's death. The old man had been sidelined by Bahuka, Jarasandha's emissary, who had been sent to oversee Kamsa during his most manic period following the birth and escape of the Slayer. Kamsa had been truly out of control then and in retrospect, he knew that had Jarasandha not stepped in and taken measures to bolster up his regency, Mathura would have burned in a brutal civil war that would leave Kamsa without a kingdom to govern or the Yadavas without a king to oppress them. Jarasandha had sent Bahuka, an old veteran who had handled such transitions numerous times, to drug Kamsa's food or drink – or both, for all Kamsa knew – in order to curb his rakshasa powers. The unknown drug had been effective, perhaps too effective. Not only had Kamsa lost his powers, including his ability to enlarge himself to gargantuan size with all the resultant side-effects that entailed – suppurating living growths sprouting from his festering skin being the most horrendous side effect – but he had also lost large chunks of time. He would sleep one night in spring and wake one morning in summer. During the interim, he would apparently be walking, talking, eating, drinking, living, breathing as normal, but in fact that was only a drug-induced walking coma.

He had no recollection of the lost chunks of time, but during those fugue periods, he would be as docile and amiable as a puppet on a string attached to Bahuka's meaty fingers. And how the emissary had made Kamsa dance to his tune: he had thrown open the coffers of the palace and given away the bulk of Kamsa's dynastic fortune, gathered over generations, to the people, using greed and the inevitable lusts and self-indulgence it brought, to lull the people into a false sense of security. By the time Jarasandha came to Mathura to cleverly claim allegiance of the Yadava nations to his Magadhan Empire, Kamsa could little more than watch as his father-in-law ruled in his name.

It had taken Kamsa months to regain his self-confidence and strength, and a violent encounter with a quad of Jarasandha's personal bodyguard, four

Mohini Fauj eunuch warriors whom he had maimed and brutalized with ease in his own bed-chamber, demonstrating his newfound strength and abilities for the first time to the master of Magadha. Jarasandha had been impressed. Kamsa had been cautious not to reveal more than was necessary: such as the fact that his powers were growing and increasing in intensity. What Jarasandha had seen was barely half of what he was capable of now. Yet Putana had told him that he would take years still to come into his full powers and if he moved too soon, he would risk losing everything. It was one thing to smash the skulls of a few Mohinis; it was another thing altogether to go up against Jarasandha himself. Even Kamsa was not impetuous and impatient enough to do that just yet, perhaps he never would be. After all, Jarasandha was more useful to him as an ally than as an enemy. It was the knowledge that Jarasandha stood behind him that kept civil war from breaking out even now, that forced tens of thousands of Yadavas to flee into exile rather than stay and fight openly. And it was the same knowledge that kept his neighbours from invading and attempting to take over Mathura.

But this was a different problem. This was the Slayer. An enemy who was interested in regional politics or empirical ambitions. This was a being prophesied to destroy him. Him. Kamsa! Why? Because he had a great destiny, that was why. And all those born with a great destiny are bound to attract powerful enemies. Every great hero has a great villain. So Kamsa had his Slayer, an infant child born to his own sister under his own roof and who desired to murder his own uncle. If patricide was the word for the killing of one's father, and matricide murder of one's mother, what was murder of an uncle called? He did not know the word. He had disliked Sanskrit so intensely as a boy, he had tipped his Sanskrit guru out of a high tower window one morning after a particular gruelling session on derivatives. But it was a crime nevertheless. How could an infant, barely two years old, be a threat to him, Kamsa, the most powerful being in this part of the world? It was ludicrous. Yet that same infant had killed Putana, his Putana. And he must pay for that crime. Infant or no infant, Kamsa would put an end to this right here and now.

Pralamba stood before him as Kamsa paced, musing on his course of action. Finally, Kamsa turned and looked intently at the Chief Advisor. The older man blanched, his greying moustaches twitching. Ever since

Jarasandha's departure, he had lived in perpetual anxiety about his fate. Kamsa knew that other kings would have had the Advisor put to the sword merely for fraternizing with the Magadhan Emperor while he acted as de facto king of Mathura while Kamsa was unable to govern, but Jarasandha *was* Kamsa's father-in-law and Mathura *had* sworn allegiance to Magadha. So strictly speaking, Pralamba had done no wrong. Even so the man was never quite at ease around his king and Kamsa himself saw no reason to give the man reason to feel at ease. Even if Pralamba had not betrayed him entirely, he had not demonstrated loyalty to Kamsa either. Had Kamsa not withstood the attack of the four Hijras in his own bed-chamber and demolished those four unfortunates with crushing ease, they would have killed him and Pralamba would have stood by and watched. So would Pradyota, Putana's husband, for that matter, and for that reason Kamsa had a bone to pick with him as well. But this was not the rakshasa Kamsa they expected to turn into a festering giant of a sudden, raging and rampaging at will, this was Kamsa the Terrible as he now liked to think of himself. A king so shrewd he had outwitted the great Jarasandha himself, and before his reign was over, he would dethrone his father-in-law as well. And to achieve such great things, he needed every political support. Pralamba was an experienced Advisor with keen knowledge of the Yadava tribes and clans and his spasa network was excellent. He was more useful to Kamsa alive than dead. And so long as he remained useful, he would stay alive.

Somehow, the Advisor was canny enough to sense this and he seemed to grow visibly less anxious as Kamsa paced. After all, tyrants who lashed out viciously rarely took such a long time to brood on their actions beforehand. Even so, he was wise enough to gauge Kamsa's agitated state and to know better than to speak until spoken to; that was one of the reasons Kamsa had kept him around after Bahuka's departure. Because of his canny judgement.

Finally, Kamsa turned to him. With offhand casualness he said, 'Gokul-dham.'

Pralamba dipped his head to acknowledge that he heard. 'What of it, your highness?'

'Burn it to the ground. Punishment for the murder of Putana, the wife of the captain of our guard. As a member of the royal staff, her heinous murder cannot go unpunished. Raze the entire settlement to the ground.

Kill everyone living there. Also kill those who stand in the way or express sympathy for the dying.'

Pralamba was silent for longer than required. He did not object vocally nor make any sound or gesture to indicate he disagreed with Kamsa's orders, nor did he assert a simple 'yes, sire,' and leave to execute his king's orders. This was his diplomatic way of communicating to Kamsa that he disagreed but that it was upto Kamsa to ask him why he disagreed. Again, another excellent reason why he remained alive when virtually every last minister, advisor, preceptor and officer of the court had been executed or imprisoned in the past decade.

'Well?' Kamsa asked, his voice echoing in the empty throne chamber. 'Since you have not left to do my bidding I can only presume you wish to offer some objection. Speak!'

'Not an objection, your highness. Merely...a doubt.'

Kamsa gestured impatiently, indicating to him to go on.

Pralamba went on with a mite more confidence, careful to keep his voice low and his gaze unchallenging.

'My Lord, Gokul-dham is governed by Nanda-Maharaj.'

'So?'

'Nanda himself is a peaceful man. But he is dearly loved and supported by the people, particularly the Vrishni clan.'

Kamsa nodded grimly. 'And the Vrishnis are leaders of the rebellion. All the more reason to teach them a lesson.'

'True, my lord. The rebels must be dealt with firmly. But you propose to attack Gokul-dham and harm Nanda and his people. They are peaceable folk and not directly involved in the rebellion.'

'They must support, encourage, supply the rebels. Otherwise Akrur and the other chieftains would not be able to sustain themselves for so long and harry our army this effectively,' Kamsa said. 'Ever since Vasudeva and Devaki scurried away like cowards...' He clenched his fist in anger. The thought of his sister and her husband eluding his grasp still rankled; even though ostensibly they had left on a pilgrimage, his spasas informed him that their departure had given credence and strength to the growing

rebellion within his nation. Akrur, son of Svaphalka, was reportedly leading the rebellion with the Vrishnis at the fore of the Sura insurrection. Until now, they had only succeeded in harrying his army and defying his authority in symbolic rather than meaningful military tactics but any such defiance was a thorny barb in his flesh and could not be tolerated. ‘Gokul-dham is the heart of Vrishni territory. It is not possible that this Nanda-Maharaj and his people do not supply and provide the rebels with their needs. Punishing them will send a message to the rebels and curb the menace before it grows into a full-blown insurrection.’

Pralamba nodded slowly, unable to ignore the unshakeable logic of this argument. ‘What you say is true, sire. But attacking a peaceful hamlet such as Gokul-dham and a revered community leader such as Nanda-Maharaj will also send out a different message, one that you may not wish to send.’

Kamsa frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘If we attack Gokul, not just the Vrishnis alone but all Sura Yadavas will rise up against you. No Yadava can bear the slaughter of innocent gopas and gopis in the heartland.’

Kamsa shrugged. ‘They are already harrying us through forays and petty insubordinations.’

‘But this would be an all-out rebellion. They would raise up militia under you, with Akrura’s Vrishnis leading the fray. We are not talking about a small assault or harrassment.’

Kamsa was still not impressed. ‘We Andhakas have fought the Suras for decades. We are willing to continue if need be.’

Pralamba clearly wished to argue the point but he took a moment to pause and gather his wits before continuing. ‘But this time, if they rise up Drupad would support them. He might even join his forces with their’s.’

‘Drupad? King of Panchal?’ Kamsa snorted. ‘Why would he risk making an enemy of Mathura?’

‘Because he is already involved, sire. It is well known that he is sheltering many tens of thousands of refugee Sura Yadavas who have fled to Panchal. And as you know full well, he has always coveted Mathura.’

Kamsa could not disagree. ‘That he has,’ he admitted reluctantly.

‘And if Drupad joins the Sura Yadavas, then Kuntibhoj will certainly join in as well.’

Kamsa raised his head, thinking. ‘Kuntibhoj regards Vasudeva’s sister Pritha as his own daughter.’

‘Indeed, sire, she is even known as Kunti for that reason.’ Pralamba was wise enough to see that his liege had caught the thread of the argument and did not need to be prompted further. He waited as Kamsa rose from his throne and paced a few moments, thinking.

‘And Kunti alias Pritha, Vasudeva’s sister, is married to that discoloured king of Hastinapura, what’s his name? White-face?’

‘Pandurang,’ Pralamba said.

‘Yes, Pandu. So if Kuntibhoj joins in, then there’s a possibility of old man Bhishma putting Hastinapura’s akshohinis into the alliance as well.’ Kamsa walked over to a painted map depicting the Bharata subcontinent. He considered the forces that would be aligned against him, jabbing his finger against the heavy canvas as he called out each name: ‘The Suras. Panchala. Bhoja. Hastinapura.’

He turned to look down at Pralamba, eyes glittering. ‘Is it a coincidence that all these happen to be territories that have successfully resisted the efforts of Jarasandha and remain hostile to the empire of Magadha?’

‘Nay, sire. It is no coincidence. That is another reason why they are only waiting for an excuse to open a war front with Mathura. They regard Mathura as a weak...’ The old advisor bit off his words in mid-sentence. He was about to say ‘weak link’ but had just realized how that might sound to the ruler of that alleged ‘weak’ link. ‘...as a possible bargaining tool,’ he continued, ‘and hope that by fighting and crushing Mathura they will force Jarasandha to break off his campaign against the other territories and return here to defend you, his son-in-law, as well as Mathura, the pride of his empire. Tactically, that would make it impossible for Jarasandha to continue his campaign of expansion and consolidation. If Jarasandha has to stay and defend Mathura on so many fronts—,’ the advisor gestured at the map which depicted Mathura surrounded by the territories Kamsa had just pointed out, ‘it would effectively grind the Magadhan campaign to a halt. Through shrewd alliances with the other nations, they would throw Jarasandha’s forces out from there as well, and

push him back to the western frontier provinces, leaving him nowhere to go except the far western mleccha lands.'

Pralamba was an old horse and when he referred to the far western lands as 'mleccha' he put every nuance of derogatory inflection into that term. To the old guard those regions western of the Kusa ranges were not merely barbaric and uncivilized, they were undesirable.

Kamsa thought about this for several moments. He could not find any reason to disagree with anything Pralamba had said. Yet he seethed at the thought of letting Putana's death go unavenged.

He dismissed Pralamba abruptly and sat brooding.

Somehow, he must find a way to get at that brat and destroy him once and for all. It was no longer a question of his own survival. It was revenge, pure and simple. In the meanwhile, he reassured himself reluctantly, the three remaining assassins still remained to do their job. He could at least hope they fared better than Putana.

As the days passed and Krishna still did not speak to her as he had before, Yashoda began to wonder if the attack had affected him somehow. They had ascertained that Putana had been attempting to feed him poison milk to kill him. That he had survived was a miracle due partly to his own extraordinary nature, she knew, but what if the poison had affected him in some way. The deep sleep he had fallen into immediately following the incident, the fact that he hadn't spoken to her through the mental voice he had used so frequently before, these things troubled her. At the same time, he seemed quite normal and playful, his appetite was as healthy as ever, and when watching him at play with his brother Balarama, everything seemed quite normal. But that was the point: her Krishna was not quite normal, he was more than normal. As days went by and he seemed like all the other infants his age, sons and daughters of her sisters and friends who came daily to play with him and Balarama, she began to doubt her own memory. Had she actually heard him speak to her within her mind? Could it have been motherly instinct that made her certain she knew what he was thinking? What about the cart he had shattered with a single kick of his little foot? Had that truly been the work of some rakshasa and had it been Vishnu's divine hand that had spared him rather than his own supernormal abilities?

She hesitated to bring up these matters with Nanda. He seemed preoccupied and distracted as well. There was talk of rebellion and of an alliance against Mathura. Nanda had always been clear on the matter of politics: whatever the problem, war and violence were part of it, they could never be solutions to anything. His staunch insistence on pacifism was both a necessary counterpoint to the constant heated tempers and enraged debates as well as a frustration to those who felt the time for talk and peaceful methods was long past. Vasudeva and Devaki had escaped into exile and nobody knew exactly they were even now, only that they were safe and well. She was relieved at that news. She was less relieved to hear that Akrur and the Vrishni rebels had bartered an alliance with Drupad, king of Panchal. She did not know much about politics. But Nanda spoke to her when his mind was overflowing with worries and he felt that Drupad was an ambitious and grasping king, a war monger who would

rouse his army and ride on Mathura without much provocation. He felt that Akrur had erred in bringing him into this fray. But Panchal was the only nation willing to shelter the fleeing Sura refugees seeking to escape the Usurper's yoke and risk incurring the wrath of Kamsa, and such support came at a heavy price.

If Akrur reached an agreement with Drupad, then Panchal would march on Mathura. And if Panchal's army attacked Mathura, Bhoja could not stay neutral. King Kuntibhoja would have to join them, if only because, as adoptive father of Vasudeva's sister Pritha alias Kunti, he was obliged to do so. And if Kunti's adoptive father joined in, then Kunti's husband Pandu might be similarly motivated. Pandu himself did not have sufficient power to commit Hastinapura's considerable might but his Pitama, Bhishma of the Terrible Vow, certainly did. And if Bhismam Pitama aligned with the forces against Mathura then it was almost certain that Jarasandha the Magadhan would join in the melee. It would be a war on every front and it could be decades, or even centuries, before peace descended on the Yadavas again. Nanda knew and feared this more than the actual threat of violence. It was one thing to suffer the yoke of Kamsa. But was it worth risking a century of war to overthrow that yoke? And who was to say what the eventual outcome might be? After all, the Bharata dynasty, from which Hastinapura's rulers were descended, specifically the Puru line, were the forebears of the Yadavas. And Yadu had been outcast by his own father Yayati, banished to these regions. There were still tribes who recalled that ancient humiliation and resented it, believing that Yadavas had equal claim to the throne of the City of Elephants, Hastinapura, or as they preferred to call it with deliberate irony, Nagapura, City of Snakes. What might begin as a sincere attempt to support an oppressed people and overthrow a tyrant Usurper might well end up as a war engulfing the entire subcontinent. War was like a half-starved wound-maddened tiger unleashed in a closed house full of people: the only certain outcome was that people would die. Who and why did not matter to the tiger of war.

So Yashoda kept silent about her concerns, thinking she would give it another day or two, then another week, then another fortnight. And as the weeks passed, she began to resign herself to the change in her beloved Krishna. So what if he could not speak to her through her mind any

longer? He was still her beloved one. He was healthy, happy, playful... most of all, he was alive! She was grateful for that.

Now that Krishna was walking, it was harder to keep track of him. Most infants took a few steps one day, then stumbled and fell, then gradually progressed over the next few weeks. Not Krishna. One day he was sitting and creeping and crawling, the next day he was dancing on Putana's corpse, and from that day onwards, he walked like any toddler. He lurched, he stumbled, he almost fell – and sometimes actually fell – but mostly he regained his balance and continued on his merry way. He had some trouble going downhill. On one occasion, Krishna was sitting beside Yashoda and playing with a wooden wagon cart. Yashoda heard her name called by Aindavi and Kirtida, her best friends, and turned her head for a moment. As they approached, Aindavi put her hand to her mouth and screamed. She pointed over Yashoda's shoulder and Yashoda turned, her heart leaping with panic, and saw Krishna trundling down the grassy slope. The cart had gotten away from him and was rolling downhill and he had gotten up to follow it. The cart picked up speed as it rolled and so did Krishna, his chubby arms raised and waving as he sought to maintain his balance. The pull of Prithvi Maa drew him down and he ran faster after the rolling toy cart. Yashoda called his name and ran after him, followed closely by her friends. She could hear Krishna laughing in his baby gurgle as he went and it was evident that he was neither afraid nor aware of the possibility of coming to harm.

About halfway downhill, he lost his balance, and went head over heels on the grass – and kept on going. Yashoda gasped, running faster. Krishna tumbled a few times, then came to a rest sitting up. His heavy head jerked forward on his slight neck, and he released a choked burst of laughter. Yashoda came running up beside him and crouched down, cradling him to her chest, swaying from side to side, tears of relief pouring down her face. Her friends crouched beside her, reassuring her, touching her arms, touching Krishna, and she realized in that moment that divine or mortal, it didn't matter to a mother's heart. To a mother, even a god infant was still her son and even if he was invulnerable to every conceivable danger, she would still worry her heart out over him.

When she finally released Krishna from her smothering embrace, he smiled up at her proudly and held up his fist.

‘Maa!’ he cried, the only word he could speak aloud. The wooden cart was clutched in his chubby fist.

‘Maa!’ he cried again, waving the cart at her until she nodded and acknowledged his triumph.

He had chased down the cart and caught it. To him, it had been a little adventure, nothing more. Soon after, he had his milk, burped happily, then fell asleep with arms and legs sprawled as usual, the wooden cart still clutched in his fist. She tried to prise it loose but when the wood creaked as if it was about to crack, she let go at once. He wasn’t about to give up his prize that easily.

After that first little triumph, the adventures increased in number.

One day she was feeding one of the cows, Krishna beside her. He loved being around the cows. He had a way of putting his hand on their bellies, palm pressed upwards so he could reach their bulging stomachs, and making a resonant nasal sound in his sinus before saying, ‘Maa!’ It was possible he meant to say something completely different but at the moment, Maa was the only word he could say. As it happened, it was an appropriate term to use. Cows were quite literally Go-Maata. Cow-mothers. She couldn’t help feeling that even his little ritual of placing his palm on their bellies and making that odd sound was a kind of blessing.

She wasn’t in the least surprised when the cows began yielding richer, sweeter milk than ever before. She was quite certain they were the very cows her little Krishna had touched...though perhaps *blessed* was the right word.

There came a day when she came out of her front door to find every untethered cow gathered outside, waiting patiently. She stopped short, taken aback. The cows stood silently, as if waiting for something or someone. Moments later, the pitter patter of little bare feet sounded and her dark rascal came to the threshold. At once, the cows sent up such a lowing and mooing that people came rushing from around the house to see what was going on. Krishna clapped his hands gleefully, smacking the palms together in that uncoordinated way infants have, sometimes missing and slapping empty air, giggling open-mouthed. Then he raised both his palms and showed them to the gathering of cows. At once, they subsided. One solitary calf right at the back, probably unable to see from behind the

big cows, lowed once, plaintively. Krishna put his finger to his lips and said, ‘Shhh!’ The calf subsided as well.

Then, as Yashoda and the other family members watched in amazement, he began making that nasal sound again. Except that this time it was almost recognizable, despite his inability to pronounce words clearly just yet. Yashoda felt certain it was the sacred syllable Om. But the way Krishna made the sound, it was deeper, more primal somehow, like something that transcended language and words and meaning. Something that went back to the beginning of time and the human race. It was a sound filled with great power and history, made by the nasal septum of a two year old infant standing naked on his doorstep!

Then he raised his palm again and held it out to the gathered cows. Yashoda blinked as something passed from that open palm to the cows. She could say what it was exactly. It was not light, not quite a glow. It was wholly invisible. Nothing actually was seen coming from his open palm. Yet something did come from him and pass to the cows. Something that she could only describe as...a force. An energy. A blessing.

The cows lowed loudly again, this time with a tone of satisfaction, the sad-sack tone of cows since time immemorial, then turned ponderously and clumped their way back to their foraging grounds and tabelas. They didn’t need to be herded; they found their way quite well by themselves.

Only the little calf remained. Hanging back, he started to follow his mother, then hesitated and turned his head back, looking mournfully at Krishna.

Krishna smiled. Yashoda saw him beaming brightly as if he knew exactly what ailed the little calf. And he stepped off the threshold, almost losing his balance as he stepped onto the soft grassy ground of the courtyard. She felt her arms reach out instinctively to grab him, but saw that he needed no help. He padded across the courtyard to where the calf stood, waiting uncertainly.

He laughed and threw his little arms up to the calf’s neck. It was still much too wide around for him to embrace. But somehow he seemed to be able to embrace it and to everyone’s surprise he gave the calf a big wet kiss on its lips. The calf lowed softly in surprise then was quiet. Krishna

laughed and swung onto the calf's back, sitting astride it as he must have seen some of his fellow young gopas and gopis do.

The calf seemed pleased and lurched forward, running after its mother, following the herd. Krishna held on easily, laughing his gurgling laugh, absolutely fearless. Seeing him heading downhill, the gopas and gopis closest to him began to shout out warnings and run after him. Krishna continued undaunted, squealing with joy. The calf mirrored his childish enthusiasm, galloping like a horse.

'Maa!' Krishna cried happily as he passed over the hilltop and out of sight.
'Maa!'

It was still the only word he could speak aloud.

Shaking her head in amused despair, Yashoda ran after him. Even though she knew no harm would come to him, she could not simply stand there as her son rode recklessly down the hillside.

From that day onwards to the end of its days, that little calf never once fell ill or had any complaints or problems. Eventually, it would outlive every cow in the land and become the oldest living cow ever. It was only much, much later that people realized the connection and harked back to the day Krishna had blessed the cow with his own life-essence, shared through a kiss.

Kamsa threw aside his quilts and rose from his bed. Moonlight streamed in through his open windows, casting long shadows on the marbled floor. He paced the floor for several moments, unable to go back to sleep, unable to decide what to do with himself. He had not slept well a single night since the news of Putana's death. The politics of his position made it undesirable for him to unburden his mind to anyone at court. There were the concubines but he had never trusted any of them even as a boy; he was hardly able to trust them now. He had issues when it came to trust. It was only natural, when his own sister had betrayed him by marrying their worst enemy and had then birthed the child that would grow up to slay him.

He missed the time he had spent with Jarasandha, riding and fighting, barely time to recover one's energies and nurse one's wounds. Being under the command of a powerful leader, one who knew what he was doing and how to command, he had been able to absolve himself of all worry. He had lived moment by moment, fight by fight, battle by battle. He had survived some close encounters, each one feeling like a major victory. He had slaughtered many enemies, and each death had strengthened him. He was a warrior. Fighting was what he did best. Even leading men on a battlefield was not as satisfying: one always had to think tactics and strategy and counter-attack and defense and retreat and supply chains and all the paraphernalia that went with commanding armies. As a warrior, he could simply fight and kill, and move on without a second thought or backward glance. The earth had been his to roam, its every treasure his to take, and all problems could be solved with the blade of a sword.

He longed for that simple life again: to take up his sword and ride out. To rejoin Jarasandha and ride out with his forces. To fight mindlessly, knowing only the relentless intensity of warcraft and bloodshed, survival and slaughter. No thought of tomorrow, no cares beyond surviving the present moment, no time to worry. But things had changed between him and the Magadhan. For one thing, Jarasandha was his father-in-law, and Kamsa's two lovely wives awaited his return in their idyllic palace. Awaited his return so that he might do his conjugal duty and seed them

both with child. And much as he desired those two wonderful wives, and would want nothing more than to plough their fertile fields and seed them, it was the fact that Jarasandha wanted it that made him reluctant. To Jarasandha, everything was politics and power. He had married his daughters to Kamsa in order to tie his own bloodline to that of the Yadavas. It was that tie that had given him the right to march into Mathura not long ago and assume regency of the kingdom during the period of Kamsa's apparent 'illness'. The fact that the 'illness' in question was nothing more than the work of Jarasandha's own spasa Bahuka, planted in Kamsa's palace by the Magadhan, and caused by the mixing of an unknown potion in Kamsa's food or drink over several months was not known to anyone but Kamsa. The results of the poisoning, if it could be called that, were all that everyone could see, and those results were striking: from a powerful rakshasa capable of expanding himself to a height of several hundred feet high if he desired, Kamsa was reduced to a mindless husk of a mortal man again, barely able to keep track of what day it was and what had happened yesterday - or what he had eaten for his morning meal that same day. His rakshasa powers had been taken from him in one cruel swipe. Then again, it had been Jarasandha himself who had fed him certain potions that had caused that very rakshasa nature to surface in the first place. So, looking back now as he paced his chamber by moonlight, he realized how obvious the whole plan had been: Jarasandha had intended all along to awaken Kamsa's rakshasa nature so that he would overthrow his father and usurp the throne, then, when that very rakshasa power caused Kamsa to lose control and go on a rampage of bloodshed that threatened to raise up his own people against him, Jarasandha had countered the first potion's effect with a second one, altering Kamsa's physiognomy yet again.

But unforeseen by the Magadhan, the second potion had resulted in a peculiar side effect. Kamsa's ability to increase his density while outwardly retaining the same size and form. And with Putana's help and her toxic milk, Kamsa had enhanced this new ability to the point where he was the equal of any of Jarasandha's own supernaturally empowered champions. Impressed by his son-in-law's newfound abilities and the apparent maturity that came with the change, Jarasandha had withdrawn his forces from Mathura, with the understanding that Kamsa would abide by their alliance and father heirs upon both his daughters at the earliest.

Now, the day of reckoning was approaching soon. With Putana's plan to assassinate the Slayer before he grew to full strength having failed, Kamsa seemed to be left with no real options. Only today he had received a missive from Jarasandha, summoning him to a conference of Kings. The Magadhan's empire had grown to a formidable extent: not as large as Jarasandha himself had envisaged and desired as yet, but far greater than any other kingdom in Aryavarta had expected only a few short years ago. There was no question of opposing Jarasandha, not with the Yadavas themselves in revolt against their ruler. And as Pralamba had wisely reminded him, there were a number of other neighbouring kingdoms with their own political ambitions and agendas. The instant he weakened or took a misstep, Mathura would be wrested from him as easily as a battlefield crow snatches away a morsel of flesh. He could not afford to make a misstep.

This was the only reason he still suffered the Slayer to live.

Weary of pacing the same floors, he left his chambers and strode out into the moonlit night. He headed for the stables, not because he wished to ride but because he did not know what else to do. He needed to do something that would distract him from these political anxieties. Something that involved pulverizing boulders or smashing skulls would be wonderful.

The stable house was dark, silent and redolent of horse droppings. He walked the length, trying to decide which horse would be strong enough to put up a decent fight. The animals were asleep but at his scent, they roused and began to whicker softly to one another. At least a few bared their teeth in the darkness, threatening to nip at him if he came within reach. Amused, he held out a finger to one, a mean-spirited grey beast that was the get of a dyke imported from the arabi deserts during his father's reign. The stallion snapped hard at his finger. Hard enough to bite off any man's finger clean through the bone. But Kamsa was not any man; he had hardened his density just enough to test the horse's bite. The beast's powerful jaw clamped down on a finger that was denser than the hardest oak, not quite as solid as iron. Kamsa heard the sound of bone chipping and felt the horse's tooth chip. The stallion's eyes widened in shock and he reared back. Never before had he bitten any living being capable of withstanding his powerful jaws. Kamsa had a feeling he would never bite anyone again either. He laughed and moved on to the next.

‘Why harry the horses? Surely you are man enough to face a more wily opponent?’

The voice was quiet, challenging, even mocking. It came from the darkness at the far end of the stable house, in the shadows where the moonlight streaming through the open doors did not reach. Kamsa squinted but his abilities did not include the power to see in the dark. The stench of fresh horse manure came to him strongly; the arabi stallion had vented his bowels in shock and several others, sensing their fellow’s distress, had followed suit.

‘Who’s there?’ Kamsa said in a normal voice. He had no need to raise his voice nor to insert any inflection. He was king of the realm. He was possessed of powers no mortal foe could withstand. Fear was not a part of his mental composition. But he was genuinely curious. Who would be here at this unearthly hour? And what man would dare address him thusly? For a moment, he thought of Pradyota. The Captain of his guard had been devastated by the news of the death of his wife Putana - allegedly killed in an accident while on a routine visit to Vraj - but as far as Kamsa knew, he had no idea of Kamsa’s ‘special’ relationship with Putana, nor the real reason why she had been visiting Vraj. Putana had been very astute in keeping her true nature a secret from her mortal husband; she had been keeping that secret for a very, very long time from a great many husbands. Still, Kamsa constantly felt a twinge of unfamiliar emotion every time Pradyota came before him for official matters. He was even tempted to unburden his heart to the man, to share their mutual grief at the loss of the woman whose love they had both shared albeit in very different ways. Kamsa had not been a husband to Putana in the sense that Pradyota had yet he had shared a bond with her that was more intimate and secret than that between husband and wife. He doubted Pradyota would understand and in any case, he had no intention of revealing her secret. What would be the point now that she was dead? So he had kept his mouth shut and his emotions bottled but now, in this darkened stable house, for some reason he thought perhaps, just perhaps, the man addressing him might be the captain.

The dark figure separated from the shadows at the far wall and approached Kamsa. As he came closer, the moonlight was still insufficient to illuminate him fully. But at least Kamsa could make out who he was. He

was not Pradyota, he realized and felt an irrational rush of relief at the realization.

It was the old stable hand, the ancient fellow who had always been around for as long as Kamsa could remember. He had been the one who brought the pony on which Kamsa took his first ride, and even then, he had looked ancient. Kamsa rarely bothered with the menial help but the man's constancy in the ever-shifting firmament of his life was unusual enough that he had glanced occasionally at the worn parchment map of the old syce's face, creased with a thousand wrinkles and wondered how anyone could live that long.

He had also been there while Putana and Kamsa had worked on developing Kamsa's newfound abilities. He might not have been present when they went out into the wilderness to execute the more elaborate training regimes Putana had put him through, but he had seen enough to know that the king's new strength was unusual. Kamsa had wondered aloud if he could be trusted and Putana had glanced back at the old man and smiled an odd smile before replying yes. Kamsa remembered that odd smile now and wondered what it had meant.

In the darkness, with barely enough light to reveal the outline of the old man's form, the thousand wrinkles were not visible, nor were the other signs of age and decrepitude. He was just a man-shaped being standing in the shadows, no distinctive features or details visible. He could be anyone, any age, any race. And when he spoke again, his voice did not betray his age either. This lent him an air of menace that Kamsa had never sensed in him before. Perhaps it was just the way he stood in the shadows, legs akimbo, arms dangling loosely by his side, eyes glinting in the shadows as he stared directly at his king, undaunted either by his knowledge of Kamsa's true abilities nor of his royalty.

'What did you say, old man?' Kamsa asked softly. He was spoiling for a fight and while there was no real challenge in taking on an old man, if this was all that was available, he would not refuse it. Horses, rhinocerous, men...a skull was a skull, and smashing one was all he desired right now.

The old stable hand said nothing for a moment. Kamsa assumed the man had realized his mistake and was recalcitrant now. Not that it would save him. He was due a punishment. But then the syce spoke again and this

time there was no mistaking the raw menace and challenge in his voice. Even Kamsa was a little surprised at the gruff arrogance in the man's words. It was one thing to make a remark in passing and quite another to retort to a man's face, particularly when that man was King Kamsa the Marauder of Mathura.

'You grieve for your lost woman yet all she did was lie and deceive you to the very end. You thought she helped you because she wished you to succeed in killing your prophesied slayer. But all she truly desired was her own moksha.'

What was the old man blabbering about? 'Are you speaking of Lady Putana?' Kamsa asked. He was so surprised at the man's words, he forgot his anger for a moment. Of all the nonsense he had thought the old man might spout, speaking of Putana so intimately had not been anticipated. 'What do you know about her, you muck-raker?'

The old syce shifted slightly, or perhaps it was the moonlight that moved behind Kamsa, illuminating the ancient wizened face a little more. He could see more than just the man's eyes now. It almost appeared as if the creases and lines on that ancient face had smoothed and he was as young and robust as he had been when he was as young as Kamsa himself. A trick of the light and shadows, nothing more, Kamsa thought.

'I know more than you ever will,' said the oldun. 'I know that she sought to die at the hands of the Slayer, because to be killed by the Eighth Child guarantees direct ascension to the heavenly realms. That was the only reason why she played along with your puerile games and pathetic attempts at thwarting the inevitable.'

Kamsa's eyes widened. 'What did you just say?' He clenched his fists and took a step forward, feeling his flesh harden instantly. 'How dare you, insolent old fool!'

'Silence!' barked the stable hand. 'You may not have been taught to respect your elders but you will show me respect when I speak to you, boy. I may rake the muck your horses make and work all day in these stinking stables, but I am still your elder and you will show my age the respect it deserves.'

Kamsa was astonished. Did the man wish to die right here and now? Clearly he was out of his senses, senile probably. 'Who do you think you

are? Don't you know whom you speak to? I am--'

He got no further. The old man was on him before he could speak his own name out loud. Kamsa felt a powerful hand upon his throat, clutching his adam's apple in a grip of steel, and the old man's breath on his cheek. It smelled of old apples and saffron. The man himself stank of horse shit and sweat. But it was the hand on his throat that had Kamsa's attention: he had hardened his body to the consistency of iron layered several dozen times, hard enough that a sword swung with full force at even the softest part of his body would shatter to shards without nicking him. Yet the old man had grasped his throat in a vise that could crush him instantly. He felt the force of that grip, felt the pain in his adam's apple, like something lodged in his throat, and knew that despite his great invulnerability and ability, the old syce was stronger and more powerful and could kill him on the spot if he desired.

'I know exactly who you are,' said the old man, a faint spray of spittle coating Kamsa's face as he hissed the words from an inch away. 'You are the guttersnipe who overthrew one of the greatest kings that ruled Mathura and Usurped the Yadava throne, plunging this great nation into the darkest age of its history. I should rip your throat out and let you bleed out on this manure-stained floor while the horses snicker. For I cannot brook letting you sit upon my throne for a day longer and destroy all that I spent my life building up. I have seen you do too much damage to this great nation already, I cannot watch any longer. Say one wrong word and I shall kill you where you stand.'

‘Yashoda, come on! You’ll miss the start!’ cried her friends. Her sisters were out of sight, probably joining in the festivities already. Not for the first time she wished Nanda was with her. But as host of the event, he had to go ahead to ensure that all was in order for the ras-lila. Normally, she would have taken care of all the arrangements: she loved the process of selecting flowers for the garlands, supervising the decorations, the setting up of the tents and stalls, the preparation of the food, the whole noise and bustle and rushing madness of the whole event. She thrived on being in charge and putting together elaborate arrangements for feasts and festivities at short notice. Nanda had even asked her tentatively if she wished to involve herself, either wholly or partially. It was she who had refused. She knew how hectic such things got and once she had dipped her toe in the water, she would not be able to resist diving in, so to speak. And in all that hustle and bustle and giving of orders and supervising a hundred different things at the same time, she could not possibly keep a constant watch on Krishna.

And she could not accept anything less.

Krishna was all that mattered to her now. She would not accept anything happening to him on her account. Nanda’s burly fellows with their lathis could watch over him and twirl their oiled moustaches all day and night, only a mother’s eyes could keep track of a little tyke constantly. As anyone who has ever raised a little child knows full well, sooner or later there comes a moment when one looks away, or turns one’s head, or lifts one’s eyes for a moment. Just a moment. And somehow, through the peculiar powers unique to their ilk, little infants will find a way to put themselves in harm’s way precisely in that instant. For her to involve herself in the ras-lila arrangements would mean trusting him all the time to the watchmen. She could not do that. Not yet. perhaps not ever.

So here she was, among the last to arrive at her own festivities, rushing to keep up with the others. She was all dressed and bejewelled and was pleased by the fact that she had only grown slightly plumper than before she had birthed Krishna. Not that Nanda minded, for plumpness ran in her family and he favored her being ‘healthy’ rather than lean - as he had told

her on many an occasion, making her blush - but for her own vanity. She wanted to fit into the same ras suit she had worn before her pregnancy, her favorite green and yellow and purple one, and she did. With just a little adjustment at the seams, but not much more. Looking forward to an afternoon with her friends and sisters and their families, dancing and clicking sticks and singing the ritual songs together. She could do with a little laughter and cheer.

‘Yashoda!’ her friends cried, disappearing over the top of the hill. She saw them crying out with delight as they looked down at the festival grounds on the far side of the hill, then disappear from sight. She wished she could simply run up the sloping rise and down the other side, as they had done when they were children. But it was a good three hundred yards uphill in a gentle gradient, with hummocks and rabbit holes everywhere and she was already out of breath. My, but if it wasn’t she who had put on weight, then why did she feel so heavy?

‘Maa,’ Krishna gurgled sleepily. He had just drunk a stomachful of milk before they left. As if acknowledging the fact, he burped now, loud and long, the sound almost making her giggle out loud. ‘Maa,’ he said again, contended, then his head lolled on her shoulder. She staggered back, almost losing her footing entirely and tumbling backwards.

She glanced around. The bodyguards were there behind her, about ten or fifteen yards distant, two of them talking genially with one another. They were supposed to maintain a cordon around her at all times but as the days passed they had grown bored of standing alone out of talking distance and had taken to strolling in pairs, chatting incessantly. Why was it people always thought women talked a lot? Clearly they didn’t know Vrishni men! The two closest to her were aware of her but not looking directly at her. In any case, if she did actually tumble over, they were too far to reach her in time.

She took another step uphill and gasped. Great Goddess! Who said she hadn’t become fat? She felt absolutely humongous right now. As if she had put on a hundred kilo weight. Or a thousand!

Another step, and this time she could actually feel her bones creaking with the strain. This was ridiculous. She could barely move. She stopped and leaned against a tree. Sweat stains were spreading around her underarms

and down her back. She was already exhausted even before she reached the ras-lila! How was she going to dance?

Krishna's head lolled a little and somehow his momentum carried his head down her shoulder. The side of his head touched the trunk lightly, just a feather brush.

The bark of the tree split apart.

It cracked and fell in powdery fragments.

Yashoda frowned and looked closely at the tree trunk, at the spot where Krishna's head had touched it lightly.

The trunk had cracked.

There was a distinct line in the trunk.

She blinked, bewildered.

What did it mean?

She looked at Krishna, fast asleep. She looked down at the arm holding him and tried to adjust it a little for comfort. The arm screamed with agony. She realized that the muscles she thought had stiffened had actually been strained to the point where they could take no more weight. They screamed with protest as she tried to shift Krishna to her other hand.

Sweat pouring down her face and neck, staining the blouse of her best ras-lila suit, she struggled to lower Krishna to the ground. Somehow, with a mighty effort, she managed to place him on the ground at the foot of the sala tree. She rested his head and back against the trunk of the tree. His head rolled forward, then swung back instinctively, striking the trunk. It was just a nudge really. Her Krishna was a tough boy that way, often competing with his half-brother Balarama in demonstrating how much he could bear without crying - although when it came down to push and shove, it was always Krishna who called 'Maa' before Balarama asked for Rohini.

The tree trunk split with a resounding crack.

She gasped and reared back. For an instant, she thought the tree itself was about to tip over. The cracking sound was followed by a rending, groaning sound and the tree itself swayed and shook. Monkeys and birds resting on

the branches above cried out and leaped away or took flight in alarm. Then, with a deep moan the tree seemed to settle and held still.

She swallowed nervously, wiping the sweat from her face with a fold of her garment. Krishna lay back against the tree trunk, sound asleep, his lips pouting slightly as if they had just left off suckling.

She glanced around. The bodyguards were coming towards her, having heard the sound of the tree and the commotion of the wildlife. One raised a hand questioningly. She shook her head, indicating that nothing was wrong. And it was true: nothing was wrong. Yet something had just happened here. What? She realized she suddenly felt lighter, much lighter than when she had begun climbing the hill. She stood warily to her feet and yes, she was feeling so much lighter she could have run up to the top of the hill and down the other side, as her friends had done. But how was that possible? What had changed?

Krishna stirred a little in his sleep, making that baby-snoring nasal sound he sometimes made, and the tree groaned again. A few more birds that had just begun to resettle took off again. A monkey screeched indignantly some distance away, complaining about these two-footed strangers who came and disturbed the peace.

In a flash, Yashoda understood.

Krishna! She had been carrying him when she had begun feeling heavier. He had been falling asleep at the time and as he had fallen deeper asleep, he seemed to grow heavier.

And when she put him down against the tree trunk, the tree itself had cracked at the touch of his head. Just now, when he had shifted, the tree had protested.

Somehow, her Krishna had increased in weight.

But how was that possible?

He was just a babe, asleep. Even if he was touched by divinity, what did that have to do with his weight?

The sound of a flute came to her from over the hill, followed an instant later by the sound of laughter and other music and the clacking of sticks. So. The ras-lila had begun.

She bent down and took hold of Krishna as she usually did, gripping him under the arms. He had grown too big for her to pick up with one arm around his back as she might have done a year ago, but now, even with both hands gripping him firmly and using all her strength, she could not budge him! She strained, using her back to exert force, the way she did when pulling a heavy object. Yashoda was not a delicate woman. Like any Vrishni Yadava, she had always done her share of the work and cattle herding and dairy farming required strong hands and an even stronger back. Apart from that, she had always been athletic and good at games as a girl, especially games like kabbadi and lathi wielding. If anything, she had only grown stronger since then, with a mother's workload and a baby to carry around everywhere.

Yet, try as hard as she might, she could not budge little Krishna. It was all she could do to try to lift his chubby little finger off his lap, and even that was as hard as lifting a heavy grinding stone!

She slumped back, staring in wonderment at her little wonder. He remained sound asleep, leaning back against the sala tree trunk - which had bent at a noticeable angle by now but still sustained his weight - puckered mouth issuing a faint whistling sound every time he exhaled.

Something flashed inside his mouth.

Her heart leaped in her chest.

She leaned forward, watching closely. In the distance, the sound of the ras-lila increased in intensity. But her entire attention was focussed on her little beauty. He continued sleeping soundly but she was sure she had glimpsed something inside his little mouth.

There! She saw it again. Like a tiny light flashing.

There was something in his mouth. She was certain of it now.

Her heart pounded as she reached for his lips. They were already puckered, so she instinctively touched the tip of her little finger to the conjunction. At once, he reacted, pushing his lips outward then pulling them inward again. She withdrew her finger, and his lips parted at once, seeking the source of nourishment with the instinct of infants since the beginning of time. When he did not find it, his dark face crinkled in a disapproving frown.

Then he yawned.

His mouth opened wide, revealing his baby teeth and pink gums and the inside of his mouth and the passage of his throat.

Yashoda peered inside, trying to see what it was she had glimpsed, flashing or blinking.

She froze, staring.

Her breath paused in her throat.

Her entire being ceased.

She stumbled back, almost falling over, then caught her balance and rose to her feet. She stared down at her little baby, asleep against the sala tree, his mouth now closed, the yawn completed. Her palm was clasped across her own mouth, covering it in the universal gesture of shock.

‘Yashoda!’

Someone was calling her name.

She turned and looked uphill, and saw Nanda, silhouetted against the top of the hill, waving.

‘Yashoda, come on! The ras-lila has started!’

She started towards Nanda, wanting to go to him, to tell him what she had just seen inside their little babe’s mouth. The incredulity of the sight she had witnessed made her head reel. It was all she could do not to break into a run and sprint uphill to her husband, to fall into his arms, gasping and crying and unburden her mind of the impossible sight that she had seen.

She took several steps uphill, her feet moving of their own accord. Then realized that she could not simply leave Krishna lying there asleep under the sala tree - which was bent over at an alarming angle now, as if even in his sleep he had pushed it back until the angle suited his comfort. The bodyguards were nearby, watching her in puzzlement, unable to understand what was alarming her so, yet realizing that something was amiss.

‘Yashoda? Everything is well, no?’ called Nanda from the top of the rise. He sensed something amiss as well.

Yashoda turned to call to her husband, to beckon and ask him to come down so she could speak with him. She wanted to show him what she had

just seen, to confirm that she had not simply imagined it, that it was real and not a product of her hysterical imagination.

But before she could call out or say a single word, a whirlwind struck.

10

Kamsa was wakened by the sound of someone trying to break down the doors of his bedchamber. He staggered out of bed, raising a hand to shield his eyes from the gaudy sunlight streaming in through the uncurtained verandah doors and unbolted the door. Four tall bald heads glared menacingly at him. Mohinis.

‘The Emperor wishes to see you at once.’

Kamsa blinked. ‘Jarasandha? In Mathura?’

‘No. We are to take you to him at once.’

The quad of eunuchs was in his bedchamber, watching and following as he moved around, trying to awaken his sleep-deprived mind. Water, he needed water right away. He had been up till early this morning. Even now, his body ached and protested with every move. That old syce! Of course, he reflected sombrely, he had not been merely an old syce at all. He had been something quite different. But he had no time to reflect on that now. The hijras were hustling him with their customary aggressive efficiency.

‘Must it be today itself?’ he asked, already knowing the answer.

‘His orders were to take you to him immediately,’ they said. ‘It is most of a day’s journey. We must leave this very instant.’

Ever since his ability had manifested, he had taken to storing at least three large pots of water in his bedchamber, ensuring they were kept filled at all times. Often, after a hard session working out with his ability in the wilderness, he was stricken by a prodigious thirst. He would often awake at night with the same parched sensation. His denser body required more water to slake its needs, and food as well. His consumption was enormous by any standards yet not an ounce of it showed on his body.

One pot was half empty. He picked it up anyway, and drained the contents in a moment. When he lowered it and reached for the next, he noticed the hijras watching with interest. He knew they were impressed by his ability to lift the heavy pot one-handed but would never show it. When he drained the first pot, he used his free hand to pick up the second one, which was so full that a little water sloshed over the side when he picked it up. He

straightened it and raised it up as he lowered the first one. He saw their eyes cutting to one another. Now he knew they must be impressed by his ability to balance one full pot weighing at least a hundred kilos in one hand with an empty one in the other hand, without spilling another drop.

He put the first one down and picked up the third with that hand, holding it at arm's length as he drank the entire contents of the second pot, then switched hands and drained most of the third as well. It was one of those mornings.

He dropped the third empty pot to the ground with a resounding echo and patted his flat, empty abdomen, making a show of turning around as he pulled off his upper garment and pulled on a fresh one. He saw the hijras eyes widen and noted their exchange of looks and secret gestures: a touching of one finger tip to another, a jerk of a chin in a certain direction, the rolling of one's head at an angle. They were expressing astonishment at how any being could consume that much water without revealing any sign of it upon his body. They had no notion that he could read their secret sign language - it was one of the things he had picked up during his stint with Jarasandha's army, and had been shrewd enough to keep to himself. Good to be able to interpret the secret coded communications of your enemy; better yet to be able to do so without their knowing you can do so. They must surely be aware of how he had despatched three of their comrades in this very chamber not many moons ago: he sensed that awareness in their eyes as well. It was the reason why they had been relatively polite with him. Had they thought he was merely human, they would have hauled him away by now like an errant dog. But now, word of that incident coupled with their watching him drink close to three hundred liters of water without his belly expanding by even a millimeter had earned their respect. They were impressed despite themselves: that was saying something, for Jarasandha's Hijras weren't easy to impress.

He smiled. 'I believe I shall eat before we leave,' he said aloud. 'I have a great appetite in the mornings.' He didn't wait for them to protest. He felt ravenous enough to put away at least as much food as he had drunk water. He doubted they had ever seen anyone consume two or three hundred kilos of food - still without showing any sign of it upon their body. He had a feeling these Hijras would think very carefully before disrespecting or

questioning his authority. To complete the victory, he said casually, ‘Do join me at table.’

The journey was by riverboat. Jarasandha was at a place a few score yojanas upriver. He would move on the next day. This was why Kamsa had to be brought to him today itself. By this time tomorrow, Jarasandha would move onto another city, another battle and once out of reach of the river, it would take days to reach him. The boat was like nothing Kamsa had seen before. The Yadavas, like most Aryas were not seafaring or even river-faring people. They preferred traveling with solid ground underfoot, not over water. But he had heard tell of cultures further south in Aryavarata where entire nations used river concourses the way most others used roads. He assumed that this craft was of their design. Long, sinuous as a serpent, it stretched for at least four score yards, maybe a few more, and was about barely seven or eight yards wide. There were two rows of eunuchs with unusual long rowing poles on each side of the boat’s length, perhaps eighty on each side. The craft’s sides curved upwards from the water as if seeking to complete a circle. Running the length of the center of the craft from one end to another was a platform elevated about a yard from the boat’s inner base. Upon this were affixed seats and tables. Foremen walked the length of this platform, wielding whips. The quad that had fetched Kamsa led him aboard the snake boat without a word to anyone and indicated a seat for him to rest. He eschewed the seat and remained standing, wishing to see how such a craft was worked.

The foreman at the end of the snake boat called out a command and at once the teams of Hijras came alert, taking up their oars. A drummer started a martial beat, slow but precise, and the foreman gave commands for the rowers to angle their oars, then to begin rowing. Kamsa felt the surge of power as the boat leaped forward almost at once, against the current. The powerful muscles of the eunuchs glistened in the morning sunlight as they worked rhythmically in perfect unison. A foremen or two cracked a whip in the air beside the ear of anyone not able to keep perfect rhythm and the marginal error was instantly corrected. Knowing how disciplined Jarasandha’s Hijras were raised to be, Kamsa thought that there would probably be few occasions to actually punish them with those whips. Their efficiency and coordination was quite extraordinary. He had never thought it was possible to move upriver at such a pace, at this point

in the Yamuna's course. Yet the snake boat's canny design and construction coupled with the Hijras excellent rowing were carrying them forward at a pace even a 4-horse chariot team would be hard-pressed to match. He saw Yadava soldiers, commoners and children pointing and gesturing at the snake boat as it sped past them. He developed a new admiration for his father-in-law's shrewd military mind. It was the use of such ingenuity and ramrod discipline that made Jarasandha the most formidable conqueror this part of the world had known.

Several hours later, they disembarked at a point where the river widened briefly to one of its enormous delta-like patches. Here the flow was relatively slower, but the sheer width of the course was enormous, almost a full kilometre from bank to bank. There were small islands in the center of the river, and he could see armed men on each of them.

As they approached their destination, he saw the results of Jarasandha's recent campaign. There were dead bodies everywhere on the eastern bank, human as well as elephant, horse and camel. Fires burned in pockets across the land, some several yojanas away, others only a few dozen yards from the bank. From what he could make out of the closest ones, they were piles of corpses being unloaded from uks wagons and heaped on pyres. The stench of burning flesh carried for yojanas around - he had smelled it an hour before they reached this part of the river. At another point, there were soldiers still fighting in a clump of trees. He could see the glint of the setting sun reflecting off armor and weapons. Faintly, the sounds of men screaming and dying came and went as they sped past. At one point, a hail of arrows came out of nowhere and splashed into the water yards behind their boat. Kamsa was unable to tell where they had come from but a moment later a javelin, beautifully thrown, came swishing through the air and would have hit the main foreman at the front of the boat. The eunuch saw the javelin but ignored it and it narrowly missed him by perhaps an inch. There were no more missiles aimed at them.

When their boat began to slow, he understood that they were about to disembark. He could see the unmistakable signs of a large army presence - krta-dhvaja flags flapping in the strong evening river breeze, lances reflecting sunlight as riders rode by on a nearby road, the stench of dead flesh from somewhere nearby, suggesting a battlefield. Most peculiar was a place they passed, a large makeshift construction from which great roars

could be heard. It sounded like a stadium of some kind, with some sport in progress, and a great audience watching. He wondered what sport they were playing. At the thought, his aching muscles began to hurt again and he remembered the old syce and the activities of the night before.

They disembarked on the eastern bank where a surprisingly large jetty served several dozen such snake boats. The constant coming and going of these vessels suggested a major troop movement. Kamsa understood at least one reason why Jarasandha's enemies feared him so much: even when off conquering some new territory, his forces were never too far away from previously held kingdoms.

He was taken by chariot to a staging area a mile or two eastwards. Here, a great encampment stretched out for as far as his eye could discern. Even though he had fought in Jarasandha's army years ago, Kamsa was impressed by the new scale and precision of that army's development. Then it had been an alliance of diverse kings with a common vested interest banding together to attempt to create a unified empire. Now, it was an emperor with his empirical host, building a world with his own personal brand on it. Everywhere he saw only a single krta-dhvaja, and that was Jarasandha's banner. Apparently, the alliance had been reduced to a single sigil. Had the reduction been accomplished by attrition or infighting? Probably a combination of both. Jarasandha no longer needed anyone else's help or support to continue his campaign.

The emperor's pavilion was an impressive sight from the outside, guarded densely by the largest eunuchs Kamsa had ever seen. They reminded him of the Hijras who had surrounded Jarasandha when Kamsa first went to meet him, back in Magadha. That was a long time ago and he had fought and bested a few of them through sheer arrogant luck and youthful speed. Now, he knew he could crush any of them. A part of him hoped he would have a chance to do so.

Jarasandha was seated in dignity upon a throne dais in the center of an enormous tent whose interior rivaled the throne chamber in Mathura. He was surrounded by eunuchs as usual, Kamsa noted, many in various states of casual relaxation. These were Jarasandha's inner circle, the giant cross-breeds he kept close by him at all times. They were the best fighters of all. But that was not the only reason he kept them close. They were also his

companions in other pursuits. Jarasandha's proclivities were wide and diverse and he made no secret of them.

'Son-in-law,' said the Magadhan, greeting Kamsa with his usual show of formality. 'Welcome. It is good to see you once again. My daughters will be even more pleased than I. It has been awhile since they had the pleasure of your company. They are in separate quarters quite near mine. Would you like to see them first?'

Kamsa had expected that his wives would be present. Jarandha's desire that Kamsa continue his bloodline by giving him heirs was vital to his plans to firmly entwine Mathura's destiny with Magadha's future. 'Perhaps later. You wished to see me urgently?'

Jarasandha gestured. Several of the eunuchs catering to the more menial duties such as fetching food and drink or swishing fans departed the chamber at once. The few who remained lounged languorously on velveteen cushions, scantily clad in garments that Kamsa would have preferred seeing on women. Noticing Kamsa's grimace, one fellow with an egg shaped head and kohl-ringed eyes raised his eyebrow and smiled provocatively. Kamsa smiled and shook his head, knowing better than to rise to the provocation.

They were served food and drink as Jarasandha talked. The God Emperor spoke of the political situation, various factions and links and alliances, all of which Kamsa knew of already.

'I am well aware of the politics of Bharat-varsha,' Kamsa said at last. 'I hardly think I needed a refresher lesson, sire.'

Jarasandha's tongue flickered between his parted lips as he tasted a particularly tasty delicacy, some variety of blackish red crustacean that he said was a favorite savory of the people of this region. Jarasandha was known for sampling the cuisine of every region he conquered and choosing which tribal chieftain to permit to rule as satraps on his behalf based on his liking the food prepared by their cooks. Kamsa noticed that the delicacy had claws and a hard shell and as Jarasandha popped it into his mouth whole, the loud crunching sound left no doubt it was some variety of riverbed crawler. He thought of advising Jarasandha that the item in question was supposed to be eaten after one cracked open the shell then realized the point was moot. He picked out one for himself and popped it

in. The crunchy sensation was actually quite pleasurable. It occurred to him that his newfound ability enabled him to eat things he might otherwise have found undigestible. He wondered if his new digestion could process anything his mouth could break down. It might be interesting to try.

'I heard of the death of Putana,' Jarasandha said, sending his forked tongue flickering out to clean the whole of his upper lip and then his chin. Now that must prove to be an useful appendage under certain circumstances. 'And that you did not take it too well.'

Kamsa shrugged. 'I was upset but not anymore.' He looked Jarasandha directly in the eyes, knowing that as father of his wives, the God Emperor might forgive infidelity on Kamsa's part, but not emotional attachment. 'The woman herself meant nothing to me. It was her failure that upset me.'

Jarasandha held his gaze a moment longer. If eyes could seek as widely as the Magadhan's tongue could reach, then Jarasandha would have looked inside Kamsa's belly and sought the truth within his bowels. As it was, his response seemed to satisfy Jarasandha. His father nodded, suddenly seeming relieved. 'Of course. Failure in one's soldiers is unacceptable. But you have other assassins out seeking the Slayer.'

Of course Jarasandha knew he had other assassins at work: everyone of them was given to him by Jarasandha himself. Kamsa nodded. 'Each of them is capable of storming a citadel, let alone killing an infant.'

Jarasandha picked out another delicacy from a different platter, no doubt the preparation of another tribe's best cook. 'Yet this is no mere infant. To slay the Slayer is no simple mission.'

He popped in the item and took two bites before making a face and using a silk napkin to spit out the uneaten morsel. Clearly, that tribe was not going to be holding much sway over political matters in this region.

Kamsa sipped his wine, forcing himself not to gulp it down. It had already been several hours since he had eaten and he was ravenous already. At least the aches and pains from the night before had reduced somewhat. That old fellow! 'Yet Putana assured me that even this Slayer can be defeated.'

Jarasandha nodded. ‘It may well be so. But we shall know soon enough, shall we not? I am sure the other assassins are making their move against him even as we speak.’ He gestured dismissively. ‘The reason I called you here is that I wish that you should leave off this campaign against the Slayer.’

Kamsa stopped with his goblet in hand, about to sip. He looked at Jarasandha and put down the goblet. ‘Leave off? What do you mean, sire?’

‘Leave it to the assassins. In any case, they will probably succeed in ridding you of the problem. But--’

‘But what?’

‘But in the event they fail as well, it might be best if you do not pursue this course further for the time being.’

Jarasandha leaned forward. ‘Are you telling me I should let the child prophesied to grow up to become my murderer live free? That I should sit here and do nothing about it?’

‘Not here, exactly. I would have you sit upon the throne of Mathura,’ Jarasandha said. ‘After all, I helped put you on that throne, did I not?’

‘Yes, and I am grateful for that, father-in-law,’ Kamsa said. ‘But this is a personal matter. I cannot simply let it go, as you suggest.’

‘It is personal, that is why I am asking this of you. You are a king now and a king must look beyond his immediate personal interests to the larger issues.’

‘Such as...?’

‘Such as the rising unrest in your own kingdom. The increasing emigration of the Yadavas to other nations such as Bhoja. The discomfort of your neighbours and other powerful states about your inability to govern without civil disobedience.’

‘Ah,’ Kamsa understood at last. ‘You are concerned that I may harry the Vrishnis and provoke a civil war. If that happens then you’re worried about Bhoja supporting the rebels and other states joining in the melee as well. That’s what you’re really worried about, isn’t it?’

Jarasandha stopped eating, leaned back in his throne and looked at Kamsa speculatively. He was as lean and ramrod thin as ever, his slender

appearance belying his physical strength and fighting skills. ‘I see you have improved your knowledge of political science.’

Kamsa smiled. ‘I had an excellent guru.’

Jarasandha burst into laughter. The eunuchs turned their heads in surprise: clearly, they weren’t accustomed to their god emperor being amused by his visitors. ‘And diplomacy too! Well, well. Who would have thought it? Kamsa the boy wonder suddenly growing hair on his brain!’

Kamsa took up his goblet of wine again and drank deeply. ‘You have nothing to worry about. I will not be making any rash moves against the Vrishnis. There will be no retaliation for the killing of Putana. Even if the other assassins fail,’ he paused, forcing himself not to admit how much that prospect angered him, ‘even then, I will not pursue any direct course of action for the time being. I know how delicate the political situation is right now. A single misstep could set the rebellion ablaze. Once the Yadavas go to civil war, it can only end with my own death. Better to let the Slayer go for now and deal with him later than risk my own countrymen rising up against me and destroying me.’

Jarasandha nodded approvingly. ‘You see it clearly then. You might well rid yourself of one future Slayer only to create a whole nation of Slayers who want you dead. Better to bide your time. Your day against the Slayer will come, I am sure of it. And when it does, I have no doubt that you will be ready to face him, whomever he might be.’

There was an instant when Kamsa saw something flicker in Jarasandha’s eyes as his nictitating eyelids panned shut sideways then opened again. Could it possibly be? Could Jarasandha know the identity of the Slayer? If so, why would he not tell Kamsa? Surely it was in Jarasandha’s own interest to keep Kamsa alive and powerful?

Then he remembered what the old man had told him last night - this morning actually. And he thought to himself, yes, it was possible, even likely, that Jarasandha knew the identity of the Slayer but chose to keep it to himself. After all, the three surviving assassins were all Jarasandha’s own men, hand-picked by him for this very mission. They must surely be sending word back to him somehow.

It did not matter. In any case, Jarasandha and Kamsa needed one another, not merely to join their bloodlines and give Jarasandha’s grandchildren the

legitimacy he lacked, but as political allies too. If Jarasandha knew who the Slayer was, he would do everything in his power to destroy the child before he grew stronger. About that, even the old man had no two opinions.

Jarasandha rose from his seat. ‘Enough talk,’ he said imperiously. ‘Come now. Let us try some sport.’

‘Sport?’ Kamsa asked, frowning as he rose. He set the goblet down. ‘What sport did you have in mind?’

Jarasandha smiled, his snake eyes flickering mischievously. ‘Something that will require all your newfound ability to survive. Come, let me show you.’

11

Yashoda cried out as the thicket erupted in an explosion of leaves, dust and wind. There was no warning or indication of anything untoward even a moment earlier. It was as if a whirlwind suddenly descended out of a clear sky and struck this very spot. The air churned at a great speed, lifting up countless particles of dust and tiny debris. She was forced to cover her eyes with the back of her hand. The wind whipped around her, tugging her this way then that, threatening to topple her over. Trees roared above, the wind stirring their leaves like a storm. The monkeys and birds screamed and cried out in terror, going berserk. The whole world turned brownish grey, the colour of fading autumn leaves. She struggled to stay on her feet even as she tried to find her way back to the sala tree.

Krishna! I must get to Krishna!

But the instant she moved a step downhill, the wind increased in intensity, whipping her face with savage intensity. She stepped back upwards, moving away from the direction of the tree and her son, and instantly felt the difference. The tree was the center of this unnatural storm. Her heart flooded with terror. She turned and stared uphill. She could still see Nanda silhouetted against the clear blue sky. He was staring down hill in disbelief. As she watched, he roused himself and started sprinting down towards her.

The storm is only here, in this spot, nowhere else.

She knew what that meant.

This was another attempt on her son's life.

Krishna!

She took another step downhill and was buffeted back so hard, it felt like a mule had kicked her in the midriff. She fell back, staggering, and for a second uncovered her eyes as she flailed out to try to keep her balance. The dust blinded her. She cried out in pain and terror and grasped hold of something that felt like a neem tree trunk. She held on to it for safety as the wind increased, screaming and howling like a thousand savage beasts

out for blood. She made another attempt to move towards the spot where she knew Krishna must be but it was quite impossible. She would either be blinded or worse: there were branches and small stones being flung about by the whirlwind. One thumped her in the back, knocking the breath out of her. She knew that if she tried to go closer again, she would be killed.

Even that itself was not enough to stop her. But the real problem was that she knew she couldn't pick up Krishna and run away with him. That was the reason why she had been separated for him for these few moments. The reason why she had been about to ask Nanda to come to her and try to figure out a solution. Somehow, Krishna had increased his weight to the point where he weighed too much for her to carry.

The whirlwind grew more intense, the dust and debris striking her all over now, hurting terribly. She kept her eyes shut and hugged the neem tree, using it to shield her frontal body and vital organs as best as she could. Stones and branches struck her incessantly from behind and one blow from a sharp rock on the back of her head made her vision turn black for a moment, but she clung on fiercely. Though she could see or hear nothing, she knew that this was no mere natural phenomenon. This was some kind of asura taking the form of the wind. A demon whirlwind. She knew it as surely as she knew the reason why Krishna had increased his weight. Not to trouble her and make it impossible for her to carry him - or perhaps just enough to force her to put him down, so that she would not be with him when the wind demon struck, but in fact he had done so in order to make it harder for the demon to pick him up and spirit him away.

Harder.

But not impossible.

As she clung on for dear life to the tree trunk, Yashoda felt the whirlwind ratchet up to a new level of intensity, turning the world around her blackish grey, and felt even the tree she was holding on to start to uproot. It shuddered violently, and in that instant, she thought this was the end, she was about to die and there was nothing she could do to save herself or her little baby.

Although, perhaps, he might be able to save her.

'Krishna!' she cried out, just as the neem tree tore free of its roots in a terrible rending agony, and she felt herself lifted off the ground and flung

up into the air.

12

The roar of thousands filled the air. The stench of sweat was overwhelming, even though the place was open to the night air. Torches burned at regular intervals, and Kamsa could see their flames flicker as the crowd stomped their feet and rose and sat in enthusiasm as they cheered on the fighters. The stadium was a quadrangle and in the center was a grassy ground cleared of all stones, rocks and impediments. This rectangular field was divided into two halves and clearly marked with chalk dust lines. Within the two halves of this rectangle stood perhaps forty men. Kamsa squinted. Yes, exactly forty men, twenty on each side of the middle line. The two teams faced each other, spread out across their respective halves in defensive formations. All the men were stripped bare, wearing only a dusty langot, the little strip of cloth used to cover one's privates, tied around the waist by a string. Their bodies were well oiled. Kamsa noted boys standing on the sidelines, ready to rush in and apply more oil to the players' bodies as needed, others redrawing the chalk lines where they were rubbed out during play.

'The goal is simple: To get to the enemy's innermost line.' Jarasandha pointed to the two lines behind the teams, the short sides of the rectangle. 'The enemy team's players can stop you using any means, but if any of them are touching you when you touch their home line, they are eliminated from the game. For every enemy player you eliminate from the game, you are entitled to bring back one of your own players who was eliminated earlier - or, if he is too badly hurt to continue, you can bring a replacement. Players attempt to cross to enemy lines one at a time at first, but each successful contact with the home line entitles a player to return with a comrade to try their luck again, and so on.'

Kamsa nodded. 'And the game ends when all the enemy players are eliminated or all your players have touched the enemy's home line.'

Jarasandha's thin lips curled in a half-smile. 'I see you're familiar with the game.'

'It's a variation on an old war game played for millennia. It's based on the ancient game of chaupat. The war game of strategy.'

Jarasandha's smile widened. 'So it is. How interesting. I'm delighted to see that your education has expanded since we last met. Very pleased indeed. Of course, there's one essential difference between this version of the game and chaupat.'

Kamsa waited for Jarasandha to deliver the punch line he knew was coming.

'Chaupat is played with bone dice and pieces on a board of squares. It's a game for idle kings and merchants who have money to wager and time to spare but don't wish to exert themselves. Kho Kabbadi is played with real opponents and involves real bodily harm.'

Jarasandha directed Kamsa to a section of the stadium not immediately visible. Kamsa looked over a railing at a small area just outside the playing quadrant, beneath the rows of wooden seats on which the crowd sat. There were several dozen bodies piled there, limbs and heads and torsos grotesquely twisted and bent at impossible angles. Many of them still had their eyes open, faces twisted in a rictus of agony and Kamsa saw one particularly large and well-built specimen staring up at him blankly, his eyes reflecting the flickering light of the torch near Kamsa's head.

Jarasandha patted Kamsa's shoulder patronizingly. 'I encourage bouts between my soldiers and men from the opposing army every night. It helps build morale. How would you like to try your luck?'

Kamsa heard himself say, 'I wouldn't mind having a go.'

He turned back to Jarasandha and smiled at his father-in-law. Jarasandha chuckled and patted him on his back again. 'That's the spirit, my boy!'

Kamsa knew that Jarasandha thought he knew what was about to happen - but he also knew that Jarasandha was unaware that Kamsa knew what Jarasandha had planned, or the fact that Kamsa had come prepared for this very event. Thanks to the old syce in Mathura.

13

Krishna was asleep. Ever since the attack by the Matrika Putana, he had been sleeping more than usual. The reason was the milk he had consumed. As Putana had grown larger in size, enlarging herself to gargantuan proportions, so also the milk flowing from her glands had increased in quantum. Krishna had consumed a great quantity of that poison substance. Several score times his body weight, in fact. Powerful as he was, he was subject to certain basic limitations of the form he used in this world. The form of a mortal human infant did not allow for much leeway: the poison was far, far more than he could absorb or digest in this body. His only recourse was to call upon his cosmic powers and divert the poison to the ethereal sphere. To the infinite form of Vishnu himself, seated on the great serpent Ananta, floating on the ocean of milk. In that timeless state of nidra super-consciousness, the Matrika's poison milk was nothing to him. He could turn it into anything he desired. But Vishnu was preoccupied with a great many matters and although Krishna was his own amsa, literally a part of himself in human form, not merely an avatar, he could only allot so much of his attention span and energy to this task. It also transpired that Vishnu was currently engaged in a great conflict between the devas and asuras, a new skirmish in the infinite war between the two celestial factions. Therefore he was only able to give his Krishna self a portion of his energy and time. Krishna himself was forced to do all the work, pushing the poison to his original father-self, and was limited by the weakness of his human infant form in this work. Vishnu could have sucked the poison up to the ocean of milk in an instant, cleansing Krishna in the wink of an eye, and he would do so the instant he was free, but days and now weeks had passed on earth and Vishnu's involvement in the asura-deva struggle and other matters had only increased since then. So Krishna the infant concentrated all his energies in pushing the poison up to Vaikuntha-loka. This drained him considerably. It was the reason why he had not been able to speak mentally to Maatr Yashoda and reassure her since the incident. It was also the reason why he slept so much more than before. Most perplexing of all was the inexplicable urge he had developed to consume dahi, a substance he knew of but which was hardly appropriate for an infant of his tender age. He could hardly wait until he was old

enough to ask Yashoda to feed him dahi in all possible forms: lassi, most of all! Even freshly churned butter would do, as would whipped curd. Yum! The thought of it made him open his mouth and long for it.

But now there was something else amiss. He was still asleep, exhausted from a long session of pushing the poison heavenwards, but he had sensed something ominous unfolding around him. It was the reason why he had allowed his weight to increase, in order to compel Yashoda-maiya to put him down. He knew the demon was coming: he could smell him approaching long before he reached. The demon had been watching and biding his time for weeks now, ever since Putana's death, and at last he saw his opportunity. Yashoda was relatively unescorted, with only the bodyguards several yards away, and an open field of attack.

Even when Yashoda had put Krishna down, and his head had lolled back against the tree trunk and the trunk had cracked, Krishna had been aware of what was going on. While the human part of him was fast asleep, the divine part still knew that Yashoda was in grave danger. So he sent an impulse into Nanda-baba's mind, causing him to come to the top of the hill and call out to Yashoda. This in turn made Yashoda leave Krishna alone for a moment, long enough for the demon to see his opportunity and make his move. Krishna was concerned that the demon would attack while Yashoda was still with him, in which case, she might be harmed. This way, she was several yards away at least. He would have preferred that she be miles away but this was the next best thing. As the whirlwind exploded around him and the wind and debris enveloped him in a blinding miasma of madness, he senses Yashoda clinging to the neem tree nearby. She was being buffeted and battered but she would survive unharmed. Now he could focus on managing the demon.

The creature in question was a being named Trnavarta. Krishna was not familiar with him personally but he had sensed this particular being's presence - his supernatural stench, actually - for some time now. He had been one of the group that had arrived in Vraj with Putana, one of the team of assassins sent by his uncle. But in fact Trnavarta was not Kamsa's man at all. His loyalty was pledged to Jarasandha, who was a demon himself, and a very powerful one at that. Krishna knew Jarasandha well - or rather, Vishnu knew him, which was the same thing.

Jarasandha was a bad man. A bad, bad man.

Someday, Krishna would have to confront him too. He knew this for certain just as he knew that Jarasandha was using and manipulating Kamsa to further his own ends. But right now, Krishna was facing Trnavarta and had to deal with him.

He opened his inner eye and looked at Trnavarta.

Not his human infant eyes - they would be blinded by the dust and grit, perhaps injured severely - he opened his celestial eye, the ability to view things as they truly were, looking beyond the obvious superficial appearance and physicality.

He saw himself at the apex of a vortex. Dust, debris, grit, even little stones and twigs and branches, all swirling round in a frenzy. The sala tree was being systematically stripped of its leaves, branches, even its bark was peeling off and being swallowed by the vortex. The funnel of the whirlwind was focussed upon his little human form at the base of the tree, as Trnavarta tried to lift him up in the air. Thus far, he was not having much luck and this was frustrating him. He whipped himself faster, churning the air in a circular motion, reducing the radius of his vortex to increase the intensity. This made the funnel narrower, which was good because the intensity was reduced even further outside of the center.

Krishna sensed Yashoda-maiya breaking away from the neem tree and stumbling away from it instinctively, her eyes still shut. Nanda came running downhill just then, and he took hold of Yashoda and led her a few yards farther away from the center of the chaos. The bodyguards were nearby too, one holding his head where something had cracked it open, blood pouring down his face and eyes, but there was nothing he could do. This was not some woman they could pull away from Krishna or even an assassin with a knife or a sword. Krishna observed Yashoda and Nanda speaking agitatedly to one another, trying to peer through the murky storm by the sala tree, then debating with the body guards. Other people had come to the top of the hill, alerted by Nanda's shouts, and word began to spread as people realized what was going on. The music ceased over the hill and people stopped their ras-lila dancing to deal with this new crisis. Krishna hoped they would keep their distance. In his present weakened state, he was not sure how much he could do to protect them.

Now that he had checked on Yashoda and Nanda and knew that they were safe, he turned his attention to Trnavarta himself. Where was the asura? With all the dust and debris flying about, it was difficult to make out the demon himself. At first all Krishna could see was a funnel of grit spinning to a height of twenty or thirty yards above the ground. It enveloped the entire sala tree, making it seem as if the tree itself were spinning around. Krishna sent his consciousness up the length of the tree to the top.

There.

At the very top, almost perched atop the tree itself was the demon, a distinctly masculine figure standing upright. Though he took the form of human flesh on earth, his body was made of molecules of pure asura maya, and he possessed the power to spin these molecules around the way a dancer in swirling robes could spin until the robes swirled around as well, rising in the air. Right now, he was almost entirely in his demon form, his upper body only barely discernible, his face contorted with murderous rage and effort. His mouth was open and a howling sound exuded from it, a keening sound like the wind. His torso looked like a great wad of cloth tightly wound into a knot, the bottom of the knot splaying out into myriad threads that merged with the grey funnel of the vortex. At a glance, it looked a little like a man in a grey frock suit twirling while playing ras-lila. The thought made Krishna giggle a little.

Trnavarta heard or sensed the laughter and his eyes widened. Motes of matter broke free from his eyes and face and went spinning down to join the vortex. His face lost integrity as his anger rose. He opened his mouth and howled in response.

Foolish child! You dare titter at me?

Sorry, mister asura. I can't help it if you look so funny! You look like a ras-garba dancer in a flowing skirt, turning round and round. Don't you feel dizzy, spinning so fast?

Trnavarta roared and lashed out with one arm. A branch of his spinning vortex reached out and swiped at the place where Krishna's inner eye hung suspended in mid air above the tree, looking down. Krishna felt a sensation like a blast of wind and grit coming at him but of course, his inner eye was insubstantial and could not be touched or harmed. Trnavarta

realized this at once and roared again, in frustration this time. His upper body shook in anger, making him look like a dancer who had suddenly missed a step and was angry with himself for his own clumsiness.

This made Krishna laugh even more, because it did look quite funny.

Silence, you brat! I will silence you forever for your impudence.

Krishna stopped laughing and smiled. You may certainly try. But before you do, why not go someplace where we have more space to settle this? Someplace higher perhaps? The whole sky is empty and available for us.

Krishna saw Trnavarta look down at the base of the tree below him and at the physical body of little Krishna seated there, still apparently asleep. Then he looked up at the sky. He nodded slowly, a wily look coming over his wind-ravaged face.

Perhaps we shall. I know you have deliberately made your body heavier in the hope that I would be unable to lift you high and drop you down from a height. Until now, I have been unable to lift your body itself, no doubt due to your unique nature. But if I cannot touch your body and lift it up, I can raise up the ground on which it rests. The ground is not possessed of any divine power so it cannot resist me!

And with a great burst of laughter, Trnavarta reached down with his insubstantial grey body and began to rip up a section of the ground around the sala tree. In moments, he had torn free a patch several dozen yards around, roughly circular, with the sala tree in the center. He exerted a visible effort, a little strain showing on his face, then yanked hard, ripping the little island free of its earthly tethering. Roots and rocks fell free as the patch of ground rose up into the air. Krishna felt his physical body jerk as it was lifted up in the air. With astonishing speed, Trnavarata carried him up in the air, up to the sky as he himself had suggested. He was surprised. He had only suggested the idea because he had been certain Trnavarata could not lift him. The asura's demoniac nature made it impossible for him to man-handle Krishna's divinely infused human form. But by uprooting the whole patch of earth, Trnavarta had outwitted him.

Kamsa finished oiling his body and dismissed the helper. The boy ran back to the sidelines to join his companions, whispering amongst themselves as they pointed out the players on the field. Kamsa saw some coins exchanging hands and grinned to himself. He wondered whom they were betting on. He felt certain it would be Jarasandha's team of champions. Kamsa had been given a choice of playing with Jarasandha's team or the opposing army's team. He had deliberately chosen to play with the opposing team, knowing that would irk his father-in-law and provoke him into trying harder. Jarasandha still believed he was surprising his son-in-law into mistakenly thinking he would be able to use his powers to easily demolish his opponents on this field, not knowing that each of the players was possessed of their own powers as well. But Kamsa knew this already. He knew this because the old stable syce had told him so the night before. Not merely told him to warn him, but had prepared him for it as well.

Yadu, that is his name. I should think of him by that name.

After all, he mused, the man was no mere horse carer. He was none other than Yadu himself. The founding father of the Yadava nation and forebear of Kamsa's entire line.

'Do you know who I am?' the old man had demanded when he moved against Kamsa last night, his fingers grasping Kamsa's throat in a grip so tight, Kamsa could feel his breath choked off. Which was impossible because once he increased his body's density, it was no less than a thing made of solid iron or lead. Yet the old man was strong enough to crush even a throat made of iron. How was that possible?

'I am Yadu,' said the old syce, his breath wafting hot against Kamsa's face, redolent of the last meal he had eaten. 'I am the forebear of your race, boy. I have lived long enough to see this nation grow from a single family of exiles into the proud Yadava nation it is today. And yes, as you are probably wondering, I am stronger than you. For the ability you have developed, though it was unwittingly awakened by Jarasandha's potions yet its essence is in your very blood itself. My blood!'

Then the old man had released Kamsa with a shove. Kamsa had stumbled back against the stable wall, striking it with force enough to make the entire structure shudder and groan. The horses whinnied in alarm, smelling the aggression in the air, reacting to it. The more aggressive ones stamped their feet and kicked the rear of their stalls impatiently. Yadu turned his back on Kamsa, walking a few steps away.

‘I have watched from the sidelines these past centuries as your ancestors, my descendants, built a kingdom and a nation that I was very proud of. Even Ugrasena, your father, was a good king, though in his youth he did tend to warmonger more than he needed to he more than made up for it by realizing the futility of violence and addressing his past excesses by seeking peace with his allies, our fellow Suras. After all, whether you live on this bank of the Yamuna or the other side, you are all Yadavas, children of Yadu. And I was glad to see peace finale settle across this war-harried land. But then you came along and revealed your inner demon. And everything fell apart! ’

Kamsa regained his voice and glared at the old syce. ‘You mean to tell me that you have lived here as a stable hand for these hundreds of years and nobody knew it? You, the forebear of the Yadava race himself?’

Yadu shrugged. ‘They thought me dead a long time ago. They even mistook a body for mine on the battlefield, and assumed it was too mutilated to recognize. It happens. Sons are impatient to inherit, people are always happy to have change...’ He shook his head, sighing, ‘The very origin of our line began that way, with my father disowning me.’ He looked up and saw Kamsa staring up at him blankly. ‘It is not an incident much written about in Yadava histories, because it was not our proudest moment, to know that our line began because I was exiled from my own father’s house for my inability to do as he asked.’

Kamsa came forward warily, rubbing his throat. ‘What did he ask? Who was your father?’

Yadu shrugged. ‘His name was Yayati and he wanted to exchange his old age for my youth...’

‘Exchange...?’ Kamsa couldn’t understand what the man meant. He was still having a hard time processing the idea that this old stable sweeper was his ancestor, the progenitor of his entire lineage.

Yadu made a dismissive gesture. ‘It’s a long story. I shall tell you some other time. Right now, there is a reason why I am revealing my true identity to you.’

Kamsa waited to hear the reason.

Yadu told him. It was a very good reason. Listening to it made Kamsa forget all about the pain in his throat. It almost made him stop wanting to lunge at Yadu and tear the old man apart limb from limb for having done that to him.

Now, Kamsa stepped out on the field and began slapping his muscles to warm them up. He slapped his chest hard several times, then his massaged his shoulders, swung his torso around to loosen his back muscles, bent and slapped his inner thighs, outer thighs...He felt a shadow approach, looming over him. In the background, the sound of the crowd was a tangible thing, all pervasive, filling the air like rain on water.

‘Yadava!’ said a great booming voice. For a moment Kamsa thought he must be hearing an echo caused by the enclosed stadium. Then he looked up into a jaw the size of his own thigh and realized that it was not an echo, merely the natural sound produced by a person of that great size. The man’s chest was probably twice as wide as Kamsa’s, and Kamsa was not a small man by any standards. He was also a good two head taller and his arms hung by his sides like entire hams of meat. His jaw was square and jutted out at an angle, forcing his lower teeth up over his upper teeth. When he spoke, the sound was like someone speaking inside a wooden barrel filled with metal ingots.

‘Our master tells me you consider yourself invulnerable,’ said the grating barrel voice.

Kamsa did not answer. The man’s tone made it clear he was more interested in issuing insults than actually conversing. This was a common precursor to games as each team boosted their own spirits by insulting the other team and calling them names. He had expected no less.

The man seemed to realize that an answer was not forthcoming from Kamsa.

‘Well, since you consider yourself invulnerable,’ he said, ‘I wanted to show you this.’

The man drew a sword. It was a fine broadsword, fit for any high lord or even a king in battle, the metal beautifully worked and beaten to a fine perfection. Judging by the size and length and the making, it could probably hack through armor if wielded hard enough; it might take a swing or three but no armor could withstand more than a few direct hits with that weapon. It was what Yadava's Marauders used to call a Godslayer.

The man with the crooked jaw raised the sword in his hand then hacked down at his own forearm, the inner softer side. The Godslayer struck his forearm with force enough to part metal armor. With that much force behind it, it should have parted any man's forearm from his body easily.

Instead, the sword simply struck the forearm with a dull thunk.

The man raised his eyes to see if Kamsa had noted this result. Then he raised the sword again and hacked at his own foot, aiming directly for the knee, the weakest part of any man's leg. The sword struck it again with a dull thumping impact. There was no effect on the man's knee. Even the skin wasn't broken.

The demonstration went on a few moments longer. By the time Crooked Jaw was done, the sword was chipped and cracked in a dozen places, but there was not so much as a blemish upon his person.

Finally, he handed the sword to another of his companions, a broad shorter man with enormous bulging shoulders who grinned to display missing teeth. 'That is Maitrey,' said Crooked Jaw in his booming nasal voice, 'he eats only nails and glass. I am Vindhya.'

Kamsa did not say a word.

Crooked Jaw looked down at him and smiled grimly. 'You thought you were the only one, did you not? Well, you were wrong. We are all the same, and we have far more experience and knowledge of our ability than you, sweet-faced prince. You should go back to your sweet-smelling kingdom and resume prancing with your ponies and princesses. This is no place for you.'

Kamsa cleared his throat. 'King.'

Crooked Jaw frowned.

'I am King of Mathura, Lord of the Yadavas.'

Crooked Jaw grinned. ‘I hear your Yadavas have fled to other kingdoms rather than be ruled by you. Is that why you come here? To grovel at our master’s feet in the hope that he will aid you again and give you more of his potions to drink so that you may gain more abilities?’ He leaned closer and chuckled. ‘Or perhaps you needed something to aid you in bed with his daughters? Word is that you have not been able to seed either of them with child for years. Perhaps you require some help? I would be happy to help anytime. As would all my team mates. Just say the word.’

Kamsa reached out a hand, indicating the sword.

Crooked Jaw raised an eyebrow but handed the sword over without comment.

Kamsa took the sword, turned it inwards, the point of the blade aimed at his own lower abdomen, gripping the hilt in both hands, and said, ‘When I am done here on this field today, you and all your team mates will wish you were my wives and could feel the pleasure of mating with me.’

Crooked Jaw’s eyes narrowed and his fists clenched.

Kamsa went on. ‘And if you survive, I would be happy seed you with child if you wish as well. I have more than enough to seed all your nation’s women as well as men.’

And he plunged the sword’s point into the weakest point of any man’s abdomen, hard enough to pierce wood.

The sword cracked and broke into three separate pieces.

Kamsa handed the hilt back to Crooked Jaw who stared at the broken blade. ‘You can keep this one. I prefer my own.’

He smiled to himself as Crooked Jaw flung the pieces of the broken sword across the field, yelling at his startled team mates as he strode back to his side. He knew his own words had been somewhat bombastic to say the least, but it was the only way to get the point across - and then break it off.

Krishna looked down with his inner eye and saw the ground receding far below. He could make out the hill and all the revellers in their gaily colored ras-lila outfits staring up and pointing as they saw what was happening. He could see Yashoda-maiya and Nanda run forward, arms outstretched, crying out, agitated, and could feel their anguish and pain as they saw their child being spirited away by the wind demon. He saw the bodyguards roaring with ineffectual anger and waving their muscular arms and lathis about impotently. He felt sorry for them all, for such events were so far beyond their power to control, they might as well be ants trampled underfoot by an elephant - while the elephant itself went on his way, not even aware of the existence of the ants. The universe was a cruel place. Which was why it was so important for some to dedicate their lives to being kind. Somehow, a balance must be made.

He looked down at the sala tree, still imbedded in the island of earth that Trnavarta had uprooted from the hillside. His physical self still sat at the foot of the tree, still soundly asleep. The little babe's mouth was puckered, his curls falling across his forehead, his chubby limbs sprawled, head tilted, as he slept on blissfully unaware of the goings-on around him. Krishna had chosen to let his physical self sleep through this crisis. The human part of him needed the rest and in any case, there was nothing he could do. He was too young to run or jump or fight or wield a weapon. Whatever course of action he chose, it would have to use the power of mind far more than the power of body. Someday, his human form would be strong and powerful enough in its own right, and then he could meld more of his divinity with it to use in such circumstances. But right now, he was a babe in arms. And even a feisty babe in arms is still a babe.

Trnavarta was gloating at his triumph.

How do you fancy this, God Child? Do you like the view from here? Would you like to return to earth? To your maatr and pitr?

The asura tilted the patch of ground, and even though his cosmic form was unaffected by the action, Krishna felt his human form shift with the tilt. The very weight he had added to his body to anchor it to the ground would cause it to topple over and roll off the island in a trice now. He saw his

head roll from one side to another, striking the trunk as it moved and cracking the sala tree again.

A sharper tilt and I wager your little infant self will roll right off this flying clod! Trnavarta laughed, gray grit particles exploding from his mouth and swirling around him like a swarm of flies. *Perhaps now you realize that increasing your weight ten fold was not enough to stop me from ending your short existence on this plane!*

The demon was right. Whether Krishna increased or decreased his weight now would make no difference. All the asura had to do was tilt the flying island, or turn it over, and the babe lying beneath the sala tree would fall off and plummet to the ground. He glanced down: the ground in question was already several hundred yards distant and moving farther away. A fall from this height would certainly kill his physical form. And while a man might have been able to hold on to something to keep from falling off, a babe could not do so for long. Even if he could, that was not a real solution. Trnavarta had him at a disadvantage and he knew it. As before, the only way out of this was through the use of mental muscle not physical ones.

Have you ever looked into a god's mind, demon?

Trnavarta turned his incoherent head to stare at him. His face was still made up of countless particles, unable to reform itself into a cohesive whole so long as his exerted his wind powers, but there was enough face still left to form and exhibit expressions. He looked suspicious.

Do not try to trick me, Haridev. I know you devas. When you cannot win a battle by fair means, you will do whatever it takes to achieve your end.

You cannot kill me.

Trnavarta shook his head, grinning.

See for yourself, Slayer of Kamsa. One sudden tilt and you will be dead ten times over! Not even the Sanjivani mantra will be able to revive you because your limbs and parts will be flung so far apart, nobody will be able to find all the pieces.

If you do not believe me, look inside my mouth.

Trnavarta spread his hands. The tips of his fingers were flowing molecules of grit streaming downwards in an endless stream. Krishna wondered how the wind demon's disintegrating body kept flowing away but never depleted fully: then he glanced up and understood. The wind brought back each molecule to its proper place. Hence the cyclical form of the attack: a whirlwind or tornado spun around, which meant that each mote or particle eventually returned to its original place. Trnavarta was constantly unmaking and remaking himself, particle by particle. Like one hand pouring a fistful of sand into the other hand's palm, then back to the first hand again, and so on, endlessly, but without spilling a grain of sand.

Why should I bother? I have you now. You cannot escape me. You know this. I know this. Why should I listen to your godly blather? My mission is to kill you and I am about to succeed.

You are not. You will fail. That is the reason why I ask you to do this. Your arrogance is your undoing. You are making an assumption founded on a lie. You believe that if you destroy my physical body, you will kill me.

Trnavarta nodded. *Yes, because it is in that physical form that you have taken birth as the Slayer.*

But you are wrong. Do you think I would entrust such a great mission to a mere infant? That I would pour all my infinite power into the body of a babe? What would be the point? He cannot wield a sword, loose an arrow, fling a spear... What kind of Slayer is he?

Trnavarta frowned. *Yet you killed Putana.*

That was different. She came to me as a wet nurse and tried to use that to kill me. But the poison only made me stronger.

Trnavarta's eyes widened to twice their size, particles filling in that portion of his wind-swept face to make them almost look like human eyes staring out from the whirlwind. *Is that true? I have heard rumors about Putana's poison. Bahuka says that Kamsa's strength was derived from it.*

Bahuka is right. I cannot be destroyed. I killed Putana and I will kill you as well, unless you release me soon and go on your way and promise never to make an attempt on my life again.

Trnavarta thought for a moment. But even while thinking, he did not slow his upwards motion. Krishna felt the island continue to rise up at the same alarming speed. He glanced down. They were at least a kilometre off the ground and still shooting up fast.

Trnavarta sensed him looking down and a crafty look came into his eyes.

What's the matter, Haridev? Do you fear being so high above the ground? Are you anxious about your mortal body falling to its death?

Krishna smiled.

I told you. I do not care about that mortal form. It is merely a vessel. I can find another.

Trnavarta grinned, his teeth smearing away to particles that turned grey and joined the slipstream flowing downwards.

Even so, great one, I think it might be best if I took us higher.

Krishna felt a surge of power as the island was lifted by a great burst of energy. He saw Trnavarta's form dissolve further as the demon exerted more of his power to propel them skywards. Glancing down, he saw they were already at least two kilometers above ground and rising at a much faster rate. The yards sped by at a blurring pace. Three kilometers, then four, then five...

Too fast for you, little God Child?

Not at all. But since you do not seem interested in your own survival, I might as well kill you and be done with it.

Krishna lolled his head against the sala tree, deliberately striking it hard. The tree cracked resoundingly, the trunk splitting free of the base. So great was their upward momentum and the resultant force of gravity now that the broken tree tumbled over and over and vanished into the slipstream of the demon's whirlwind. The force of its passage caused the entire island to shudder and wobble dangerously.

Trnavarta looked puzzled and irritated.

What are you doing?

I told you. I do not care about that body's survival. I mean to kill you now.

I do not understand, the demon said. *How can you kill me?*

By tricking you into carrying us upwards.

Trnavarta stared at him.

What does that mean? I was the one who lifted you up into the air! So that I could drop your body down from a height and kill you.

So you thought. But I was the one who tricked you into doing it. That was why I made my body too heavy for you to pick up. Forcing you to raise up a whole patch of earth around me. Causing you to carry us up at a great speed. Then I tricked you into going even faster, until...

Until? asked the demon, his wind-swept voice both mournful and doubtful.

Until your momentum was so great, you would be unable to stop yourself even if you wished to stop.

Krishna glanced around.

As is the case now.

He gestured.

Trnavarta looked around.

They were yojanas up in the sky now. Except it was no longer the sky. It was the outskirts of the planet's atmosphere, far beyond the limits of the clouds and the upper reaches of the air, and at the rate they were shooting up, they would leave the earth's orbit soon enough and continue into the vast blackness of open space.

Trnavarta gasped.

And struggled for breath.

Krishna smiled.

You see? You forgot that even a wind demon needs wind in order to survive. And wind is only possible where there is air. This high, there is barely air to breathe, let alone blow around, and soon we will leave the motherly grasp of Prithvi-loka and fly out into the directionless emptiness of space.

Trnavarta exerted himself. Krishna watched as the demon's dissipated particles began to collect together, cohering into a recognizable whole again. In a moment, he was almost wholly solid, only his lower body and feet still a mass of swirling particles.

I cannot stop us! It is as if I have no more control over our movement!

Krishna smiled again. That is because wind has no power here. The force of our momentum will continue to carry us forward indefinitely now. We cannot stop. We could travel for crores or arbo years and we still would not come to a halt. Because to stop requires wind resistance or ground friction and in open space we shall encounter neither of those. Of course, we may strike another planet or heavenly body and that would halt our progress. But I wouldn't worry about that. You will be dead long before that - already you are gasping for breath, choking on the absence of air. All living creatures need air to breathe. As a wind demon it is the very blood in your veins. You need more of it to exist.

Trnavarta began to gasp and choke. He reached out to Krishna beseechingly.

Save me!

Save you? Krishna chuckled. You came to kill me. Why should I save you?

I shall serve you forever, lord! Forgive my transgression. I know your true power now. Spare my life.

Krishna pretended to think a moment. There is only one way you may survive.

Anything!

Look into my mouth.

Trnavarta stared at him. Then realized he was serious. The demon nodded vigorously and started forward. As his body had solidified, he had drifted downwards to land on the ground. Now, his body fully reformed, he strode forward to the spot where little Krishna sat at the foot of the broken tree. He bent down, hesitated, then leaned forward uncertainly.

Krishna opened his mouth wide.

Showing him the same thing that Yashoda had seen only a short while earlier, before she had set him down under the same tree.

Trnavarta stared, fascinated.

My lord! I see...

What do you see?

Trnavarta hesitated.

I see everything. The world, the planets, the movements of the celestial orbs...it is magnificent. You are magnificent, lord. You are everything and everything is contained within you.

Krishna pointed upwards. Their movement had slowed now and they were drifting like a raft upon a motionless lake in the cold darkness of space. Krishna could not breathe here and neither could Trnavarta. They would die of air deprivation in moments. But the demon was too overwhelmed by what he had glimpsed to care anymore. His eyes reflected his sudden adoration.

Now look up. Tell me what you see.

Trnavarta looked up, out into the vastness of space.

I see...the same thing I saw within you, Lord! The world, the planets, the movements of the celestial orbs...it is exactly the same!

And what else do you see? Beyond that?

Trnavarta craned his neck, his breath hitching now, his chest straining for air.

I see...you, my Lord! Your teeth, your lips, your throat, your tongue...all that heavenly beauty is contained within your mouth. You bear the universe within yourself. There is proof! I can see it with...with...my own eyes...

Trnavarta fell to the ground, clutching his chest, gasping. He reached out and caught hold of Krishna's left foot, then pulled himself closer until his forehead touched the sole of that baby foot.

Lord...

Krishna reached out and touched Trnavarta's forehead. The asura gasped one final breath, then released a long plaintive sigh. Motes of his being drifted out of his mouth, floating away into space. This time, they would not return to rejoin the rest of his body. The wind had been taken out of the wind demon for the last time.

Krishna looked around. The island of uprooted earth had travelled far beyond the earth's affectionate pull. It was now floating out into the ether. Soon, it would be out among the other planets and then it would travel to the distant stars.

Even his physical body required air. And air was in short supply here. He must return to earth, to the comforting pull of Prithvi Maa and her warm envelope of life-giving air.

He puffed his chubby cheeks and blew slowly. He had to be very careful, for the air in his lungs was the only air left. Once it was gone, he would have no other recourse.

He blew harder, feeling the forward momentum of the island slow, then stop. Harder now. And the island was starting to move slowly in the opposite direction. Back towards Mother Earth.

Faster now. Blowing harder. Travelling faster. Blowing fast and furious. Moving at great speed.

And then, that was it. The breath in his lungs was gone. His chest heaved, seeking air desperately.

He glanced back. He could see himself hurtling back towards the planet of his birth, picking up speed.

He gasped as the first vestiges of air began to enter his lungs again. There was barely enough to breathe but it was enough, just enough. He sucked it

in greedily.

Then the edges of the island began to shimmer, then blaze as the speed and intensity of their re-entry caused great friction. The leaves of the trees on the island caught fire, then the grass blazed up around him, then every last bush and creeper and vine and tree trunk caught fire. Time to leave this place!

He stood, taking an instant to balance his clumsy pudgy body, then bent and leaped upwards. Upwards and away.

He flew through the air, propelled not by any force or power but by the pull of Prithvi Maa alone. Wind, blessed wind, blew across his face. He plummeted down towards earth, as the island fell on its own, turning over and over itself now, starting to break apart into pieces and clods and burning wisps. The body of the dead asura fell with it.

Krishna descended upon the earth.

16

The crowd favored their own men, naturally. The roar of approval that met Crooked Jaw and his team as they took their positions was deafening. Kamsa glanced around the stadium. There must be a thousand score soldiers assembled here tonight, most of them drunk and battle fogged from the day's fighting. He had seen similar events often before but never on this scale. All armies needed some way to release the day's frustrations and pain. But what Jarasandha had done here was unprecedented. He had sponsored the biggest mass entertainment venue ever heard of, and by centering it around a game involving war stratagem with their own champions, he had made it personal and involving for the men. This must be the highlight of the day for the men gathered here, those that survived the day's fighting anyway. He saw any number of men exchanging notes and coins in substantive quantities and understood that betting was not only permitted, it was being encouraged. Of course! Jarasandha would be managing the betting and profiting from it as well. He was the 'house', so to speak. And as Kamsa knew well, whether you won or lost, the house always won. Leave it to Jarasandha to find a way to not only boost morale and relieve tension but also profit from it! The consummate multi-caster, merchant and warrior and king and priest, all rolled into one.

Kamsa took stock of his own team mates. They were tough looking men, of a tribe he had never encountered before nor heard of. From the looks of it, they appeared to be the reserved reticent type, not saying much, not displaying much emotion, but strong and confident. They exchanged looks, gestures and little touches amongst one another that suggested they had a strong bond. Clearly, they had played before as a team. Jarasandha might take pleasure in humiliating him as well as in winning, but he was not fool enough to give Kamsa a useless team. The only point of this sport was for both teams to be evenly matched. Otherwise, it would be a very quick and boring game.

He turned to his team mates, drawing their attention. They regarded him dispassionately, neither displaying subservience nor arrogance. They had understood their condition but not accepted it, he saw. They had something to fight for and were willing to do what they had to, even risk their lives,

but not kowtow to the enemy or bow and scrape. That pleased him. He respected enemies who chose to lose their necks in battle than bend them at someone's feet. He could work with this team, he only needed to be certain that they would accept him and work with him as well.

'I am here to win,' he told them. He used elaborate hand gestures to emphasize his words. 'If we work together, we will surely succeed.'

Then he clenched his fist and pointed it at the sky: 'To victory!'

After a brief pause in which they glanced at one another, they raised their clenched fists as well. 'To Victory!' they said in their dialect. He was relieved to note that he knew the dialect. It would communication easier.

Kamsa heard a commotion in the stadium and looked around. He saw two familiar female shapes entering the royal pavilion above the playing field. His wives, Jarasandha's daughters. They were dressed in rich robes and bejewelled as queens, and looked as coquettish and alluring as ever. They waved excitedly to Kamsa, calling out his name. He nodded, embarrassed, and saw Jarasandha smile down at him. So. His wonderfully considerate father-in-law had decided to add another level of pressure: the prospect of abject humiliation and embarrassment should he lose here today. It was one thing to lose before twenty thousand soldiers; it was unacceptable to lose before one's own wives. At least, for Kamsa.

Which was why he would not lose.

He took his position at the fore center of his team's playing area, awaiting the signal to begin the game. Bending over, patting his oiled thighs, he recalled the words of Yadu the night before:

'Until now, whatever you did was your own madness. I desire no part in that. But the road your set on now will lead Mathura to fall into the hands of the Magadhan empire and that I will not tolerate. You may not realize this but Jarasandha desires nothing more than to make the Yadava nation a part of his greater domain.'

'I realize it,' Kamsa had replied. 'And I will not let it happen.'

Yadu scoffed. 'It will happen no matter who you do here. The only way to prevent it is to convince Jarasandha that he is better off letting you run Mathura for him than for him to take over its running. He has enough on his field already to manage. There comes a point when an emperor has to

delegate and trust his kings to rule their individual kingdoms. Right now, Jarasandha is not fully convinced that you are capable of doing so. Your record has been...spotty...to say the least. But you can prove that you have changed. You can give him confidence in your abilities to manage on your own and keep him at bay.'

'How?' Kamsa asked, genuinely interested. It was a question he asked himself every day. He had known that the last time he had spoken with Jarasandha, he had only bought himself time. Jarasandha had to return to address other issues of secession and rebellion. But sooner or later, he would turn his attention back to Mathura. And he was not satisfied with how Kamsa was running things, he would wrest it away in a trice, installing his own satrapy and relegating Kamsa once more to a mere puppet figurehead. Kamsa remembered what it had felt like to be such a figurehead, with Bahuka calling the shots, and would never accept such an arrangement again. Yet his only rejoinder was to use violence, to fight Jarasandha or his champions and prove his ability through superior strength. And that had a certain disadvantage: in an actual fight, no matter how powerful he might be, Jarasandha was almost certainly stronger, and he had many more champions to spare. There was a limit to how many Kamsa could fight and kill.

'By gaining the respect of your people again,' Yadu said. 'You have done bad things, terrible things that can never be forgotten or forgiven. But you are a warrior and warriors do terrible things. Violence is the wrong path and yet a kshatriya has no choice but to walk that path all the way to the end, so that other varnas can live their lives peaceably. This is your dharma. But the least you can do is balance the scales. Prove to your people that you do what you do for the betterment of Mathura, for the future of the Yadavas. Put the marauding and madness behind you. You have already suppressed your rakshasa side admirably, that is why I decided it was worthwhile speaking with you. Now, you must rebuild the reputation you lost and become the king Mathura needs once more.'

Kamsa had only stared at him. It was as if Yadu had stated his entire life goal in words. There was nothing the old man had said that he did not agree with. He had put his rakshasa side behind him, he had turned his back on the madness and marauding. That was all the old Kamsa. This Kamsa, the Kamsa he was now, desired to be a king in the true sense of the

word. To command dignity, respect, adulation. Even the respect of his own father-in-law. He craved desperately for Jarasandha to acknowledge him as a good king and an equal, not merely a protege and son-in-law. But how could he achieve such things?

‘How?’ he asked.

The old man smiled, his thousand-wrinkled face creasing like a crumpled leather map that had been folded and refolded too many times. ‘By winning.’

Now, Kamsa returned to the present moment, to the stadium in Jarasandha’s war camp, where he stood with 19 other team members, awaiting the signal for the game to begin. Out the corner of his eye, he saw Jarasandha raise his hand, assenting. Below, the game referee blew a long sharp burst on his carved bone horn, indicating the start of the game.

The two team captains stepped forward. Kamsa and Crooked Jaw faced each other across the line that separated their two ‘kingdoms’. Crooked Jaw glared down at him. ‘We will tear you apart limb from limb.’

Kamsa grinned at him. Crooked Jaw had been expecting like threats and bombastic claims from Kamsa, not a congenial smile. He frowned, confused. Kamsa added to his confusion by dropping one eyelid in a mocking wink. Crooked Jaw snarled and shook his fist, almost striking the referee.

The man in question shouted to be heard above the hubbub of the spectators, eager for the game to begin.

‘God Emperor Jarasandha has declared that there will be no restrictions on body blows and strikes. All moves are acceptable. However, there will be no replacements either. If you lose a man, you play with what you have left. The last team standing wins! Jarasandha has also declared that since the Magadhan team won their last match, they have the honor of starting today.’

And with that he stepped back hurriedly, eager to be out of reach of the two opponents, and blew a sharp short burst on his bone horn.

At once, Crooked Jaw leaped across the line, choosing to send himself into the fray as the first invader.

The game was on.

Yashoda had not stopped crying since she saw the wind demon carry her Krishna up in the sky. To her horror, the demon uprooted the entire tree along with a large patch of earth on which the tree grew, and carried the whole up high. As she walked, the swirling whirlwind carried the island of soil and trees up, rising swifter than a chariot, until it was barely a speck in the sky. She ran towards the spot from whence it had risen, collapsing to the ground, and stared up after it until it was lost to sight.

‘Krishna!’ she cried.

Nanda kept his arm around her, attempting to comfort her. But she knew that his heart was in fragments too. He was crying as copiously as she. For what could he do? What could any father or mother save their child from such a calamity? A demon who came in the form of the whirlwind and could uproot entire islands of earth and carry them up into the sky? It was beyond imagining.

‘Where has he taken our child?’ she asked Nanda, clutching his arms in desperation.

His handsome face, tear-streaked and crumpled with pain, offered no answer.

In time, the other gopis and gopas joined them as well. A great crowd gathered at the spot of the abduction, virtually all of Vraj-bhoomi. For ever since the incident with Putana, the whole region had been ablaze with rumors of child attacks and abductions. Now, the worst fears had come true. Krishna had been taken by another rakshasa. More people kept arriving as the word spread. People were agitated, upset, even angry.

‘We must join the rebellion,’ some said.

‘Yes, this is all the Usurper’s doing. He is a rakshasa himself and has recruited other demons to kill our little ones.’

‘He fears the prophecy of the Slayer, even after the purges of the newborns.’

‘Who is to say he will not order another massacre, this time of little children.’

‘Or of all children!’

‘The only way to fight him is to join the rebellion, go into exile and take up arms against Mathura.’

‘Akrur was right. We should ally with the Bhojas and seek the military aid of King Kuntibhoja. Together, we can march on Mathura and dethrone the Usurper.’

Tempers grew hotter and the suggestions grew bolder, more violent.

Nanda listened to this all for a time, then, finally he rose, turning his tear-stained face to the crowd. At once, they broke off their angry chatter and fell silent.

Nanda wiped his face with his sleeve. ‘I understand your anger. I have felt it too. But the day that Yadavas go to war against Yadavas is a day I do not wish to live to see.’

Some of the softer elements, those who realized the shame and horror of a civil war, asked gently, ‘Then what would you have us do, Nanda-Maharaj? Things cannot go on as they have until today.’

He nodded slowly. ‘I know this better than you. It is I who have lost my son today.’

Everyone nodded and agreed with him. He had more right to speak than they did here.

‘Yet the solution to violence is not more violence. The answer to oppression is not rebellion, nor is war an answer to any problem.’

The harder elements, those who advocated rebellion and civil war on a daily basis, were ruffled by this answer. While retaining a show of respect for their dearly loved chieftain, they asked gruffly, ‘Then what is the solution? Shall we stand by and do nothing as our children are slaughtered?’

Nanda looked this last speaker directly in the eye. While a man of peace to the core, Nanda was not a weak man. Like all those who choose the path of non-violence he was, if anything, stronger than most warriors. For any fool can take up a sword and shake it. It takes a truly brave man to refuse to pick up a sword when one is already pointing at your throat. ‘The solution

has already been given to us. Have you forgotten what Gargamuni told us? What all the elders and wise men have told us?’

Everyone nodded. ‘The Slayer!’ they said aloud in unison.

‘Aye,’ Nanda went on. ‘The Slayer. He has been born. And he survived Kamsa’s worst attempts. That itself is proof enough of his power. The day is not far when he will rise up and rid the earth of the blasphemy that is the Usurper. And then we shall all be free. And we shall have achieved that freedom without fighting our brothers in Mathura, or pitting half our nation against the other half in a bloody civil war that may go on long after Kamsa himself is gone.’

There was wisdom in his words and even the most hardline political radicals in the gathering heard this wisdom and acknowledged it. Some still felt that immediate action was needed. After all, they argued, if the Slayer was only recently born, it would surely take a great many years before he grew old and strong enough to face a being as formidable as the Usurper. How were they to survive until then?

‘By migrating out of Vraj,’ Nanda said.

This announcement sent shock ripples through the gathering. ‘Migrate? You mean exile? Leave our land? Our nation? Our herds?’

Everyone knew what had happened to Akrur and the other chieftains who had led the exodus to Bhoja and other neighboring kingdoms. Their lands and herds had been annexed on the Usurper’s orders and they had lost everything. They lived now as permanent exiles, condemned to execution on sight if caught. It was not a life most desired. The hardliners were silent and grim, feeling that exile was better than living in humiliation but they still could not see how this was in line with Nanda’s desire to wait until the Slayer arose to do his task.

Nanda set their doubts at rest. He shook his head. ‘Nay. Nothing as drastic as exile. We shall not leave this beautiful God-given earth. We shall merely move to a nearby location, a place where the Usurper’s soldiers will not find us easily and where we can bide the time until the Slayer rises.’

‘Where?’ they clamoured. But some already knew. For Nanda had been discussing this very option for weeks now, ever since the first attempt on

Krishna's life. They had even helped make arrangements secretly. But now they waited for Nanda to reveal his plans in his own words.

'Vrindavan,' Nanda said.

'The forest? Among the wild creatures?' some asked, alarmed. It sounded almost as bad as going into exile. Vrindavan was a large and dark forest, filled with unknown predators and big enough to lose one's way. It was not anyone's idea of a good place to live.

'There is a secret grove within the forest,' Nanda said, 'It was set off a long time ago in order to breed different varieties of honeybees to produce the famous honey from which the soma, honey wine, is prepared. Its location is a secret to all but a certain section of wine makers, because they did not wish for anyone else to have access to that special honeybee and its heavenly produce. It is large enough for us to take our herds and live comfortably, a small Vraj-bhoomi within the heart of the great forest. It can be accessed via a secret pathway from the gardens. My friend Vasudeva told me of its location and suggested that if things became too difficult here, we could seek shelter there.'

'We can take our herds there?' someone asked hopefully. For most Vrishnis, exile was less terrible than leaving one's herds behind.

'Yes,' Nanda said. 'We can rebuild our houses there and live as comfortably as we do here. We shall have to be careful with our cook fires to avoid giving away the secret location. But if we post watches at strategic locations and do not venture out from there, it will be nigh impossible for the Usurper's soldiers to find us. They are more likely to lose themselves in the forest than stumble across this secret nook.'

Everyone looked at one another. There seemed to be no real objection to this plan. Even the hardliners, disgruntled as they were about the lack of violent response, admitted to themselves that for the time being, waiting and watching was the wiser option.

There was only one question that troubled everyone.

'What if the Slayer never rises?' asked a lone voice of doubt.

Nanda sighed and looked at Yashoda. She had stopped weeping only because she had been drained of tears. But she was still watching the sky

and praying silently, unwilling to lose hope. ‘I believe the Prophecy. The Slayer will come.’

‘And what if he fails?’

Nanda was silent. He did not know how to answer that.

Just then, Yashoda started forward. ‘Look,’ she said hoarsely, her throat choked with too much crying. ‘Look!’ she said louder, pointing upwards.

Everyone turned their attention skywards, peering up.

Even Nanda looked up, curious.

He saw it.

A speck, growing larger as it approached very, very quickly. Now it was a tiny dot, then a larger dot, then it was the size of a little fingertip, then it was the size of a thumb... and it was growing larger very quickly.

‘Krishna!’ Nanda heard himself say.

18

Crooked Jaw lunged forward in an attacking move. Kamsa's team mates were spread out in a semicircle surrounding the intruder, blocking his way, ready to grasp hold of him if he tried to make a rush at their 'home' line, but also wary of coming within his clutches. His goal was to try to reach their home line while their's was to stop him from doing so. It was basic war strategy: the enemy attempted to take one's prime city, your army attempted to stop them.

The game required the intruder to constantly chant a single word. It could be anything the player or team wished, so long as it was chanted constantly without pause. The effect was to prevent the intruder from drawing breath too easily and tire much faster, thereby pressuring him to either achieve the enemy's home line or 'perish'. The Magadhan team's word was, predictably, 'Magadha' and Crooked Jaw repeated it over and over again, 'Magadha Magadha Magadha Magadha...' as he feinted this way then that. Among other things, the referee's task was to ensure that all players chanted their word without pause or respite, failing which, they would be deemed to have perished and be removed to the sidelines.

Crooked Jaw's chest was a huge barrel, which was probably the reason why the giant could continue his feinting and chanting without tiring for several moments. The crowd kept cheering him on, certain of their team's victory. Kamsa assumed that the home team almost always won these games, because if they lost, even if some survived the game itself, they would not survive Jarasandha's disapproval afterwards. That was strong motivation to win and it showed on the larger man's face as he danced with surprising agility from one end of the field to the other, sending Kamsa's team mates rippling this way then that in order to maintain a solid wall.

Finally, Crooked Jaw made his move. Feinting right, he lunged left, then dodged the other way, waited till Kamsa's teammates rushed to block that side, then turned around, and ran the same way but getting past the first wall of players.

The player he had successfully dodged made the mistake of lunging at him and grabbing his torso with both hands, attempting to knock him off his

feet.

It was a serious mistake.

Once a player made contact, the intruder was free to use whatever force necessary to free himself. Other players could join in but if the intruder then crossed the line of the area they were guarding, they would be out of the game instantly. The player who attacked Crooked Jaw had to either stop him now or forfeit his own part in the game.

But that was the least of his problems.

Crooked Jaw roared with delight, pleased rather than angry, his muttered chant shouted to express his pleasure. ‘Magadha Magadha Magadha!’ he chanted loudly. And the crowd roared in response: ‘MAGADHA! MAGADHA! MAGADHA!’ smelling first blood.

Kamsa’s team mate held his grip around Crooked Jaw’s torso. Crooked Jaw raised his elbow and brought it down on the other man’s back in a stabbing motion. Now, with ordinary men, this would hurt the man a little, depending on how much muscle and self-discipline he had accumulated. But with the special powers Crooked Jaw possessed, the effect was devastating.

The elbow struck the man’s back and broke through it. Blood spattered in a great splash, falling on the dusty ground in globules. Crooked Jaw’s elbow pierced the man’s backbone, ribs, lungs, and exposed his entire inner workings. He screamed as the last breath left his lungs and Crooked Jaw tossed him to the ground like a sack of yams. He fell and lay bleeding, his ribcage and chest a shattered mess, already dead.

That was why Magadha’s team always won: Each player was empowered by Jarasandha through the use of his special potions, designed after he had seen the unexpected effect it had had on his son in law. Kamsa had thought himself to be the only one possessed of such an ability but clearly that was no longer the case, if it had ever been. Jarasandha had found a way to create more men with the same ability and logically, if the man was bigger and stronger and tougher to begin with, the more formidable he would be after empowerment. Like Crooked Jaw. Or the rest of his team mates, all of whom were taller and wider and apparently stronger than Kamsa.

While the other teams were ordinary mortal men, with all the weaknesses that normal mortal flesh was subject to. Like the man with the shattered chest who lay at Crooked Jaw's feet now.

Crooked Jaw turned and flashed Kamsa a smile, before turning and crossing to the second block.

Kamsa's team mates were agitated for the first time. Whatever they had thought or heard of the Magadhans, they had not been prepared for this. Even the earlier demonstration with the sword they had assumed to be some kind of trickery done with a wooden sword or the like. Now, they were coming to terms with the realization that it had been real, that these were men whose skin was tough enough to resist the sharpest blade and who were possessed of greater strength than any normal man, and it was too much. They screamed at each other and cried out, unsure what to do.

'Hold the line!' Kamsa shouted over their cries.

They ignored him.

'Hold! The! Line!' he yelled, louder this time.

This time they heard him but looked at him as if he was insane.

But those on the second row understood and did as he bid.

They held their line, blocking Crooked Jaw's way.

Perhaps they thought that despite his superior strength and ability, they might still block him by skill. The game was played in different variations everywhere, Kamsa knew, and every soldier who played it took pride in his skill. The best champions of the sport were often celebrated and famous in their armies and admired by all.

Kamsa shouted instructions to his mates as Crooked Jaw continued his muttered chant, dodging the second wall of defenders now, seeking a way to dodge past them without making physical contact. Again, as was obvious, it was not that the intruder feared the contact itself but that he feared being disqualified.

Again, he dodged and feinted and dodged again. But this time the players followed Kamsa's instructions and simply held their positions, not moving an inch. Nobody responded to Crooked Jaw's feints and dodges and after several tries the giant grew frustrated.

‘Magadha!’ he cried and charged headlong at the space between two of his opponents. He meant to barrel through them and run all the way to the home line, Kamsa knew. And with his superior size and ability, he would be able to achieve just that. And any of Kamsa’s players who touched him to try to stop him would be taken out of the game, one way or another.

Kamsa was expecting that, it was the reason why he had ordered the second line to stay still and force the Magadhan’s hand.

Now, he leaped after the Magadhan himself. Even though he was front and center, there was nothing to stop him from going after an intruder from behind, except the fact that if the intruder crossed the second line while still in contact with Kamsa, then Kamsa would be disqualified from the game.

But Kamsa had no intention of letting him reach the second line.

He started running the instant Crooked Jaw began moving forward. Lighter on his feet, he was able to move much faster than the larger heavier man, and he was not burdened with having to chant a word constantly and deplete his breath. He pounded in an arc, sprinting at an angle that brought him in direct contact with Crooked Jaw, and slammed into the Magadhan’s right side, taking him completely by surprise. Had any of his team mates attempted this same maneuver the result would have been akin to a child running into the side of an elephant. But Kamsa had hardened his body density to the maximum possible and he was as heavy and tough as granite itself. He struck the Magadhan with enough force to rattle him and throw him off his forward momentum. Once Crooked Jaw was turned aside, his own running force carried him the rest of the way.

Crooked Jaw fell and tumbled, rolling over once before coming to a halt with a heavy thud. Kamsa felt the impact of the thud through the ground, far heavier than the impact of his own shoulder hitting the ground. Kamsa looked up and checked his position: he had fallen safe, within the chalk line of his ‘kingdom’s’ boundary.

Crooked Jaw, on the other hand, had fallen just over the line.

Which meant he would have to go to the sidelines and wait until one of his team mates crossed to the home line and brought him back into the game.

The bone horn blew a short sharp burst indicating that Crooked Jaw was out for the moment and the referee pointed to the sideline. Crooked Jaw glared at him as if he would like to wring his neck but he rose to his feet and went silently to the sideline. But he did so, after glaring pointedly at Kamsa.

Kamsa grinned. If he wanted, Crooked Jaw could demolish the entire enemy team single-handedly in a moment. He must demolish scores of them each day during battle. But this was different. This was a sport and there were rules and tens of thousands of his admirers watching. He would want to win within the bounds of the rules, not by breaking them. That was the fact Kamsa had counted on. And that Yadu had reminded him of. ‘The limitations that you find frustrating are also your greatest advantage. Use them against your opponent. In war as in sport, the goal is the same. Use what you are given in unexpected yet effective ways. He who does so most shrewdly wins on both fields.’ That was what the old man had taught him the night before: how to win at this game. For he had known that Jarasandha would send for Kamsa soon and that he would use this very game to try to humiliate and undermine him as a precursor to justifying taking control of Mathura. How Yadu had known this, Kamsa did not know. It hardly mattered. He understood that the forebear of the Yadava race could only have the interests of Yadavas at heart, and he had listened and trained intently all night, eager to learn as much as he could in those short hours. It helped that he had played the same game often before as a boy and a youth, although in a much milder form without such violence, and that he had actually been quite good at it.

Now, he grinned at Crooked Jaw, savouring his first victory of the game.

His team mates were ecstatic but reserved.

‘He is out for now,’ they said to Kamsa. ‘But when he returns...?’

‘And what of his team mates?’ asked another troubled voice. ‘If they are all as invulnerable as he is, what chance do we have?’

Kamsa smiled. ‘We take the battle to them.’

Then he turned to the referee and indicated himself. The referee nodded and came forward to point at Kamsa, blowing his horn again to indicate that the captain of the enemy team was now using his turn to send himself into the Magadhan domain.

Kamsa glanced up. Jarasandha was watching with a deceptively genial expression. His daughters waved excitedly, pleased to see their husband achieve his first moment of victory and cheer him on. Perhaps after I win this game, I will go to them tonight, Kamsa thought. In their father's own tent.

He grinned at the prospect and leaped forward into the enemy quadrant, slapping his thighs and chanting the word he had chosen as his team's mantra. 'Mathura Mathura Mathura...' he chanted as he moved into enemy territory.

19

Shouts went up from the Vrishnis as they saw the falling object burst into flames. Many screamed in horror as the flaming object then broke into pieces and the individual burning fragments plummeted downwards. Nanda had put his arm around Yashoda again and he clutched her tightly as they stared skywards. She gasped and screamed as well when the fragments began to break up further into smaller bits and pieces. Some were all fire and ash already, long before they reached the earth. How could any living creature survive either the fire or the fall?

Then the pieces began to fall. The Vrishnis screamed and some started to run in panic. But Nanda shouted to them to hold still. There was no point in running about. If they were hit, then so be it. They stood a better chance of survival by staying in one place and by his estimation, the objects would not fall upon them directly.

His judgement proved correct.

The fragments of the flaming object began to crash down to earth over the hill, well away from where they had gathered. The rise protected them from any debris flung up or shards that might be sent flying from the various impacts.

When everything had finished falling, Nanda gave them leave to go see.

The whole gathering proceeded up the hill.

Yashoda realized that she no longer felt weighed down by leaden feet. She could practically sprint up the hill now, energized by her desire to see if her Krishna had somehow, miraculously, survived the fall. She could not believe he would be dead.

The sight from the top of the hill was shocking.

Debris lay spread across the rolling valley. The decorations and arrangements for the festivities were destroyed or in flames but nobody cared about that. There were chunks of tree trunks, clods of earth, rocks and boulders strewn all over.

The crowd spread out, searching among the fallen debris for any signs of life.

They came across the corpse of Trnavarta first. A great hue and cry rose up. Nanda and Yashoda moved through the crowd that already gathered to view the asura's horrific remains.

His body had been all but burned to ashes by the fire, and lay sprawled across a great boulder. It was impossible to say if the fall had killed him or the flames. Either way, there was no doubt that he was dead.

Yashoda wanted to spit on the corpse and curse the demon for having abducted her son. But seeing him dead like that, she held back her anger, knowing it would achieve nothing.

She turned and walked away. Most of the Vrishnis still crowded around the rakshasa's body, awed. Most had never seen an asura before until Putana's death. This made two. They could hardly believe that these creatures of folklore and legend actually existed and moved about them in human form. Who knew in what form the next one might come?

Yashoda wandered away, her mind harried by the sight of the dead asura. If the attacker himself was dead, then what hope could there be for her little one? After falling from such a height...?

Maatr, why do you worry so? I told you, no harm will ever befall me. I am your son after all. I have drunk your milk, and that makes me extra-special!

‘Krishna!’ she cried, spinning around.

Nanda came to her.

‘Where are you, Krishna?’ she cried.

Nanda took hold of her hand. ‘Beloved one, even if his body lies here, perhaps it would be best if you do not look upon it in this condition...’

‘Krishna!’ she cried out. To Nanda she said distractedly: ‘He is alive, Nanda. He just spoke to me!’

Nanda blinked.

I am here, Maatr. On the patch of grass, sitting and waiting.

She swung around. There, over by the marigolds, she saw him now. A little chubby form sitting on his buttocks, waving and smiling.

‘Krishna, my son!’ she cried and ran to him. Nanda followed her, bewildered at first, then with a shout of excitement as he saw Krishna too and reacted. The others heard their cries and left the asura’s body to come running.

Krishna was getting to his feet just as Yashoda reached him. He raised his hands to her happily. ‘Maa’ he cried.

‘Krishna!’ she said, picking him up and hugging him harder than she had ever hugged him before. ‘Oh my son! I knew you were safe and well. I knew it!’

Nanda came up and put his arms around his wife and his son, kissing little Krishna on the forehead. ‘You are well! It is a miracle. It is God’s grace.’

The Vrishnis crowded around them, excited and happy. They began cheering and congratulating one another, even though none of them had actually done anything. They were all ecstatically happy that their little Krishna was alive and well.

‘Once again, Vishnu has protected him,’ they cried out to one another. ‘Our prayers and rituals of protection worked brilliantly. He was saved from the second attack as well!’

Cheering, they returned with Nanda and Yashoda to Vraj-bhoomi. There, they celebrated the survival of Krishna for the second time. Some of the go pas and gopis took care of the remains of the asura, doing as they had done with Putana, chopping the body to pieces and burning it again, until it had turned to ash. Again, they noted how sweet the smoke from his pyre smelled, just like the smoke from Putana’s pyre. ‘He died blessed because he was slain by Vishnu’s hand,’ they said to one another, not knowing how accurate they actually were.

Back home, Yashoda felt great elation. Her anxiety of the weeks before had vanished. She knew now that whatever befell Krishna, he would endure and survive it. She wished there would be no more attacks but she knew that her son had a great destiny and that her wishing things to be different would not make it so. What mattered was that he would not come to harm no matter what his enemies did. She believed that now.

Nanda was relieved too. He was accosted by Gargamuni who arrived when the celebrations were well under way.

‘Gurudev,’ Nanda said, performing the ritual greetings with great joy. ‘It is an honour to receive you on this special day. Once again Lord Vishnu has chosen to grace our son with his blessings. Haridev himself has protected our Krishna.’

Gargacharya looked at Yashoda and little Krishna across the room on the other cot, and at little Balarama sitting on Rohini’s knee nearby, and said to Nanda, ‘Good Nanda, you are right. Haridev himself has graced and protected your son. Because your son Krishna is none other than Vishnu incarnate himself.’

Nanda stared at the guru.

Garga nodded. ‘What I say is true, Nanda-Maharaja. Your little Krishna is the Slayer of Narada’s prophecy. He was birthed by your friend Vasudeva and Devaki when under imprisonment in Kamsa’s palace. The very night of his birth, Vasudeva spirited him here and exchanged him for your newly born daughter. She in turn was Yogamaya herself, who took birth in order to help Vishnu in this mission. She did not die at Kamsa’s hands but escaped and returned to swargaloka. All this was done so that Kamsa would not find out that Devaki’s Eighth Child is still alive and well and living in your house as your son. It was essential that you believe he was your son in order for the secret to remain a secret. Now that you have seen him defeat two powerful asuras there can be no doubt in your mind of his power, even as an infant. Imagine the great power he shall wield when he is grown to manhood? Rejoice, Nanda, Haridev himself chose to be raised as your son in your house. What greater privilege can a Vishnu-bhakt like you desire?’

Nanda was stunned by this news but recovered quickly. A part of him had always known something was unique about his little dark wonder. And today when he saw Krishna survive that great fall from the sky, he had no doubts left. He accepted every word his guru said.

‘It is true,’ he said, ‘I am greatly blessed.’

‘Do not speak of this openly,’ Gargamuni warned. ‘For there may be more asuras among your people even now, disguised as humans. Only you, Rohini and Yashoda know the truth. For Rohini’s son Balarama is a partial avatar of Vishnu as well, your son Krishna’s half-brother. While not as powerful as your Krishna, he too has a great role to play in events to come

in future years. All that matters now is that you take care of your people and give Balarama and Krishna time to grow to manhood to fulfill the prophecy and then achieve great things on earth.'

Nanda mused over Gargamuni's words. He discussed the matter with Yashoda that night, and took Rohini's suggestions into account as well. The next day, he called a meeting of his family and most trusted Vrishni elders and conferred with them for many long hours.

Finally, they all agreed on the same conclusion: The Vrishnis should take Nanda's suggestion of the earlier day. They should plan to migrate to the secret grove of Vrindavan in the great forest in the event of a calamity. There they could stay safely until the Slayer rose and destroyed the Usurper. They need not worry about the Usurper confiscating their lands. They were confident that when they returned Vishnu would ensure their homes and lands were kept safe for them. While none but Nanda and his wives knew the truth about who the Slayer was, all the Vrishnis were now convinced that Haridev himself looked over them constantly. They were certain of his protection during their exile in Vrindavan. Finally, it was decided that even if they did not migrate at once, they would ensure that the secret settlement in Vrindavan was ready to house them at a moment's notice. At the first sign of trouble, they would be able to leave at once and travel swiftly.

They began making preparations at once. It would take some time yet for there was much work to be done and Nanda did not see any need for haste. They also had to be careful to make the move suddenly. It should seem as if the Vrishnis had simply vanished from Vraj one day. They set about planning and preparing for the great migration with the same careful attention and efficiency with which they managed their cowherds and produced the famous buttermilk, curds and other dairy products that made Vraj renowned the world over.

20

Crooked Jaw's team mates did not have any reason to hold back. They knew what they were capable of and after enduring the ignominy of watching their captain being sent to the sidelines by Kamsa, they wanted revenge. They were all bigger and tougher than he was and felt confident they could destroy him easily even in a one-on-one combat.

But just to be sure, they came at him together, their intention not merely to knock him out of the game but to kill him. He had no way of knowing if this was on Jarasandha's orders or merely their own death wish for him but in any case, dying was dying, whether it was done on orders or not.

They were smart, he had to give them that much. And they were experienced warriors, so they didn't come at him from the front, giving him a chance to flail out at them. Two of them came at him from either side at precisely the same time, forcing him to choose whether to strike out at this way or that. The other two attacked him from behind, also at the same time, one going high, the other low. They intended to ram him and crush him, breaking his bones and smashing his vital organs.

He stood still and let them try.

They struck him with the combined force of four chariots striking in a head-on collision. Usually, when his body was this hardened, he felt nothing, merely observed and heard the impact of a boulder he threw or a stone he had crushed, or an iron rod striking his body. He would feel the superficial impact - the vibrations, shuddering, the sound of something thudding against his petrified flesh. But not actually *feel* anything.

But this time, he felt it.

Felt the massive weight of their combined tonnage hitting him. Felt it through his skin as hard as lead sheet, his flesh as rigid as iron, his bones as solid as granite, right into the core of his being. They must have struck him with a combined force of at least a ton of weight. Enough to pulverize anything to ruin.

He withstood it.

It was the densest he had ever made his body. He had compacted himself so much he could feel his heart pumping only once every several seconds, the blood barely trickling through his stoney veins. He was almost a block of stone. He had known he could make himself this hard - any of them could, he was sure - but most of the time it was impractical because he required to move about and so had to keep himself somewhat flexible at least. The more flexibility, the less dense his body. The more dense he made his body, the more rigid it became. Right now, he was all but wholly stone, a veritable statue.

They had not been expecting that. They had expected him to move, to lash out, to try to dodge or escape the impact. They had moved fast, in order to strike unexpectedly as well as to coordinate their timing and hit at exactly the same time. This meant that they had only partially hardened their bodies, more than enough to crush him, but not so much that they could not move or control their limbs.

So instead of them crushing him, he crushed them.

The same force of impact that they inflicted upon him rebounded on themselves.

It was like hitting a stone wall with an iron fist.

It was a contest between which was denser, stronger.

As it turned out, he was the smarter one.

He saw the two who rammed his shoulders break their own shoulders - he saw their arms crumpled and crack open, like wood split by an axe. He saw the petrified flesh and blood within exposed like an iced corpse cut open, marbled veins and gelatinous blood. He saw the white of their bones exposed, snapping, breaking, showing jagged edges.

The ones who struck him from behind, he could not see them of course. Nor could he feel them strike him. He could feel nothing actually.

It took him an instant of concentration to reduce his density enough that he could move. At once he felt the piercing thirst that always accompanied severe densification. He felt like he could drink a barrel or three right now.

Later, he promised himself. Time enough for food, drink and celebration later.

He stepped out of the tangle of bodies, turned and examined the results.

All four of his attackers lay on the ground, two with shoulders split open, one with his collarbone shattered into pieces, the fourth with chest and ribcage and lower jaw broken in several places. All the points where their bodies had impacted with his own. All because they had sought to rush him fast and he had stood stone still. Literally stone still.

‘Mathura Mathura Mathura...’

The words continued from his barely parted lips. It was the only thing he had kept up unceasingly through the scant seconds of the attack.

He looked at the enemy team. They were staring at him with gaping mouths. Never before had anyone downed four of their team mates at one go. Then again, they had never faced anyone like Kamsa ever before.

He had taken out the entire front line in a single move.

Now he moved across the first border to the second section.

‘Mathura Mathura Mathura...’

He realized the crowd had gone silent. It was as if the lid of a heavy box had been shut suddenly, blocking off the sound within. The utter silence was deafening. The crowd had probably been watching these games for years. They were so accustomed to watching their own home team win they probably had no conception that it was even possible for them to lose.

He would show them it was possible.

The other team members had recovered from the shock of their team mates' failure.

Six of them made a wall across the second quadrant, blocking his way effectively. Two more lurked on the edges, as a backup measure.

This time none of them made a move to rush him. Instead, they watched him warily, stepping this way then that to keep the wall tight yet mobile, showing him that they could match any move he made and block him.

Which was what he had expected.

He turned sharp right and sprinted to the side of the quadrant. Because they had all held the line tight to block his way, there was a gap of about

three yards at that end. It was unusual for anyone to run fast in the game because of the risk of failing to catch one's breath with the constant chanting. But he was willing to take that risk. He sprinted right to the side of the quadrant, where the referee stood with his bone horn, saw the look of surprise on the man's eyes - surprise mingled with more than a little fear, for the man had already seen what he was capable of doing - then swung sharply left, through the gap. The instant he started sprinting they had guessed what he was unto and the players on this side had begun moving to block the gap. But they were slower than he was and only two made it in time.

He barreled straight into them, aiming for their arms which they had made the mistake of linking together in a foolish bid to block him more effectively.

He tore their arms from their sockets. The cracking and ripping sounds of the arms being torn out of the hardened bodies was very loud in the stadium. He threw the torn arms aside and continued his run at the same sprinting pace.

‘Mathuramathuramathura...’ he chanted nonstop.

There were ten players holding the last quadrant. All of them had begun rushing towards this end of the quadrant the moment he moved this side. But he dodged this way and that as he came, making them unsure of which way he would go. As a result, their line was ragged and each player was separated from the others by a yard or three.

He ran straight at the nearest player and grabbed hold of him.

The man was not expecting a direct assault of all things. But he wasn't wholly unprepared either.

He reacted by grasping hold of Kamsa as well.

Kamsa had taken hold of the man's head in a vice grip and now, as the man struggled, he began to choke him while pushing his head backwards. The man in turn had taken hold of Kamsa's torso and was attempting to crush his softer rear organs on the sides.

Kamsa hardened his body instantly, and shoved with all his strength.

The man tried to harden his body but was a fraction of an instant too late.

Kamsa heard the sound of the iron-hard neck cracking and saw the Magadhan player's head bend backwards, then topple over till the back of his head touched his upper back.

Kamsa let the body drop. It fell with a dull thud to the dust of the ground.

He charged at the next player.

This man too was somewhat surprised at the assault. It was usual for the defending team to attack the intruder, not for the intruder to do so to the defenders!

Also, once body contact was made, the two players had to either wrestle one another to the ground till one yielded, or push one another across the border lines.

Kamsa wrestled the man. The man was very wide across with a thick middle, so he had gone for his thigh instead. Grasping hold of it, he threw his own body backwards, knocking both of them off their feet. The man fell backwards, landing heavily on his back. Kamsa had a much lesser distance to fall and was the one doing the throwing, so could land less impactfully. Still, it was an effort to keep the chant going and exert pressure on the man's thigh. He climbed atop the man at an angle, grabbing his langot and pulling it to gain purchase. With ordinary wrestlers, pulling the langot was an effective wrestling move because it exerted pressure on a man's most sensitive parts. But with these men it made little difference. What it did achieve was giving Kamsa a handhold.

Using the man's langot to turn around, Kamsa caught hold of the man's arm and then his thigh again.

Then he stood up.

Straining under the weight of the heavier man, he heaved him up like a sack of bricks - or iron ingots, from the feel of him - and flung him across the border line.

The man roared in fury as he realized his mistake too late. But by then he was already thudding down...across the border line and out of the game. He slammed his fist on the ground in frustration, hurling abuses at Kamsa. He would have gotten to his feet and run back into the quadrant but the referee was standing by and blew his bone horn at once.

Kamsa turned and saw that the others had no intention of waiting for him to work his wiles on them as well.

Two of them came at him, taking hold of his upper and lower bodies respectively. Their intention was probably to twist his body in different directions, either tearing him into two pieces, or contort him hard enough to injure him severely.

Kamsa rolled over the head of the other grabbing his lower body, kicking out at the face of the higher one at the same time.

The move was not sufficient to break him free of their combined grasp but it was enough to cause them to lose their balance. As each was pulling in a different direction, they tumbled together, their grip on Kamsa loosening slightly.

Just enough for him to grasp hold of their arms and twist in opposite directions - he spun like a corkscrew in midair, using his purchase on their own bodies against them.

Both arms twisted at impossible angles, then were turned like wet rags being wrung out to dry.

The men screamed in pain and shock - even though their bodies were hardened, they were still mobile enough to feel such severe trauma. Blood spattered Kamsa from both sides, splashing his chest and back. It was cooler than normal blood would have been because of the hardening. The more sluggish their bodies became the cooler the blood temperature, the slower the flow.

Kamsa landed on his feet again and turned to the next opponent.

He circled three or four of the enemy players as they watched him warily.

By now, Crooked Jaw was yelling orders from the sideline, frustrated at being out of the game and watching his team being destroyed by a single man.

Kamsa grinned at them, and waved to Crooked Jaw who was even more infuriated and began hurling curses.

‘Mathura Mathura Mathura...’ Kamsa muttered.

He wrestled his way through the rest of the team. It was hard but satisfying work. Every one of the moves Yadu had shown him worked perfectly. It

was as if the old Yadava had known precisely how his enemies would attack or respond. He supposed that was true in a sense: there were only so many ways in which a man could wrestle or physically block another man. And of those ways, there were even fewer effective ways to do so in the course of this game.

Every move Yadu taught him came in useful. Including the more complex, hand-foot combinations that required considerable agility and effort.

When at last he crossed the enemy team's home line, the crowd erupted in a huge wave of reluctant admiration and applause. They simply could not believe their eyes. Never before had they seen such a thing done, he learned later. Well, not precisely. They had seen it done only once before, when Crooked Jaw came to play for the Magadhan team. An enemy chieftain - like all the members of the Magadhan team - he had worked his way through Jarasandha's entire squad of champions just as Kamsa had done today, making mincemeat of them all. It had been even more formidable because Crooked Jaw had not possessed the power to densify his body back then. On the other hand, neither had the Magadhans. This new level of bodily prowess was a relatively recent development.

But Kamsa had faced an entire team of empowered Magadhans and demolished them. And that must surely count as a greater achievement.

As he raised his clenched fist, surrounded by the ecstatic team mates, all of whom would now be freed along with their tribes, Kamsa saw Crooked Fist coming towards him, his ugly face dark and furrowed with anger.

He turned to face him, his team mates moving aside to make way for the giant.

Kamsa hardened his body, prepared for any attack. The game was officially over, but he knew that sometimes the real fighting began after the game was ended. Especially in army camps.

Crooked Jaw stopped a yard short of him.

He glared down at Kamsa for a long moment.

'Mathuran!' he roared, making the word sound like an insult.

Kamsa waited.

'You demolished my team!' Crooked Jaw shouted.

Kamsa said nothing.

Crooked Jaw raised a clenched fist.

Kamsa braced himself.

Crooked Jaw raised the other fist, also clenched.

Kamsa waited warily.

Crooked Jaw opened both fists and joined the palms together in a gesture of namaskaram. ‘I bow to you in grace,’ he said gruffly.

Kamsa stared at him a moment, unable to comprehend what had happened. Then he understood and felt a surge of laughter bubble up. The giant was acknowledging his victory! It was the highest compliment one sportsman could pay another - or one warrior.

Kamsa clasped the man’s joined palms with his own hands. ‘Well met, warrior. What is your name?’ If they were about to become friends, he could hardly continue to think of him as Crooked Jaw. And he had a feeling that the man might not take kindly to the name being used aloud either.

‘I am Mustika,’ said the giant with the Crooked Jaw. ‘And from this day henceforth we shall be friends and fellow sporting partners.’

Kamsa grinned. ‘So be it.’

KAAND 2

1

After the attack of the wind-demon and the revelations of Gargamuni, both Yashoda and Nanda no longer lived in constant anxiety. While as parents they could never truly stop worrying about their child, they no longer worried to the extent that they had before. They knew that whatever happened, Krishna would be safe. They had seen proof of that for themselves.

The planning for the migration to Vrindavan also demanded a great deal of their attention and time. There was also the fact that it was the season for calving and many of their cows were due to drop calves anyday. They were kept busy.

While Yashoda grew busier, Rohini had no pressing demands on her time. So it came to pass that more and more often Rohini sat and watched over Krishna while Yashoda went about her chores. This meant that Krishna and Balarama spent more time together and the boys clearly enjoyed this greatly. They were both at that difficult age where they could walk and were developing their strength and were able to get into mischief more easily. And when it came to mischief, if one was a handful to manage, then both together were impossible!

Rohini would take her eyes off them for a moment to look at something or take care of something minor, and off they would go, crawling about in the dust of Vraj like serpents on an urgent mission. Or they would get to their feet together, holding on to one another's shoulders for support, and start walking arm in arm together, like two gopas walking behind their herds.

Once, Rohini realized they were gone but mistook their direction and went the wrong way to search for them. By the time she corrected her error and caught up with the two rascals, they were halfway across a field filled with lowing cows. Somehow, in the course of traversing that field, one of them had accidentally reached out and caught hold of a cow's tail to keep his balance. The cow had lowed loudly in protest and the boys had laughed in merriment, amused at the reaction. Thereafter, they had both taken to going around and tugging every cow tail in sight. Rohini had completely lost sight of them both by then and was going out of her mind trying to guess where they could have vanished so quickly. She was alerted by the irritated lowing of the cows and peered at the field.

Finally, she spotted their chubby shapes moving between the legs of the cows, the udders often higher than their little curly-haired heads. She cried out in indignation and went running to catch them. Just then, one of them tugged particularly hard at one aging cow's tail, causing it considerable distress. The aging half-blind cow took great offense at the prank and not realizing that it was Haridev himself who had committed the offense, she reared back and kicked out hard. Both bows tumbled over and over on the ground, but their falls were softened by their landing in a large patch of something soft and cushiony. When Rohini came across them, they were both lying together and laughing merrily, covered from head to toe in fresh cow dung.

Another time, they both caught hold of a cow's tail together and wanted to pull it. Each insisted he was the first to grab it so he should be the one to pull it. In their baby talk, they both argued fiercely, neither willing to relinquish hold of the poor cow's appendage. Finally, in pain from the constant pulling, the cow began to run away. Still both brothers refused to let go.

At the sound of Rohini's and Yashoda's voices, all the women in Vraj came out of their houses and saw Balarama and Krishna being dragged by a cow who appeared to be trying to win a race as their mothers ran behind them, yelling to them to let go of the tail!

Their pranks grew bolder. Once a snake slithered into the compound and was spotted at once by Krishna. He trotted off to examine the new arrival. Rohini saw Krishna from where she sat but could not see the snake due to a depression in the ground. She assumed he was merely out for a walk and continued chafing the wheat. Balarama grew curious and left his play to follow his brother.

Krishna squatted down and watched the snake slithering along the wet drain nallah behind the house. He grew fascinated by the movement and began to want to imitate it. He crawled into the nallah on his belly and began slithering after the snake, imitating it perfectly. Naturally, once Balarama saw Krishna, he wanted to do the same.

Rohini got up at once when she couldn't see both boys. She came running over and looked down into the nallah to see both Krishna and Balarama slithering on their bellies after a snake. For the life of her, she couldn't tell if they were trying to catch the snake or merely imitate it.

Swords and weapons were a special problem. Having seen them being used by men in training, both boys were always eager to imitate their older counterparts. Once, some veterans passing through left their swords leaning against the side of the house and went inside to drink some buttermilk. Krishna and Balarama saw the swords lying unattended and took their chance.

The sound of metal clashing drew everyone out of doors. They came out in a rush to see both little boys holding swords twice as tall as themselves, swinging the blades with mad abandon, each blow threatening to lop off one's head, or the other's arm or chop off a leg...

Fire, thorns, birds, jumping from heights...nothing daunted the boys. They experimented with everything if left unattended for even a moment. It was as if they felt compelled to explore every possible aspect of mortality first-hand and to experience it for themselves.

They grew up quickly, starting to play with boys much older than their ages, joining in their games and quickly beating them all. The older boys took this in good spirits, for everyone loved and admired Nanda-Maharaja and loved Krishna just as much. But it was Krishna who would soon tire of the predictability of winning each time and desire new challenges.

He would release all the cows from the enclosure at the wrong time, then climb on the fence and sit there giggling as the cows went lowing into the fields, eating more than their share at the wrong time of day, while all the gopas and gopis ran about shouting and blaming one another for leaving the fence open. It took them a while to realize that little Krishna was capable of opening the heavy fence on his own. In fact, Krishna always put Balarama to pushing the heavy fence door open while he shooed the cows out and twisted their tails to make them move faster. So when he was asked if he had done this prank, he would quite innocently and truthfully, ‘But I didn’t open the fence! It was Balarama! He did it!’ And of course everyone would turn to Balrama and Rohini would gather up her son and scold him. What was more, Balarama always took these scoldings and the resultant blame without a whisper of complaint. He would do anything for Krishna.

But the biggest mischief began when Krishna developed a fondness for dahi. He had always loved it and had begun demanding it of Yashoda even when he was of an age when children usually drank only milk. But now that he was old enough to go and take it for himself, he began indulging his taste to absurd limits.

Every night, Yashoda set a large vessel of dahi to set overnight, meant to feed the entire family the next day. With 44 people in their family, that was a very large quantity of dahi.

At one meal, Krishna finished his share of dahi and wanted more. He asked Yashoda who fetched him another serving. Krishna ate this up as well and still wanted more. Yashoda fetched him yet another serving. It was her practise to keep servings small so that no food was ever wasted. But Krishna finished the third helping and still craved more. Yashoda was involved in a very entertaining discussion with her sisters and friends and out of sheer distraction she told Krishna, ‘You mean to eat the whole store of dahi from the kitchen?’ Having said this, she went back to the discussion.

Now, Krishna was less concerned with the admonition than with the revelation that there was a greater store of dahi kept in the kitchen. Intrigued, he got to his feet and pattered away barefoot through the large house. He rarely went to the kitchen because he rarely needed to go there: Yashoda and Rohini always made sure the boys were well fed and fed on time.

This part of the house was empty. Everyone was gathered in the living rooms, talking and enjoying the evening hours of leisure after a hard day’s work.

Krishna pattered alone into the kitchen. He went about looking into various vessels, seeking out the dahi. He searched every last vessel without finding it. Disappointed, he thought that Yashoda-maiya had only said that to make him keep quiet whereas the truth was that the dahi was finished.

Upset by this, he started to run back to his mother to tug at her garment and complain to her loudly. Just then, he glimpsed a door ajar and realized there was another smaller chamber behind the main kitchen.

He pushed open the door with the fearless boldness of a boy who knows this is his house and he can do anything he pleases here. He entered a long narrow chamber which was the pantry and larder area where vegetables and other foodstuffs were stored.

There were a few vessels here as well and he searched them at once. The second one turned out to be a whole vessel filled with freshly set dahi. It was the next day's batch and due to the coolness of the weather, it had set already. There was more whey on the top than Krishna was used to in his dahi, but it was still dahi!

He dipped his fingers into it, scooping out a little, and tasted it. He had to slurp to keep it from spilling from his mouth. Yummy! He smacked his lips. This was even better than the dahi he had just had after the meal. It was freshly set and he liked the thin layer of cream on the top. The dahi Yashoda had served him had come from the bottom of today's vessel so it had been totally without cream.

He thought he would have a few more mouthfuls then stop. There was such a big vessel of it, Maatr would hardly notice a little missing from one side.

After a few mouthfuls, he still craved more. It was so creamy, so rich, so tasty!

He had been scooping out the top layer to get as much cream as possible. This meant that he had to keep going around the side of the vessel. He realized he had eaten almost a complete circle around the edge of the vessel. It looked like a wheel drawn on the surface of the dahi. Yashoda-maiya would certainly notice the missing dahi in a trice. He had never done anything like this before, he had no way of knowing how she might react.

Perhaps if I eat the cream layer on the inside of the circle it will all look the same again and Maatr won't notice.

He started scooping the creamy layer from the inside.

Time passed.

A member of the household who passed through the kitchen on his way to the backyard heard the odd sound of Krishna slurping dahi from his fingers but could not figure out what the sound meant or where it was coming from. He stood by the kitchen doorway for several moments, turning his head this way then that, and finally concluded that it was some kind of rodent digging his way under the house.

'Those rabbits are back again,' he told Nanda when he returned to the main house, 'I heard one of them trying to burrow through the ground. He sounded like he was gobbling up the mud!'

Nanda thought it was odd that rabbits should be digging in this season but said he would take a look around the next day. Everyone went back to their pastimes.

Krishna finished eating and looked down at the vessel of dahi. He had eaten the full layer of cream from the top now, all the way across. But in one or two places he had scooped his hand too deep, and the level of dahi in those places was noticeably lower than in the rest of the vessel. Yashoda would certainly notice that!

He decided that if he ate around the whole vessel, taking just enough to level out the surface, it would all look pristine again and Yashoda would not be able to tell the difference. 'It will look exactly like it was when freshly set,' he told himself, grinning.

He set to his task with gusto.

Much later, he sat looking down at the vessel of dahi. Apparently, he had managed to finish the entire thing. All the dahi was gone! He had even wiped the bottom clean with his fingers, then licked every last drop off his fingers.

Now what?

Yashoda would surely notice an empty vessel. Perhaps she might think she forgot to set the dahi tonight?

No. Maatr never forgot such things, not ever.

What to do then?

A thought came to him.

Rohini-maiya lived in the cottage next door. Perhaps she had her own store of dahi too? After all, Balarama ate much more than he did and he loved dahi almost as much.

He decided to go check.

Rohini's house was open too, as were all houses in Gokul-dham. There were no thieves here because nobody would steal from their fellow Vrishnis. That was true for all of Vraj-bhoomi. But

there was no vessel of dahi here. Krishna had no way of knowing that Rohini took her dahi from Yashoda's supply for she was a member of the family too, as was Balarama.

All he could think of was the empty vessel of dahi and what Yashoda-maiya would say once she found it empty.

He decided to try Sawariya-mausi's house next door. The lady in question was at his house, talking with his mother and her friends and sisters right now, so her house was likely to be empty.

It was empty.

And there was a vessel of dahi in the storage area, freshly set. What was more, there were other vessels as well. When Krishna checked them out of curiosity he was surprised to see that they were also filled with freshly set dahi. Seven, eight...ten full vessels of dahi! He didn't know that Sawariya-mausi sold the dahi she made at the market each day. He childishly assumed that it was all for her and her family. 'How much could they possibly eat? One vessel? Two maybe? Three at most? They don't need so much dahi. I can take one and replace Yashoda-maiya's vessel and Sawariya-mausi won't even notice.'

Even if Sawariya-mausi did notice, she was hardly likely to blame Krishna for it.

He picked up the vessel. The weight itself was not a problem but the size was an issue. It was a strain for him to pick it up and carry it.

Then he thought of something.

'What if this dahi doesn't taste as delicious as Yashoda-maiya's dahi? Surely she will wonder why then.'

Besides, he thought, once he took this vessel back home and put it in his mother's pantry, it would be from this same vessel that he would get fed tomorrow as well. So it mattered greatly to him how the dahi tasted.

He dipped one tiny finger into the corner of the surface just to taste the dahi.

He sucked the finger.

A look of ecstasy came over his face.

‘It isn’t as delicious, it’s better! Yummier!’

He tasted a little more, just to be sure.

Then another scoop, to savor that rich creamy taste again.

Then he saw that he had spoiled one corner of the surface cream, so he decided to eat around the rim to even it out.

Time passed.

Krishna sat in his neighbour’s kitchen, eating her dahi.

He lost track of time.

Before he knew it, he was looking down at an empty vessel. Again.

‘No matter,’ he told himself. ‘There’s plenty more here.’

Speaking of which...there was so much here that he could leave several for Sawariya-mausi’s family, take one home to replace Yashoda-maiya’s dahi and still have a vessel or three spare.

He decided there would be no harm in eating a bit more. Just the cream off the top of another vessel.

And so it went.

Sometime later, Yashoda realized that Krishna had been gone a long time. She asked Rohini if she had seen him. Rohini frowned. ‘He was with you when I last saw him, eating something.’ Balarama lay in her lap, fast asleep. Krishna had made him push a boulder up hill several times today, just to see whether it rolled faster when it was at different points on the hilltop. He was tired from all that pushing and had fallen asleep immediately after his evening meal.

Yashoda thought back and recalled fetching two or three servings of dahi for Krishna. ‘And he wanted more,’ she said aloud.

It occurred to her to look in the kitchen, just to be sure.

She looked around but found nobody there.

Then she remembered that she always kept the dahi vessel in the cooler pantry area and looked there.

She saw the empty dahi vessel and knew at once what had happened.

'Look at that,' she told Rohini and the other ladies who had followed her out of concern. 'He's gone and eaten the whole store of dahi!'

'But where is he?' Rohini asked.

Yashoda thought for a moment, her forehead creasing, her fist resting on her hip. That rascal Krishna, eating up all the dahi. She would give him a piece of her mind once she found him. 'He must be hiding somewhere,' she said, 'afraid that I will scold him.'

So they began searching the house, looking in all the usual places Krishna hid. It was a big house and it took a while, even with so many people searching at once, because they were all talking at once and kept going over the same places again and again. Finally they were done and Yashoda was certain that Krishna was nowhere in the house.

'Maybe he's in the cowsheds,' she said. He had hidden there once when he had toppled her brother-in-law's uks cart off the side of a cliff, sending it crashing into the ravine below. I just wanted to see if the cart could fly, he had said by way of explanation when he was finally found.

But he was not in the cowsheds either.

By the time they finished searching there, it was very late at night. There were a lot of cowsheds and a lot of crevices where a little boy could easily hide.

Everyone regrouped, most smelling of cow shit and cow urine, a few smelling of fresh milk where they had been squirted while bending down to search under the cow bellies. Krishna had been known to hide in such places.

They began to worry.

By this time, Balarama had been woken up by the commotion.

While everyone was debating where else to look and what else to do, he pushed at his mother's arms, asking to be put down, and when Rohini set him down, he instantly began walking away in a certain direction.

Rohini caught hold of Yashoda's arm and pointed at Balarama.

He was walking purposefully up the road.

Rohini and Yashoda followed him without saying a word. The rest came behind them, also trying to keep silent. When some tried to ask where they were going, the others shushed them loudly. The shushing was louder than the voices.

Finally, Balarama came to a house only two doors away from Yashoda and Nanda's residence. He stopped and looked up at the house as if sensing something. Then he ran into the open door and went in.

Yashoda and Rohini went in. 'This is Sawariya's house,' she said, recognizing it.

They went through the house, searching for Balarama.

They found him in the pantry off the kitchen.

He was standing and looking down at Krishna.

Krishna, who was sitting in the center of ten large vessels that had apparently been filled with dahi not long ago.

Nine of which were empty now. Licked clean!

The last vessel was half full and Krishna was working intently on that one now, scooping dahi with both hands and slurping noisily on them. His clothes, his hair, his face, his entire body was coated in dahi. He looked like he had fallen into a vessel of dahi or emerged from one freshly set!

He continued eating, not even aware of Yashoda and Rohini's presence - they were still by the door, peering inside.

He was aware of Balarama's arrival. 'Bhaiya,' he said, pointing down at the dahi. 'Yummy-yummy. Taste, no!'

Balarama sat down at once, and began scooping dahi into his mouth as well.

Yashoda and Rohini looked at each other. They shook their heads slowly, despairingly.

Unable to help themselves, they both burst out laughing together. Great peals of laughter poured from their mouths. Tears of laughter rolled down their faces. The others, still tiptoeing through the house and shushing one another, all heard the laughter and came running.

Krishna heard his mother's laughter and reacted at once.

He jumped to his feet.

He pointed at Balarama, who had frozen with his hand in the dahi at the sound of the laughter.

'I didn't do anything,' Krishna said loudly and innocently, 'It was Balarama! See! He's eating all the dahi!'

2

The crowd roared with adulation. People even threw money and items of food - anything they had to hand - perhaps not realizing that Kamsa did not fight for money. He fought for glory. And in the past year he had amassed a great deal of it.

The fact showed in the way he was greeted by even the aristocrats, nobles and kings in Jarasandha's pavilion as he entered. All Magadha loved him. A record number had turned out to watch the Champion of Mathura play in today's games, and before the game began one of his men had whispered in his ear the figure rumored to be the total value of the bets placed on today's game alone. It was a king's ransom.

Kamsa slapped the backs and shoulders of his men as they parted ways. All his team mates had become his dear friends and mates in life as well. Sala, Mustika, Kuta, Tosalaka, and Chanura were the closest to him and he treasured the time spent training and practicing with him. His participation in this sport had changed his life, just as Yadu had predicted. 'There are only three things in life that drive a man forward,' the old man said once to Kamsa during a particularly grueling training session. 'Someone to care for who cares about you, something you love to do, and something to aspire towards. Without these three things, nothing else is worth anything.'

Kamsa had found someone to care about briefly - Putana - and her loss had unsettled him. But the other two items on that short list had never been his to enjoy. He had never found out what it was he truly loved doing, nor did he aspire towards anything in particular. When young, he had desired to be what his father was, a great and powerful king of Mathura. But after he had achieved that goal and lived the life of a king for a decade or more, it began to seem meaningless and empty. Was this all there was to kingship? What next? And as for a goal to aspire to, he had found nothing else apart from that. That was because, all his life he had barely hoped he would achieve his first goal, of replacing his father. He had never been able to think beyond that.

But after he had begun playing this sport, he had discovered two important things. One was the fact that achievement and success changed everyone. It didn't matter that he was king of Mathura. A king could simply inherit his throne. In a sense, Kamsa had inherited his, after all. But a champion at a certain sport could only attain that position through talent, effort, achievement. Kamsa had excelled at this sport to an extent that nobody could have believed possible. But more than simply excelling, he had made the sport itself a national pastime. Nay, an international pastime! For now they were planning an inter-kingdom tournament with rounds eliminating teams until only the two or three best were left for the final day.

After all, Magadha was no more a kingdom, it was an empire. And an empire needed something to bind itself diverse and multiple cultures and peoples together. Jarasandha had seen his soldiers

playing the game behind their tents one night several years ago and had arrogated the idea for himself, sponsoring larger and larger games until finally, each time his army camped even for a week, they set up a stadium overnight and held games for all to watch. Jarasandha had intended it to be a means of alleviating the stresses of battle and the inter-tribal rivalries and enmities that often led to late night daggers in the back and gang fights. But what Kamsa had done was take the same sport and transform it into a national pastime. With himself its national champion.

Now, he had queens fawning on him, princesses eager to give their virginity, lords and merchants betting huge wagers on him and eager to be seen by him and with him for their own reasons. He had the respect and admiration of his own wives, both of him, he was pleased to note, had bellies heavy with child. But above all, he had the grudging but unmitigated admiration of Jarasandha himself.

The God Emperor rose from this throne as Kamsa entered the main pavilion. ‘All rise for the Champion,’ said his father-in-law in his piercing voice. And every last person in the large tent rose and bowed and congratulated Kamsa. Girls ran up and hung flower garlands around his neck until he began to feel like a living garden. Oily looking men with curled moustaches made barely veiled offers to have Kamsa wed their daughters, sisters, aunts, nieces.

When all the hubbub was over, he sat with Jarasandha on the throne dais. Entertainments continued in the hall, but the Magadhan’s attention was barely on the nubile dancers or exotic music, said to be from some far western nation named Egyptos.

‘You have done well,’ Jarasandha said to him. ‘I am genuinely impressed.’

Kamsa felt a flush of pleasure. He did not know why he should feel such a great satisfaction at hearing Jarasandha praise him. He knew it had something to do with the fact his own father had never praised him much as a child, and once he had imprisoned the old king, he had taken away any reason to be praised forever. In Sanskrit, there was no separate word for father-in-law. The term was simply father. And he supposed that Jarasandha had come to represent a father-like figure in his life. He had moulded him, prepared him, awakened his rakshasa nature, taken that power from him, transformed him into something else, albeit unwittingly. At all the major turning points in his life Jarasandha had been present, moving him this way then that, like a piece in a chaupat game. Even this most recent change was Jarasandha’s doing. Yadu had somehow known Jarasandha would present Kamsa with this challenge and would expect him to perform or die but it was Jarasandha who had put him into the stadium and told him to play. And even now, it was Jarasandha whose opinion mattered to him more than all those screaming crowds and fawning nobles.

‘Someday, we should have a bout or two,’ Jarasandha added.

Kamsa felt a thrill of elation. Jarasandha prided the sport of wrestling even more than the game of Kho. He was reputed to be a master wrestler, perhaps the greatest who had ever lived. For him to invite Kamsa to spar with him was a great honor and privilege. It didn’t matter if he won or lost,

Kamsa would give his front teeth just to be able to lock heads with his father-in-law and show him what he was capable of first-hand.

Perhaps that was just what Jarasandha desired as well.

‘There is trouble brewing in Hastinapura,’ Jarasandha said. ‘It will affect Mathura sooner or later. I am told Vasudeva has been in constant contact with Bhishma-pitama, the old Kuru Pitr, sometimes directly, other times through his envoy Akrura.’

‘Envoy? How can Vasudeva have an envoy? He is a rebel in exile!’

‘Not to his people. They consider him their king even now. And you the Usurper. For that matter, there are factions even within Mathura who consider you an Usurper and your father to be still the rightful liege of the land.’ Jarasandha gestured casually. ‘But you know all this already. I am concerned with the events unfolding in Hastinapura and how they will affect us sooner or later.’

Kamsa nodded. He had heard the same things through Pralamba. ‘What would you have me do?’

Jarasandha was silent for a long moment, looking into the distance. When he spoke, his voice was speculative and his tone more sibilant than usual. Over the years, Kamsa had noted that when Jarasandha lapsed into these modes of deep concentration, he often began slurring his words together in this same sibilant way. He wondered if that forked tongue was an indication of a more pervasive serpentine nature.

‘It has been a while since we heard from your Slayer, has it not?’

Kamsa nodded grimly. He wanted to hawk and spit but restrained himself. This was not the Kho ground. There were rules of etiquette and decorum here. ‘The last I heard was of the death of your man Trnavarta.’

Jarasandha went on quietly, ‘I think it might be time to step up the pressure again. There are more assassins in Vraj. They have been biding their time, awaiting my signal. I shall be giving them the word to go ahead and fulfill their missions now.’

‘You mean...’

‘Slay the Slayer, yes,’ Jarasandha said. ‘But that is only one part of the plan. Regardless of whether they succeed or not, I want you to do everything you can to harry the Vrishnis.’

‘Why?’ Kamsa asked because he was curious, not out of concern for the cow herders.

‘Because those are Akrura’s people. And Vasudeva’s. And the longer the rebellion continues, the more complacent they become. It is time to strike the rebels where it will hurt them most: in their homeland. Far from where they are right now.’

Kamsa frowned. ‘I thought that was the worst possible thing we could do. That it would only provoke the rebels to escalate their efforts against me. Perhaps even push them into an alliance with my enemies - our enemies.’

‘That is why we must do so through other means.’

‘Other means...? I don’t understand.’

Jarasandha smiled thinly at him. ‘Supernatural means.’

Kamsa stared at his father-in-law for a moment. Then he grinned. He had always had a complicated relationship with his father-in-law. Sometimes he hated this man, sometimes he idolized him. Right now it was the latter.

3

Yashoda churned the milk.

It was among her favorite activities of the day. She found the act of holding the large stirring stick and working it round in a rhythmic repetitive motion extremely soothing. A household as large as her's, with its constant influx of visitors and extended family dropping by unexpectedly for meals, required a great quantity of yogurt everyday. Not to mention those two new mouths that demanded epic servings of yogurt all for themselves. She smiled at the thought of her little Krishna's mischievous antics with the dahi handis and of how, since that day, he had become notorious in all Gokul-dham for being the biggest yogurt eater of the territory. She glanced down into the enormous vat: a goodly part of this would go straight into Krishna's and Balarama's bellies tonight itself. She could only wonder how much they would consume once they were older. Perhaps they might outgrow their excessive love for dahi by then? Ah, well. She shook her head wistfully, smiling. She could only hope.

She had to use a very large vat and a stirring stick as thick as her own hand and almost as heavy as a boat's oar. This called for all her strength and concentration, standing with her feet set firmly apart, her back and shoulders and arms using all their strength to work the stirring stick around in the precise churning action that was needed. Unlike some of the less strenuous chores she performed daily, this one left no room for idle thoughts or distractions. This in itself was soothing, for to be able to shut out one's many anxieties, worries, concerns, considerations and other mental activities was a great blessing in these troubled times. Then there was the churning itself which called for a certain skill and finesse. If she churned too fast and hard and long, the yogurt would harden too much and if she did not churn it evenly, it turned out somewhat lumpy and uneven.

Once she was done with churning today's milk to yogurt, she dragged the heavy vat into the pantry and turned her attention to her next chore. The churning of yesterday's yogurt into lassi. Or buttermilk as some called it. This process was similar to churning the milk to yogurt except that the set yogurt was much harder to churn. She looked forward to the effort. As she began stirring the enormous handi of dahi mixed with water and seasoned with rock salt and some condiments, she grew absorbed in the activity, the world around her fading into obscurity.

Her bracelets tinkled on her forearms, the malati flowers decorating her hair swayed and released their aromatic perfume, sweat trickled down her hairline and temples to be caught by the linen cloth she had wound around her head. Another thicker linen cloth swaddled her broad hips like a girdle. Her earrings swung to and fro each time she completed one turn of the churning. She fell into the hypnotic rhythm she had developed over the years, a song slipping forth from her lips as she worked. It was a lullaby she sang often to Krishna, a favourite one he always wanted her to

sing when being put to sleep, but that was not the reason she sang it now. She sang it because it was the same lullaby her own mother had sung to her while she churned the buttermilk in her ancestral home. Her nap-time had always coincided with the churning and her mother would nurse her for a while, then set her down beside the churning vat, and sing the lullaby to assure her of her presence and love as she worked. Yashoda had fallen asleep so many times to the rhythmic sounds of the churning and her mother's voice singing that song that she associated the two inextricably in her mind. Now, barely aware that she was singing, the song slipped from her lips - and from her heart - as she churned the stirring stick round and round, and a part of her mind fell back, back through the decades into the baby Yashoda lying by her mother's side as she churned the buttermilk. And perhaps her mother had heard the same lullaby sung to her as well when she was a baby and perhaps her mother had churned the buttermilk as she had sung it too. Who could say how many generations of Vrishni women had done the same? As Yashoda sang, generations of her mothers and foremothers sang along with her, each mother to her sleeping child, passing on the gift of tradition and love eternally, down the ages.

Krishna was sleeping inside the house and as Yashoda's song rose, he heard its echoes reaching back through time, linking her to her mother before her, and her mother before her, and so forth to the beginning of their race. He had been sleeping on his back as usual, arms and legs sprawled, but now he flipped over onto his back in a quick fluid motion, resting on his elbows and knees, and listened intently to his mother's singing. He could hear not just her voice but the voices of all her ancestors too. He listened to that song of the ages, across time and the barriers of life and death, and felt the maternal love and strength of each of those strong Vrishni women. How could any man ever go to war having heard that outpouring of love and nurturing?

Overcome by love Krishna began crawling towards the rear of the house then remembered that this body was now capable of independent bipedal movement and pushed himself to his feet. He ran barefooted to where his mother stood churning the buttermilk and grasped her legs from behind. Without pausing in her song or churning, she glanced down and acknowledged him. Briefly. Because her entire attention was focussed on the churning which did not brook distraction. Krishna waited then went around to her front, tugging at her garment. She sang on, her body swaying as she churned. He looked up at her and felt hunger rise in him powerfully. These mortal bodies, always wanting something or other. He desired to drink her milk. He could not be denied. The urge was powerful and primordial.

But Yashoda was busy. This was her alone time. The one time of day when she could do her chores in solitude, lost in the rapture of her rhythmic churning, or cooking, or the simple pleasure of being able to hear her own mind speak without other people around her. The household was taking its afternoon siesta and she had cut short her nap in order to give herself this precious time.

Krishna tried hard to get her attention but she was gentle yet firm in her denials. She even picked him up and put him down on the cushion in the corner, urging him to go back to sleep. It was true that if he did not get his afternoon nap he tended to get cranky. Even swayam bhagwan needed a good nap so long as he was occupying a mere mortal body.

Finally, realizing that he would not leave her alone until he had drunk, Yashoda allowed him to sip from her breast. He drank greedily, wondering at his own thirst, then was lost in the miasma of self-fulfillment that could not be described in words. Only when floating upon the ocean of payasam, upon the gently sustaining coils of Anantha, his eternal consort Lakshmi beside him, eyes upturned in the transcendental nidra state, had he come close to experiencing this level of self-fulfillment.

Suddenly, the spell was broken.

Yashoda had placed today's milk to boil on the fire. She put him down abruptly and rushed to take it off the open flame before it boiled over.

Krishna saw her, saw the boiling milk and understood that she had no choice, she could not continue nursing him and let the milk boil over and burn.

But a part of him could not accept the rejection, the sudden break in his profoundly transcendental state of self-fulfillment. Still absorbed in the trivial I-Want self-obsession of his immature human body, he succumbed to that most basic human emotion: disappointment. Angry with Yashoda for denying him the ecstasy of satisfactiong, he thrashed about, flying into a rage. He bit his quivering lips, hot tears spilling freely from his eyes, and kicked out blindly. His smallest toe accidentally struck the enormous earthen vat in which Yashoda had been churning the buttermilk a glancing blow and the vessel shattered to smithereens, churned yogurt flying everywhere. Yashoda exclaimed in surprise as the pieces and yogurt fell around her, even striking her on the back. She turned from the hot milk to see what had happened.

By the time she looked around, Krishna was gone.

At first she assumed he had gone back into the house to sulk. At such times, he would grumble to himself, sulk, and suck his thumb until he fell asleep. She cleaned up the kitchen, shaking her head at the waste of all the buttermilk and the vat, but she was in too good a mood to feel upset. Rather, she was amused at her little rascal's tantrums. She decided that today everyone would have to go without buttermilk: they would enjoy hearing the story in place of their delicious drink!

When she was done she went into the house and changed her apparel. Some of the buttermilk had spilled upon her as well and she had to wash up and clean herself off. By the time she was done, the sound of a commotion outside the house attracted her attention. Passing through the room in which Krishna had been asleep earlier, she realized now for the first time that he was no longer in the house. At once, she put two and two together and surmised that the commotion must surely have something to do with her little tyrant!

Rushing outside, she saw some gopis from neighboring houses gathered outside, hands on their hips, chattering and complaining. When they saw her approach, they fell silent at once and

looked at one another meaningfully.

‘What is it?’ she asked with a mother’s perennial concern. ‘What has he done this time?’

They sighed and slapped their foreheads and pointed up the road. ‘He went in that direction,’ said one. ‘After he finished emptying out all the dahi handis in this lane.’

Yashoda stared at them. All the dahi handis? There were a half dozen houses clustered around her estate. Surely Krishna couldn’t have finished all their dahi in such a short while? There was probably some misunderstanding.

She ran up the lane in the direction they had pointed. On the way, she met more gopis, as upset as the first ones, coming out of their houses holding the broken pieces of their dahi handis and grumbling loudly about the antics of Yashoda’s little rascal. They saw Yashoda coming and one of them hailed her, pointing off the road into the grove. ‘I saw him going that way with his vanar sena,’ she said scathingly.

Another one pointed out as she went past that her flowers were coming untangled from her hair. Yashoda ignored her, and ignored the flowers that fell out of her hair as well as her unravelling hair. Sweating now in the hot afternoon sun, she ran uphill into the grove that bordered their hamlet. Vanarsena, they had said. What did they mean? Vanarsena referred to the army of simian warriors that Rama Chandra of Ayodhya had raised to invade the island-kingdom of Lanka in order to retrieve his abducted wife Sita, in the legendary epic poem Ramayana composed by the sage Valmiki. What did that mean in this context? There were no more vanars left in the world. Like rakshasas and asuras of yore, they had grown extinct in that past age of Treta Yuga, and were no more to be found upon the mortal realm. It was believed that their only purpose had been to serve Rama Chandra, believed by many to be an avatar of Lord Vishnu The Preserver, in his battle against the evil Ravana. Their mission accomplished, they had allowed their species to fade from the earth. How could her baby have found vanars here and now?

The answer came to her in the form of a great chittering as she plunged deeper into the grove. She knew at once what the sound meant. There was a great tribe of monkeys living in this grove and the neighbouring thickets. Since Gokuldham, like most of Vrajbhoomi, was rolling hillsides covered with grassy pastures the monkeys rarely ventured beyond these forested parts. Therefore their numbers grew dense and considerable at times, and they could become quite fiercely competitive as more of them competed for limited living space.

Right now, it seemed as if all the monkeys in Gokul had gathered here in this grove, judging from the cacophony of sound. She could see them in the trees above, their dark shapes thickly clustered on the branches and tree tops, their tails hanging, their mouths open to issue an endless litany of sound. What had upset them so greatly?

She soon found out the reason.

She came into a small clearing where the sun shone through eaves in large fan-shaped beams which caught motes of dust and illuminated the darker recesses indirectly. Within this gloomy illumination sat her little Krishna. Somehow he had managed to drag several large vessels of dahi with him all the way up here. She could not fathom at first how he could have done so. Even Balarama was not in sight this time to share the blame. She was able to guess the answer from the sight that now met her eyes. Krishna sat on the base of a rice-husking mortar to raise himself as high as possible. Suspended in mid air around him were several of the dahi handis, most already depleted. Only the last handi contained a little dahi and even that was disappearing fast. Krishna was scooping out dahi with his own hands and feeding it to his new found friends.

Vanarsena indeed!

The monkeys had formed a chain of tails and limbs and were hanging suspended from the largest tree in the grove, dangling down until they could reach their benefactor. The lowest one opened his mouth to receive a scoop of the dahi, which Krishna popped into his mouth, then chattered in thanks and scampered up the tree trunk. He was replaced at once by another eager-mouthed monkey.

Apparently, this process had been repeated several dozen times already, judging from the profusion of empty dahi handis and monkeys gathered around. Yet it would hardly be enough to satiate the many remaining monkeys who were still unfed. This was the reason for the cacophony. The monkeys who were farther back in the queue were grumbling loudly about waiting their turn!

Yashoda stood and took in this astonishing sight for a long moment. She could not understand how the dahi handis were floating suspended in mid air around Krishna. Then again, if a child of his tender age could pick up and drag so many dahi handis all the way up this hill, then it was as impossible for him to make them float in mid air. That was the least of her concern. What upset her tremendously was the fact that he was not only stealing once again from her neighbors but that he was stealing not even to gratify his own greed but simply to feed monkeys. Monkeys!

This was too much.

She looked around and found a stout stick. She broke off a protruding twig or two from the side, then hefted it. Yes, it would do nicely now. She raised it and began making her way towards her little son.

Krishna was totally absorbed in his task. Standing one legged on the mortar, partially lit by the smoky beams of sunlight descending from the high trees, he looked like a performer enacting some epic role in a Sanskrit drama. For an instant, as she approached, Yashoda almost thought she could hear music playing in the background, exactly as there would be if this really were a dramatic performance. Flute music, to be precise. But that was impossible of course. She must be

imagining it, or perhaps one of the gopas in the valley below was playing the flute as usual to soothe the cows and the wind had carried the sound here briefly.

She approached the mortal from behind, waving the stick. Krishna still had not seen her. But the monkeys had!

At the sight of a human waving a big stick, the monkeys suddenly lost all interest in the dahi feeding. Shrieking madly and leaping from branch to branch, they began an exodus. In moments, the large majority of them were escaping through the treetops, branches quivering in their wake, leaves drifting free, dust motes swirling in the beams of sunlight around Krishna. Even the monkey who was next in queue for his mouthful suddenly caught sight of Yashoda approaching, mistakenly assumed that her angry gaze and upheld stick were meant for him, shrieked in panic and scampered away on all fours, leaving a dust trail.

Krishna frowned, puzzled and peered after him. ‘Vanar come!’ he called out plaintively. ‘Come eat dahi! Nice-nice tasty-tasty!’

All the vanars had suddenly lost their appetite. Or perhaps they had remembered a monkey marathon they had forgotten about: they competed hotly to race one another in a bid to get as far away from the angry mother with the raised stick as possible.

At last Krishna realized that someone was behind him and turned around.

At the sight of Yashoda’s angry sweating face and the raised stick, he gaped in surprise.

Suddenly, all the floating dahi handis came crashing down to the ground, making a loud racket. Most of them being made of baked earth, they shattered on the ground. Whatever force had been holding them up in the air seemed to have deserted them all of a sudden.

In another moment, all the vanars had deserted Rama Chandra, leaving him alone to face his legendary foe.

Krishna stared at Yashoda. He gaped at her. He had never seen her so angry before. Or brandishing a stick. The stick appeared to be very thick and very strong. If she hit him with it, he had no doubt it would hurt considerably.

He had no wish to feel how hard.

Leaping off the mortar, he jumped down on the ground.

With a yell that rivaled the shrieks of his monkey friends, he ran.

The great asura lord gave pursuit, picking up her hem with her free hand to avoid tripping over it.

The chase did not last long. The boy could have raced ahead at any speed he chose, or flown away, or leaped to another planet if he so pleased. But the fact that he was being pursued by his mother seemed to weigh heavier on him than the fear of her punishment. Not coincidentally, the Sanskrit word for punishment was the same as the word for stick: danda. It was Yashoda's anger that Krishna feared far more than her danda.

And so, not far ahead, he slowed, then stopped. He was crying profusely, his kohl smeared around his eyes, giving him the appearance of a badger. He stood in the shade of a peepal tree, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes, face wet with tears and slime.

Yashoda came running up, saw him standing there, and stopped to catch her breath. She had a catch in her side. Though she had slimmed down considerably in the past few months, she had still a way to go before regaining the slender waist she had sported before entering motherhood. As for her hips, they would never return to their pre-maternal narrowness and excess weight tended to collect there, making it difficult for her to run this fast. She got her breath back and saw how miserable Krishna was: she realized she had scared him badly with the stick. Mischiefous though he was, willfully he had stolen the dahi handis and taken them into the grove to feed his monkey friends, no doubt as some kind of retribution for her ignoring him when busy with the churning, he was not malevolent or malicious. The instant he saw his mother with a big danda, all the mischief had fled at once. Now, he was genuinely scared.

She stopped for a moment and marveled at a boy who could face giantesses with poison milk and wind demons who could carry you up to the sky but feared his own mother. Then again, all boys feared their own mother, even when they were no longer boys!

Still, she knew she could not succumb to his tears. She must impress upon him that he had done wrong. Stealing milk products was the worst crime in Vraj. Everyone made a livelihood from these products; they were no less than gold or silver to a jewel trading community. This time, Krishna had gone too far. He had not even stolen the dahi for himself to eat, he had simply taken it out of petty spite. She could not risk him throwing such tantrums every time he was denied her attention for a moment or two.

So she grasped his arm, seizing him firmly but not roughly, crouched down to his height, and proceeded to explain right and wrong to him. He kept glancing at the stick still clutched in her hand and after a few moments, she threw the stick aside so he would know that she did not mean to strike him. She had never meant to strike him, truth be told.

He listened intently and as she continued berating him, his tears subsided. By and by, he stopped sniffling and listened to her. In response to her questions whether he would behave himself from

now on, he shook his head vigorously. But once the fear was past and he understood there would be no hitting with that scary big stick, she saw a glimmer of defiance creep back into his dark eyes again. She knew that look well. It meant that he had agreed and accepted her terms...for now. But he would likely do it again and yet again.

She had to give him some serious deterrent. Something that would rob him of the illicit pleasure of theft and mischief and make him feel it was not worth the punishment.

Her gaze passed over the stick and discarded it. She could never strike him with that thing. Not her baby. Never.

Then she remembered the mortar on which he had been standing when she found him. Walking him back to that place, she proceeded to tie him to the mortar with a rope. She intended to show him how effectively she could curtail his freedom and restrict his movements. If there was one thing her little Krishna hated, it was being confined to one place for long. This would seem like a far worse punishment than the stick. She passed the rope around his slender little frame, intending to tie him to the mortar.

When she reached the end, she found that the rope was too short to tie properly.

She looked around and saw another length of rope. A pile of hemp rope lay discarded here, probably left by someone after some task. She joined the first length to the second, extending the overall length and then began to tie the rope to the mortar.

Again, the rope was too short.

She frowned. This was odd. Adding the new length of rope should have made the whole sufficient to tie. Yet it seemed to have reduced in length rather than increasing! How was that possible?

She tied a third piece of rope - and met with the same result. Once more the rope was just too short to tie a knot.

Again and again, she continued trying, until finally, she had joined enough ropes together to tie up all the monkeys in Gokuldham. It was to no avail: she still could not tie a simple knot to secure Krishna to the mortar.

She looked at her son.

He was looking into the distance, his chubby cheeks dimpled by a mischievous smile.

She took his chin in her hand and raised his face. She saw the look of mischief on his face. It had not taken long for him to regain his confidence!

‘I know you are responsible for the rope not being long enough,’ she said softly. ‘I saw the way you made the dahi handis float in air, and I know of the things you are capable of. I know what I saw when I looked into your open mouth that day, the day the wind demon attacked you. I know who you really are.’

The look of mischief faded to be replaced by an inscrutable expression. He said nothing, merely listened to her voice.

‘I know you can do almost anything you set your mind to,’ she said. ‘I know that I am merely a mortal woman and no match for your divine abilities...’

He stared at her with great big soulful eyes, as if drinking in her emotions.

‘Yet,’ she went on after a pause and a sigh, ‘yet I am also your mother in this life. Whatever else you may be in eternity, in this era you are my little son. And I your mother. And in order to be your mother I must teach you certain things, how to behave, how to respect your elders, how to speak well and live well, how to do well...It is my dharma, just as your dharma in this form is to be a good son. Therefore, my Lord, my divine Supreme Paramatma, I pray to you, grant me this boon. Let me be your mother. Let me teach you what little I know about being human. Let me show you the way, as I know it. We may or may not enact these roles ever again, but for now, for this one short wink of an eyelash, we are united in this relationship of blood and flesh and nurturing, and I must do my part. Therefore, my Lord, my Bhagwan, I beseech you, work with me. Help me help you. Teach me to teach you. Show me how to show you the way.’

Krishna looked at her for a long moment, saying nothing. He looked at her sweating face, the flowers wilted and faded and fallen, the undone hair, the dusty garments, and suddenly a look of profound embarrassment and shame came over his little features. He bowed his head slowly, his chin dipping gradually as he came to realize how he had troubled and vexed his mother. It did not matter if he had intended to do so or not, the fact was he had done so and that was all that mattered. She was vexed, troubled, harassed and weary. She only wanted to teach him this lesson and then they could resume their loving relationship as before.

He nodded once, acquiescing. Then held out his little hands.

Yashoda looked down and saw the rope had grown in length. Now there was more than enough to tie a knot. She slipped the knot into place, finding the rope seeming to move almost of its own accord, the knot forming perfectly on the first try, without needing any adjustment.

Then she stepped back. Krishna was tied to the mortar now.

But she wondered who had really learned a lesson: the son or the mother?

“I am pleased with you,” Jarasandha said. His voice echoed in the enclosed confines of the stone chamber.

Kamsa felt himself flush with pleasure at the compliment. It took an effort to keep from showing his father-in-law how much he enjoyed being praised by him. It was rare to be complimented by the God Emperor. Even rarer to receive such a compliment unsolicited. Kamsa wondered what he had done to deserve this particular kudos but held his tongue and waited to hear what Jarasandha said next.

The Magadhan reached the bottom of the stone stairwell and vanished for an instant. Kamsa was close behind him, but by the time he reached the bottom of the stairwell, he found himself unable to see where Jarasandha had gone. He felt a moment of unease: the God Emperor was better known for slaughtering people, even his own, rather than complimenting him. Perhaps the kudos had merely been intended to throw Kamsa off his guard. Then he glimpsed a flicker of light from a corner and saw that there was a slanted passageway there. It was virtually impossible to detect unless it was lit from within as it was now. Kamsa had to bend over to pass through and even then he felt the claustrophobia of his environs press in upon him.

They were deep within the subterranean chambers of Jarasandha’s new city, the resplendent Magadha that Kamsa had seen taking shape a decade ago. They had ridden here half a fortnight ago, and Jarasandha had treated Kamsa as an equal and a friend all through the trip, introducing him to several of his commanders and kings en route, referring to him with evident pride as his son-in-law. All concerned had treated Kamsa with such deference he had felt an unexpected surge of satisfaction. Even Ugrasena could not have had so many kings bowing to him during his long reign. That in itself gave him a great sense of satisfaction.

He remembered his father again now as he followed Jarasandha through a long winding low-ceilinged passageway to finally emerge into a large stone chamber. Jarasandha dipped the head of the torch into a little channel that ran around the wall of the chamber and at once, the liquid in the channel took flame. The fire travelled around the wall and higher still, illuminating the chamber. Kamsa saw that a network of artfully concealed channels had been cut into the stone for the fluid to flow freely. The liquid itself took fire but burned slowly, providing more than sufficient light to see by yet giving out no smoke or discernible odor. He guessed that was important in an underground chamber where one could easily suffocate with too many lit torches blazing at once and insufficient ventilation.

He marveled at the architecture of the chamber. It was artfully designed and executed, cut entirely from stone. Yet he could not fathom the purpose of such a chamber. It was clearly no

underground dungeon or place of confinement. What purpose did it serve then?

Jarasandha smiled at him. ‘You are wondering at the function of this place?’

Kamsa nodded. It was a reasonable question.

Jarasandha pointed at the far wall of the chamber. ‘Observe.’

The Magadhan began chanting shlokas in the rapid-fire self-absorbed tone that Kamsa had heard brahmins intone so often before. But the language he used was not Sanskrit. Nor was he reciting any type of shlokas that Kamsa had ever heard before. The very language and form of pronunciation was alien, foreign, unfamiliar to his ears.

He was startled when the far wall of the chamber burst into flame. It was as if the same fluid that ran in the recessed channels had been splashed in great quantity upon the blank stone wall and had caught fire. The very wall itself seemed to blaze with a brilliant searing green light.

Kamsa covered his eyes from the suddenly blinding light. ‘What--?’ he began.

‘That is a Vortal,’ Jarasandha said. ‘The mantras I recited are the key to opening and closing it but there are other means by which it can be accessed. Some involve the use of devices such as you cannot imagine. But these things do not concern you. All you need be concerned with is the fact that such a thing as a Vortal exists and that it can be used at will.’

Kamsa stared at the blazing wall of green flame. ‘I don’t understand, father,’ he said. He had taken to calling Jarasandha father these past few days - at Jarasandha’s own request. It seemed to roll naturally off his tongue. ‘What is this thing, this...Vortal?’

Jarasandha explained it to him.

Kamsa goggled.

‘A portal for traveling from our world to other similar worlds?’

‘Yes,’ Jarasandha said, ‘Worlds that are variations on our own world. Infinite worlds, infinite variations.’

Kamsa shook his head. ‘Forgive me, father. I do not understand.’

Jarasandha chuckled softly. ‘I should have expected that. Yes, I do understand and it does not matter one whit. The beauty of the Vortals is that you do not need to understand them in order to use them. You only need know how to use them. And that is something I can show you easily enough.’

He stepped towards the wall of green fire. Flames flickered and rolled and crackled upon the stone wall, emitting the most peculiar mossy green luminescence Kamsa had ever seen. ‘Come,’ Jarasandha said, ‘let us pass through. What I have to show you can only be understood after you go through the Vortal.’

Kamsa swallowed. He could face warriors twice his size, take on armies, battle enemies by the dozen. But this... this was... ‘Sorcery,’ he blurted, unintentionally speaking the world aloud.

‘Perhaps,’ Jarasandha said calmly, ‘for what else is sorcery but a highly advanced form of science whose rules we have yet to learn. But even if it is sorcery, it is of a form that can be used to our advantage.’

‘Must I...’ Kamsa asked, then paused, swallowing thickly. ‘Must I pass through it?’

‘Yes,’ Jarasandha said casually. ‘Because if you do not, I shall tear you limb from limb right here and now and eat your vitals. Have I made myself clear enough?’

Kamsa forgot his terror of the strange green wall of fire and turned his attention to his father in law. He saw that Jarasandha meant every word: he would literally tear Kamsa to pieces and eat his organs, probably while Kamsa was still alive enough to feel the excruciating agony. Kamsa’s newfound body density made it impossible for almost any other human being, including the formidable Crooked Jaw, to so much as squeeze his tendons let alone break his bones or cause real harm, and it was possible that if he fought Jarasandha one on one he might win...But then again, he might not. And he was not sure he wanted to risk it.

Suddenly, he didn’t feel too afraid of the green wall of fire. Whatever it may look like, it probably wouldn’t burn him. After all, Jarasandha meant to go through it as well and he would hardly condone burning off his own skin or flesh. Besides, Kamsa had no reason to think his father-in-law meant him bodily harm - not unless he refused to obey his orders.

‘I shall do as you say, sire,’ he replied and stepped towards the Vortal.

‘Follow me,’ Jarasandha said quietly to him as he reached out with one hand, touching the green wall of flame. Kamsa watched in amazement as Jarasandha’s hand passed through and through the flames and disappeared from view. ‘And we shall ensure the destruction of the Slayer and his entire clan very shortly.’

Then Jarasandha stepped through the green wall of fire and passed from sight.

Without giving himself time to think or question what he was doing, Kamsa followed him.

5

Kamsa cried out in alarm.

He was surrounded by dense rock. Buried deep within the earth. From the look of it, the rock and soil here had not been disturbed in millennia and lay exactly as formed through eons of accumulation.

‘We are buried!’ he cried.

Jarasandha turned back to him and laughed. ‘Do not fret. You will come to no harm here. In fact, you are not truly here at all, merely a wraith, a wisp of yourself. We are both no more than ghosts in this realm, for this is the plane of Narada.’

Kamsa forgot his shock and bewilderment and looked up. ‘Narada? Narada-muni?’

‘Yes. Look at me,’ Jarasandha said. He held up his hand. Kamsa saw that Jarasandha’s entire body had acquired a rim of fiery greenish flame, as if it had caught fire from the wall of green fire through which they had passed. The Vortal, as Jarasandha had called it. Jarasandha’s upheld hand sizzled with this same eerie flame, flickering even in the webbing between his fingers. ‘Now look at yourself.’

Kamsa looked. His body too was ringed with the same greenish fire.

Jarasandha waved a hand at the nearest rock. His hand passed right through the rock without any effort, and seemed quite unharmed. ‘You see?’ he continued demonstrating by punching harder, then moving his entire body forward to show how easily he could pass through the solid bedrock of this subterranean plane. ‘Like ghosts!’

Kamsa followed him hurriedly, not wishing to lose sight of his father in law. He wondered what would happen if he were stranded here in this plane alone. He had no wish to learn the answer.

Jarasandha moved freely through the underground, traveling in a slightly upward gradient now. Kamsa did the same, his stomach still feeling queasy as he passed through entire layers of earth and stone and even underground water. He thought he felt colder here in this place and when he passed through the pooled underground water, he was certain he felt a faint sensation of...wetness? damp? But Jarasandha was right. He could not actually feel things as usual. It was more his mind telling his body that it ought to be feeling such things.

‘Our actual physical bodies lie back there in the underground chamber. That is why I keep the Vortal chamber out of view so my body can be safe when I travel to other realms. You already saw how securely I locked the numerous doors and gates to the subterranean chamber. No harm will come to our physical forms while we travel. And no harm can come to us here. Because, you see my son, we are not actually here. Only our consciousness extends into this realm of Narada. We are probing this place only with our minds.’

Kamsa understood the words Jarasandha was speaking but not their entire meaning. He made out that they were safe, they were locked in, they were traveling, and they were not actually here, just mentally. He agreed whole-heartedly. Anyone who attempted such things would have to be mental!

Jarasandha continued explaining things as they went forward. He was still talking when he suddenly vanished. Kamsa had another moment of heart-stopping shock when he thought his father in law had abandoned him here in this hellish realm forever. All manner of thoughts passed through his mind, mostly related to karma and wicked deeds and the likelihood of hell for one such as himself. Then he emerged from the stone-bounded darkness of the underworld into the open air beneath the open sky and clouds and sun, and saw Jarasandha only a short distance away. His heart flooded with relief.

‘You must see this,’ Jarasandha said. ‘But be very quiet and as still as possible. So long as we do not agitate the ether we are invisible but if we move or speak or feel violent emotions he will sense us. That would not be good. In this plane of existence, he is as a god. After all, this is his realm, created by himself for his purposes.’

Who was he talking about, Kamsa wondered. Then he looked over Jarasandha’s shoulder and saw for himself.

Narada-muni! In the flesh!

Kamsa started forward, anger rising. ‘You lied to me! You--’

A hand as strong as an iron vise caught hold of his neck. Not only his voice, his breath was choked off abruptly. He felt his windpipe being crushed. So powerful was Jarasandha’s grip, he had only to squeeze a little harder and Kamsa’s neck would snap. Kamsa was shocked out of his wits. It had been a while since anyone had been able to lay hands on him in this fashion. His unique ability had made him believe he was invulnerable. And he was invulnerable to all intents and purposes. But clearly Jarasandha was far, far more powerful than he. The single-handed grip the Magadhan exerted on Kamsa’s throat was more powerful than anything Kamsa had experienced before. He realized for the first time in over a decade that he was not beyond the reach of mortality after all. It was a revelation.

The face of his father in law was bestial, animalistic in its intensity. The eyes flickered shut and open repeatedly with their nictitating eyelids flashing sideways to reveal serpentine eyes. The forked tongue flickered between those thin lips. And the skin itself appeared mottled and cracked and veined like snakeskin that had aged a millennium or two. ‘I. Said. Be. Quiet. Be. Still.’

Kamsa’s eyes bulged as the life faded from his body. He felt his vision blurring then turning dark. He realized he was dying. It was an extraordinary sensation. He had not realized he could die after all. Evidently, it was possible.

Slowly, by degrees, vision returned, breath returned, and with them came life. He felt himself set down again and then released. He fell forward, gasping and choking but suddenly very conscious of his own actions and careful not to make any noise. He recovered quickly. His body healed instantly, if it had been harmed at all.

He looked up at Jarasandha who glanced down at him scornfully. ‘I am sorry, father. I did not mean...’

Jarasandha gestured dismissively. ‘No apologies. You cannot suffer harm in this place, nor die as you might have assumed. But you can feel and suffer. Remember that the next time you disobey me.’

Kamsa got to his feet. ‘I saw the brahmin and lost my head.’

Jarasandha nodded. ‘I have the same reaction when I see a brahmin, any brahmin. But you must learn to control it. We shall kill many brahmins in time, you and I. That is one of the reasons we were given this rebirth. But there are other tasks equally important. This trip is to ensure that that larger mission is fulfilled successfully. Do you understand?’

Kamsa nodded.

Jarasandha looked at him for a long moment. The Magadhan’s face and appearance was as before, his snake like inner nature concealed beneath the mortal garb once more. But it lurked thinly beneath the surface, able to lunge out at any instant. Kamsa berated himself for forgetting that, even for a moment.

‘Very well, then,’ Jarasandha said at last. ‘Let us continue. Our task here is simply to observe, nothing more. We must not attract the attention of the one who created this plane or he will unleash more grief upon us both than even I could unleash upon you. Do you follow, Kamsa?’

Kamsa nodded vigorously.

'In this plane, he is supreme. For it is not a real realm or plane of existence in the usual sense. It is merely a Vortal between worlds. And Narada is a master of Vortals. As a messenger to the devas, he needs to pass quickly from one plane to another, one time to another, one part of space to the other and this is the quickest way. He has created this plane from the amalgam of effluents of all his trips, and uses it to observe various events and to plan his next move. The reason why you were about to lunge at him was because you felt he had betrayed you, am I right? You felt he had forewarned you about the Slayer's impending birth so that you could prevent the Slayer from being born or kill him at birth itself, isn't that so? And when you realized that the Slayer survived after all and is still alive and growing up safely somewhere, and will someday come to challenge and attempt to kill you, you felt that Narada had lied to you. That is what you meant when you started to lunge at him, is it not?'

Kamsa stared at his father in law in amazement. 'Exactly! But how--?'

'I have known since the beginning, Kamsa,' Jarasandha said quietly. 'But had I told you of events that were to happen in years ahead, you would have either dismissed my cautions or suspected my motives.' He shot Kamsa a shrewd glance. 'As you suspect them even now. For that is how a conqueror thinks - suspect everyone, trust no one. But do not fret. I would expect nothing less of you. After all, I taught you that outlook. Trust no one, not even me. In life as in death you are alone. It is the only way to triumph over the world. But as for Narada,' Jarasandha glanced in the other direction, 'he is only one player in a much larger game of gods and kings. He told you of the prophecy not to help you but to serve his own ends. It was your folly that you assumed he was acting in your interests and advising you. In fact, he intended the exact opposite. He was steering you towards your own destruction!'

Kamsa stared. 'But...he told me about the Slayer!'

'Yes, and what good did it do you? Did he tell you where and when and how the Eighth Child would be born? Did he tell you how He could be killed? Narada does know these things, yet he never shared such information with you.'

Kamsa's mind boggled with the implications. 'But he told me to seek you out! We would never have met if it were not for him.'

Jarasandha chuckled and shook his head. 'My envoy was already on the way to Mathura to request you to come to Magadha. My alliance with you was a foregone conclusion. All Narada did was insert himself into your life at an opportune time in order to give you the illusion that he was helping you.'

Kamsa frowned. Then grew angry again. His fists clenched and he raised them to pound the earth before remembering that it would be futile in this plane. He let his hands fall to his sides again, and they fell uselessly through the grass on which he sat.

Jarasandha held out a hand. Kamsa took it and rose to his feet. Jarasandha put his hand on Kamsa's shoulder. 'That is why I brought you here today. It was time you learned of Narada's duplicity. And of the larger game being played in which the brahmin, you, I, and even the mythical Slayer Himself are but participants.'

He began walking again, his arm still around Kamsa. 'Come. Let me show you.'

6

Krishna's antics became the talk of Gokuldham. No matter how destructive the pranks played by the little dark one and his milk-fair brother, people always forgave them. At times, there was nothing to forgive. After the incident with the stick, Yashoda took to disciplining Krishna each time he misbehaved. She would never raise a hand on him or use too intense a tone and loud a voice. Because she sensed that these were things Krishna did deliberately and knowingly. Some part of him knew they were things he was not supposed to do and that was all the more reason for him to do them. They were his way of getting her attention or the attention of the other gopas and gopis. He thrived on attention. At times, when caught in some act of mischief, when a crowd gathered to berate his latest activity, he would start dancing. And soon enough the angry voices would fade and be replaced by amused exclamations as everyone marvelled at his agility and sense of rhythm. His dark feet pounded the dust, his body spinning and twirling at impossible angles, as he danced with a pace and perfection none other could match. Even the most accomplished dancers of Gokul gaped in amazement and admiration. Krishna's dance was a thing to behold.

And always, accompanying the dance, came the sound of flute music. The same haunting melody that Yashoda had heard the first time in the thicket. And just like on that occasion, no one could make out where the music was coming from or who was playing it. Because the flute was the patent musical instrument of the Vrishnis, used to herd wandering cows, soothe sick ones, and even to coax dry ones into yielding milk, nobody gave it much thought. But Yashoda began to realize that in fact the flute music was coming from Krishna himself. Somehow, miraculously, impossibly, he was playing the flute and dancing at the same time - even though no flute was ever visible! How this could possibly be, she did not know. But like so many other things involving Krishna, she learned not to question it. Simply to accept. The music itself was so beautiful, so memorable, that nobody cared much about its origin or source, they simply stopped whatever they were doing and listened, watching as the little dark child's bare feet pounded the dust and his body spun round and round until it seemed as if the very earth spun with him. Or because of him. As if it were due to his dance that the planet itself spun on its axis, and because of the angle at which he leaned while dancing that Prithvi itself tilted at that peculiar angle while spinning. He was the Coriolis effect personified, the one who made worlds spin and Creation exist.

This was the beauty and magic of govinda's dance.

On one occasion, he wanted fruit. He loved to eat fruit, though not as much as he loved buttermilk and curds - nothing compared to buttermilk and curds. And there was no fruit in the house. So he picked up a fistful of grain and went to the fruit seller in the market, meaning to exchange the grain for the fruit. This too his mother had taught him after the incidents with the dahi handis. 'People depend on selling or trading these items to earn their keep and feed

themselves,' she explained to him patiently, 'by taking them without paying for them, we are depriving those people of their own means of living. We must always pay a price for everything we consume.'

He did not know how much the fruit would cost and it did not occur to him that even a fistful of grain - especially a tiny fistful like his - would hardly compensate for the fruit he desired. But he remembered to take the fistful at least.

But by the time he reached the fruit-seller, the grain had run out through his fingers and barely a grain or two remained on his sweaty palm. He held it out and knew that it would be much too little to pay for the fruit. In his little brain - for as a mortal, he was a babe and subject to the limitations of his body and age - he thought that such tiny grains could hardly compensate for such big fruits. The size measure was not quite accurate, but it was a measure at least and the only one he could think of, for the last time he had seen his mother buy fruit, she had handed a sack of grain that was about the same size as the basket of fruits she had received in exchange. Now he had no grain to offer and he was determined to prove to Yashoda that he did not mean to steal or deprive other people of their own means of living. What else could he offer that would compensate for the fruits he wished to buy? Finally, an idea came to him and he smiled to himself. Yes, that would do nicely!

The fruit-seller was busy bargaining with another customer and did not notice little Krishna at once. There was some question about whether or not the fruits were fresh. When she finished and the other customer moved on, carrying a small basket of her purchases, little Krishna piped up from below her line of vision.

'Maatey,' he said, for he had been taught to address all women as Mother unless told otherwise, 'how many fruits will this buy me?'

The fruit-seller looked down at the little boy's closed fists. He opened them and showed her the contents.

'Deva!' she exclaimed, attracting the attention of all the market. 'Where did you get those!'

Attracted by the commotion, other customers and even vendors came to see what was going on. The instant someone spotted little Krishna, word spread and in moments a crowd had gathered to witness what new mischief Nanda-Maharaja's and Yashoda-devi's son was unto now.

'What is it, Malani-devi?' asked one of the bystanders of the fruit-seller.

'Look,' she said excitedly, pointing to Krishna. 'Look at what he is offering to pay me for my fruit!'

Everyone looked. And was flabbergasted.

For in his two little fists, Krishna had a small fortune in precious stones. Sparkling diamonds, scintillating rubies, pearls, emeralds...It was a kilo weight of the choicest gems any of them had seen.

'Where did you get these?' someone asked Krishna.

By this time, Krishna knew that something had gone amiss. He could only think that they were all so agitated because they thought he had stolen the gems, which he had not, of course. He had simply picked up two handfuls of stones from the ground and turned them into the kind of gems he knew his mother liked through the power of his mind. But he also knew he could not say that to these people because mortals did not believe anyone could do such things. So he tried to be as truthful as possible: 'I got them from the sack of gems in my mother's kitchen,' he said. 'I didn't steal them!'

Everyone goggled at the thought. They knew Nanda-Maharaja was well off. But surely not this well off! 'How many are in the sack in your mother's kitchen?' they asked curiously.

'Oh, lots!' Krishna said, mistakenly thinking that if they thought there were plenty more where these came from they would see that a couple of handfuls did not matter much. 'There are many sacks full of gems like these. Hundreds of sacks! Thousands!'

Everyone laughed. Now they knew he could not be telling the truth. Even King Kamsa the Usurper in Mathura did not possess thousands of sacks of such precious gems. Once again, it was assumed that Krishna had been unto his usual mischief and had filched the gems from someplace.

One wag cried out a closing comment that had everyone in splits: 'Malani-devi,' he said to the fruit-seller. 'You should have kept quiet and taken the payment! Nobody would ever dare to have bargained with you about your fruits! You could always say that you had once sold a basket to Krishna for a king's ransom in precious stones!'

Even Krishna laughed with the crowd. Though he did not quite understand why they were laughing.

From time to time when he was naughtier than usual - which usually meant that he had caused others to become overly upset or irate at his antics, instead of causing them to laugh as they had over the gems and fruits - Yashoda would gently lead him to the place where the mortar was kept and tie him to it as she had done that day in the grove. The tying did not harm or cause him any great inconvenience and she never left him tied too long. It only served the purpose of restricting his freedom and reminding him that he needed to correct his behavior. He understood this and complied without protest, even when he did not understand what he had done wrong. Yashoda

always explained his fault to him, patiently, and answered any questions he had, but even so, he often had difficulty differentiating between the things mortals considered incorrect, inappropriate or wrong, and the things they accepted as part of natural behavior. After that first day in the grove, Yashoda understood that it was only Krishna's compliance that enabled her to tie him up and for his movements to be restricted by the mortar but it was the lesson that mattered, not the danda. If she could teach him without waving the stick, she would do so, even if it meant teaching him ten times to understand what he might learn in a single beating with the stick. For that which was learned through infliction of pain, suffering or coercion was no different from the learning acquired by a slave or a dog. It was only when one learned willingly that true knowledge could be acquired.

But then one day an incident occurred which made Yashoda realize that even this mild punishment was no longer useful.

It was also the incident that changed the lives of all who lived in Gokuldham and Vrajbhoomi forever and led to the great exodus of the Vrishnis.

The mortar had been moved that day, and been placed in a different part of the backyard of Yashoda's house. There were two arjuna trees beside it, growing close to each other and leaving just enough space for a child to slip through, but not enough for a grown person to pass. Krishna was in one of his stubbornly mischevious moods that day, not just doing mischief but acting defiant about it. In time to come, even Yashoda would have no recollection of what his fault had been on that occasion because the events that followed were more memorable. But it was his attempt to drag the mortar that made her decide she needed to escalate the penalty. Because of this, Yashoda tied Krishna to the mortar in such a way that he was on one side and the mortar on the other side. The mortar blocked one way, and if he tried to drag it the other way, the trees would impede his efforts.

'Now wait here and think about the mischief you did until I finish my chores,' she scolded before leaving.

Krishna sat sullenly for a while, arms folded across his chest, eyes crossed in a sulky expression, lips pouting. Feeling drowsy as he often did when overcome by too much emotion, he fell asleep without meaning to and in moments he was leaning against one of the arjuna trees, eyes closed and thumb in his mouth, soothing himself to an unconscious state.

He opened his eyes and found himself in a different place and time.

He was on the side of a great mountain, in a grove of extraordinary beauty. The colours of the flowers and fruits and leaves, the quality of the air he breathed, the crystal clarity of the water in the waterfall and river nearby, all testified to this being some supernormal plane. The beauty of the vista he viewed was overwhelming.

'You are on the slope of Kailasa,' said a voice and he turned to see an ancient man clad as a brahmin, with long flowing white beard and red ochre garb. 'This is the sacred grove called Mandakini. We are in the shadow of your friend and fellow immortal, Mahadev.'

The old brahmin indicated the top of the mountain. Krishna looked up and saw a snow-crested peak that was as familiar as the backyard of Yashoda and Nanda's house. 'He is engaged elsewhere, as are Maatey Parvati and their sons Karthikeya and Ganesha. Hence I came to see what the commotion was about.'

The instant he uttered the word 'commotion' Krishna heard sounds of laughter and splashing. He turned to look down at the river below, at a still pool formed by the overflow from the cascade.

There were several people there, splashing about merrily and making a great deal of noise and commotion. Even from here, he could see that they were naked as they day they were born.

'They are Nalakuvara and Manigriva, sons of Kubera, treasurer of the devas,' Narada said. Krishna knew the old brahmin's name was Narada although he did not know how he knew. It was as if all knowledge was coming flooding back into his mind just as readily as the cold glacial river water was cascading down that waterfall below. 'They have consumed too much varuni and thought it would be good sport to come and frolic with the gandharvas and apsaras who dwell here.'

Krishna glanced down again and made out two male forms among the score or more of female bodies cavorting in the still pool below. They all appeared to be enjoying themselves greatly.

'Their enjoyment of vicarious pleasures is not in itself a sin. It is the impunity with which they do so with women other than their own wives, in a place reserved as a sacred sanctuary, without the permission of the owner, in a state of such intoxication that they can barely stay conscious. And most offensive of all is the fact that they act thusly only because they are empowered by the considerable wealth of their father. There is no quality of rajas that I find more offensive than pride of wealth. The earning and accumulation of riches is a matter of karma and is irrelevant in the larger scheme of things. But when people pride their riches over all else, even common sense and decency, they lose their humanity. To see these two young men act thus indecently and think they can get away with it because they are spoiled sons of a rich father, this is unacceptable to me. Therefore I shall curse them. It shall be their fate to remain naked as they are now, and to stay in a state of immobility for a hundred years, until they are freed from my curse by none other than you, son of Vasudeva. And that time has now come.'

Almost at once, the landscape changed before Krishna's eyes. Gone was the idyllic beauty of Mount Kailasa, abode of the Three-Eyed One, and in its place was Yashoda's backyard again: with the two arjuna trees before him. He looked around and saw that Narada had vanished as well.

He sat up and looked at the trees. They were stout and old, and looked like any arjuna tree he had seen. But he knew now what they truly were.

'It is your lucky day,' he said to the trees, patting each one gently with his baby hands as he stood up. 'Your time of danda has ended, and I am to free you now.'

And he began to pull with all his might. The mortar moved forward several inches until its edges struck the two trees. There it held fast. Krishna knew that the force required to pull it free was more than a single horse could exert. Perhaps two or four horses might do it, pulling together and using strong ropes. But he had no horses at hand, and Narada-muni's words had been quite clear. It was unto him, son of Vasudeva, to free these two punished souls.

Jarasandha and Kamsa watched as Narada watched little Krishna tugging at the mortar. As he strained his little mortal body, the ropes binding him to the mortar began slowly to stretch and then to fray. He saw this and stopped pulling for a moment. Taking firm hold of the mortar itself, he began to pull at it with all his might, trying to push it through the gap between the two arjuna trees. There was no room for the mortar to pass of course. Yet the force Krishna exerted was so great, the mortar began to pull at the trees themselves.

A great cracking noise sounded, and with a huge heave of effort, the arjuna trees began to emerge from the ground, their roots unseated by Krishna's force. With a great powerful tug, he leveraged the mortar to pull both trees out by their roots. It was an astonishing sight for even the mortar was twice as high as the little dark-skinned boy himself. The trees towered over him, ridiculously tall and strong.

Kamsa could not imagine what strength it must take to uproot the trees. He had smashed many trees since he had acquired his new abilities. But to uproot them in this fashion? Both trees emerged from the ground, their roots trailing for several yards, clotted with clods of earth. Dust rose up in the air and the trees both came crashing down to the ground on either side of Krishna, sending up a great noise of timber cracking.

Kamsa flinched as he saw people approaching at a run. Jarasandha smiled at his nervousness and patted his shoulder. 'They cannot see us. We are watching through Narada's Vortal, and Narada himself cannot be seen by anyone on earth at this time. And so long as we remain still and do not evoke too much emotional disturbance, even Narada will not sense our presence here. We are merely ghost observers.'

Kamsa nodded, reassured but still unnerved by the fact that there were people before him whom he could clearly see and hear but could not hear or see him in turn.

Yashoda came running up thinking the worst had happened. She was relieved beyond words to see Krishna standing safely, the remnants of the ropes dangling from his arms and waist. The dust cloud behind him had partially settled to reveal the two fallen trees, their roots exposed, and the mortar which had been crushed beneath the trees when the fell. It was incredible to conceive that her little son could have brought down those two great trees, yet from the first instant she had no doubt that this was indeed the case.

'Krishna!' she cried, embracing him. He was coated from head to foot in dust, turning his jetblack skin powdery white in colour. 'What have you done this time?'

He smiled at her. ‘Maatr, I freed the sons of Kubera!’

She looked in the direction he was pointing, at the two fallen trees. People had gathered around, talking agitatedly. But Krishna was pointing where nobody was looking, at the ends of the roots of the two trees. Yashoda saw a shimmering miasma gathering, as if some preternatural sap were oozing from the tips of the roots and collecting together into two separate masses. As she watched, the masses coalesced to form two ghostly humanoid shapes. She was even able to discern that they were men, two young men clad in rich robes and jewels. These two ghostly shapes, barely as substantial as the dust settling around them, joined their palms together and bowed before Krishna.

‘Supreme yogi,’ she heard them say, and knew at once that they were speaking not in sounds but in words only her mind could hear, just as Krishna had spoken to her when he was younger. ‘You are the Paramatma. All of Creation is merely your body. You are the ultimate controller of senses, souls, essences, and corporeal forms of all entities. You are Kala itself, Time Infinite. You are Swayam Bhagwan. You are none other than Vishnu, the indestructible Preserver. You are the mahout and the prakriti. You contain rajas, sattva and tamas within your being. You are the overseer of all things, the supremely knowledgeable One, the uncapturable, the personification of almighty brahman itself. In this your amsa, you have blessed us wrongdoers by freeing us of our earthly prisons, leaving us free to return to our true forms and resume our celestial duties. Pray, give us permission to depart now, Lord. We are eternally grateful to you and remain your servants. We pray the forgiveness of your servant Narada as well and deeply regret the offense we caused him and Mahadeva as well by violating the sanctity of the sacred grove.’

And as Yashoda looked on in wonderment, her little Krishna cried out, ‘Go now! You are forgiven.’

And after circumambulating her son with folded palms, the two guhyakas vanished without a trace.

Only then did Yashoda become aware of the great commotion around her.

‘Another asura attack! And once again Nanda and Yashoda’s little one was spared only by the grace of Vishnu. Look how close he came to being crushed by the falling trees. Look at the state of the mortar!’

The voices rose in a cacophony, deafening out Yashoda’s protests and attempts to explain. She tried repeatedly to explain that it was only Krishna who had pulled down the trees but of course nobody would believe her or credit her story.

Finally, Krishna himself put a hand on her head and said affectionately, ‘Maatr, do not trouble yourself. They will believe what they believe to be true. But you know the ultimate truth.’

She was appeased by his words and his childish wisdom. But still felt troubled. ‘Yes, my son, but they are very upset. There is talk of migrating out of Gokuldham, even leaving Vrajbhoomi and going into exile. They fear that this is yet another sign that we Vrishnis are no longer welcome in this land. They mean for us to make an exodus! Your father Nanda’s friend Upananda has been advocating it from the very first incident of the cart-breaking and now he might even prevail, given the current mindset of our people. This may well be the incident that provokes our clan to leave this beautiful homeland and go into exile!’

Krishna nodded, understanding all, and patted his mother lovingly. ‘So be it,’ he said. ‘Let what will be be.’

She stared at him.

He grinned mischievously. ‘How do you know it is not what I intended from the very beginning?’

She was thunderstruck. Could it be possible? That Krishna wanted them to leave Vraj and Gokul? ‘You mean...’ she began.

He shushed her with a raised finger. ‘Let us not speak further, Maatr. Who knows who might be listening. Come, take me home now and bathe me. I wish to be clean and fresh before I drink of your milk again. And I am thirsty enough to drink all your milk today!’

And he took her larger hand in his own, clasping it tightly, and turned her homewards.

9

Jarasandha cursed as their view of Krishna and Yashoda faded, and even Narada turned away, looking smug and satisfied.

‘What is it?’ Kamsa asked. He was still reeling from the sight of the Slayer. That child? That little tyke? He was the prophecies One who would someday kill him, Kamsa? He could barely believe it. Yet he had witnessed the felling of the trees with his own eyes - or whatever passed for his eyes in this incorporeal plane - and he knew that what he had seen was no little boy.

‘He knows something,’ Jarasandha said. ‘He is looking forward to going away with his clan! That is not the way it was supposed to be.’

Kamsa frowned. ‘How was it supposed to be?’

‘The attacks by the assassin squad I gave you were meant to chase the Vrishnis out of Vraj with their tails between their legs, frightened and scared, seeking sanctuary.’

Kamsa thought for a moment. ‘Is that not what is about to happen? They are going into exile now, are they not?’

‘Yes, but that little God of the mortals, he is upto something! He knew all along that they would go into exile and he is not afraid of it. He looks forward to it, even takes credit for it himself!’

‘But what does that mean?’ Kamsa asked.

‘It means that our traps and snares set in the place of exile might be foreseen by him,’ Jarasandha snarled. As he spoke he dove into the ground. Kamsa followed. They were traveling back to the subterranean spot where they had entered this realm, he knew now. Back through the gateway that Jarasandha called a Vortal, to their own world. Kamsa would be relieved to return there, he did not care overmuch for spiritual tourism.

‘I see,’ he said, understanding suddenly and filling with bright, shining hope. ‘You intended this all along. You gave me Putana and the other assassins to send after the Slayer, knowing that they would fail but would serve a greater purpose: to shepherd the Vrishnis into a trap?’

Jarasandha shrugged as they passed through giant boulders and stratified fossils. ‘I did not know for certain they would fail. I hoped they might succeed. But if they did not, then yes, there was a larger plan in place. And yes, that larger plan was to shepherd the human herd into a place where we could pick them off as calves in a den of wolves.’

‘And that is precisely what is happening now,’ Kamsa observed. ‘Yet Krishna said he did not fear it, he even seemed to welcome it.’ It was peculiar saying the name of the Slayer, but even as he said it, he knew that it was right. This was indeed the son of his sister’s body, the one who was prophesied to kill him. He could feel the blood they shared the instant he spoke the name, feel the connection that bonded them eternally. ‘Therefore, it would seem that he is not aware of the traps you laid in that new place of exile.’

Jarasandha slowed down, Kamsa did likewise. Jarasandha was silent for a moment then looked sharply at Kamsa. ‘You are right. Perhaps he welcomes it because he mistakenly believes the attacks will continue in Gokul. Perhaps he does not know of the dangers awaiting him in exile! Not only him, but his people as well, for as you have seen, the key to destroying a leader or savior is to destroy those who regard him as a savior. Destroy faith and you kill a god. For what is a god without anyone to believe in him?’

He clapped a hand on Kamsa, hitting him hard enough to knock out Kamsa’s breath momentarily. ‘You may be right. Perhaps the Slayer is naive enough to fail to see my larger plan. He foolishly thinks that this is the best way for his adopted human family to survive!’

Kamsa grinned. It was rarely that he made his father in law happy, yet he appeared to have done so for the second time today. That was an achievement. ‘And now you will tell me all about your plans to ambush him and his people in the place of exile, and how they will finally end the life of the Slayer and rid me of his menace, yes, father?’

Jarasandha nodded indulgently. ‘I shall, son.’

And they passed through the Vortal back to their world.

10

Yashoda still could not accept that her entire clan should be forced into exile. She loved Vraj and Gokul dearly and the thought of leaving broke her heart. But she was reassured by Krishna's words as well as by Nanda's assurances that this was the inevitable course of action.

'Even in council,' he said gently, 'all the elders agree that these attempts on our son's life are signs that must be heeded. We must make this move. But have no worry, my beloved. The place we go to is no less beautiful and resplendent than our beloved Gokuldham.'

'Where are we going?' she asked, curious.

'A place called Vrindavan,' he replied.

'The legendary garden grove?' she exclaimed.

'A secret hamlet whose access is through the legendary gardens, yes. But while everyone knows Vrindavan the gardens, famed for their grapes and soma wine, only a few trusted souls know of this secret place. We use the term Vrindavan but even if the enemy searches the garden for weeks they will not find the way to our secret hamlet.'

Yashoda was reassured even more. And after Nanda's explanation she began to look forward to seeing this secret hamlet that he had described in such loving terms. After all, Gokuldham had been her home since marriage while it had been Nanda's since birth. If he looked forward to moving to this new place so enthusiastically, then she would not say or do anything to discourage him henceforth.

And so it was on a bright spring day, with a spring in their step and smiles on their lips, the Vrishnis migrated out of Vraj-bhoomi, making the journey to Vrindavan. They travelled by uks wagon carts, horses, mules, even elephants and camels. Dogs drew smaller carts of belongings, helped by the young children. The long gaily clad procession was so joyful and happy as it made its way across Vraj's meandering hill slopes that they seemed more like people going to a festival than a migration into exile.

KAAND 3

1

The sound of the flute filled the valley. Its haunting melody curled around the senses, evoked forgotten memories and lost emotions and cleansed the heart of anxiety. In her new home overlooking the lake, Yashoda sang a plaintive folk song to the melody of the flute. In the meadows where the vast herds grazed, Nanda and the other Vrishni lords marveled at how much their yield had increased and health improved. The gopas and gopis through the secret hamlet worked and played, loved and lived with renewed hope and vigor. Contrary to their fears, the migration had improved their lot instead of diminishing it. They had found everything to their liking in this secret place. The landscape was breathtakingly beautiful, the water clear as crystal, the air sweet, the animals and birds curious and unafraid - itself an auspicious sign - and all omens and signs were favorable in the extreme. The cows were yielding more milk, richer and creamier milk than ever, curds set perfectly in less time, buttermilk tasted invigorating and ghee heavenly. Even the wine was superior! But most of all, they felt safe here. Not only did the Usurper not know of this place, there was only one ingress point and it was closely watched night and day by their sentries posted in discrete lookout posts. Not one horseman or foot soldier could come to Vrindavan without word reaching Nanda at once, and for an army it would be sheer folly for the ingress point offered an impenetrable defense.

The Vrishni were happy here. And the sound of the flute expressed their happiness more eloquently than words. That lilting song, so memorable, so sweetly sad, so profoundly moving, summed up all the struggle and travail they had gone through as well as the joy they now felt.

They would bide their time here until the Slayer arose. Until the Usurper lay dead. Until Mathura was restored to its rightful ruler.

They would live out their lives, herd their cows, collect their milk, churn their buttermilk, perform their rituals, celebrate their festivals, and play the sweet-sad drama of life under these stars and this sky, and bide their time till they were called upon to do whatever was needed.

Warriors all, they did not come here to hide or escape persecution, they came to grow and strengthen their resolve, and incidentally, defy Mathura by refusing to pay any more taxes. So long as they had remained in Vrajbhoomi, they were obliged to pay the mandatory taxes and it had galled them all these years to know that those spears and swords and lances borne by the marauding armies of Kamsa were paid for with their own hard-earned coin. Now, by leaving Vraj, they had ended that obligation. This secret vale of Vrindavan was not officially under Mathura's dominion. They owed no one taxes here. The same process was being repeated all across the Yadava nation. For if there was one way to hurt a kingdom, it was by denying it taxes. Without taxes, even the mightiest army would run out of supplies, or motivation, sooner or later.

In its own way, this defiance was more effective than open civil revolt and it had the benefit of not costing Yadava lives.

The flute summed up all these things and more. The defiance of the Vrishni, the tyranny of the Usurper, the heaven-assured Coming of the Slayer in time, the end of the reign of evil, the start of a new era of hope and peace.

The flute sang on and in its bittersweet notes was contained the soul of all who lived here.

For it was from their hearts that Krishna drew these emotions and translated them into song, a song he then performed through the simple reed length of the flute itself.

The odd thing was, even when one could see Krishna engaged in other pastimes, one could still hear the song of the flute. It was as if his presence itself called the flute song into being. He had no need to actually touch it to his lips and blow: the flute song was the song of his own heart, expressing all that he had come to know about his people.

Right now, though, Krishna was busy with another instrument quite different from a flute.

Balarama and he sat by the lake slinging pebbles across the water.

They were attempting to make the pebbles skip on the surface of the lake but by shooting them from the slingshots, not by hand.

‘There!’ Balarama cried in triumph as his shot skipped twice and almost a third time before sinking into the still surface. ‘I did it!’

‘Once doesn’t count, brother,’ Krishna said calmly, preparing to toss.

‘It skipped twice!’ Balarama said.

‘Once.’

‘Twice!’

Krishna slung his pebble. It skipped twice and then sank, almost exactly as the one flung by Balarama. ‘There! Now that’s how you do it.’

‘Mine skipped twice and then almost once more. Your’s only skipped twice.’

Krishna grinned at his brother. ‘Do it again and prove it.’ It was his favorite comeback: Whenever Balarama claimed to have outdone Krishna - which was almost all the time - Krishna defied him to do it again.

Balarama promptly loaded a new pebble, wound the sling, then slung the shot. The pebble skipped once, twice...and a third time before making a fourth ripple and sinking into it.

‘There!’ Balarama cried excitedly. ‘That was at least thrice, maybe even four.’

‘Thrice,’ Krishna said calmly.

‘Thrice then,’ Balarama said, folding his arms across his chest. He was twice Krishna’s size and weight and width. ‘Bet you you can’t match that!’

Krishna smiled to himself and slung a new pebble. But at the very instant he was about to fling it, the sound of a calf sounded behind them. Krishna released the pebble but it sank at once with barely a ripple.

Balarama turned in response to the calf’s cry. ‘What was that?’ he said.

For the moment in which Balarama’s head was turned, Krishna gestured and the pebble that had sunk rose up again from the water and skipped gaily across the water.

‘Now that’s how you do it,’ Krishna said coyly.

Balarama turned back to the lake and saw the line of ripples spreading across the water. ‘Seven...eight?’ he cried out, as the pebble finally sank - or was allowed to sink. ‘That’s impossible! You must hav cheated, Krishna!’

Krishna wagged a finger admonishingly. ‘Don’t be a sore loser, bhaiya. You can try again as many times as you wish. But first let’s go see what ails that calf.’

2

Krishna and Balarama had been given charge of the calves, in a bid to curtail their mischief-mongering. The suggestion came from Nanda, who had some experience with mischievous children. ‘My brothers and I raised hell in Gokul when we were growing up,’ he admitted one night to Yashoda. She was surprised. Nanda was so dignified, calm, almost phlegmatic, it was hard to think of him as a snotty nosed boy running around half naked in the dust with his brothers, raising mayhem. Yet the stories he told her were hair-raising and blood-curling and she prayed aloud that her Krishna and his brother Balarama would not repeat some of the same stunts. She even made him promise not to repeat them aloud in Krishna’s presence, to avoid giving the little rascal any ideas. Nanda chuckled and promised her. Then he offered the suggestion that they let Krishna and Balarama manage the calves.

‘Those two rascallions?’ she said. ‘They’ll drive all the poor little ones into the water and dance on their backs playing the flute!’

For an instant, Nanda actually imagined Krishna and Balarama dancing on the backs of the poor submerged calves as they lowed and protested noisily. Then he shook his head. ‘You might be surprised. Sometimes the best way to curb mischief is to give a naughty child responsibility.’

‘Isn’t that a contradiction?’ she asked. ‘Should responsible chores be given to well-behaved children?’

He shrugged. ‘Of course. But even the naughtiest children do grow out of their mischievous ways in time. And one way to help them do that is to give them early responsibilities. I think what our two rascals need is something useful to do, something that takes up just enough of their attention and energy to keep them from getting into mischief all the time. Oh, they won’t stop altogether, don’t expect miracles overnight. But it is hard to be frolicking and running around when you have a herd of calves to watch over and bring back at end of day.’

Yashoda was doubtful about the idea but agreed to it if only to see if Nanda was right. ‘The only thing that worries me,’ she said thoughtfully, ‘is those poor calves!’

Nanda chuckled. ‘My dearest one, I think you will find that our little dark lord and his brother will be more gentle with those poor calves than with all the other children in Gokul...’ he corrected himself, ‘in Vrindavan, I mean.’

She nodded but her brow remained furrowed.

Now, Krishna and Balarama sprinted up the hillside. Only a little while ago all the calves had been on this hillside, around the lake. When had they gone over the hill and why? There was water on the lakeside slope, fresh green grass...there was no reason for them to trudge uphill suddenly.

As they reached the top of the hill, they saw the reason.

One of the calves appeared to have gone mad. It was running from one end of the pasture to another, head-butting its fellow calves, driving them farther away from the lakeside. The other calves were all crying out in protest but moving in the direction they were being herded. The mad calf was galloping like a manic horse rather than a young cow, rearing up and kicking backwards and snorting angrily.

‘What’s gotten into Gauri 56?’ asked Balarama. Since almost all cows were given the same handful of names, Krishna and he had decided that they would attach numbers to the names to distinguish between the various namesakes. Gauri, literally meaning White-Face or Fair, was one of the most common since most Vraj cows tended to be white and brown in patches.

Krishna narrowed his eyes. ‘That’s not Gauri 56,’ he said quietly, in an odd tone. ‘It’s not one of our calves at all.’

Balarama frowned. ‘Then whose is it?’

Krishna turned and looked at him sharply. Balarama looked at his brother’s eyes and saw the blue sky reflected in them. Then he realized what he was seeing was not blue sky at all, but simply the colour blue. The whites of Krishna’s eyes had turned deep blue. And in his black pupils something blazed deep within, like a banked fire smoldering.

‘Uh oh,’ Balarama said, recognizing that look from past encounters. ‘Here be asuras.’

And then, in a wink of an eye, Krishna was gone. Balarama felt a faint wind as his brother shot away, but neither saw Krishna’s body blurring nor his passage from this hill rise down to the meadow below, some two hundred yards away. It was as if Krishna had vanished from this spot and reappeared there. It was one of the many things that Krishna could do but Balarama could not.

‘Not fair,’ Balarama grumbled. ‘You always do that!’

He sprinted downhill, compelled to cover the same ground in a more mortal manner, by running fast. But he could see that he would not reach in time to actually do much. That was why Krishna had used that particular means of travel: to put himself in harm's way first and protect his brother. It was what he always did.

'Not fair,' Balarama grumbled again as he ran downhill, gathering speed. 'I'm the older brother, I'm supposed to take care of you!'

Krishna smelt the demon. It was an oddly pleasant odor, sweetish, slightly milky, and not unpleasant. Even had he not possessed preternatural instincts, he would have guessed something was amiss with this particular calf. Real calves never smelled sweetly. They stank of dried cow dung, stale milk, and half-chewed cud which they often vomited up. Those were the smells he associated with them and for which he loved them. They were the smells of nature, of life itself, of eating and defecating and growing. This odor from the demoniac calf was too unnatural, too perfumed to be real. Only a demon would try to make itself alluring. Real calves were too busy surviving and didn't care to impress anyone!

But if the demon calf had intended to lure Krishna somehow, it was doing a poor job of it. Right now, all it seemed intent on doing was herding the calves in that particular South-West direction. Why? Krishna watched as the demon calf roared and reared up on its hind legs, literally exuding fire from its nostrils before dropping down on the ground with a thud and lowering its head threateningly. Terrified, the calves were running now, starting to stampede in panic. This appeared to be what the demon calf wanted: to stampede the calves in that direction. What purpose would that serve?

The demon calf turned to face Krishna. It was grinning. There was no other way to describe the look on its bovine features: its lips were curled, revealing big white cow teeth, and its ears were twitching madly though here wasn't a fly in sight. It stamped its fore hooves on the ground, challenging him, then lowered its head, snorting flames from its nostrils.

It meant to charge him.

He had no issue with that. He would have charged the demon anyway.

But the calf herd was stampeding madly away, already several hundred yards distant and running faster. The demon calf had stampeded them for a reason, he knew. It could have torn them to pieces, killed several if it wished before Krishna reached in time and stopped it. Instead, all it wanted was to send the calves running.

Suddenly, Krishna knew why.

‘Balarama!’ he shouted. ‘Stop the calves!’

He felt a rush of air pass by and saw the blurring fair body of his brother go racing past him. Balarama could not travel as Krishna could but he could run very fast when he cared to and he was running his fastest now. Krishna felt a surge of relief. Thank the Goddess he had Balarama with him. Otherwise, he would have been forced to choose between fighting the demon calf and saving the calves.

Now, he could concentrate on the demon calf.

‘Come on,’ he shouted at the calf, still stamping its feet and snorting fire. ‘Come on then.’

The calf lunged forward, coming at him at an all-out run, its head lowered. As it came, horns sprouted instantly from its head. Not the usual two but a whole thorn-thicket of them, twisted, pointed, razor-edged horns such as nature never produced, each one deadly enough to rip flesh and tear skin to shreds. As it came closer, the horns continued to grow blurringly fast, as long as swords now, then as long as spears, and still growing. Evidently, they were supposed to keep growing even as they struck the enemy and ravaged his body. So that was this demon’s ‘thing’.

Krishna roared and spread his arms, as if preparing to embrace a friend.

The calf demon crashed into his belly, the horns piercing his body in a dozen places and punching through his flesh and skin and bone. The calf demon roared its triumph and pounded over the ground where Krishna stood.

Balarama sped after the calf herd. At first, even he did not understand Krishna’s concern. Then he thought about the direction in which they were racing and understood at once.

There was a gulch in that direction. Perhaps twenty or twenty five yards deep, and lined with sharp rocks and thorny scrub at the bottom. If the calves continued their stampede they would certainly tumble over the edge and fall into the gulch, killing or maiming almost every last one of them. So that had been the demon calf’s intention. Devilishly clever. And so mean. To slaughter an entire herd of innocent calves just to distract Krishna.

But the demon calf had not counted on Krishna having an ally equally capable of fighting - or helping.

Balarama overtook the stampeding herd on the far right side. He blurred past the calves, glancing to his left to see startled white-eyed bovine faces downturned in terror. To the calves the demon calf had been their worst fear realized. A predator who looked just like one of them. Any animal could have startled them but it was the unexpected shock of seeing one of their own behave that way that had driven them to panic so quickly and easily.

He was ahead of the herd now and could see the gulch only a few dozen yards ahead. It would be very close. He put on one final burst of speed, then cut inwards, in front of the stampeding herd. He heard the leaders low in protest but they kept heading straight on. They were boxed in by now with the large boulders that strewed this field and could only make a turn gradually. He would not be able to turn them aside away from harm's way.

That meant he had only one option.

He reached what seemed like a good spot and quickly pushed boulders from either side inwards, blocking the way ahead until only a fairly narrow passage was left. Just about room for a half dozen head of calves to pass through.

He stationed himself in this passage between the boulders, facing the oncoming stampede, and spread his legs, raising his hands, bracing himself.

The first calves struck his outstretched hands with terrific impact. They were not full-grown cows, but then again, neither was he full-grown. It took all his strength and will to keep from being knocked off his feet and ridden over. He held his ground as calf after calf piled up against the leaders, their combined weight and momentum pushing him backwards, his feet skidding in the grassy dirt as he was shoved backwards. He dared not turn his head to see how far he was from the edge but knew it could not be more than a few yards now. And still the calf herd pushed, pushing madly.

Balarama clung on madly, fighting now for not just the lives of the calf herd but his own as well. For if he fell into that gulch now, he would have a hundred head of half-grown cows falling on top of him and he had no desire to know what that might do to him.

Krishna felt the calf demon's vicious horns ripping through his skin and flesh. He felt the pain that he would have felt had he been merely mortal. He also felt the fiery sensation that was more than any mortal could have felt. That was specially for him. Some kind of asura poison that only affected devas and their amsas or avatars. He felt the demon's exhilaration at having accomplished his mission. He even read the calf demon's thoughts.

'Lord of asuras be praised! I have done what even mighty Putana and Trnavarta could not accomplish! I have slain the Slayer! I shall be richly rewarded for this. A hundred brahmins shall

I feast on tonight once my lord rewards my success.'

Krishna focussed his energy on the parts of his body that had been torn and damaged by the asura's horns and poison. He felt the milk of Anantha seeping through him, culled from the ethereal realm of Vaikunta, felt it healing, repairing, rebuilding. In moments, his mortal body was whole again, as undamaged and unblemished as it had been before the calf demon's charge.

'Not so fast,' he said aloud to the demon. 'Before you get to feast you have to finish your mission.'

The calf demon had raced past him after goring his body. Now, it swung around, hooves kicking up sods of earth and clods of grassy mud as it turned its bovine body. Its large cow eyes bulged as it looked at little Krishna, still standing, arms akimbo, untouched.

'But...I gored you!' it cried out in anger and frustration. 'I felt the flesh rip! I saw your blood splatter. I smelled your vile mortal smell.'

'Yes,' Krishna said, the blue of his whites now expanding to fill the entire well of his eye sockets, his black pupils disappearing to tiny pinpoints within an ocean of deep blue, the blue glow spilling out from his eyes, flashing out like liquid light to extend for yards around him, like the light of a lamp in darkness. 'Now see my non-mortal side.'

And this time he charged the calf demon, roaring and lowering his head.

The beast had not admitted defeat yet. With a bellow of fury, it lowered its head and lurched forward, combining the little boy's momentum with its own furious charge.

Child and calf met in a collision so resounding that birds fell stunned from trees, fish held still in the lake, and all across Vrindavan, every Vrishni heard the sound and looked up at the sky, mistaking it for a clap of thunder.

Balarama heard the sound too but was too busy to pay it heed. The first of the herd had struck him at almost the same instant, and he was using all his considerable strength to act as a wall. One after another, the calves crashed into each other, their forward momentum driving the whole group forward, each impact pushing Balarama's feet inches backward - towards the yawning gorge. He could not turn to see how far behind the edge was now, but he knew he had already been pushed several yards past the boulders he had hurriedly shoved together. Which meant he must be close...

He felt the back of one foot scrabbling for purchase, meeting only empty air.

Another calf, a laggard, struck the back of the herd. Balarama bellowed with strain as he pushed back, shoving with all his might. The struggle he faced was not merely one of strength but one of size. Powerfully endowed though he was with supernatural energy, the strength of the eternal serpent himself, as well as a portion of Vishnu's own energies, he was limited by his human form. And right now, that form was the body of a little boy. As it was, his hands were raised up to their limit, holding the snout of one calf and the hump of another, his little feet scrabbling for a hold on the gritty ground.

He roared again, not merely restraining now, but actively pushing forward.

The calf herd lowed and called out in protest as they felt their own hooves pushed backwards, slipping back over the ground, digging furrows in the earth.

'Back!' Balarama yelled. 'Back, you idiots!'

Something of his intent must have communicated itself to the herd. Or perhaps his shoving tipped them off. Either way, they began to turn head and move back the way they had come from. They milled about in confusion, unsure which way to go to escape from the danger.

'Back, you fools!' Balarama said, as he slapped the last of them away from him.

He took a moment or two to catch his breath and wipe the sweat from his brow.

Only then did he turn and look back.

Directly down at the gorge, right below his feet.

3

They regrouped by the lake, after counting every last head of the herd to ensure that none had run off or been harmed. For once, they also looked at each calf's snout, just to ensure that none were calf demons mingled with the rest, biding their time. One of the older calves, a female, opened her mouth and gave Balarama a good look at a mouthful of half-chewed cud before spitting it out at him.

'Thank you,' he said quietly, wiping off the mess without malice. 'But I'm not hungry right now.'

He patted her neck affectionately, proud of the fact that he had not lost a single one.

'That wasn't so bad,' he said, turning back to Krishna.

Then stopped.

Krishna was staring at the lake.

Balarama looked.

He could see nothing out of the ordinary.

Just the lake, the trees, creepers, vines, flowers, birds, a few kraunchya with their thin legs in the shallows, dipping their long beaks in search of fish..

'What is it, brother?' he asked, puzzled.

Krishna inclined his head slightly.

'Demons,' he said. 'I can still smell them.'

Balarama frowned. What did that 'still' mean? Krishna hadn't mentioned smelling any in the first place. Oh wait. He remembered Krishna saying something about keeping their eyes open and their senses alert the very day they came to Vrindavan. But that had been a while ago. Nothing untoward had happened since then. Balarama had come to think that perhaps they would be able

to spend their time in play here. He liked the place just as much as his mother Rohini did. He liked the fact that she was happy here. It made him happy as well. But Krishna had been acting different ever since they had arrived. He was not as mischievous as before. Nor as radical in his pranks and tricks. It was as if he had been waiting. Waiting for what?

Waiting for this.

For the asuras to emerge and show themselves. And attack.

And it seemed that day had come.

Krishna knew the demon was close by. But he could not make out where it was or in what form. All he could do was wait for it to show itself.

He watched the lake, glad that Balarama was being quiet beside him. Balarama-bhaiya could sometimes ask too many questions or talk too much. But he was quiet now.

Everything seemed normal. Birds landed in the trees and took off. Monkeys chittered and leaped from branch to branch. The fish swam in the lake, creating ripples below the surface. The kraunchya birds hopped slowly from foot to foot, seeking prey. One of the kraunchyas was coming out of the water onto the lake shore. The commotion of the calf demon's attack had passed and nature had returned to its normal equanimity again.

Krishna glanced back at the hilltop. The calf demon's attack had taken place on the other side. He had destroyed it in the second charge, ripping its body to shreds, snapping each length of horn to fragments, then had buried the whole deep within the ground. He had come to the lake afterwards, to slake his thirst and wash the offal off his body. Now, the calf herd grazed peacefully in their usual hillside spot and all seemed well.

But he knew the demon was close. He could smell it. It smelled closer now, if anything! But where was it? There was nothing but the kraunchya bird on the lake shore before him.

The crane raised its wings and flapped them once, opening and closing its long beak. It seemed to be complaining to Krishna about the lack of fish.

Krishna turned to Balarama. 'We should take the herd back.'

'Already?' Balarama glanced at the sky. 'There's plenty of time yet. The other boys will have finished their chores and will come by to play with us here as usual. They always help us herd

the calves back.'

'Don't argue with me, bhaiya,' little Krishna said to his brother who was twice as large, tall and wide as he. 'We should take the herd home now and warn the other children not to come play by the lakeside today. We can always--'

'KRISHNA!' Balarama yelled.

Krishna swung around, just in time to see an enormous gaping maw converge upon him. The gigantic maw enfolded him completely, and some giant creature swallowed him whole into its belly.

Balarama could barely comprehend what he had seen. One moment there was nothing dangerous in sight. Then suddenly a giant maw was converging on Krishna - and swallowed him up whole! Only now, after it happened, did he see that the thing that swallowed Krishna was the very kraunchya bird that had been on the lake shore nearby. The crane had suddenly come running up the gradually sloping incline of the lakeshore towards where they had been standing, expanding in size as it came. In a trice, it was ten times the size of a normal kraunchya bird. Now the crane loomed above him, thrashing about, its elongated beak shut tightly, emitting peculiar sounds. The other normal kraunchya birds in the lake reacted to the appearance of this abnormal fellow, sending up raucous cries of alarm and distress. One by one they took to the air and flew away, calling out their shock at seeing one of their species behave thusly. Other birds reacted as well, rising in hordes from the trees and nearby thickets and groves, each calling out in their own unique voices, indignantly protesting this unlawful intrusion into their peaceful hamlet.

Balarama stared up at the enormous crane lurching before him. It appeared to be dancing about, its webbed feet thudding down on the ground as it hopped. One foot landed very close to him and he realized that he ought to get out of its way. But Krishna! The wretched thing had swallowed Krishna! Had he not seen it happen with his own eyes, he would never have believed it. Yet he had been looking directly at his little brother when the cursed crane came bounding up like a dog and swallowed him in its giant beak.

'Balarama!' cried a chorus of voices. 'Krishna!'

He turned just as the children of Gokul came racing over the hill-top. It was the time for them to play until the sun dipped lower and it was time to take the herds home. They came over the rise and started running downhill, waving and yelling at him. He saw their eyes go wide, showing the whites, and their pace slow, their arms cease their waving and their mouths gape open, as they saw what was going on by the lake.

A giant kraunchya bird hopping about angrily, making bizarre animalistic sounds, while Balarama moved about trying to avoid being crushed by its giant webbed feet.

The children screamed and yelled, pointing to the giant bird. Yet, despite their horror, they still came on, unable to wholly comprehend what they were witnessing. Balarama tried to raise his hands and shouted to wave them off.

‘Go back home! It’s a demon! It swallowed Krishna!’

Dhum! The bird’s foot narrowly missed hitting him.

He looked up, more concerned now with his own survival than with waving the other children away. They should be able to see the danger for themselves after all.

The kraunchya bird was growing more and more agitated. It was doing everything but flying. Flapping its wings. Opening its beak wide to emit a bizarre parody of the natural crane bird cry. Hopping about from foot to foot.

Suddenly, it screamed with agony and shuddered. It came to a dead halt, beak raised to the sky, entire body taut and quivering. It shuddered again. And again.

Balarama saw something occurring around the throat of the bird demon. A discoloration. The white feathers there were turning dark bluish, as if dark blue blood were seeping from within, staining the pristine ivory plumage. But he doubted that even asuras had blue blood - green perhaps, but surely not blue. Blue was the colour of brahman, the infinite force of which all Creation was composed, the colour of Dharma and Devas. No. That discolouration could only mean one thing: Krishna. His brother might have been swallowed whole by the bird demon in a moment of ingenious ambush. But swallowing was not the same as digesting. No mere demon could simply consume Krishna! And that colour spreading like blood across the porcelain plumage of the bird demon was proof of it. Krishna’s presence in the bird’s throat was causing it more discomfort than a burning coal. A flaming coal of pure brahman, energy incarnate in human form. That, my friend, Balarama thought with pride, is my brother. Swallow that, demon!

With a final shuddering croak, the kraunchya demon bent its long neck, pointing its beak at the ground, and heaved once, twice, thrice. With the third heave came a great outrush and Balarama winced, raising a hand to cover his face in case the demon had been performing its role as a crane too diligently. He didn’t mind cow froth or even cow dung. But half-digested fish he could do without!

To his relief, the only thing that fell from the giant beak was a familiar little form, two legs, two hands, two eyes...yes, Krishna, intact and fully operational. Back on earth!

The other children yelled and shouted in wonderment, pointing. Balarama glanced back and saw that several of them had approached within yards of where he stood. The fools! Did they not realize the danger they were in? If it had been one of them the bird demon had swallowed, they would have been half through the creature's digestive system by now, slowly putrefying. He started to yell at them again, but just then Krishna rose to his feet and leaped up in the air.

The kraunchya demon had still not fully recovered after regurgitating Krishna. Clearly, having the god child in his throat had not suited its physiognomy. The blue stain around its throat remained even now, as if irreparable harm had been caused to that region.

Now, as Krishna leaped up in the air, the demon screeched and paddled its feet backwards. But Krishna was too quick for it. With one deft move, he grasped hold of its beak, the upper in one hand and the lower in the other hand.

The demon screamed and fell sideways in its attempt to escape. Its legs and wings thrashed about helplessly.

Krishna stood on the lower beak, almost sideways now, and pushed the two beaks apart with all his might. As he pushed, he expanded himself, growing as rapidly as the crane demon itself had grown before ambushing him. In the wink of an eye he was as large as the demon itself, and the creature's beaks were pushed to their farthest point and beyond...

The bird demon issued one final chilling cry which echoed through the valley. Then, a horrible tearing sound followed as Krishna pushed its beaks apart past the breaking point. Balarama averted his eyes.

The children danced around Krishna and Balarama, hands interlinked, chanting songs praising Vishnu. The elders were gathered together in the village communal center, at the top of the meadow where Nanda's herds grazed. They glanced at Krishna several times then at one another. None knew what to say next.

It was Gargamuni who came to their rescue with the right words. The preceptor had accompanied them into exile, insisting that their spiritual welfare was his responsibility. He was also their sole contact with the outside world now as he could come and go freely without anyone daring to question his movements or motives.

'It is time to acknowledge the truth, Nanda-Maharaja,' said the old sage, his light brown eyes twinkling in the golden light of sunset. 'And it is time for all to know the reason why your son has survived every attack by the most formidable demons imaginable. He has done what no mortal grown man could have done each time, and he has done it over and over again. Indeed,' Gargamuni paused dramatically, 'he has done what no mortal could have.'

Everyone looked at him in awe. Even those who had suspected or dreamed or sensed what he was about to say next had never thought the day would come when it would be acknowledged and asserted in so many words. Yet when the great brahmin who was their spiritual and religious guide himself spoke the words aloud, at once each and every person present there knew that he spoke the absolute undeniable truth. They knew this in the same way that any living creature on earth can recognize the sun in the sky, life-giver of all natural things. For all living beings recognize their benefactor, and all babes know their birth-mother.

'He is Swayam Bhagwan, sent to grace us and live amongst us. He is the great soul, the fount of brahman itself, father of Brahma the Creator and originator of worlds infinite. He is the Slayer of Kamsa.'

Then the great brahmin grew melancholy and sad, falling silent until Nanda asked him gently what was the matter. 'Alas,' said Gargacharya. 'Now it is certain that his presence here is known to all those who serve the purpose of evil. Even if Kamsa himself dare not set foot in this vale to challenge our beloved deva just yet, he will surely have sent out a horde of demons. I fear that the asuras in the form of a crane bird and the calf were only the beginning. The assault on Krishna will be unending now and ever escalating. It is no less than a war. Except that this war is waged upon a single being, this little son of Vasudeva and Devaki.' By this time the guru had told the whole story of the Slayer's birth and all around were aware of every last detail of Krishna's extraordinary conception, birth and true origins.

‘What can we do to help our Savior in this fight?’ asked someone.

‘Yes,’ added another voice that was echoed by all present. ‘If need be, we are willing to lay down our lives for Him. For he is the One we have been waiting for, our future salvation. We shall protect him by all means.’

Garga shook his head sadly. ‘Your sentiments are sincere but your efforts of no avail. The Slayer must walk this path alone. This is a time of testing for him. It is his karma to battle the demoniac hordes sent by Kamsa and his evil allies single-handedly.’

‘But he will surely prevail, will he not?’ asked a hesitant voice. This was none other than Yashoda.

Garga turned a kind but troubled face to her.

‘Would that I could say yes without doubt, good Yashoda. But the truth is that these things are not the province of us mere mortals. All I can say that if the answer was such a foregone conclusion, there would be no fight, no struggle. Our Lord in this child’s form would simply go forth and destroy the Usurper and liberate us all from his tyranny. The fact that he does not do so indicates that he is not ready yet. Perhaps he requires time to grow his physical body? Perhaps he needs to perform some other mystical dharma of which we are not aware? Perhaps he simply needs to face these challenges and prove himself before he is ready to face the lord of these demons and fulfill the prophecy. I cannot say for certain. All I can say is that even a prophecy is but a prediction. And even a god can be defeated, even killed. I say this not to frighten you, good mother, but merely because the knowers of brahman can never be untruthful. It would violate my vows. Since you asked the question, I must answer honestly. And this is my honest answer: Krishna must survive these tasks and challenges on his own. That is all I can say for now.’

Everyone was silent, pondering the words of the preceptor.

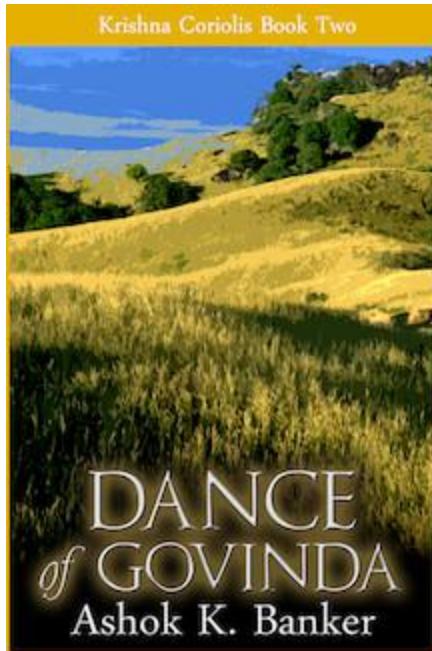
Outside, in the fading dusk light, the children continued to play. In the center stood Krishna on one foot, his other foot bent in his favorite stance, head tilted, chin pointed upwards, playing his flute.

The melody drifted across all Vrindavan, and in the distant eaves and drifts, leaves stirred as if roused by an invisible wind and strange sounds startled the gentler denizens of the woods, as if from creatures that none could see but were omni present.

Deep in the darkling woods and thickets, where the wormwood crumbled, laughter echoed, mocking the music.

And still the flute played on.

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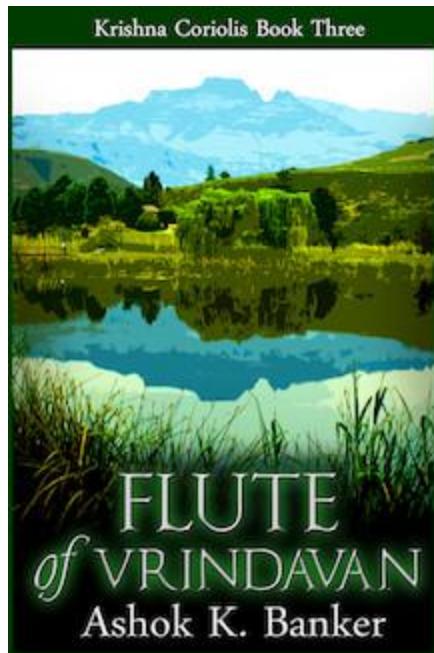
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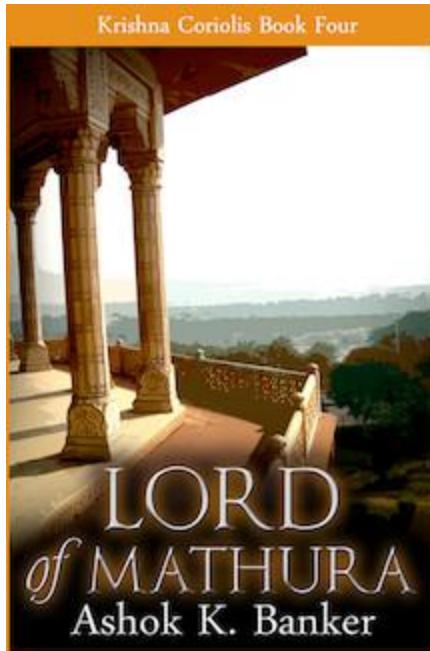
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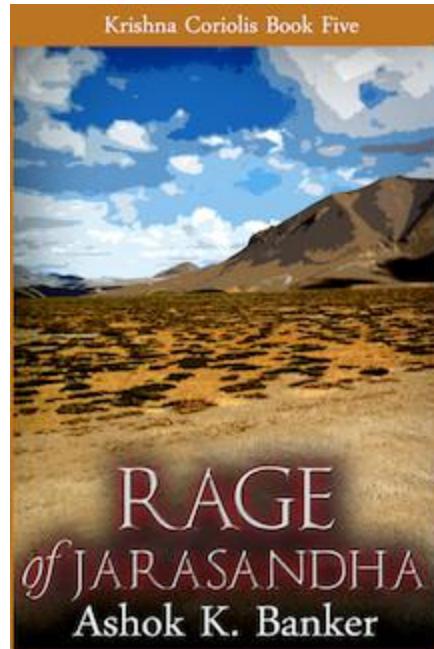
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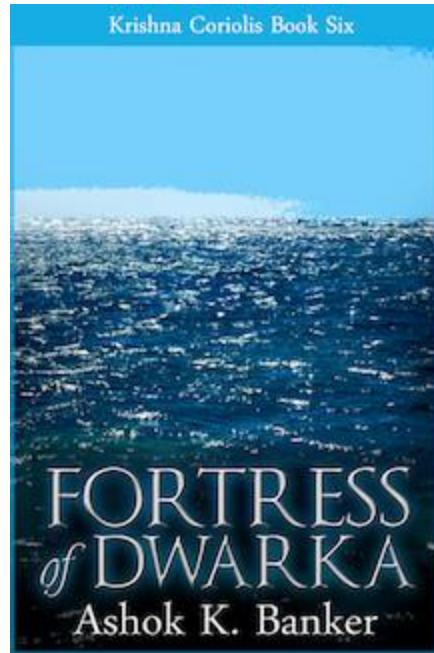
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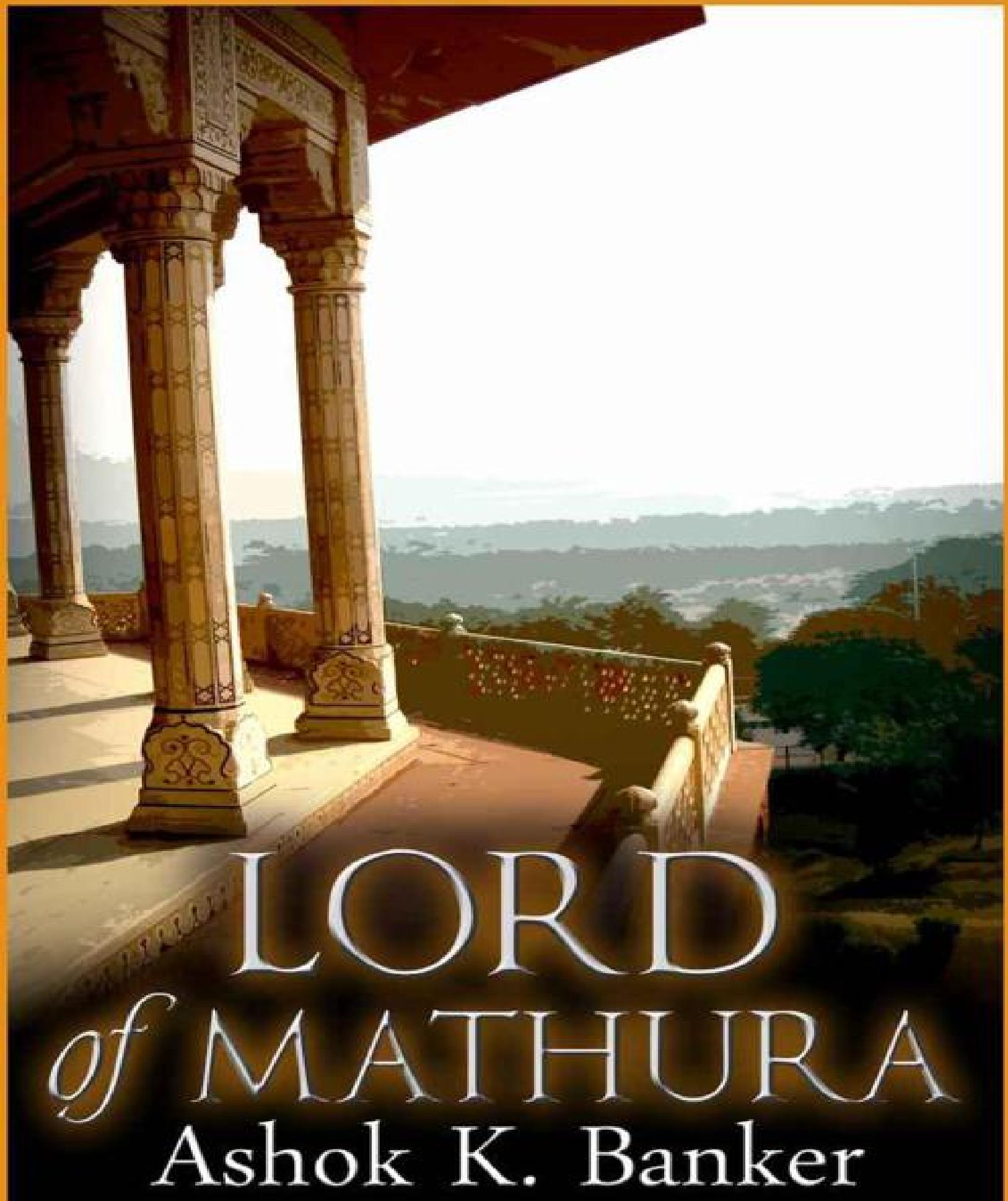
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LORD *of MATHURA*

Ashok K. Banker

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About Ashok

Ashok Kumar Banker's internationally acclaimed *Ramayana Series*® has been hailed as a 'milestone' (*India Today*) and a 'magnificently rendered labour of love' (*Outlook*). It is arguably the most popular English-language retelling of the ancient Sanskrit epic. His work has been published in 56 countries, a dozen languages, several hundred reprint editions with over 1.2 million copies of his books currently in print.

Born of mixed parentage, Ashok was raised without any caste or religion, giving him a uniquely post-racial and post-religious Indian perspective. Even through successful careers in marketing, advertising, journalism and scriptwriting, Ashok retained his childhood fascination with the ancient literature of India. With the *Ramayana Series*® he embarked on a massively ambitious publishing project he calls the Epic India Library. The EI Library comprises Four Wheels: Mythology, Itihasa, History, and Future History. The *Ramayana Series*® and *Krishna Coriolis* are part of the First Wheel. The *Mahabharata Series* is part of the Second Wheel. *Ten Kings* and the subsequent novels in the Itihasa Series dealing with different periods of recorded Indian history are the Third Wheel. Novels such as *Vertigo*, *Gods of War*, *The Kali Quartet*, *Saffron White Green* are the Fourth Wheel.

He is one of the few living Indian authors whose contribution to Indian literature is acknowledged in The Picador Book of Modern Indian Writing and The Vintage Anthology of Indian Literature. His writing is used as a teaching aid in several management and educational courses worldwide and has been the subject of several dissertations and theses.

Ashok is 48 years old and lives with his family in Mumbai. He is always accessible to his readers at www.ashokbanker.com—over 35,000 have corresponded with him to date. He looks forward to hearing from you.

PRARAMBH

1

The song of the flute filled the hamlet of Vrindavan.

Its sweet mournful melody carried to the remotest eaves and highest treetops and no creature that heard it failed to be moved.

Its daily presence brought comfort and strength to the denizens of that secluded valley, assuring them that they were safe and secure in this little world away from the world at large, that someone powerful and benevolent watched over them constantly, and that any threat would be dealt with at once. But there was another message imparted by the flute: one embodied by the sweet sadness of its song. This said that life and all its pleasures were finite and would end someday, and all we could do was make the best of the time we have for it will not last. It mourned the lost brothers and sisters of the Vrishni who were here in voluntary exile from their beloved homeland, it mourned the tragedy that had befallen the Yadava nation as a whole, it shared the grief of love and loss, death and failure, war and vengeance.

The flute sang of things that could not be spoken, things that were felt but left unsaid, things that had happened before and would happen again, inevitably, but not now, not just yet. The flute song was the pause between battles, the respite between wars, the rare moment of peace between the violence of yesterday and the madness of tomorrow. The flute was what kept the Vrishni sane and whole and nourished them with the nectar of hope each fine day in Vrindavan. The flute was their reason for going on, for facing each new day with confidence, for living.

When the song was done, the hand that played the flute lowered the instrument. The player wiped the wooden reed on his brightly colored anga-vastra before tucking it securely into his waistband sash. Even now, despite all that had gone before, he was still just a boy.

Yet there was a sense of serenity about him that belied his years. His dark face could be sombre and brooding like a monsoon cloud yet when he smiled his white teeth flashed in that dark space like lightning against a pitch-black sky. His hot brown eyes gleamed with life, danced with intelligence. His smile tended to crease one cheek more than the other, giving him a sly rascally look that portended mischief. Unconcerned about his appearance and grooming, he nevertheless managed to always look fetching, almost girlishly handsome. In contrast to his brother's fair-skinned bullish bulk, he was a slender dark calf.

Already, the mother gopis gossiped about what a handsome young man he would turn out to be and how some young gopi would be very lucky to have him as her mate. Child marriage was common among Yadavas but not always compulsory. In the case of a clan headman such as Nanda Maharaja, his sons could choose their mates when they pleased. The Vrishni, even more than other Yadavas, appreciated the finer emotions and the heart played as important a part in that choice as other factors such as clan, tribe, gotra and family. In Krishna's case, he was already a prince among gopas and could have any gopi of his choice for a paramour and wife.

The younger gopis returning from the pastures, herding their calves before them, were proof of this adoration: every last one smiled and waved and greeted him as they went by, praising his flute playing. He smiled enigmatically as he always did, saying nothing, but acknowledging them all and somehow making each one feel as if it were *she* alone that he had smiled at so fetchingly. They ran giggling, happy, to pen their calves for the night.

Lazy summer was working its way slowly towards autumn and the cowherds of Vrindavan spent the evenings indulging in their favorite ras-lila pastime. When the work was done for the day, everyone looked forward to a few hours of companionship and respite. The cowherd's life was a simple one: hard-working, responsible and honest with no

unendurable hardships or glamorous highs, merely an endless series of routine repetitions, day after day, season after season. After the first traumatic year of exile, the idyllic hamlet of Vrindavan now seemed like home itself to the Vrishni and they had already come to love and enjoy its bounty.

Krishna wandered down the dales and glens, pastures and pens, hills and dips, lakesides and wooded areas, playing his flute. At the meadow where the community played ras-lila, every gopi waited and hoped to see him appear. More than one dreamed romantic dreams of herself with Yashoda's dark-hued son. But today Krishna was not in the mood to play. Today he felt his heart ache with a peculiar sadness, a commingling of the dusky languidness of evening and the satisfaction of a long day's hard work mixed with the certainty that this season of peace and calm would not last, that it was but a lull before the coming storm, and when that storm came, it would be terrible in rage.

He did not feel fear exactly for despite his mortal form, he was Himself incarnate and as such immune to the weaknesses and injuries of flesh and mortality. But he had come to care deeply about the people amongst whom he lived and he knew they would pay a price for sheltering him—were already paying a price indeed, for here they were, in exile from their beloved home pastures. Many mortals believed that to be able to see the future would be a wondrous gift but those immortals who *did* see the future knew that it was no gift, nor wondrous. For the future, like the past, like life itself, contained not only good, wonderful things and events, but also many dark, terrible, painful things. What person could *want* to know all the bad that would befall them before it happened? Mere knowledge of it alone would cast a backward shadow over all the rest of that person's existence. And so, in Krishna's case, that shadow loomed long and large, for he could see all the way into Eternity.

In a manner of speaking, it was grief that Krishna was experiencing at this moment. For time could keep no secrets from him. And he saw the terrible wages of death and suffering that had been endured since his birth on this mortal plane, the deaths and suffering that were being endured even now,

at this very moment, and the many yet to come. And the burden of all this pain lay heavy upon his heart.

And so he wandered the hills of Vrindavan and played his flute, filling the world with melody, the sweet-sad beauty of his song, trying to lighten his burden through music.

He was not wholly successful.

But it helped.

It helped a little.

And that was enough.

Even a god could not will away pain entirely. At best, he could try to transmute it into something else: painting, music, katha, dance, any of the many ways in which mortals and gods and yes, even demons, transmuted their emotions into art.

In its own way, the song was Krishna's own form of ras-lila.

WAR was an art.

Kamsa was a master of the art.

He charged through the enemy ranks, flailing, pounding, battering, bludgeoning, hammering....

Though he wielded swords and weapons when required, his new method of attack relied more on brute force than technique or finesse. Under Jarasandha's guidance and aided by the Magadhan's ayurvedic elixirs, his body had grown even harder and become more invulnerable than before. Finely honed Mithila steel blunted when in contact with his skin, a javelin thrown by a bull-strong giant shattered without leaving the tiniest scratch, and even arrows with special steel heads designed to punch through armour splintered on impact with his impenetrable hide.

But more amazing than his ability to withstand damage was his ability to inflict it.

As he was demonstrating so ably right now.

He was working his way through a throng of enemy foot-soldiers. There had been perhaps four or five hundred when he had made first contact. Two score or more had been killed at that very instant, bodies crushed and smashed to bloody pulp like ripe berries under the impact of his weight and forward momentum. The huddled mass of the remainder, no doubt believing that by concentrating their strength together they might resist him, swayed for a moment then held their line like a hemp rope strung taut between trees. Perhaps half a score more were then crushed between their own comrades behind them and Kamsa when he pushed forward.

He saw men wheeze bloody spray from their mouths and nostrils as their lungs collapsed or were punctured in the killing crush. He heard bodies crumple and lose their very shape as he exerted strength. Others exploded like bulging wine bags bursting under an elephant's foot, spraying bloody remains everywhere.

He was coated in blood and guts and bone chips and offal.

It stank of victory to his flaring nostrils.

He roared and heard his own roar resonate, the increased density of his body somehow altering the sound of his voice to sound lower-pitched, gutteral, hard enough to assault those unfortunate enough to be within his proximity and cause actual physical pain: he saw men clutch at their ears and blood ooze from their auditory orifices.

He spread his arms, bent forward in a bull's charging stance, locked his knees, and shoved forward with a mighty effort.

The ranks of enemy soldiers rippled like grass before wind. At the back of the huddled ranks, men were thrown yards away, tumbling madly head over heels.

He heaved again, then pushed forward, feeling his feet sink into the hard packed earth, the earth yielding beneath his weight and force.

The entire battalion of enemy soldiers were pushed backwards as if struck by a battering ram. Soldiers at the edges and rear went flying in all directions, bodies flung through the air like straw scarecrows in a storm gale.

Kamsa grasped hold of as many of the nearest unfortunates as he could get a hold of—perhaps a score of enemy soldiers—picked the whole mass up bodily, and *shoved* them.

The soldiers whom he grasped and used as purchase were crushed like ripe grapes, their organs and bodies spattering in his iron grip. The combined mass of their bodies served as a cudgel with which he bludgeoned the battalion itself. He shoved this way then that, pushing forward until the whole mass began to give way like a laden wagon once inertia is overcome, and he walked forward slowly, steadily, step by step shoving five hundred massed men backwards.

It was a sight to behold.

Many of Kamsa's own men stopped to watch. Even the *enemy* stopped to watch, unable to believe their eyes!

At the rear of the enemy battalion, men were being thrown onto their backs, then trampled underfoot by their own comrades as they were pushed back by the power of Kamsa's onward momentum. Men were being pressed brutally hard against each other, some pierced or penetrated by their comrades' weapons or armour, others merely caught in the press and crushed to death.

It was a grape-press and Kamsa the vintner pressing living men into blood-wine.

By the time he had pushed ahead a hundred yards, every last man in the battalion was dead or dying from fatal wounds. Not a man remained whole in the entire lot.

Finally, Kamsa stopped and let go of the men he had been holding onto. They fell like wet sacks to the bloodied ground. Ahead of him, the mass that had been an assembled battalion of some five hundred enemy soldiers,

clad in gleaming armour, had been reduced to half a thousand pulped and mangled corpses.

He glanced back and saw the gory trail of his death walk: two score yards of the battlefield painted crimson with the blood, gore and offal of crushed bodies and body parts, like a great mark of death upon the face of the enemy's ranks. It reminded him of a freshly ploughed field, the dark just-turned earth contrasting with the unploughed side. Except that what he had done here was better compared to reaping, not sowing. He had reaped their lives like wheat cut by a harvest blade.

He looked around the field. The battle was still continuing to either side of his position. But not a single other enemy soldier approached him or dared to attack. If anything, they had pushed back and away to stay clear of him. It was one thing being before him in battle and compelled to fight; it was another thing to witness the mayhem he caused and still wish to fight him.

He stood alone, alive, in a clearing of corpses within a forest of battle.

He grinned and thumped his own chest twice to mark his victory. There was no need to issue the typical chauvinistic roar of triumph.

The sound of his chest-thumping itself was louder than a full array of tom drums. It resonated across the field, louder even than the mangled screams and clash of weaponry, like a giant drumbeat tolling the defeat of the enemy.

A movement caught his attention, out the corner of his eye. It was a single warrior, racing towards him on foot, sword held up like a javelin. It was a senapati of the enemy army, probably the commander of the battalion he had just threshed like bloody maize. The man must know that he stood no chance yet he came straight at Kamsa, striking down diagonally as if dealing with any normal human opponent. Fool! To think he could attack Kamsa with a single sword.

Credit to the fool, he was fast.

The sword raked Kamsa's waist, the blade crumpling like tinfoil, and with his other hand, the man tried to stab Kamsa with a dagger, aiming for his throat. Kamsa was impressed by the man's courage and folly and permitted him his attempt. When the blade point shattered and the blade itself shattered with each successive stab, the man was left with no weapon and no hope of success. Still, he hammered at Kamsa's iron body with his fists, kicked out, jabbed and slapped, breaking his own ankle, his wrists, his forearm, and dislocating both his shoulders out of sheer fury and desperation.

And yet he fought on, audaciously, hopelessly, pitifully.

Kamsa grasped hold of him with a single hand, holding him up by the throat, the broken body still flailing desperately.

Kamsa was curious. ‘Why did you throw your life away? You knew you could not best me.’

The man stared down at Kamsa with hate burning in his black pupils. ‘You slaughtered my entire tribe today, Childslayer. What is a chieftain without a tribe? Kill me now and let me die with honour like my kith and kin!’

Kamsa cocked his head, glancing sideways at the grape-pressed bodies of the men he had killed. An entire tribe? Had he really done that? In just a short while, no more time than it might take him to eat a meal or defecate.

‘Fight me now, Monster of Mathura!’ the chieftain cried hoarsely. ‘Fight me or die!’

Fight me or die? Kamsa almost smiled at that absurd threat.

Then, without even looking at the man, he closed his fist around the man's throat, feeling his fingers meet as the bones and tendons and flesh crumpled in his fist. The flailing and threats ceased at once. Kamsa let the corpse drop to the ground heavily, blood spurting from the severed throat.

He did not like that phrase though he had heard it often before and knew he would hear it again. Not the first one: *Childslayer*. That one he did not mind for he had slayed children and enjoyed doing so. He didn't mind being called what he truly was, after all.

It was the second name he didn't care for.

Monster of Mathura.

He was no monster.

He was Kamsa, King of the Yadava nation.

Lord of Mathura.

When would the world accept him as such?

3

Jarasandha was pleased. Watching the battle from a high promontory, he viewed Kamsa's rout of the enemy with pride and pleasure.

His protégé had come a long way. Kamsa had done him proud.

His son-in-law's prowess on the battlefield today and in the preceding months, had been nothing short of formidable.

No other fighter in his ranks matched the power and ferocity of Kamsa in battle. Certainly none matched his tally of kills to date. The King of Mathura took lives like a force of nature, reaping like a whirlwind or monsoon typhoon.

Even Jarasandha sometimes found reason to marvel at his accomplishments. The sheer volume of death inflicted by his son-in-law was prodigious. Kamsa had already become a legend in the ranks of the Magadhan army. Once written off as a mere stripling Yadava capable of being taken down by a handful of Mohini Fauj, the son of Ugrasena and Padmavati had now earned the respect of even Jarasandha's most renowned champions. Almost all had come to accept and befriend him, some more closely than others. A few, very few indeed, had made the mistake of antagonizing or opposing him and had suffered the price for their folly: mostly on the akhara, the wrestling field which was the only place Jarasandha permitted his own soldiers to resolve their internal differences. There, as on the battlefield, Kamsa fought with a ferocious single-mindedness that was unmatched, dispatching those foolish enough to oppose him with mortal blows or crippling injuries. Those who played against him sportingly, he dismissed from the game with a mere broken limb or two.

From a stripling of a boy unable to overcome his own base desires and lusts to a true warrior and leader of armies, Kamsa had come a long way.

Even his governance of Mathura had improved considerably. While the resentment remained and pockets of resistance continued to defy his claim to the throne, the overall situation had calmed down. No more open defiance and challenging of his authority. No more martyrdom and suicidal frontal assaults on his soldiers or himself. Political backbiting and character vilification were not things that troubled Jarasandha overmuch: they were a part of public life and even he knew how bitterly the people of his dominions must speak of him behind closed doors. So long as that bitterness was restricted to backdoor gossip and mere talk, it did not bother him. If anything, it only proved that Kamsa was maturing as a politician and statesman: every successful ruler had people who resented him. It was only when that resentment boiled over into open sedition that it became a cause of concern.

Jarasandha had risen and come forward to gain a better view of Kamsa's triumph in battle. Now he regained his seat, gesturing to his lackeys to fetch him choice sweetmeats. He always enjoyed sampling the local specialities of each region he conquered. For some reason, eating their food made the conquest real and memorable. The fact that he literally ate choice portions of meat carved from the bodies of victims in each region, prepared by their own cooks in the style of the region, lent a new meaning to the term 'sweetmeat'. It also added to his awe-inspiring reputation as the 'eater of nations'.

As he snacked on some delicious spiced cuts taken from the living body of the chief of chiefs of the region he had just invaded and was in the process of conquering, Jarasandha considered Kamsa again.

He knew that the main cause of the change that had overcome his son-in-law stemmed from diverting Kamsa's rakshasa predilection for violence and lustful living into more manageable diversions. Cooped up in Mathura all year long, Kamsa had taken to unleashing his appetites on his own

people. That was not an advisable course of action for a long-sitting monarch. The old Yadava who had trained him in the use of his newfound abilities had clearly understood this and had successfully showed Kamsa how to divert his considerable power and strength into more sporting pastimes.

Jarasandha had then taken Kamsa to the next level: turning him into a yodha in his own ranks, using him as a tool of conquest and expansion, while providing Kamsa a natural outlet for his aggression. Better that Kamsa batter the brains of enemies in the battlefield than the heads of his own citizens in the streets of Mathura. Jarasandha had encouraged and enabled Kamsa to wrest the throne from Ugrasena for his own ends and a kingdom weakened by internal strife was not what he desired. He wished Mathura to remain strong and resilient so that when he sidelined Kamsa and effectively governed the region, it would be a valuable part of his greater plan.

Thus far, the plan had succeeded magnificently. Kamsa had performed brilliantly and Mathura had settled into the routine of bureaucratic torpor that was the usual condition of most capital city-states. The bitter strife that had threatened to plunge it into civil war only a decade earlier had settled into a series of disgruntled factions jockeying for power positions and seeking to ingratiate themselves with Kamsa and his powerful father-in-law.

Only a few pockets of outright resistance remained, buoyed by their delusional faith in their supernatural savior, the legendary Slayer of Kamsa. But thus far, the Slayer hadn't so much as dared to harm a hair on Kamsa's handsome head. Jarasandha had long since relegated that myth to the back room of his attention: if and when the mythic Deliverer truly lived up to his name, he would be dealt with swiftly and firmly. Like most myths, he probably thrived on half-knowledge and shadowy rumor. The instant he stepped out into the clear light of day he would be vaporized like mist. The only danger, if one might perceive it even as that, was the growing cult of believers who regarded the mythic Eighth Child as some kind of avatar of Vishnu, or even, Jarasandha chuckled to himself softly, as

God Incarnate! These foolish superstitious peasants. They would believe anything fed to them by their brahmin oppressors.

In any case, Jarasandha had a plan for dealing with the so-called Deliverer. Supernaturally empowered or no, God or mere myth, the plan Jarasandha had in mind would put paid to him once and for all, both the Child and the Myth. He dismissed the irritating distraction of the Slayer and turned his thoughts back to the main preoccupation that required his attention.

Jarasandha's main focus was on building Kamsa's strength and reputation, both as a yodha in battle and as a king. Among the Yadavas, the two were always interdependent. While he enjoyed Kamsa's participation in his own ongoing campaign of conquest, he also ensured that Kamsa returned to Mathura regularly enough to establish his dominance and leave no doubt about his kingship. The day-to-day governance was ably handled by veterans like Pralamba and his own minions and hand-picked loyalists but even though he was mostly a figurehead it still was important for Kamsa to be *seen* governing. It was time now for Kamsa to return and be seen again being Lord of Mathura. That was what he had decided after viewing the battle: Kamsa had earned sufficient valor points these past weeks. Now, he must be sent home.

He watched now as the familiar chariot wound its way up the hillside, bringing Kamsa to him.

Moments later, Kamsa stepped off the chariot and bowed before Jarasandha, grinning as he presented his father-in-law and emperor with the severed head of the chieftain he had just defeated in today's battle. 'My Emperor,' he said. 'A little something for your stew tonight!'

Jarasandha chuckled. 'Well done, my son. Come, sit with me. You have done well today.'

Kamsa inclined his head graciously. Along with other graces, he had come to accept his position visavis Jarasandha as well, which was also pleasing to the Magadhan. It was tiresome to have to keep swatting down the younger man and remind him who was top dog in this pack. Better by far to accept one's position and enjoy the fruits of grace.

'By your grace, father,' Kamsa said as if echoing this very sentiment.

Jarasandha smiled.

Yes.

Kamsa had turned out quite well after all.

KAMSA noted that Jarasandha had set up his observation post before a cave mouth. The interior of the cave was dark and forbidding. He had heard rumours about the being that dwelled within that cave. He was curious about it but this was not the time to ask Jarasandha. Perhaps later....

Jarasandha was silent awhile. Then he broached the subject that truly concerned him. The one problem that Kamsa and he had yet to conquer. Kamsa had been expecting him to bring it up and was not surprised when Jarasandha spoke.

‘I wish to speak with you about the Deliverer. It is time we dispatched that problem once and for all.’

Jarasandha’s tone was casual, as if speaking of a troublesome chieftain of a small tribe that still refused to yield despite the rest of the nation surrendering. Just another gnat to swat.

Kamsa did not take the problem of the Slayer as lightly. He felt his own grin vanishing and his face hardening at the mention of the old nemesis.

‘The first group of assassins led by Putana were all defeated,’ he said. ‘And the Vrishni have gone into exile, taking refuge in a secret hamlet within the Vrindavan hills. Finding them is difficult enough, getting to the Deliverer is virtually impossible. And killing him...’

Kamsa clenched his fist tightly, crushing the goblet he had just drunk from without even realizing he was doing so. The metal crumpled like paper in his fist, blood-red wine spilling between his fingers and dripping to the ground. ‘If only I could face him once, myself. I would...’

‘You would endanger us all,’ Jarasandha said sharply. ‘I have told you this before and I shall say it again, Kamsa. A wise general does not go running himself to face his arch enemy. He uses his army, his captains, his akshohini, strategy and tactics, ruses and wiles, to achieve his ends. You are no longer a mere warrior prince. You are King Kamsa of Mathura. If this Deliverer comes to you, then you will have the chance to crush him. But it is not your place to go rooting in crannies and nooks for cowardly rebels.’

‘Then what would you have me do?’ Kamsa asked.

Jarasandha carefully selected a choice item from the platter beside him, a delicacy left almost raw. He inserted it into his mouth and chewed slowly, savouring the exotic flavour. A trickle of blood escaped from the corner of his mouth and wound its way slowly down his chin. His tongue shot out, cleaning the trail, the tip of the extended organ lingering around his jaw and neck for a moment before retracting back into his mouth with a slurping sound.

‘Childslayer,’ Jarasandha said.

Kamsa frowned.

‘That is the name by which you are known, is it not?’ Jarasandha asked. ‘The name by which you became famous amongst your kinsfolk?’ He smiled slyly, the twin tips of his forked tongue slithering in and out between his lips. ‘Or notorious, as some would say?’

Kamsa shrugged. He had long since inured himself to Jarasandha’s attempts at provocation. Besides, he didn’t mind that particular title. It was true after all.

‘You earned that name because of your fondness for slaughtering newborn babes, infants, the first-born male child of every household. Is this not so?’

Kamsa nodded.

Jarasandha sucked on another choice delicacy, something wet and pinkish that made a slurping sound as the Magadhan relished it. ‘It is time to resurrect that reputation. To unleash the Childslayer within you once more.’

The ground beneath them began to shudder. Kamsa saw that the Mohinis stationed near the mouth of the cave appeared nervous and unsettled. Several of them began to move away from the dark opening, leaving only their emperor’s immediate bodyguards at their posts. The shuddering continued, growing steadily in intensity as if something were approaching. Jarasandha himself appeared calm and unruffled. Kamsa took his cue from his father-in-law. He knew better than to show trepidation or nervousness in Jarasandha’s presence. When with men, one must behave like a man, Jarasandha always said.

‘Unleash...?’ Kamsa asked.

Jarasandha smiled again slyly, dabbing at the corners of his lips where pinkish juices were smeared. ‘You sent Putana and Baka to assassinate the Deliverer. Their failure has upset Baka’s brother-asura greatly. He desires vengeance.’

Suddenly, Kamsa understood the meaning of the cave and the shuddering and the fearful attitude of the Mohinis—they who never showed fear even in the face of certain death. ‘Agha,’ he said. ‘I recall Putana mentioning him at the same time when she recommended Baka. He was unavailable at the time for some reason.’

Jarasandha chuckled. ‘Unavailable. That would be one way of putting it. Yes, Putana assumed that she alone would be more than sufficient to deal with the Eighth Child. To have sent Agha would be like sending a lightning bolt to kill an ant. But now we see that the Deliverer is not to be underestimated. Therefore I have summoned Agha. He is eager to undertake this task in your name. To carry on the work of Chilslaying for you.’

The rumbling was reaching a crescendo. Kamsa could see something approaching from deep within the dark maw of the cave, as if some mighty creature were rushing up to the surface from deep within the bowels of the earth where he dwelled. It would arrive at any moment now.

Kamsa nodded. ‘So Agha will go to slay the Deliverer.’

Jarasandha beamed. ‘Not just the Deliverer. *All* the children of Vrajbhoomi. There has been talk that the Deliverer has at least one sibling, empowered with supernatural abilities as well.’

The skin on the back of Kamsa’s neck prickled but he said nothing. He had heard the rumors too. They made him uneasy. How many Slayers of Kamsa were there? What were these supernatural abilities? And what of the conviction, so deeply rooted in some of his citizenry that they would not renounce it even under extreme torture, that the Deliverer was in fact Vishnu Incarnate himself?

Jarasandha continued. ‘It’s best to be safe. Rather than chance killing one and sparing another, Agha will wipe out the entire population of Vrishni young. As we already know, they have taken refuge in a secret hamlet within the Vrindavan hills. Agha will insinuate himself by travelling within the earth as only he can do, seek them out, and slaughter the children. If he can kill the Deliverer too, well and good. If not, he will force the Deliverer to emerge from hiding and confront you directly.’

Kamsa swallowed, his throat suddenly dry at the thought of confronting the Deliverer himself. ‘Excellent.’

Suddenly, the cave collapsed, engulfing the Mohinis standing closest to it, even though they were at a distance of several yards from the cave entrance.

Kamsa watched as the roof of the cave fell in upon the unfortunate Hijras, then drew back, shuddering. And then the cave opened again, wider than before. Within its gaping entrance he saw the half-broken bodies of the Hijras, screaming in agony. Then the cave shuddered again, violently, and they were swallowed into its depths. The remaining Mohinis had moved as far away from the cave entrance as possible, weapons drawn and ready. The cave mouth turned this way then that way, seeking fresh victims, before it raised itself up to point at the sky and roared a deafening blast.

The cave was not a cave at all, Kamsa realized. It was an asura. A snakelike being as large as a small hillock, curled upon itself, with a maw as enormous as a cavern. Most unnerving of all was its effective camouflage that enabled it to lie so close to the Mohinis that even they had not suspected its true nature.

‘Agha,’ Jarasandha said pleasantly, introducing their guest. ‘Meet Kamsa Childslayer. It is at his bidding that you undertake this mission we entrust unto you. Go to Vrindavan, find the Child Avatar of Vishnu, and eat him as well as all the young children around him.’

A stench of rotting flesh such as he had never experienced before wafted out, carrying the memory of a thousand carcasses consumed and half-digested within that gargantuan belly. A sound filled the air like a deep bass trumpeting that caused his very bones to vibrate within their sockets. A deep redolent rumbling intonation that was closer to thunder than to any voice spoke then, at a pitch so low, dogs began barking and baying across the land in panic:

<Eat the Children. It shall be done.>

Kamsa grinned at Jarasandha who smiled back.

All three of them laughed, Jarasandha, Kamsa and Agha.

The sound of their laughter echoed like distant thunder. It carried a long, long way.

KAAND 1

‘KRISHNA!’

Balarama looked at him and raised his eyebrows. Then he wiggled his eyebrows so they danced like caterpillars. It was a habit he had developed recently—mainly because he knew it annoyed Rohini-maata.

It didn’t have the same effect on Krishna. His younger brother ignored him and continued walking, using the crook to nudge a calf that had lagged behind the herd. The calf lowed softly in protest then trotted dutifully to catch up with his mother, his hindquarters swaying, little tail twitching.

‘Krishna! Wait for me!’

Balarama began dancing from foot to foot, the way the gopas did while playing ras-garbha. Because of his bulky body, the dance looked funny rather than graceful. It took all of Krishna’s self-control not to burst out laughing. Balarama would do anything to be noticed by Krishna!

‘Krishna!’ This last call was plaintive, almost complaining.

Balarama now combined the wiggling of the eyebrows with the dancing from foot to foot, and added another gesture to the mix—stretching out his arms, palms upwards, as if asking for help. He somehow managed to keep moving sideways and downhill while doing all this, almost keeping pace with Krishna who was walking normally. It was impressive, considering Balarama’s usual lack of physical grace and his girth. Balarama began mouthing the word ‘Krishna!’ with an accompanying expression that imitated the caller who, from the sound of her voice, was fast catching up with them.

The total effect was hilarious and had Krishna not been determined to keep from laughing he would have been in splits, rolling on the ground. It was certainly one of Balarama's best performances in his teasing mode.

Krishna casually stuck out the crook and tripped Balarama up. His brother stumbled with a 'Uff!' and somersaulted downhill, rolling over and over several times before crashing into the trailing calf and his mother cow. Both raised angry moos and were joined by the rest of the herd. Balarama landed on his rear and sat up, grass on his face and hair and more than a little cowpatty all over. He spat out a mouthful of grass and glared uphill at his brother.

Krishna spread his hands apologetically and shrugged as if to say, *What else to do, bhai? You were being a pain!*

Balarama grinned and waggled his eyebrows again, looking at a point just behind Krishna.

Krishna sighed.

The sound of female feet padding across the grass approached and then little Radha's pretty face popped up beside him. 'Krishna, I've been following you for yojanas!' she said breathlessly.

Since the distance from the village to these pasture hills was barely three miles and a yojana meant a distance of roughly nine miles, it was hardly likely she had actually run for even one yojana, but Radha always liked to exaggerate.

Krishna smiled indulgently at her. 'Why are you following us, Radha?'

‘Not *us*, silly,’ she said, still breathless. ‘Just *you*. I want to keep you company while you graze the herds.’

He smiled, shaking his head. ‘I have Balarama to keep me company. And aren’t you supposed to be milking and mixing curds and making buttermilk and things like that?’

She grinned impishly, the solitary dimple appearing in her right cheek as she turned her round face up to him. ‘I won’t tell if you won’t tell!’

Krishna grinned. Despite her tendency to follow him around like a new-born calf, he had to admit he found Radha endearing. While all the Vrishni gopis could be as boisterous and upstart as their male counterparts, Radha was bolder and more adventurous than most. She thought nothing of climbing trees or running races with the boys and was capable of winning at both! Even Balarama who was as instinctively chauvinistic as most Yadava males didn’t protest too loudly. What he did do, as he had done just moments ago, was tease Krishna about Radha’s obvious crush. More than once, Krishna had caught her gazing at him in frank adoration. And when he played his flute, no matter where she was or what chore she was engaged in, Radha would drop everything and come running to sit at his feet, rest her chin on her upturned palms, and listen in rapt admiration.

There was no doubt that she was a fan of his flute-playing but it went beyond that. She would fetch and carry for him even when he requested her not to do so: Krishna didn’t like having others do his work as he didn’t believe in anyone being superior or inferior. Given a chance, Radha would act as his willing slave. It took several stern admonishments before she stopped. Now she settled for following him around wherever he went. It had started to become a bit of a nuisance especially during the times when Balarama and he liked to go off together in search of fresh pastures, or merely rove the wild unexplored backwoods behind the main hamlet. Radha was always so excitable and boisterous, there was no way to spend a quiet afternoon with her around.

And here she was again, hot on their heels, breathless and excited.

Krishna and she reached the bottom of the hill where Balarama was dusting off his clothes.

‘Balarama-bhaiya,’ she sang happily. ‘I was calling and calling, didn’t you hear me?’

Balarama glanced at Krishna with a look that suggested that his eyebrows might venture skywards at any moment. ‘You never called out to me, Radha. You only called Krishna’s name.’

Radha slapped her own forehead. ‘Of course! How silly of me! Next time, I’ll make sure to shout your name just as loudly. Maybe you’ll make Krishna walk a little slower so I can catch up. I can barely *run* as fast as he can *walk*. Isn’t he amazing?’

Since Radha was one of the fastest runners in Vrindavan and Krishna rarely moved faster than a leisurely stroll, playing his flute as he went, there was nothing Balarama could say without contradicting her. So he settled for a shrug and a non-committal grin. But the instant, she looked away, he waggled his caterpillar eyebrows at Krishna again. Krishna sighed. It was going to be one of those days!

They walked along quietly for a few moments, the only sounds the lowing of the cows and calves and the tweeting of birds on the treetops.

Radha sighed heavily. ‘Great Vishnu in Vaikunta!’ she said, ‘it’s so quiet and peaceful here. Not noisy and bustling like in the village all the time.’

Krishna sensed Balarama turning his head to look pointedly at him. He could almost hear his elder brother’s unvoiced comment: The reason why the village is always noisy and bustling is because *you’re* there!

Wisely, Balarama didn't speak his thoughts aloud. They continued walking quietly for a while longer, and Krishna was just starting to think, *Why, this isn't so bad after all. Maybe Radha can keep quiet for a bit. She may finally be growing some patience and good sense.*

As if to prove him wrong, Radha screeched.

The sound made Krishna and Balarama jump. Even the calves nearest to them jerked spasmodically in reaction. Several cow mothers turned their heads, their mouths having stopped chewing as they sought out the source of the distress signal. Their tails twitched in agitation. When Radha screeched, the whole world paid attention.

‘Look!’ Radha cried excitedly, ‘Marigolds!’

And she was off, sprinting between the cows and calves, racing towards a patch of saffron-golden flowers about a hundred yards further on as it was the finish line of the most important race of her life.

Krishna watched her heels kicking up dust as she sprinted away and finally permitted himself to look at Balarama. This time, both his brother's eyebrows were raised high and Balarama had one arm crooked, the fist resting on his waist, head tilted disapprovingly in a deliberate parody of disapproval.

Krishna sighed and nodded. ‘She can be quite a handful.’

‘You think?’ Balarama replied.

They both burst out laughing, shaking their heads in despair.

‘She’s really not that bad,’ Krishna began, ‘She’s sweet and well-meaning. If only she wasn’t so loud—’

Radha screamed.

Balarama raised his eyebrows. ‘You were saying, brother?’

Krishna grinned. ‘She must have found lotus flowers this time.’

Radha screamed again. Then, plaintively, ‘Krish-na! Come quick!’

Balarama said, ‘You have been summoned by the princess.’

Krishna elbowed him affectionately.

Radha shouted, her voice tinged with genuine panic this time, ‘Krishna! Balarama-bhaiya! Please come quickly. Something strange is happening here!’

Krishna and Balarama exchanged a sharp glance then began sprinting towards Radha.

KRISHNA stopped short and looked around, expecting the worst.

He could see nothing amiss.

Radha was standing in a bed of marigold flowers, clutching a few to herself and staring at the ground a few yards further away.

‘What is it, Radha?’ he asked.

She pointed. ‘There.’

He looked. Balarama, who was a slower runner, came up beside him and looked as well. They exchanged a glance, frowning.

‘I don’t see anything,’ Balarama said.

‘There, silly!’ Radha said impatiently. ‘Use your eyes! It’s right in front of you.’

They looked again.

‘I see grass, a tree, flowers, earth...’ Balarama shrugged. ‘I have no idea what she means.’

Radha sighed loudly then came stamping up between them, pushing them aside.

She leaned over and pointed at a plant growing between a clump of flowers.

‘There. Don’t you *see* that? That shouldn’t be growing there.’

She was pointing at a perfectly ordinary looking plant.

Balarama turned his back to her, rolling his eyes at Krishna.

‘Why shouldn’t it be growing there, Radha?’ Krishna asked as patiently as he could manage.

She put one hand on her hip. ‘That plant doesn’t belong there! It’s just wrong.’

Krishna resisted the urge to sigh and roll his eyes too. ‘Well, I’m sure Bhoo Devi has a good reason to make it sprout up in that spot.’

Now it was Radha who rolled her eyes. ‘Bhoo Devi? The spirit of the planet couldn’t make that plant grow there. She wouldn’t make such a foolish mistake.’

She went on for a while about how the plant was poisonous and posed a danger to the cattle and how they would have to watch for more like it in case one of the calves happened to munch it innocently. Krishna listened with only half his attention. He was more involved in helping Balarama steer the herd through the woods. Radha chattered nonstop all the way, not helping one bit with the steering, rattling off the many different ways in which young calves’ lives could be endangered by consuming the wrong fodder.

They emerged from the woods into a vista of such perfection that even she was momentarily silenced. The three of them stood at the top of a rise,

staring out at rolling hills covered with lush kusa grass of emerald green, even Krishna didn't know what to say at first. A gentle wind blew softly across the undulating slopes, the grass rippling like waves on the Yamuna in the wake of a ferry boat.

'It's the perfect pasture,' Radha said. 'It really is! Look at that grass. I have never seen anything like it before. I must go tell my father.' She bent down and pulled up a handful of the grass, taking care to uproot it with a little sod still clinging to the roots. 'I'll be back!' she cried, racing back the way they had come, her feet making a swishing sound as they went through the grass.

'Don't hurry,' Balarama muttered.

Krishna elbowed him affectionately.

Balarama pushed him back. Krishna almost lost his balance.

'It is a great pasture,' Balarama said.

'It's perfect,' Krishna admitted.

The herd seemed to think so too. They were mooing and lowing to one another happily, munching away happily, tails flicking rapidly. The pastures closer to the village had been used up and it had been hard to find fresh feed for the herds of late. The cattle of Gokul-dham were used to roaming freely across the grass seas of Vraj-bhoomi, not being cooped into a bounded valley as they were now at Vrindavan. The village elders had been speaking of this more often at the meetings, wondering aloud how they would manage once the existing pastures were fully depleted.

Now, it seemed, there was a solution. Krishna and Balarama had found new pastures, better than any other in Vrindavan. Perhaps even better than

any in Vraj-bhoomi.

3

RADHA ran back the way they had come, through the woods.

Passing the bed of marigolds she had spotted earlier, she slowed. She would break off a section of the plant she had seen earlier and take it back to show her mother; Maatr would know what the plant was called and might be able to understand why it was growing here, out of its natural environment. Despite her confident banter, all Radha knew for sure was that the plant was of a type that grew underground or in caves, never on open sunlit ground. Her mother would know much more about it. And both mother and father would be very pleased to hear about the discovery of the new pastures. To a cowherd, fodder was one of the most important things in life. Finding it, maintaining a constant supply, growing more...much of the art of herding had to do with ensuring one's herds always had good fodder all year round. Especially when you cared for creatures that chewed constantly and needed to be fed every waking minute, that often proved to be a great challenge. They would be thrilled by the news, as would the rest of Vrindavan.

She smiled as she waded through the marigold bed, careful not to stamp on even a single flower. Like anyone who loved plants, she treated them with respect and affection. She would never dream of plucking a flower unless it was needed and even when she did so, she always took care not to damage the plant itself.

She stopped and looked around. This was the spot where they had stopped earlier. She could see the clumsy footprints left by heavy-footed Balarama and Krishna's lighter-footed careful treads. The plant should have been right...here. But it wasn't.

The plant was gone.

How was that possible?

She looked around, puzzled. It was shady and cool here, the eaves of the overhanging branches providing considerable shade. Further away, the early morning sun streaming down through interwoven branches left dappled patterns on the trunks of fruit trees. She realized that there was very little birdsong audible, almost none in fact. And she could neither spot nor hear many squirrels or other little creatures. That was odd but nothing extraordinary in itself. There was also a stench coming from somewhere on the wind that she could not place, a fetid odor, as of raw carcass. Perhaps some predator had killed nearby and the remains were upwind of where she stood. She glanced that way: the shade was so dense there, it was almost dark. Dusky, twilight dark.

She peered, wondering just how thick the trees could be to block out the sunlight that effectively, then shrugged. All that Bhoodevi did served a purpose. Perhaps the poisonous plant she had spotted here earlier was the natural diet of some creature that lived in such shadowy wooded areas. Perhaps one such creature had come by and eaten it already. It was quite dark there in the shade between those two enormous trees, almost dark enough to be a cave entrance. The plant usually grew underground or in dark caves, so it wasn't completely unreasonable for it grow here in a relatively dark shady spot.

She held up the handful of kusa grass she had uprooted and smiled. She would run back to the village and tell her father the good news. He would have the distinction of telling Nanda-Maharaja and the rest of the Vrishni. It would brighten everyone's day. Finding new pastures was cause enough for a celebration. There would be a feast tonight, she guessed. And dancing. Ras-garba. She would have a chance to dance with Krishna! His Lila was the best of all. Nobody else could play as well as he.

Singing to herself, little Radha ran back towards the hamlet of Vrindavan with the good news.

Behind her, the shadowy darkness that she had peered into only moments earlier stirred and began moving sluggishly, preparing to consume its next meal.

Yashoda heard the excited shouts and came out of her house, using her elbow to open the door because her hands were covered with curds. She had been making the lassi for the family for the day, a considerable chore in itself because of the quantity Balarama and Krishna consumed. She saw Vinayaka and Sudipta's little girl Radha surrounded by a crowd of excited young gopas and gopis. Several older cowherds were gathered around as well, listening to the girl. Radha was describing something in great detail, spreading her arms wide and spinning around to indicate something vast and beautiful, as far as Yashoda could tell. Her pretty face was beaming with pleasure and from the reactions on the faces of those listening, it was apparent that they were enjoying listening to her ebullient description too. Yashoda smiled and brushed an errant hair off her forehead with the back of one hand, smearing a little curd on her face and not minding. She wondered what they were all talking about. Then she saw Rohini leave the group and come walking briskly to her.

‘What is it?’ she asked even before Rohini reached her doorstep.

‘New pastures!’ Rohini said, infected with the same enthusiasm that seemed to be spreading throughout the village. People were gathering around, converging from all over as the news spread. ‘Our two little rascals have discovered new pastures beyond the north-east woods!’

‘Really? That’s wonderful. Are they big enough to feed all our herds for a while?’

Rohini gestured towards the crowd gathered around little Radha. It had grown five fold already and was still expanding as the whole of Vrindavan’s population rapidly converged on the bearer of good news. ‘If you believe Sudipta’s daughter, these pastures are big enough to feed all the herds in all the Yadava nation for all eternity!’

They laughed. ‘Little Radha always had a tendency to say more than was needed,’ Yashoda said. ‘Especially when it involves our little Krishna.’

‘Yes, she is quite besotted with him, isn’t she?’ Rohini said. ‘In any case, even if one takes her exaggerations with a big pinch of salt, that still suggests these new pastures must be quite bountiful. Perhaps even enough to feed our herds for two or three seasons.’

‘Which would give the present pastures time to replenish.’ Yashoda smiled. ‘That’s wonderful news! I must find Nanda and tell him.’

‘Oh, he already knows,’ Rohini said. ‘He’s gone to organize the gopas and get them to start moving the herds at once.’

‘I want to go too,’ Yashoda said, then remembered her half-stirred curds. ‘But I have to finish this batch first before it settles.’

‘I’ll help you,’ Rohini said, ‘four hands will make the churning go faster than two. Then we’ll go together to see the new pastures.’

Smiling happily, they went inside the house together.

On the village street outside, Radha finished repeating the description of the new pastures for the umpteenth time, then, as the gopas and gopis in the crowd turned to one another to discuss the implications of this exciting news, she looked up at her own mother and father.

Her father had already examined the sample of kusa grass and pronounced it eminently edible. He had even bitten off a bit and chewed it enthusiastically, drawing laughter and good-natured jesting. The mood in Vrindavan was happy today, happier than it had been in a long while. Now, her father had gone off with Nanda-Maharaja and the other elder gopas to

organize the migration of the herds, while her mother remained here, speaking with several other gopis, many of whom were Radha's aunts.

'Maa,' she said, tugging at her mother's garment.

'Yes, Radhey?' Sudipta said, looking down at her daughter.

'Can I go back and show my friends the way to the new pastures? They want to take the rest of the calf herds there right away.'

Sudipta looked at her sisters, discussing the question with them. A few gopas were around too and they heard her query as well. Nobody had any objection to their children taking their calf herds to the new pastures. Everyone—man, woman, child, cow and calf—in the village was going there anyway.

'Go ahead, but don't get lost on the way,' she said with habitual motherly affection. 'Those north-east woods are quite dense, I'm told.'

'Dense, maa?' Radha repeated. 'They're dark as caves in places! But don't worry, I could find the way back even in the dark with a cloth around my eyes!'

She ran off to tell the younger cowherds that she had permission. They let out a series of happy whoops and cheers, each running off to fetch his or her own little herd of calves and nursing mother cows.

Shortly afterwards, as Rohini and Yashoda were finishing the last batch of buttermilk for the day, a long procession of young gopas and gopis passed through the center of the village, leading all the young calves and cows with them. Sounds of tongues clicking, bells dingling and excited young voices shouting to one another filled the air.

The hustle and bustle was reminiscent of the way things had been back in Gokul-dham before the Vrishni had been forced to go into exile. A sense of hope and anticipation was in the air. Discovering new pastures was as big a miracle for cowherds as finding a new continent was to an explorer. Perhaps their luck had changed at last. Perhaps the good lord Vishnu had seen fit to grace them with happy days once more. The last few months had been dark, frightening times, with asuras assaulting children and with the discovery that the Slayer had been born in their midst, thereby blessing them as well as guaranteeing great hardship and struggle ahead. Today's news was a much-needed boost to their flagging morale and everyone intended to make the most of it.

The grown up gopas and gopis watched their children march happily down the pathway, smiling and commenting on their exuberance. Little did they know that they would not be seeing their young ones again that day and for many, many days to come.

The procession of young gopas and gopis wound their way from Vrindavan to the north-east woods, singing and dancing merrily. There was a festive spirit in the air. A boy in front, a good friend of Krishna and Balarama, named Sridhara, played the horn, its sound carrying across the entire hamlet.

Many of the gopas and gopis played flutes, a musical instrument always favoured by Vrishni cowherds for its ability to carry long distances and remind herds of the presence of their watchers; the fact that they played (or attempted to play) melodies favoured by Krishna belied their musical ambitions. There was not a child in Vrindavan who did not look up to their youthful Savior and Deliverer and adore him as a Vaishnavite adores Vishnu.

The less musically inclined ones carried slings and used them as they went, pausing to engage in contests of skill—‘I bet you couldn’t hit that brown leaf on the top of that tree!’—then sprinting to catch up with the rest, an easy task due to the slow bovine progress of the herds. The prize for the victor was that he would get to run up to Krishna and touch him first, shouting as they did, ‘I touched him first, I was first!’

Those who were not as proficient as the others in sling-shooting got upset because they would not be able to touch Krishna first. They snatched the slingshots from the winners and threw them as far ahead as they could, even ahead of the herds in front. The winners went running to retrieve them but the others who had lost raced them and reached first, throwing the slings even further. So it became a race and the young calves, seeing their young masters and mistresses running ahead, increased pace, drawing moos of protest from their lactating mother cows.

One of the slings landed in a clump of trees. Cuckoos roosting in the trees set off sharp calls, flying about in agitation, unaccustomed to mammals in their environment. The gopas imitated the cuckoos and climbed the trees, throwing the slings to one another to prevent the owners from retrieving them. The owners laughed good-naturedly and tried to chase down their slings.

Young monkeys screeched from the trees, leaping from branch to branch, upset at these new hairless simians who had invaded their domain. The boys attempted to imitate them, hanging from branches and swinging while calling out in monkey voices. The herds caught up with them and trundled past as they continued their monkey-play. The gopis called them monkeys and cuckoos as they went past, giggling at their antics. Then they dismounted from the trees and ran again to catch up with the herds.

When they reached a brook, they splashed through it, sending frogs leaping helter skelter in startled panic. The boys imitated the frogs, leaping in the water till they were soaked from head to foot. Soaked, but at least clean at last, if only for the moment, as their mothers would have commented if they had seen them then!

In this manner, they made their way to the north-east woods, playing and shouting and engaged in tomfoolery, even their herds sharing in the infectious spirit of festivity. They barely noticed when the way through the trees grew darker and more shadowy, absent of monkeys, cuckoos, frogs and all other wildlife, or the fetid stench that filled the air in this particular neck of the woods.

The herd slowed down, sensing something amiss, but the children drove them on relentlessly, too impatient to be cautious. Those that commented on the denseness of this part of the woods and the fetid odor were told by their friends that there was probably a swamp nearby.

Radha had a moment of unease when she saw the calves and cows in front entering a place dark enough to be a cavern entrance, but then she recalled

that it had been there earlier as well, and continued chatting with her gopi friends. The gopas were too excited and up to mischief to even notice much except that it had become darker. They incorporated this change of environment into their play, pretending to be bats swooping this way and that way blindly, deliberating banging into one another or brushing gently against the mother cows and patting their rumps affectionately.

Slowly, the entire procession made its way into the open, waiting maw of the asura Agha.

6

KRISHNA felt the rumble of distant thunder and stopped playing his flute.

He looked around.

Balarama had gone exploring the pastures, seeking to measure their full extent. A runner had already come from the village, telling them that their father and the other elders were bringing the herds here and that Radha and the younger herders had already set off with the calf and mother herds. They would be reaching shortly.

The sky was bright blue, fat shapely clouds drifting lazily by, casting undulating shadows on the sea of kusa grass, the wind shirring in the grass was a soothing accompaniment to his flute, and until a moment ago, he had been as close to yoganidra as it was possible to get on this mortal plane. The rumbling of distant thunder was a harsh counterpoint to this placid quietude.

He realized he had felt the rumbling rather than simply heard it.

There it was again.

Like the rumbling of a stomach left too long unfed.

Exactly like that!

Except louder, much *much* louder.

The ground beneath his feet shuddered noticeably this time, like a minor earthquake. The calves nearest to him lifted their heads long enough to stop chewing and moo indignantly. Their mothers stopped chewing too. Several of them turned to look in his direction.

He raised a hand, calming them.

Where was Balarama?

Krishna cast his inner eye outwards, travelling at the speed of a bird across the top of the tall grass, over the hill and down the next valley, then up the next rise and down the next dip, until he located his brother, still walking towards the far end of the pastures in a northerly direction.

Balarama paused, sensing his brother's questing consciousness and turned to look back the way he had come. His fair broader features frowned, understanding that there was something wrong. Even as far away as he was, he could feel a vestige of the tremors that Krishna was experiencing.

Balarama turned and began running back to Krishna. The grass shirred around his pumping feet, staining his already grass-stained lower body greener. His muscular legs pounded the ground hard, bearing his bulk easily but not as swiftly as he would have liked at such a time.

'I'm coming, bhai,' he said softly, knowing he would be heard even miles away.

Krishna turned back and looked in the direction of the woods. That was the only way to get here. To either side of the woods, the landscape was dangerously broken and undulating, steep rocky rises and abruptly plummeting wadis. Dangerous enough for humans, much too risky for cattle.

The only way to these new pastures was through the woods. And something was in the woods, intending harm to his friends and their herds.

Krishna began running in the direction of the woods. Unlike Balarama, he ran with great lithness and athletic grace. His slender form was built for speed. He raced through the tall grass like a humming bird speeding back towards her nest. The calves and mother cows he had been herding looked back in dismay, lowing to one another to lament Krishna leaving them.

He burst through the woods and came face to face with a monstrosity.

Something that resembled a gargantuan earthworm was shattering tree trunks and cracking branches as it undulated. The dust and soil falling from its body suggested that it had freshly emerged from beneath the surface of the earth. It bucked and shuddered, its enormous length shivering as it shifted from side to side. It touched a sala tree a yard thick at the base and the tree trunk cracked with a resounding sound, the tree toppling over to crash down heavily. Monkeys and birds and animals screamed and chittered from elsewhere in the woods, but no animal or birds sounds were audible in the region of the bucking demon.

Krishna understood that the creature must have emerged from the ground and insinuated itself into the woods slowly, gradually, moving perhaps a few feet at a time, then waiting for hours before moving again. Over the course of days, perhaps even weeks, it had taken up position in the darkest areas of the woods, then lain still, waiting. Like a serpent, it had intertwined itself between trees, looping and twisting sinuously until it covered a considerable area. He could only imagine the length of the beast from mouth to tail: miles certainly. Perhaps a whole yojana long? The bulk of its body was still inside the ground, he saw, and that was why it was moving so violently now. It was trying to retreat into its hole, to return underground where it could travel more easily through the subterranean caverns to which it was accustomed, there to consume its meal at leisure.

He already knew what its meal consisted of: the calf herds and child cowherds. With the power of his inner eye he could see little Radha and the other young gopas and gopis alongwith their calf herds and mother cows, all inside the belly of the beast. They had been startled when the ground began moving underfoot and the world around them began to shake. Now, they were terrified, for they understood that this was no earthquake or tremor; they were inside some great creature's maw and were about to be consumed.

He could see them screaming and crying out plaintively, scared despite their inherent brave outlook, for how could they fight such a creature once they were within its body? They could hardly guess at what it even looked like and the fetid rank air within the beast's body was already choking and sickening the children as well as the cattle.

The question was why the creature had not consumed them already. All it had to do was gulp and swallow and every last child in Vrindavan old enough to mind the herds would be digested alive, slowly, agonizingly. The most merciful death would suffocation for lack of air. The most terrible would be a slow acidic digesting over days.

'I will not let that happen,' Krishna said grimly.

He raised his voice, raising his cowherd's crook and shaking it at the towering beast. 'I will not let you take them!'

At the sound of his voice, the beast ceased its shuddering.

Suddenly, a section of its vast body rose up in the air, exactly like the head of a snake rising to open its hood. Except that the segmented body resembled a worm more than a snake and when the head rose up, it did not widen into a hood, merely opened to reveal a great maw, some fifty yards wide, and perfectly round. Blind and lacking any other sense organs, its maw opened in sections to reveal interlocking overlapping flaps of dusty

grimy leathery hide that resembled an iris spiralling open. Within that giant maw, he saw an immense terrifying darkness, and within that darkness, several yards deep, he saw his friends and their herds, struggling to stay upright, leaning against one another or against the more sure-footed bovines, pale and very scared, crying with fear and incomprehension. Many were indignant or upset too: Krishna saw some of the bolder young gopas wield their slings, looking for a target. There was none. They could hardly fling stones about in the beast's mouth; they would only hit their own friends or cattle. They were eager to fight but had no way to fight such a creature. Helpless and angry, they shouted to Krishna to do something.

‘Release my friends!’ Krishna shouted.

A deep rumbling awoke from inside the earth. It began from underground, and Krishna knew that it was coming from the part of the asura’s body that was still beneath the surface, deep within the earth. By the time it travelled to its maw and burst from the open orifice, it emerged as a cruel imitation of laughter. Lacking a mouth, the creature spoke with a mentally projected sound that resembled boulders gnashing against each other in an avalanche.

<I will eat your friends and digest them,>

it said.

<Then, when I am done, I will exude them as offal into the bowels of the earth.>

Krishna’s eyes blazed deep blue, his dark skin exuding a glow that cancelled the darkness of the worm’s shadow in the woods.

‘Who are you, demon?’ Krishna demanded.

<I am Agha. Baka was my brother demon. Putana was as a mother to some of us, a sister to others. I will avenge them as well as the others you slew. I am the shape of your vengeance.>

‘You are a worm!’ Krishna said. ‘I will crush you underfoot.’

<Then your friends will die within my maw.>

‘I command you to release them at once. They had nothing to do with the deaths I caused. I killed your demon kin. I am the one against whom you should direct your vengeance!’

Agha’s maw lolled this way then that for a moment as if considering Krishna’s words.

<My mission was to kill them all. But I would rather confront you and eat you, Deliverer. You are the tasty morsel I seek. I have not fed in months. You will make a good meal...Deva.>

‘I will be your meal, or you mine. That is between us and we shall settle it...once you release those innocents and set them back on the ground unscathed and alive.’

Agha’s maw lolled for another moment. Then the asura reached a decision. The giant worm head swayed and lowered itself to the ground in a clearing caused by its own retreat.

The instant its mouth touched the ground, Krishna shouted to his fellow gopas and gopis. ‘Radha, Sridhara...my brothers and sisters of Vrindavan! Flee! Take your herds and flee from here.’

An exodus began, as the frightened children and cattle emerged from the maw of the gargantuan demon-worm, stepped once more upon solid earth, and backed away fearfully, gazing up at the great creature into whose mouth they had all trooped so unsuspectingly. Many were coughing and choking, some even spewing the contents of their belly, sickened by the stench and filth of the creature's interior.

Balarama arrived just then, winded but spoiling for a fight. Speaking to Krishna with the mind-voice they had both used almost since birth to communicate with one another, he shouted silently:

Brother, I am here, shall we attack the creature together?

'No,' Krishna said firmly. 'You must lead Radha and the others with their herds to safety. Take them back home. Keep the elders and others away from this part of Vrindavan. Get as far away as possible. This battle may range over a great distance. I do not want anyone injured.'

Balarama's face darkened when he heard that he was not to stay and fight.

But then he looked up at the size and adjudged the length of the asura and knew that what Krishna said was wise and necessary. His natural propensity for aggression was subsumed by his unquestioning devotion to his brother. His anger subsided and was sublimated instantly into energy, the energy he would need to do as Krishna bade.

He nodded and began herding the children and cattle away. They disappeared into the woods and Krishna sensed them making their way back towards the village as quickly as they could possibly go. This time they traversed the same route sombrely, many in tears, others angry and furious with the demon; there was no singing or playing or frolicking.

Krishna resented the asura for that more than anything else; it may not have harmed any of them but it had nevertheless instilled terror into the

hearts of the innocent. For that alone, he would make this creature pay dearly.

‘Come, Aghasura,’ he said, stepping forward. ‘You said you wanted to eat me alive, did you not? Go ahead then. Here I am. Eat me!’

Agha issued a coughing sound that might have been a peal of delighted laughter.

Then the worm beast turned its maw towards Krishna, raising a cloud of dust.

Krishna stepped into the giant cave-like maw. The instant he set foot onto its inner surface, the overlapping flaps closed like an iris spiralling shut.

Its body shuddered as it began to swallow its prey, moving him forcibly lower down the length of its body to digest him.

NANDA heard the sound of the beast before he saw it.

He was leading the main body of the clan's herds over a hilltop when a deep coughing sound issued from somewhere ahead. The cattle shied momentarily, lowing in puzzlement. The sound was loud, louder than any animal living in these parts could possibly make, and utterly alien in its deep rasping tone.

It was accompanied by a deep rumbling sensation, as the earth itself quivered underfoot. This upset the cattle further, causing some to bolt downhill. Gopas sprinted to head them off and the situation was well under control but Nanda's heart ran cold as he understood this was yet another asura attack. What else could it be? Things had been so peaceful these past weeks, Yashoda and he had even begun to hope that the worst was over. Despite all that Gargacharya had said, as parents their hearts longed for their Krishna to have a chance at a normal life, playing and frolicking like any normal young gopa.

But now, here was yet another reminder that the devas had a very different fate in store for him.

That was when he saw the beast.

It rose up in a cloud of dust, towering above the tops of the trees in the wooded area to the north-east of Vrindavan where his people seldom ventured. Nanda had explored these parts himself when they first came to dwell here and had written off this region as being inhospitable and uninhabitable. He had had no idea that beyond those dense woods lay several lush green pastures. It had sounded like a miracle when he received news that Krishna and Balarama had found those pastures. But

now, looking at the creature that rose from the woods, he wondered if it had indeed been a miracle or a curse.

The creature that towered above the trees resembled an earthworm freshly emerged from the ground, shedding dust and earth and stones from its grimy body. It was enormous, the size of a hundred sala tree trunks clumped together. Rearing up, it swayed from side to side ponderously, like any subterranean creature unfamiliar with the world above the surface. It appeared to be blind, he noted, for he could see no eyes or any other discernible organs. Its maw opened then, wide enough to accommodate the entire herd that roved before Nanda, several thousand heads and more. Its body length stirred sluggishly between the trees, cracking trunks and shaking entire fruit groves till they shed their ripe loads, and he saw that its sinuous body stretched for miles. He clutched his crook tightly, hardly able to comprehend the existence of such a beast, let alone imagine his little Krishna confronting it. His breath caught in his throat at the very thought. What epic new threat was this?

Then the beast's maw turned towards the hilltop on which Nanda stood, and for a brief moment he could see within that gigantic oral orifice.

He saw the tiny dark form of his beloved Krishna, standing inside the mouth of the beast.

The father in him wanted to cry out and run to his son's aid. But even in that brief glimpse, he saw Krishna's stance, as steady and balanced as if standing on solid ground playing his flute. He saw also the deep glow of powerful blue light that exuded from Krishna's body, spreading outwards to illuminate the dark maw which attempted to consume him and was reminded that this was not merely his adoptive son, it was Vishnu Incarnate.

Then the giant worm swayed and crashed down to the earth once more. Raising a great cloud of dust and debris, it plunged underground, the entire hillside and countryside shuddering as it burrowed its way through the

ground, seeking to bury itself deep within its natural habitat. Trees were uprooted and knocked off, trunks split, the air filled with dust and debris. Cattle lowed and reared and turned their heads in alarm, and it was only through the efforts of his expert gopas and gopis that a stampeded was prevented.

In a moment, the entire thicket ahead was concealed from view by the rising cloud of dust. The earth underfoot continued to shudder mightily and from somewhere deep inside, the sounds of the beast could still be heard, making that peculiar trumpet-like sound of distress or rage, or perhaps both.

Yashoda came up beside him, breathless from having run too quickly. He glanced back and saw her sisters and the rest of their clan approaching as fast as they were able. His wife put a hand on his arm, clutching it tightly. He felt her fear and anxiety through her tight clasp, knowing her every gesture well enough to read her heart's innermost secrets without her having to say a word.

She read him as easily, not saying a word for a moment, just staring at the enormous cloud of dust drifting slowly in their direction. He was glad she had missed seeing the beast itself. Yashoda was a strong person but the sight of that creature was enough to give any grown Vrishni nightmares for the rest of their life.

Finally, she spoke, putting into words the inevitable question. All around them the other gopas and gopis were pointing and staring and talking in hushed anxious voices.

‘Krishna?’ she asked, her tone suggesting she already knew the answer but had to ask anyway.

He gestured at the cloud ahead. There was no need to say more, even if he could describe such a sight as he had just witnessed.

He felt her hand tighten on his arm, squeezing hard enough to choke off circulation. He let it stay, saying nothing.

They stood like that, watching, for a long while. There was nothing they could do except wait. And pray.

KRISHNA was in the maw of the beast. From the sensations rippling through its body he understood that it was attempting to burrow deep inside the earth. Its intention was plain. Burrow into the ground, swallow and digest him. Any normal human would suffocate from lack of air. Even if he survived, he would be crushed by the grinding maw, then have his flesh dissolved by the beast's powerful intestinal acids.

But of course Krishna was no normal human.

He felt the shuddering sensations of Aghasura breaking through packed earth, shattering stone and igneous formations as it burrowed. He felt also the vibrations of its segmented body underfoot as it shifted its own flesh and tissue, carrying him deeper into its innards, like a moving floor that slid food down its digestive tract. From all around him he felt and smelled the fetid odor of rank juices oozing. The ground underfoot grew squishy and squamous, the air rancorous, and he felt himself spattered from all sides with disgusting fluids.

Aghasura was attempting to digest him.

Like any worm of any size, the demon was basically one long digestive tract. Its entire being was devoted to the single-minded act of feeding and processing food. The first part of the process was to shower the digested prey with stomach acids which would break it down into its constituent parts, all the while pushing the food further down the length of its body. Like any large creature, it probably needed to feed constantly. He wondered how it found sufficient nourishment.

That answer came soon enough. Krishna heard and felt the worm-demon slowing in its downwards progress, then the distinctive sound caused by

the unwinding of its gigantic maw as it opened up, followed by peculiar animal sounds of protest and outrage. The maw closed again and he felt the presence of other living creatures nearby. He willed his crook to glow, issuing blue light, and saw a pair of blind sluglike things squirming restlessly as they came to terms with their fate. He saw as well as heard and smelled a fresh barrage of stomach juices spatter the new arrivals, and heard their low grunting sounds of discomfort as the acids began to eat through their hides and flesh.

He willed his crook to dim again, eliminating the nightmarish glimpse. Evidently, Aghasura had not been content with swallowing him alive. It had decided to pause and consume some more food, some manner of subterranean fauna the existence of which was neither known or imagined above ground.

Soon the grunts of the new prey subsided as they began to succumb to the combined lack of air as well as the stomach acids.

Krishna decided it was time to turn the tables on his new tormentor.

He willed his own body to exude light, brilliant glowing blue light, produced by the cells of his body using the energy of brahman. He increased the glow steadily, lighting himself up until he glowed as brightly as a small sun. The two unfortunates wallowing in their predator's tract saw the glow of brahman shakti exuding their fellow prey and emitted sounds of alarm at this blinding effulgence.

Other subterranean creatures clinging to the sides and top of underground caverns through which Aghasura burrowed his way relentlessly also observed the glow bursting out from the fore part of the giant worm as it rolled past. Blue light exploded outwards, like a firefly trapped inside a closed palm, its light visible through gaps in the fingers of the holder.

Krishna increased the brahman shakti until he felt the darkness around him dispelled by his own brightness. He continued to increase the intensity of his effulgence, bathing the worm demon's insides with the heat of his divine energies. The effect was immediate: Aghasura's progress slowed as the worm demon began to feel the scorching heat of a god incarnate's wrath.

Balarama and the other children paused and looked back.

The cloud of dust produced by the plunging worm demon still hung in the still air above the woods. They were some miles away from that place now and Balarama judged them to be safe from immediate threat.

He had done as Krishna had instructed, without question or complaint. But he still resented having to leave his brother to battle this new menace alone. His *younger* brother. It went against every cell of his being; why else had he been put upon this mortal plane if not to protect and serve his younger sibling?

True, he was doing so by obeying Krishna's wishes and herding the children to safety. But it was not the same thing. Besides, Balarama was a fighter, a warrior, a yoddha. Until he matched strength and arms and wits with an opponent, he was not complete. His frustration was not directed Krishna, who had had no choice but to ask Balarama to lead the children to safety. It was at circumstances: he longed to be the one doing the fighting as he had when calf demon had attacked.

As if sensing his conflicting emotions, Radha spoke up beside him.

'He will triumph, will he not?'

Balarama answered without doubt: 'Krishna always triumphs.'

But he clenched his fists in frustration, wishing he were there in the thick of the fight, alongside Krishna.

Radha glanced at him. ‘You would be with him, fighting by his side.’

He nodded.

‘He is your younger brother, you wish to protect him.’

Balarama sighed. ‘Krishna does not need protecting. He protects us all. All worlds are in his shadow. He is the Protector of all Creation.’

‘And yet you are his older brother and would fight for him.’

‘To the death,’ he agreed.

She was silent for a moment. ‘It must be strange, to have a younger brother who is a god so powerful, the great Protector Vishnu himself made incarnate in human form.’

Balarama shrugged. ‘He is what he is. He is Krishna.’

Radha nodded at the wisdom of this simple statement. ‘He is Krishna.’

They fell silent then as a new rumbling filled their inner ears, sensed rather than heard. The ground trembled as something momentous approached, then, with an explosion of dust and trees and shattered trees, Aghasura breached the surface of the earth again, in a spot about two miles from the place where he had attacked the children. All the watching children exclaimed in horror as they viewed the sheer size and scale of the gargantuan clearly. The beast was enormous, towering hundreds of yards high as he exploded from the ground, shedding boulders and rocks and roots by the ton.

Aghasura’s body was blazing with blue light.

The light originated from a spot somewhere to the fore of the worm demon's length, exuding outwards. It was blindingly intense, visible even in the bright sunlight, and shone out with an effulgence that seemed to emerge like swordpoints of blue flame from a hundred different points on the creature's body. As if the light were tearing its way out of the worm's body, bursting forth. It was clear that the blue light caused the worm considerable pain, for it thrashed and squirmed in the air, thudding to the ground with earth-shuddering impact again and again, in a futile attempt to squash the source of the light. Its body convulsed and quivered, undulating and twisting.

Yet all its struggles were of no avail. The blue light only seemed to glow stronger than before, bursting through from more and more places along the demon's enormous length. Holes began to appear all along the beast's hide, starting as small pinpricks through which the blue glow leaked at first, then expanding steadily to larger and larger wounds, until the creature was bleeding and oozing life from a hundred different places.

From the hilltop overlooking the woods, Nanda, Yashoda and the adult gopas and gopis watched, keeping their precious herds in check to avoid a panic stampede. From the pastures, the children of Vrindavan and their calf herds and mother cattle watched as well. All Vrindavan watched. Even the birds in the sky hovered and stared down, eyes round with amazement at the sight of a worm so enormous struggling and suffering for its life. A few of the larger ones opened their beaks and longed for a taste of such a worm, imagining how rich and dense its flesh must be, packed with nutrients. How early would a bird have to rise to catch such a worm? None dared attempt to find out!

Slowly, with great heart-rending sounds of agony, Aghasura began to die. In great torment, the worm beast thrashed and tossed for the last several times, finally shuddering to a collapse. It slapped down on the grass one last time, shattering more trees and sending splinters of fresh timber flying hundreds of yards away as its great length came to a final resting

place near one of the many subterranean holes made by its own passage. Here it quivered and trembled in its death throes, life slipping away from its tortured flesh as the power of brahman exuded from a thousand places on its body, blue light bleeding forth to illuminate the dark woods, bright enough to be visible from yojanas away.

Balarama started running almost as soon as the worm subsided. Radha and the other children followed, eager to see for themselves that Krishna was safe and well. It was one thing to know that he was god incarnate and would always triumph, it was another thing to see for themselves that their childhood friend and playmate was unharmed and well.

The ground was torn up, swathes of earth layers ripped up and piled helter skelter, raw dark earth from a hundred yards down mixed with topsoil and flora and vegetation. Trees lay scattered like fallen warriors after a battle. Flowerbeds were crushed to smidgens of colour. Radha recognized the beautiful bed of marigolds she had spotted earlier and pointed it out to Balarama as they ran past. Closer to the spot where Aghasura had fallen, the earth was ruffled and brindled like a wild dog's fur. The children had to pick their way carefully to avoid falling or breaking their feet. The calf herd had been left behind in the pasture for the time being. They would be safe enough there: they were too afraid to move away and the mother cows would ensure the calves stayed together.

Finally the children reached the site of the fallen asura. Even in death, the demon worm was a terrifying sight: enormous as a hillock turned on its side, maw gaping open, oozing putrid purple unguent, its seemingly endless body winding in labyrinthine coils across the countryside before finally disappearing into the ground where it continued for who knew how many more miles. It was hard to believe such a creature could co-exist in the same world as ordinary mortals. Yet here it was, proof that demons lived among us freely once and many still did, albeit in secret now.

Krishna stood before the gaping maw of the creature, facing it, his body glowing with the same blue light they had seen exuding from Aghasura at

the end. As Radha and Balarama approached, Krishna raised his arms and incanted a mantra they could not hear—in fact, it was not intended to be heard by human ears, not then and not ever—and the result was incredible.

Aghasura's corpse, putrid and decrepit, began to burn with the same blue light, catching aflame with tongues of blue fire that rippled down the creature's length at the speed of wind. In seconds, the entire yojanas-long body of the asura was blazing then crackling sharply in the noonday sun then sizzling and scorching and spitting, relentless blue fire turning the enormous winding body into instant ash. Within moments, the gargantuan was consumed entirely, like a long wick coated with phosphor. Only ash remained, drifting down in the wind. A breeze sprang up out of nowhere, catching the ash flakes, and bore them away into the sky where they passed beyond the limits of vision.

NANDa and Yashoda stared down into the abyss. It was hard to believe that a living creature could have burrowed so deep into the ground. Had they not seen Aghasura with their own eyes they might not have believed such a thing was possible. Apparently, the demon worm, in its last desperate throes, had broken the surface here hard enough to leave a crack in the ground that descended for several hundred yards and was over two score yards wide. The tunneling of its passage must have come close to some subterranean cavern or crevice below, breaking through that underground cavern to leave this great ditch. The ditch cut across the only access to the woods—and to the pastures beyond.

Briefly Nanda wondered if perhaps the demon had *intended* to do this and had managed to wreak this last act of vengeance upon the people whom his Slayer protected. He dismissed the thought as moot. The demon itself was dead, slain by their little Krishna in a magnificent display of his supreme powers. What did it matter how or why this ravine had been produced: the fact of its existence made it impossible for the Vrishni to take their herds and cross to the new pastures.

He looked around at the others. They had already ascertained for themselves the lay of the land. Nothing needed to be said. Their faces were sombre. He knew that none of them were concerned any longer about fresh feed for their cattle. Right now there was only one question on all their minds.

‘How will our children return home across this abyss, Nanda-Maharaj?’ asked a gopa.

Nanda looked at Yashoda. She was staring up at him, round-eyed, her anxious face asking the same question silently.

He looked around. Everyone was looking to him for leadership.

‘Krishna will bring them home,’ he said, sounding more confident than he felt.

‘But how?’

He spread his hands. ‘He will find a way. He defeated that great beast. We all saw him do it. What is a mere abyss crossing after accomplishing such a feat?’

‘Even so, we are worried. Krishna is super-human, he is invulnerable. He can battle asuras and leap mountains. But our children are merely mortal. What if harm befalls them? Who knows what other asuras lurk in those northwoods?’

‘Yes!’ echoed another gopi. ‘We want our children home safe with us.’

‘Right now!’

Yashoda looked at her husband then turned to the crowd of agitated Vrishni and raised her hands. ‘My husband has answered you already. Krishna will bring them home safe, somehow.’

‘But how?’ asked a gopi, her eyes glinting with emotion. ‘How can we simply take your word for it? The lives of our children are at stake.’

Yashoda gestured at the devastation left after the battle with Aghasura. ‘Did he not just save your children today? Did you mean to stop him midway and demand to know how he was saving them? Does it even matter?’

There was an embarrassed silence in which she heard several whispers and caught more than a few sharply exchanged glances.

‘Krishna will bring our children home,’ she said firmly. ‘All we need do is have faith in him.’

Many heads nodded approvingly in response. After a moment’s thought, even the gopi who had demanded to know ‘how’ nodded as well, looking a little shamefaced at her outburst. Nanda did not take offense at their emotional outburst: when it came to their children, parents could resort to any words or means.

Nanda cleared his throat, glancing at Yashoda with a telling glance to indicate his appreciation to her for stepping in at the right time. She squeezed his arm as he spoke. ‘It would be pointless standing around here. I suggest we all return to the village with our herds and return to our day’s chores as usual, until Krishna’s return with the children and the calf herds.’

Everybody made sounds of approval and turned to go, starting the laborious process of getting the herd turned around and moving back homewards. The cattle lowed and mooed, disappointed at not getting the new feed they had been promised but obeying their caretakers diligently.

As Nanda glanced back in the direction of the devastation wrought by Aghasura, he had a brief moment of misgiving. It was that very misgiving that had delayed his response when confronted by the angry parents of the children across the abyss. He had not wanted them to see his doubt hence had not replied at the time. Fortunately, Yashoda had not shared his doubt and had answered confidently and reassured their troubled minds. For his part, he still had doubts.

What if Krishna cannot bring them home safely? What if he cannot bring them home at all?

That was a possibility too terrible to contemplate.

He put the thought aside and followed his wife and clansmen home, trying not to think about it further.

Krishna will find a way.

He must.

KRISHNA and Balarama stepped aside from the main group of children. Radha and the other young gopas and gopis were still jubilant, celebrating their near-death experience and subsequent survival as a result of Krishna's heroism by chanting harvest songs. Even the cattle seemed relaxed, chewing the fresh green grass with lazy ease. They had stopped briefly in the woods at Krishna's request, a request Krishna had made after seeing Balarama's face when he returned from scouting out the way ahead.

'What is it, bhai?' Krishna asked now, speaking softly to avoid being heard by the others. It was evident from Balarama's face that something was amiss. 'Where are our parents?'

Balarama spoke softly as well, keeping his face turned toward Krishna and away from the others. 'They must have returned home. There is no way for them to cross over to us. The demon created a great rift before dying. It is impossible to cross such a great abyss.'

Krishna looked into Balarama's eyes, then shut his own eyes, seeing Balarama's visual memory of the rift. He saw the yawning ravine, the darkness deep below, the devastation wrought by the dying worm, the ragged sheer cliff-like sides of the drop, and accepted the impossibility of anyone making such a crossing, leave alone young children with calves and mother cows in tow. He continued to view the surrounding area through Balarama's eyes and saw that there was no other way across. They were effectively cut off from the village, the abyss too wide to bridge by any natural or man-made method, too wide to cross via rope or sling or anything else.

'What shall we do now?' Balarama asked.

Krishna was silent for a moment, contemplating the larger meaning of this occurrence.

‘Perhaps if we both use our strength we can throw rocks into the crevice to fill it up?’ Balarama suggested.

Krishna shook his head, still silent. He saw that action taken in his mind’s eye, saw every last detail of it vividly: Balarama and he heaving great boulders and rocks and flinging them down into the abyss, working for days, then weeks, then months, without success. The abyss was deep beyond measure and the more they tried to fill it, the deeper the crack would grow. It would take more than a year to fill it and even then it might not be safe to cross. The crevice was so deep, it had opened up veins in the earth’s crust that exuded dangerous vapours. The vapours themselves were toxic to breathe in.

Besides, the upheaval that such a great landfill would create would endanger the children and calf herds. After all, this was pasture land. To fill such a great crevice would mean tearing up miles of pasture fields and could well provoke further seismic unsettling.

Balarama nodded, reaching the same conclusion that his brother had drawn through their shared spiritual link.

‘What if we build a bridge using tree trunks?’ Balarama said. ‘That way we would only have to cover the gap, not fill in the whole crevice.’

Krishna envisaged that course of action too: The vapours rising from the crevice would rot the trunks before the bridge was completed, rendering the bridge unstable and even more dangerous than a rock fill-in. And the danger from the vapours themselves would still remain. He shook his head again.

‘Then maybe we can each take hold of a child or calf in each arm and leap the divide?’ Balarama asked, his face crinkling as he realized the folly of such a suggestion even before he finished speaking it.

Krishna almost smiled as he envisaged this option: Balarama taking hold of calves and cows and children and leaping across. No, it was much too dangerous, apart from the fact that the mere act of leaping such a dangerous abyss might permanently disturb the mother cows or calves. The same went for the children, even without taking the vapours into consideration. If they had not been facing such a dire crisis, he would have smiled at the image itself. As it was, he settled for another regretful shake of his head.

‘Or we leave the herd behind and take our friends across somehow?’

Krishna shook his head at once this time. He didn’t have to think about it. The herds could not be left behind here in this place. They would pine for their keepers, for their fellow cattle, and most of all, for Krishna himself. He knew—and everyone in Vrindavan knew too—that it was his flute playing which soothed and eased the herds, kept them healthy and safe from sickness and disease, caused them to give such rich nourishing milk that in turn kept the denizens of the hamlet healthy and strong as well.

No.

Leaving the calf herd and mother cows behind was tantamount to slow suicide for the Vrishni clan. There were gopas and gopis. The herds were as much part of their lives as their own beloved families. They would literally pine to death without their calves and mother cows.

They bandied about numerous different ideas and options, some ludicrous, others desperate, all quite impossible to implement successfully. Each time, Krishna was able to envisage all possible

outcomes with his mind's eye and prevent them from making unnecessary and dangerous efforts.

‘Well then what *shall* we do?’ Balarama blurted at last.

He was impatient and tired. The children were tired and growing restless too. They wanted to be home with their parents and families. Only the calves and mother cows were content to munch on the delicious grass all day, so long as Krishna was near.

‘We have to do *something*, Krishna!’ Balarama said impatiently.

‘No,’ Krishna said. ‘We cannot do anything. We must simply wait.’

‘*Wait?*’ Balarama asked, then frowned. ‘For how long?’

Krishna thought for a moment. ‘For one full year.’

Balarama stared at him, aghast. ‘One full year? What do you mean?’

Krishna put his hands on his brother’s forehead, showing him the vision he saw in his mind’s eye. Balarama stiffened momentarily as his mind was commandeered by Krishna then relaxed and saw the images his brother intended him to see. Together, they viewed the earth deep within the abyss shift and change position, great plates of rock and igneous formations shifting slowly, grinding with enormous force against each other, constantly moving this way then that, great rivers of lava flowing far beneath, great explosions and tectonic movements rippling through the body of Bhoo Devi, the mother deity of the mortal realm. They saw how, over the course of the next four seasons, the abyss itself closed of its own natural accord, suppressing the deadly vapours, bridging the gap to make that narrow ridge of land perfectly safe to cross or walk or stand on for millennia to come.

Krishna removed his hands from Balarama's head.

Balarama stared at his brother. 'You mean...We are to stay here in these pastures until...'

'Until a year has passed.'

'But why? How could this come to pass?' Balarama started to say something more then hesitated.

Krishna nodded, urging him to go on.

'How could you *let* this come to pass?' Balarama asked.

Krishna shrugged. 'I did not. It was meant to be. Our stay here serves some larger purpose that even I do not fathom right now. All I can say with surety is that we, the children of Vrindavan, the calf herd and the mother cows, are meant to stay here in these new pastures until a full year has passed. After that time, we will be free to go home once again.'

'But how—?' Balarama started to ask, then stopped. 'So you do not know the why or wherefore of this event?'

Krishna shook his head one final time. 'There are some things even I must accept as given. This is the nature of the universe itself. Every being and event is governed by other beings and events. All things are interrelated. Not every mountain can be climbed, not every abyss bridged, not every problem resolved to one's own satisfaction. Sometimes, one must simply wait.'

Balarama nodded slowly, almost sadly. 'Then we wait.'

But there was no joy in his voice.

12

The sun was low in the evening sky. The cattle had been returned to their pens but were restless, missing their calves and the mother cows. The adult gopas and gopis of Vrindavan missed their children too, the more so because of the attack of the asura that morning. They worried that some harm might have befallen their child despite Krishna's best efforts. Even if their child was safe and sound, they longed to have him or her in their presence, to see for themselves, to touch, hold, embrace, kiss.

Everybody took their evening meals together and it was almost time to eat, so they worried that their children would be hungry, thirsty and tired. Every adult in the village was out of doors or on the thresholds of their houses, sitting, standing, waiting, watching. Their eyes kept looking at the dirt road that wound its way out of the village and over the hills that led to the northwoods, expecting at any moment to see those familiar faces come bobbing over the last rise, hear those playful voices shouting and calling out boisterously, see those little people come running up with their customary exuberance.

Dogs lay listless, waiting for their little masters and mistresses, not touching their own food for they were habituated to eating scraps at the feet of their young owners, gobbling each morsel proudly and tilting their heads to listen intently to the laughter and teasing of the children, loyal eyes gleaming as they followed their little lords and ladies about all day long. Now, they could not understand why the day's routine had changed, why their masters and mistresses had not returned home as usual.

Nanda and Yashoda and Rohini waited together, along with the rest of their large extended family. All eyes were anxiously fixed on the road, all hearts heavy with concern, all stomachs empty for none had eaten a morsel all day long nor would they eat until their little precious gems were safely back in their treasure troves.

Nanda's parents Parjanya Maharaja and Variyasi Devi in particular were very anxious, kneading their palms and cracking their knuckles repeatedly. An air of tense anticipation hung over the entire village. Nobody was taking care of the evening chores nor were they making preparations for the festivities all had spoken of earlier to celebrate the safe return of the children. After all, when the children themselves had not yet returned safely, how could they celebrate their return?

The sun slipped lower and soon sunset was imminent. Birds began to fly back to their nesting places, long shadows crept across the land, and the cattle began to low uneasily, sensing the unhappiness of their human caregivers. The happy hamlet, usually so joyous and filled with shouts and laughter and exuberant voices, was deathly quiet. A pallour of anxiety hung over every house and field.

Suddenly a gopa sitting on a high forked branch of a tree shouted excitedly. 'They are coming!'

At once, the entire tableau came to life. People began bustling about, cookfires were relit in haste, dogs leaped up from their supine positions and began barking and running about in excitement, cattle stopped lowing and turned their heads to the north, the direction from which their little masters and mistresses usually came home.

And then, like a mirage resolving into reality, came the children, over the hillrise, down the last winding road and into the village. Parents ran, shouting, and embraced their little gopas and gopis. Children screamed in joy and sprinted to hug their parents, squeezing until their arm sockets ached. Dogs barked and leaped about joyfully. The calves trundling behind the children raised their tired heads and mooed as loudly as their little voices would allow, announcing their happiness at being home again. The mother cows settled for lowing sonorously then rubbing foreheads with their mates and fellow cows.

Soon the tense atmosphere was completely dispelled and life seemed as normal again in Vrindavan hamlet. One by one, each family went indoors, settling down to eat their evening meal. At some point, someone mentioned something about the planned celebration, but as the evening progressed it was decided that everyone was too tired and needed a good night's rest, so Nanda Maharaja declared that the next day would be a day of feasting.

'But cows will still need to be milked and sick calves still need to be nursed,' he reminded everyone as he went about informing them. He always repeated the same words of caution, smiling broadly as he did so, reminding them that for those who lived off the land there were no holidays, but that did not mean they could not celebrate.

Vrindavan went to sleep peacefully that night, relieved and content, and Nanda and Yashoda and the rest of their family took special pride and care in the feeding of their little Krishna and Balarama over the evening meal. For once, even Yashoda did not question how much dahi they consumed—and the quantity was prodigious even by their healthy standards!

* * *

Back in the pasturelands, across the unbreachable rift, the young gopas and gopis had accepted Krishna's explanation that they would be staying here for a while longer in order to let their herd graze and nourish themselves on the rich new feed.

But as sunset fell, they began to long for their families. The younger ones were on the verge of crying for their mothers and fathers, the older ones for their siblings, and some even cried for their dogs and their homes. One young boy cried for a sparrow with a broken wing he had repaired and nursed back to health, thinking that the sparrow's eggs were to hatch this

very day and that he might have missed seeing them hatch. A mood of gloom and misery descended along with dusk.

Then, to their surprise, their parents appeared, bearing bundles of food and gifts.

Their dogs came bounding over the pastures, leaping through the tall grass, their tongues lolling joyfully. The parents of the boy who had nursed the sparrow even brought the entire sparrow nest, complete with eggs and mother bird, and they hatched as he watched in rapt amazement. It had been his dream to see baby birds hatching and that dream was fulfilled that evening. All the little ones were content by evening's end, all their day's desires fulfilled, every single family reunited. It hardly mattered that it was in the pasture fields and not at home. To the Vrishni, the fields *were* home in a sense.

As night fell, the parents set up camp there itself and made their children comfortable for the night, singing lullabies and putting them to sleep with affection. They regretted having to go away but promised to be back the next day and every day, as long as the children stayed here in the fresh pastures. They also explained, as Krishna had, how the calf herds and mother cows would benefit from feeding continually on this lush grass and by degrees, the children were soothed and lulled to sleep.

They slept peacefully and happily that night, regarding the stay in the pastures now as a great adventure and responsibility, believing that they had to stay here for the sake of the herds, for it was true that the distance from the hamlet to here was too great to cover easily each day and the herds would benefit from a few days of rest.

Only Balarama knew what they did not even suspect:

It was Krishna who had partitioned his essence and taken the forms of all the grown up gopas and gopis, even the forms of the dogs and other

creatures, in order placate the children.

He had done the same in the village, presenting himself as the children and the calf herds and the mother cows, so that the parents would be at peace, believing their children were home safe, and the cattle would be relieved to have their mother cows and calves back safely as well.

Krishna had promised he would bring the children home safe, *somewhat*.

He had kept his promise.

And he kept it every day for the next year.

KAAND 2

1

WHEN the year was over, almost to the day, the crevice was fully closed and the surface of the ground restored to its earlier appearance. It was difficult to believe that such a great abyss had existed here at all. Krishna and Balarama led a joyful procession of young gopas and gopis and their herd homewards at last. Balarama looked around at the ground that had been blighted only a few weeks earlier and wondered aloud at how such a thing could have come to pass.

‘Everything serves a purpose, my brother,’ Krishna said cheerfully, as if they had only been out for a day trip and were returning home at the end of the day.

‘What possible purpose could be served by keeping us away from our families for a year?’

Krishna shrugged. ‘I do not know. And in the end, it hardly matters why. All that matters is the how. How we endure each new crisis and overcome it. For the only thing certain in life is that there shall always be crises.’

Balarama was not content by that response. But he accepted it.

Radha was almost sad to part with Krishna. Her house came before Krishna’s and Balarama’s houses on the way home and she seemed loathe to go in, waiting by her threshold and waving to them until they went out of sight. Then she went in, seeming less happy to see her family again than to have spent the time with Krishna. Of course, she thought, as did all the other children, that they had seen their families only the previous evening!

Yashoda was surprised when Krishna came running into the house and clasped her firmly. ‘Arrey!’ she exclaimed, smiling with maternal pleasure. ‘What happened? You act as if you have not seen me in months!’

‘One full year, mother,’ Krishna said. ‘I have missed you dearly.’

Yashoda swatted him playfully. ‘What nonsense are you talking? You went in the morning and came home in the evening! Only one day has passed.’

Krishna looked up at his mother with pure unadulterated love in his eyes. ‘Mother, one day apart from you is like a year to me.’

Yashoda looked down and saw something in his eyes, something that she had not seen in the Krishna who had bid goodbye to her that morning. Something she could not quite define. It was the same Krishna, yet different.

She did not know how that could be possible. But she did know that with Krishna, *anything* was possible. She felt her heart reciprocate the great outrush of emotion brimming in his eyes, and clasped him to her breast, embracing him tightly. She kissed his face all over, rubbing his arms and legs, then took him by the hand into the other room and fed him the best meal of his life.

Watching him eat, she felt fulfilled and sated herself. While he ate food that nourished his body, being in his presence nourished her soul.

2

There was a shortage of fruit in Vrindavan. The elders were concerned as all the fruit trees had been yielding rotten or poor produce. Their concern was not one of taste or luxury: fruit was essential for good health, their own as well as their cattle. They had to find a new source of fresh fruit quickly. Yet they must do so without leaving Vrindavan. How was this to be accomplished?

Sridama had a suggestion which he offered to the younger gopas as they were discussing the matter while watching the calf herds. ‘I know a place where there is plenty of fruit. It’s like a heaven of fruit, with the most juicy, tasty fruits you ever imagined, all growing in one place.’

The boys exclaimed, some of them licking their lips. Every Vrishni loved fruit. Even some of the dogs sitting around their masters looked up, twitching their tails hopefully at the prospect of fruity treats.

‘Take us there,’ they said. ‘Let us go now!’ It had been so long since any of them had tasted fresh fruit, they could barely wait.

Sridama looked around, his smile fading. ‘I cannot.’

‘Why not?’ someone asked.

‘Nobody is supposed to go there,’ Sridama replied.

‘Where?’ Balarama asked at once. Balarama took every such statement as a direct challenge. To say in Balarama’s presence ‘nobody dares do this’ or ‘nobody can do that’ was like pointing a finger at him and challenging him to do it himself. ‘Tell us how to get to this heaven of fruit.’

Sridama looked around nervously. ‘I’m not supposed to say.’

Balarama stepped forward, elbowing the other boys aside without any malice. ‘Tell me, Sridama.’

Sridama looked at Krishna. He revered Krishna and would do anything Yashoda’s son said. ‘My father made me promise not to tell anyone...’

He paused significantly, looking directly at Krishna.

Krishna glanced at Balarama. They understood what Sridama meant: Krishna hardly fell in the category of ‘anyone’.

‘You can tell me, Sridama,’ Krishna said to his friend.

Sridama shook his head. ‘A promise is a promise. I cannot tell.’

The other gopas all voiced their protest.

Krishna thought for a moment, then said, ‘He made you promise not to tell anyone, is that right?’

Sridama nodded vigorously.

Krishna grinned.

‘But he didn’t make you promise not to *show* anyone, did he?’

Sridama thought for a moment, then slowly shook his head, a smile appearing on his thin long face.

Krishna rose to his feet.

‘Well, then, you won’t disobey your father if you show us the way. Come on, let’s go find this fabulous fruit grove!’

A chorus of cheers exploded as everyone followed after Krishna and Balarama.

Balarama tugged at Krishna’s elbow as they started off down the pathway. Krishna glanced curiously at his brother.

‘Bhraatr,’ Balarama said in a voice that suggested he did not want an argument. ‘You promised me last time that next time it would be my turn to deal with any threat that befell us.’

Krishna nodded. ‘So I did.’

Balarama jerked his head ahead, indicating the way they were headed. ‘In case anything should happen today, remember that. I’ll do the fighting this time.’

Krishna grinned. ‘Very well, bhaiya. But in case you need any help, I’ll be there, right behind you.’

Balarama snorted. ‘Me? Need help? Never in an entire eon. I can handle any asura that makes the mistake of showing its ugly face.’

Krishna shrugged. ‘So be it, bhaiya. The next asura that threatens us, you will deal with it.’

‘And you won’t interfere, even if I’m in trouble,’ Balarama warned.

Krishna nodded. ‘Not unless you ask me for help.’

Balarama thought for a moment, then broke out into a wide grin. ‘That’s fine. That’s quite fine. Thank you, bhraatr! I won’t let you down.’

Krishna slapped his brother on his back. ‘I know you won’t, bhaiya.’

Balarama glanced one last time at Krishna, to check if there was any double entendre or hidden meaning to Krishna’s words. But for once his brother seemed completely sincere. Balarama grinned.

Finally he would get a chance to fight!

He didn’t notice the sly mischievous grin on his brother’s face.

‘There. Up ahead through that gap then up a little way, then down again, and you will find yourself in the palmyra grove.’ Sridama pointed.

‘Palmyra grove,’ one of the other boys said. ‘Here? In Vrindavan?’

‘It must be a trick by the asuras to lure Krishna in,’ said Krishna’s cousin, son of his uncle Upananda. ‘We should go back and report this to Nanda-Maharaja. He will know what to do.’

Sridama shook his head woefully. ‘He knows about this grove. It was discovered some time ago by my own father and myself.’

Balarama and Krishna exchanged a glance. ‘Nanda-Maharaja knows about this fruit grove? Then why won’t he let everyone take fruit from here?’

Sridama looked around fearfully. ‘Because a demon resides in this grove.’

At once the boys reacted, some widening their eyes, others making exclamations.

Only Balarama was intrigued, excited even. ‘What sort of demon?’ he asked, trying hard to appear nonchalant.

Sridama looked sheepish. ‘You will laugh if I tell you. But it’s very a dangerous demon. It killed three men even before we came to Vrindavan to live.’

Balarama looked at Krishna, holding his gaze. Krishna sighed and tilted his head as if having second thoughts about something. Balarama kept his

gaze steady, as if demanding something. Finally, Krishna sighed again and nodded, relenting. The rest exchanged glances, wondering what that was about but said nothing. They were used to Krishna and Balarama communicating in mysterious ways.

Balarama let out a whoop of satisfaction and started up the path. The other boys all called after him, alarmed.

‘Balarama-bhaiya, the demon!’ one said.

Sridama looked at Krishna. ‘He’s going inside the grove, isn’t he?’

Krishna shrugged.

‘To find the demon and fight it himself, yes?’

Krishna shrugged again.

Sridama covered his face with his hands. ‘My father will kill me if anything happens to Balarama! He’ll say it was my fault!’

Krishna put his arm around Sridama’s shoulders. ‘Nothing will happen to Balarama. I’ll make sure of that.’

And Krishna went up the path too, following behind his brother.

The other boys all looked at each other, scared witless and wondering what to do.

There was nothing to do really, except wait.

Balarama and Krishna looked around, astonished. ‘There’s enough fruit here to feed everyone for a year!’ Balarama said.

And there was. The Palmyra grove was an idyllic place: fruit trees of every description grew all around. It was impossible for such a diverse variety of fruits to grow together in one place, many required different soil or sunlight or water, yet here they were, all clustered together like one enormous tribe, growing side by side, shoulder by shoulder. The sticky sweet aroma of fresh fruit was everywhere, sometimes pungent, sometimes sweet, sometimes mingled as different trees exuded different scents.

Krishna plucked an orange from a low-hanging branch. He tore a piece of the peel off and juice squirted out, almost hitting Balarama’s eye.

‘Ow!’ Balarama exclaimed, rubbing the juice from his eye, the eye watering at once. ‘You did that on purpose! ’

‘Sorry, bhaiya,’ Krishna said innocently. ‘Here, have some of the fruit. It’s delicious! ’

Balarama took a quarter of orange and popped it into his mouth. Tangy nectar exploded on his tongue. He blinked and chewed. ‘It really is, bhraatr! This is the best orange I’ve ever eaten!’ He crunched a seed by mistake and made a face. ‘And I don’t even like oranges! ’

Krishna pointed. Growing close beside the orange tree was a jackfruit tree, enormously tall and massive and ancient-looking. ‘Look. That’s impossible. Orange and jackfruit never grow together.’ He turned around,

pointing this way then that. ‘Nor do banana and strawberry. Or jambun and sweet lemon!’

Balarama looked and shrugged. ‘There must be magic at work here. Maybe the demon who lives here loves fruit. Maybe he used his magic to make these trees grow together.’

Balarama stopped and looked around.

‘What is it?’ Krishna asked, finishing the last of the orange.

‘Listen. What do you hear?’

Krishna listened. ‘Nothing. Not a sound.’

‘Exactly. That’s impossible too. In a grove like this, there should be any number of birds, animals, insects, all consuming the fruit openly or secretly, and they would make *some* noise. But I don’t hear so much as an ant nibbling on an orange peel.’

Krishna didn’t need to point out that ants didn’t make much sound nibbling on orange peels: Balarama was merely trying to make a point. He nodded, looking sombre. ‘You’re right, bhaiya, somehow this demon has scared off every other living creature.’

‘Yes,’ Balarama said, bending low to the ground and sniffing. ‘He must be very powerful to keep this beautiful treasure trove of ripe fruit all to himself.’

‘And very dangerous,’ Krishna added.

‘I don’t care,’ Balarama said at once, spinning around. He pointed a finger at Krishna. ‘This time, I’m going to face the demon, Krishna. You owe me this one. You promised!’

Krishna grinned. ‘And I intend to keep my promise, bhaiya!’

Balarama narrowed his wide eyes suspiciously. ‘You mean it?’

‘Of course,’ Krishna said, spreading his arms in invitation. ‘Be my guest, brother. This demon is all your’s to deal with.’

‘And you won’t interfere if the fight gets rough? You promise to let me deal with him on my own entirely?’

‘Well, I can always come to assist you if you need me,’ Krishna said.

Balarama bristled. ‘I don’t need any assistance! I can handle any asura on my own.’

Krishna raised his hands in surrender. ‘Okay, okay. Let me go look around. You start shaking the trees so we can collect the fruits that fall.’

‘And if you hear anything or see the demon, you shout out and call to me,’ Balarama warned. ‘Don’t engage him yourself. Agreed?’

‘Agreed,’ Krishna called back over his shoulder.

He smiled a secret smile as he went, but Balarama didn’t see the smile.

Balarama went up to an apple tree, took hold of the trunk and shook it hard. Scores of apples rained down, most of them on his head and shoulders. Balarama grimaced and kept his eyes shut, peering out when the deluge was over. One errant apple thudded down on his head and bounced off. He caught it in mid air, looked at it carefully. It looked beautifully ripe, red, and luscious. He wiped it on his anga-vastra till it shone waxily. Then he took a bite. The crunching sound it made was delicious in itself; the juicy pulp that he bit into was sugar sweet and of the perfect consistency. It had been awhile since Balarama had eaten an apple at all, let alone one this tasty. He chewed his way through the whole apple in moments, then picked up another one, bigger and juicier looking than the first. He bit into this one too, sweet sticky juice spattering his own cheeks. He wiped it away as he demolished the second apple.

So absorbed was he in biting into the crunchy apple, he failed to notice the beast approaching him from behind until it was upon him. The first inkling he had was a mighty blow to his back. It felt like two giant hammers pounding into his back, driving him forward. He fell against the apple tree hard enough that the trunk cracked and whatever few remaining apples remained on the boughs plopped to the ground.

Balarama turned around and looked at the creature that stood before him, rearing up on its hind legs and revealing a mouthful of large jagged teeth. Its eyes glowed red, and it stank of a peculiar sweetish odour that he could not place at first.

‘A donkey?’ he said, unable to believe the evidence of his sight. That was what the demon looked like, a donkey!

The creature reared up and lunged forward in a maneuver no mere donkey was capable of executing. Balarama rolled aside just in time. The donkey’s fore paws struck the apple tree with enough force to split the wood into splinters. The tree crashed to the ground. The donkey demon flipped over and swung around with an agility and peculiarity of movement that was

impossible for any four footed equestrian. No doubt about it: this was an asura.

In case Balarama still had any doubts, the creature opened its mouth and instead of the usual braying donkey sound, it let off a series of deep meancing growls more befitting a lion or tiger rather than a mere ass. Then it reared up again preparing to launch forward in that peculiar way, somehow able to leap forward only on its hind legs while attacking with its fore legs. Balarama saw that its fore paws had sharp talons in place of the usual cloven feet and if he had any reservations left about harming a mere donkey, they were dispelled at once by the sight of those deadly talons.

‘Come on, then,’ Balarama muttered. ‘Let’s see what you have.’

The donkey demon flew at Balarama with a speed that was astonishing—and unexpected. It took Balarama by surprise, and he barely had time to dodge the attack. Even so, the left forepaw nicked his shoulder, tearing the muscle there and drawing a splatter of blood that stained the strewn apples on the floor, matching their ripe red colour.

Balarama roared with displeasure. ‘Now you’ve sealed your fate!’ he yelled.

He charged at the donkey just as the demon reared up again, flashing its deadly teeth and hammer-strong paws.

Boy and donkey clashed with a resounding thud of flesh against flesh.

5

KRISHNA heard the unmistakable sounds of a fight and ran back to the spot where he had left Balarama.

He arrived just in time to see Balarama grappling with a being that resembled a donkey but was clearly demoniac in nature.

Krishna grinned and watched as Balarama took hold of the demon's hind legs and swung the beast bodily around. The beast issued a resounding roar of outrage, a sound more suited to a predator than a donkey.

Balarama swung the donkey demon around over his head, his upper body heaving with effort, legs planted firmly on the apple-strewn ground.

Then he let go.

This time the donkey asura screamed in terror, the unmistakeable cry of a creature that faces certain death. It flew several dozen yards high in the air before falling back to earth.

Moments after its landing, it lay still, its body grotesquely sprawled in a manner that left no doubt about its state.

Krishna approached Balarama, still carrying the armful of fruit he had found.

Balarama dusted off his anga-vastra and arms. There was a wound on his shoulder which gaped open, the skin torn and hanging by a flap, the flesh visible and bloody. Krishna gestured at it with his eyes and Balarama

shrugged and slapped at it casually as if to say it was nothing, but he did wince a little, belying his own bravado.

‘Nice fruit,’ Balarama said, pointing his chin at the armload Krishna was carrying.

‘Nice fight,’ Krishna said, jerking his head in the direction of the dead donkey. ‘Who was that?’

Balarama shook his head. ‘Just some donkey!’

They burst out laughing together.

Just then the other boys burst into the clearing together, carrying sticks and slings and stones in their hands, eyes wild and ready to do battle but terrified at the possibility of facing another Aghasura or Putana-like gargantuan.

‘Krishna! Balarama!’ they cried. ‘Where is the demon? We will stand with you against it.’

Krishna and Balarama exchanged a glance.

Then, as one, the brothers rolled their heads and pointed at the dead donkey.

‘There. Be careful. It may only be pretending to be hurt.’

The boys turned to stare wide-eyed at the broken body of the asura. As recognition of its form flooded their scared minds, their mouths opened and tongues lolled.

‘But...but...it’s only a donkey!’ cried one of them.

Krishna winked. ‘Takes one to know one! Balarama fought it all by himself. I never lifted a finger, right bhaiya?’

Balarama rolled his eyes but nodded. ‘Right, bhraatr.’

Krishna burst out laughing as Balarama glared at him hotly. After a moment, Balarama’s temper subsided.

‘You knew all along,’ he said accusingly. ‘You knew the next demon would be an ass, not a real demon like Agha or Baka or Putana. That’s the only reason why you let me fight it alone.’

Krishna chuckled. ‘But it was a real demon, bhaiya. You even have the wound to prove it. Besides, you made an ass out of it in the end.’

Balarama glared at him again then shook his head and started chuckling, despite himself.

In moments, both Krishna and he were laughing together.

The other boys joined in.

6

Once the blighted land had healed itself, the new pastures were quite safe to travel to and back. Between the new pastures and the magical fruit grove, the Vrishni had ample nourishment. The lush supply of fodder and fruit energized the herds as well as the carers.

For once, the Vrishni were well-fed, safe and relatively content. News from the outside world came rarely but what little news trickled in suggested that the Usurper had finally reduced his campaign of terror against the Vrishni and other clans still loyal to Ugrasena. Not quite a truce, but a political detente seemed to have fallen into place. A season of calm between storms. Nobody believed it would last or that the Usurper genuinely desired peace and prosperity for the Yadava nations. But they needed to rebuild their strength and prepare themselves for the final assault. Akrura and his associates send word across the land that everyone should lie low and bide their time.

Kamsa himself seemed to be away from Mathura more often than present on the Yadava throne, busy with his endless wrestling tournaments in different parts of the Magadhan empire. Even when he was at court in Mathura, Magadhan ambassadors seemed to be hovering around every district of Mathura, never in official positions themselves but always watching over the shoulders of Yadavas who governed or administered various functions.

In this manner, Jarasandha was controlling his interests in Mathura without overtly seizing power. It was a frustrating time for they were neither wholly free from tyranny nor were they being oppressed sufficiently to warrant an open rebellion.

This was the genius of Jarasandha at work, Gargamuni said, to keep the Yadavas under his thumb yet never give them any justification to openly

rise up and shed the blood of their own tyrant king.

At such a time, the Vrishni and other loyalists had no choice but to wait things out. If they rose up or took any violent action, it would only seem churlish and spiteful on their part. The only thing to do was abide and await their moment.

As cowherds accustomed to spending days simply waiting and watching over their flocks, waiting was something the Vrishni were good at doing.

So they waited. And watched. And rebuilt their strength secretly.

One day, the opportune moment would come at last and they would rise up and follow their Deliverer to freedom from tyranny.

Krishna was sitting on the hillside overlooking the lake near the new pastures, playing his flute.

It was a feast day for the clan and everyone was gathered by the lake in their festive colours. Families sat and ate under the trees or on the meadows. The herds grazed freely over the new pastures, permitted to eat their fill today, for that was their way of feasting. Children played in the lake, splashing and swimming, the smallest ones riding their father's shoulders. The older children swung from a rope tied to the overhanging branch of a great banyan tree, letting go the rope to fall into the lake.

Radha sat near Krishna, listening enraptured to his playing.

She seemed to change a little more each passing day, growing before his very eyes. Since the time in the pastures, all the children of Vrindavan had grown closer to Krishna than ever before, but of them all, none more than Radha. She followed him wherever he went, often to his exasperation. Sometimes, when Balarama and he wanted to play rough games with the boys, she would insist on joining in, and the other boys would object vociferously, unwilling to be as rough with a girl as with each other. Krishna didn't mind as much as Balarama did. Radha could outrun any boy or girl in the village and she could hold her own in virtually every game as well.

Besides, he liked having Radha around. Ever since they had returned from the enforced exile, she had changed almost overnight. Before, she had chattered constantly, driving Balarama crazy at times. Now, she had a quietude that he found comforting. She never demanded that they talk and was content simply to sit and stare at the clouds or watch the birds or fish or cattle.

Krishna took immense contentment from simply being one with nature. There was something about the natural rhythm of the world that he found very soothing. Whether it was rain falling on eaves, wind stirring across pastures of tall grass, koels calling to one another from high branches, or simply the sight and fragrance of flowers swaying in the breeze and surrendering their pollen to flitting bees, he could watch and listen for hours on end. It made him feel connected to the earth, to Bhooadevi herself.

After all, it was at her behest that he was here on this mortal plane, doing her work, saving her children from the cruel tyranny of asuras. So, like any child, he was content to simply lie in Mother Earth's cradle and watch her go about her work through infinite forms and means. And the new Radha seemed to enjoy it just as much as he did. Far from chattering away the hours, she could find contentment in simply lying or sitting nearby and immersing herself in the sounds of nature just as he did, lost in the infinite song of the Earth.

He lowered his flute at last.

He loved the way the sounds of the world seeped back into his consciousness after a long session of flute-playing. It was like watching a new day dawn over the world: see the colours seeping into things, the earth become animate once again.

He heard the voices and laughter of the people in the meadow below, the splashing of the children in the lake, the contented lowing of the herds in the pastures...it was a beautiful day, overcast with gentle thin clouds that obscured the direct sunlight enough so one could lay on one's back in the lake and float, staring up at the powdery blue sky. The water in the lake appeared lighter hued than usual, not its usual dense greenish blue. Birds flitted through the branches of trees overlooking the lake. A pair of woodpeckers were at work on one immensely tall tree nearby on the hill, working steadily at pecking a hole large enough to accommodate their family. The rat-a-tat sound was musical and pleasing in its own way. Even

nature's stenches were just smells, her noises part of the music of life and Krishna embraced it all, the loud with the soft, the roar with the whisper, the humming with the growling, the swamps as well as the orchids.

'That was your best ever,' Radha said.

She was looking down the hill, at the lake, yet Krishna knew her eyes were wet and shiny with her response to his playing. He had sensed the changes brimming within Radha, had understood what they meant and what they implied; he knew what they would lead to over time, and it made him sad at times, for what she desired could never come to pass, what she felt could never be reciprocated. Yet she had every right to feel, to desire, to be what she chose to be, and he would not deny her that experience, even if it led to sadness eventually.

'I was trying to imitate the song of the earth on a summer's day,' he said. 'A day like this.' He was silent for a moment, still listening to the music of Bhoodevi all around them. 'I didn't succeed.'

She turned to look at him, startled. 'You succeeded so well! Your music is ethereal. Even apsaras in swargaloka can't play music like you can, Krishna. Your flute speaks a language all its own. All eternity stops to listen.'

He was surprised. The new Radha rarely spoke much, so such an eloquent and passionate speech was unusual coming from her. Apparently her loquaciousness hadn't vanished completely, it had merely been sublimated into a more elegant avatar.

'The song belongs to they who listen,' he said gracefully, acknowledging her praise and accepting the compliment. 'Without the right listener, that woodpecker's hammering is just noise. But to me...'

'It's music. As it is to me,' she said.

He smiled. She *did* understand.

They sat looking at each other for a long moment, as the music of the day continued around them, an orchestra performing exclusively for their benefit. The sun drifted behind a cloud, then floated out again, altering the lighting and mood around them. A gentle breeze rippled over them, carrying the coolness of the lake water, soothing and refreshing.

A scream destroyed the harmony.

The fact that it came did not surprise Krishna at all. He had known it would happen sooner or later. He had just not known precisely when or where or how.

He knew now. It was here and now. It had begun, again.

Krishna was on his feet at once. Radha sat bolt upright, looking around.

‘Krishna,’ she cried, pointing. ‘In the lake!’

‘I see it,’ he said grimly.

He sprinted downhill.

Balarama was the first to see the beast appear. He was running along the bank, playing with the other gopas and gopis when he sensed a disturbance out the corner of his eye.

He turned and looked out at the lake.

He saw the water swirling darkly. At once that it was no ordinary eddy or backwash. There was something under the surface, rising up fast, something big. Though he had been playing and enjoying himself as much as the others, he had developed a preternatural alertness. In a way, he considered himself Krishna's early warning bell.

He turned to shout to those nearest to it to get out of the water.

But before he could open his mouth, a gopi swimming in the water, carrying her little son on her shoulders, happened to look down. She saw the dark water rising beneath her and screamed a blood-curling scream.

'OUT! OUT OF THE WATER, EVERYONE!' Balarama bellowed, running around the shore, pulling those in the water to dry land, wading into the shallows to help others get out quicker.

He didn't need to glance around to see where Krishna was: Krishna would be arriving as fast as his feet could carry him. That went without saying. Balarama's job was to get these innocents away from the new threat as quickly as possible without anyone coming to harm.

With a sinking heart, he saw that it would be quite impossible. There were too many people in the water, many of them children and elders incapable

of coming out quickly. And from the swirling in the center of the lake, the thing that was emerging was coming much too fast.

More than that, it was big, bigger than any underwater creature had any right to be. How had it been there underwater all this while without anyone noticing, he could not fathom. Then again, the lake was extremely deep in some spots, perhaps even deep enough to contain an underwater monster without anyone ever suspecting. So long as the creature stayed out of sight until the opportune moment, it was undetectable.

He cursed, wishing he had had the foresight to dive into the lake and delve as deep within its depths as possible before they began swimming. That way, he might have found something amiss and been quicker to alert everyone.

‘OUT! EVERYONE, HURRY!’ he shouted. But they were still moving too slowly, confused by the splashing and hampered by moving through water.

He splashed into the lake, helping an elderly couple to wade, gasping, to where their younger family members could help them ashore. He glanced back and saw that already people were climbing the hill, still dripping from the lake, eager to move as far away as possible from the imminent threat. That was reassuring. After the last few encounters with demons, there was no telling how large this new creature might be or what form it took and the larger the area left deserted, the better the chances were of innocents staying safe.

He helped a pair of young children out of the water, grasping each by one hand apiece and swinging them to their mothers on shore. He sensed movement beside him and knew without looking that it was Krishna.

‘Took your time,’ he said, grumbling. He had seen his brother on the hilltop, playing his flute and talking to Radha.

‘What do we have?’ Krishna asked, picking up an elderly gopi and carrying him like a babe to safety. He set the elder down carefully, nodded his head in acknowledgement of the profuse thanks and blessings, and splashed into the water again to assist the next person.

‘Something big, mean and ugly would be my guess,’ Balarama said, taking a young tyke off his father’s shoulders as the father struggled to manage two other young children.

‘Get everyone to the top of the hill first, make sure they’re all safe, then head back to the village.’

Balarama picked up a hefty young boy who was too panicked to swim properly and all but hurled him to his parents’ arms. They caught him and shouted their blessings to Balarama. ‘I’m staying with you, brother. You may need my help!’

‘They need your help more than I do,’ Krishna shouted back from several yards away. He was pulling a raft with a dozen-odd youngsters on board, all of whom were too terrified of the swirling water to swim back to shore. ‘Top of the hill, then back home!’

Balarama gritted his teeth in frustration. He was tired of playing nursemaid. He could lift ten times what the strongest grown man in the village could lift, throw as many times as far as the best pitcher, and was stronger and faster and a better fighter than even the veterans. Yet everytime there was a crisis, all he seemed to do was carry little children on his shoulder and urge everyone to move ‘faster, faster’.

But he knew better than to argue with Krishna at a time like this. So he busied himself with getting the last of the stragglers ashore. Then he turned and looked at the lake.

KRISHNA was in the lake, treading water, and it was all he could do to keep from being pulled along with the swirling eddy. It was no longer just a swirling, or even an eddy. This was a full-blown whirlpool, spinning madly around with great force and speed. Already it covered more than half the surface of the lake, and still it grew, increasing in fury and force as if some enormous invisible butter churner were churning the lake. Children were sobbing and screaming as their elders led them away from the lake.

Krishna could hear Balarama's voice bellowing behind him, herding their people to safety. Then the sound of the whirlpool increased, the water churning with a frenzy that could only be described as madness, frothing and bubbling and eddying in gouts that spouted unexpectedly like boils bursting upon the back of a great beast. The sound itself resembled some furious whirlwind trapped in the lake, as if a dervish was struggling to break free.

Krishna felt the whirlpool suck at his legs, drawing him in. He fought the current, but the force was prodigious, like a storm centred upon the lake. It was then that he realized that the beast that lay under the lake was not seeking to burst free. It was seeking to suck people *in*. Down to its depths. Into its natural habitat.

He glanced around and was relieved to see nobody left behind. Balarama had cleared everyone to safety. They were climbing the hill even now, struggling to reach the top. He heard the shouts and cries of those who had reached the top already, calling to those still climbing to hurry. He heard his own name called out time and again and knew that every pair of eyes was seeking him out, every heart anxious for his well-being. That was what was at stake here: not merely the lives of those he loved and cared about, but the survival of mortalkind itself, and of the values and

principles that made mortalkind worth saving. The concern for all loved ones, even if one happened to be invulnerable, indomitable, or, as in his case, God incarnate.

Krishna knew what he had to do to deal with this attack. If the beast would not come up to face him, he would have to go down to meet the beast.

He relaxed his body, ceasing to fight the sucking claws of the whirlpool.

He allowed the vortex to take him in, into the heart of the eye of the storm, into the lair of the underwater beast.

He sucked in one last gasp of air, not because he needed it to survive but because he wanted to taste air before he went into battle. The water engulfed him and the skin of the lake closed above him.

All sound changed. Gone was the music of the earth, the song of Bhooodevi.

Instead, he was left with only the ballad of the beast. A deep watery keening that was as sad as a dirge and as desperately hopeless and fatalistic as an end-of-the-world dance. It was a strange and terrible song and he knew that this asura would be no easy opponent like the last one. This one was a singer of death.

He opened his mouth wide and swam down to meet it. He had a verse or two he wished to sing to it himself.

10

Radha watched with her heart in her mouth as Krishna plunged into the whirlpool. From this vantage point at the top of the hill, the maelstrom looked like a gigantic eye in the lake, as if some unimaginably huge monster was gawking out through a hole in the earth to peer up at heaven. The water itself was swirling so swiftly and angrily, boiling and raging, that she could not understand how Krishna could even withstand its pull. When he finally took one deep breath and plunged in, she reached out with one hand, suppressing a shout by covering her mouth with her other hand. She remained that way for several moments, willing Krishna to reappear... now...now...now...

He didn't appear.

The last of the stragglers reached the top of the hill. Those who had not been by the lake had arrived as well, and all the inhabitants of Vrindavan hamlet now stood atop the hill overlooking the lake. Balarama pushed a pair of young tykes up to the top and glanced over the entire group before turning to look downwards. She could see his own anxiety and frustration in his fair features. She knew Balarama was no less brave and strong than his brother and enjoyed fighting much more than Krishna, yet he was always the one given the task of shepherding the flock while his dark-skinned brother fought the demons. She could guess how frustrating it must be for Balarama and admired his fortitude and loyalty. Even now, his full attention was focussed on ensuring that everyone was present and accounted for, and only when he was certain his task was successfully accomplished did he turn to see how the battle fared.

There was not much they could see from up here. The water continued to churn and swirl furiously. From time to time a spout of water spewed up, sometimes rising several score yards in the air, topping even the tallest

lakeside trees, before falling back in a plume of spray. But mostly, the maelstrom raged and boiled and spun around as if it would never cease.

Finally, after several minutes had passed, Balarama started asking everyone to move on, to head home to the village. Many protested weakly but succumbed to his commands: all Balarama had to say was ‘Krishna said’ and nobody would argue the point. Every family had young ones or elders or both and everyone knew that if the battle came this way, there would be no time to get the slowpokes out of harm’s way in time. As it was, they were lucky simply to have gotten free of the lake without a single casualty. There were a few minor injuries and some broken limbs, including a pair of broken legs as a result of running away from the lake too fast while looking back over one’s shoulder: that was little Samit who had a habit of running races that way as well, and had fallen before for the same reason, though never this badly.

Most were shaken and bruised but otherwise unharmed. Many were praising Krishna for having saved them yet again and praying for his speedy triumph over this new calamity. Radha thought of reminding them that it was Balarama who had first seen the disturbance and gotten everyone out, but realized there was no need. They all knew Balarama’s contribution was considerable, but regarded the older brother as a part of the term ‘Krishna’. It was the way one said ‘Thank God’; you didn’t need to say ‘Thank all the Gods.’

They began the long trek back homewards. Radha turned her head to watch as the procession wound its way towards the village. Balarama was the last one, bringing up the rear. He turned and saw Radha still on the hill and frowned, beckoning to her.

She folded her arms on her chest, firmly.

‘I’m saying,’ she said.

Balarama shook his head. ‘Krishna said...’

‘You’ll have to carry me kicking and screaming if you want me to go home,’ she said. ‘And I bite too.’

He looked at her for a long moment, a sceptical expression on his face.

She made two fists of her hands and raised them in a fighting stance.

He grinned. ‘Don’t be absurd.’

‘Don’t be stupid. I’m staying. Take the others and go home.’

He looked at her a moment longer. ‘He will kill me if anything happens to you.’

She raised her fists higher. ‘I will kill you if you try to make me leave.’

He thought about it for another moment, then shrugged. ‘Remember to tell Krishna later that you said that.’

She lowered her fists. ‘I’ll tell him I fought and beat you and you cried for your mother and ran back all the way home.’

He grinned. ‘That will do too.’

He turned away, shouting to the rear enders to move faster.

Radha turned back to look down at the lake. She had no intention of budging from here until she knew her Krishna was safe and sound.

12

KRISHNA was being given the battle of his life. Putana had been no match for him. Her only real weapon had been her poison milk and once he consumed that and survived, she had nothing left. The other asuras each had some special power or unique ability. But this asura was remarkable.

For one thing, it was a serpent of mythic proportions. He could not tell exactly how long its body extended but he could only guess it went on for at least a mile or two. That in itself was not unique: Aghasura had been far bigger in terms of sheer size. The difference here was that this demon was a water serpent. And its venom was lethal. Almost as toxic as Putana's poison. It was extraordinarily strong as well, and its multitude of heads was something he had never imagined possible. Each time he wrestled a new head away from himself, or prevented one from sinking its fangs into his body, beating it aside or crushing it with his hands or feet, a new one popped up, and another, and yet another. This had been going on ever since he had descended into the maelstrom.

That was the other thing: The demon was able to twist around at a speed to match any tornado, except that it could do so underwater. In that way, it was as unique as Bakasura, whose special ability had been the manipulation of wind.

This asura combines the powers of all my previous attackers, Krishna realized. *Whoever sent it, he thought that perhaps if I could defeat each of those asuras individually, by combining all their abilities together, he would be able to defeat me.*

It was an ingenious idea and one that Krishna couldn't discount as a failure. Not yet. Perhaps not at all.

For one thing, the serpent was managing to strike home a few times. The sheer number of heads it possessed and the blinding speed with which they attacked from every side made it simply impossible for Krishna to deflect or destroy them all. Besides, the asura was shrewd, shrewder than most asuras and better versed at battling gods. Every time he used a maneuver that would have bested a lesser demon, he found himself counterpointed and then attacked again in a new way. Not only was the demon a worthy opponent, it was managing to hurt him!

He felt the places where the demon had sunk its fangs into his body, albeit briefly. Each place throbbed with pain. The poison was no ordinary toxin intended for creatures of the earth. It was a special Halahala type of venom that could slay gods. He didn't know how much it would take to kill him but he suspected that if he was struck enough times, it would succeed. After all, even he was subject to the limitations of the human form. His eternal Being would survive of course, but Krishna the mortal infant would perish. And Krishna was what he was in this life and at this time. Losing this body and being forced to take another rebirth or avatara or amsa would itself be a defeat, perhaps a decisive one. Certainly an unacceptable one.

He could not let that come to pass.

The main purpose of this descent to earth was to rid the world of the last of the asuras. Those demons that had somehow managed to survive and stay upon the mortal realm despite the repeated species cleansings he had inflicted upon this plane in previous incarnations.

That was why he had chosen to descend as Vishnu Incarnate. Not an avatar or an amsa. But as God Himself, albeit in a mortal identity. And that identity was Krishna, the closest he had come to replicating himself as he truly appeared, in his own image. Krishna was *He*. It was why he had maintained the black skin, the dark features, the facial similarity, and so many minute details.

He was Krishna in this life.

He could not let an asura defeat Krishna.

Not this asura or any other.

He roared, the sound audible even deep underwater.

They were perhaps half a mile beneath the surface of the lake now, the serpent demon seeking to draw him in even deeper, to take him to the bowels of the earth, thence perhaps to transport him to some place where he could bite him to his heart's content until he lost all resistance and began succumbing to the lethal god-slaying venom. Already, the power of the vortex was enormous, the pressure immense. He roared to give himself courage and struck out.

Hitting at the serpent with renewed vigour, while grasping hold of the slippery coils and drawing them upwards, He struck out for the surface, forcing the demon upwards, ever upwards, even as he fought and kicked and punched it.

The demon sensed what he was doing and fought back just as fiercely, striking with several heads at once now, not caring how many he destroyed so long as a few got past his defenses and struck his flesh with their fangs, sinking in a little more venom with each strike before he could react and rip out the offending head, twisting and crushing it.

Krishna felt his body succumbing to the poison even as his wounds bled openly now, releasing his precious life fluid into the swirling maelstrom. The water around them had turned dark with his own blood, as if night were falling inside the lake. He knew then that if he did not take this battle to the surface and turn his desperate defense into a powerful offense, he would lose.

And if he lost, then the mortal realm itself would be lost.

RADHA was relieved when Balarama relented and permitted her to stay. She couldn't bear the thought of being far away again while Krishna risked his life to battle another demon.

She knew he was probably not risking his life in the sense that a normal human boy might risk it. But he was still battling an unknown opponent, one that had been sent to kill him. And why else would demons try to kill him if he was truly invulnerable? It must mean that he had some weakness that could be exploited and each successive asura hoped that it could succeed where earlier ones had failed. It meant that remote as the possibility might seem, Krishna could be harmed. She had no wish to be safely away with her family while Krishna fought alone.

She watched the lake for several moments after Balarama and the last of the rear enders had disappeared down the winding road that led homewards. The water continued to boil and seethe, explode in plumes and geysers, swirl furiously like a maelstrom. But nothing else happened for a long while. She wondered how Krishna could hold his breath this long. Did he even need to breathe? Clearly, he *did* breathe, so that meant his body required air to survive. How then did he survive under water for so long?

She recalled the legend of Matsya, the fish incarnation of Lord Vishnu. She knew that fish breathed air but they absorbed it through the water itself which they took into their gills. Perhaps that was how Krishna could stay so long underwater: by extracting the air from water. Next, she wondered about his skin and his bones: could they be cut, pierced or broken? She did not recall ever hearing of Krishna being hurt in any way, not so much as the smallest cut. Even after battling those terrible asuras, he had been unscathed. So he was invulnerable then. Which begged the question again: Why send asuras to try to kill an invulnerable god?

She knew she was ranting mentally, that the inability to know what was happening beneath the lake was driving her insane with worry. She tried to calm herself, to hum the song Krishna had been playing on the flute that evening, only a short while ago. It was so soothing, so calming, like the sound of wind, or water, or birds...

What was it Krishna had said?

The song belongs to they who listen.

He had meant her.

She was the listener, he the singer. And so long as he sang, she was content to listen eternally.

Suddenly, she saw that something was changing in the lake. The maelstrom was still churning madly. But the colour of the water had altered subtly and was continuing to change.

She squinted, peering intently.

Yes, there was no doubt about it. The water looked darker now. She looked up. There were no clouds above the lake or any whose shadows could be darkening the surface of the water. No. The change in hue came from the water itself changing colour. She watched as the water grew steadily darker, changing from its usual bluish green to a more reddish brown...

Suddenly, she knew what the change in colour meant.

The lake was filling with blood.

Someone—or something—was bleeding.

She put her fist in her mouth, stifling a gasp.

She prayed it wasn't Krishna. Even the thought of him being injured made her sick to the stomach.

Surely he couldn't shed so much blood, enough to change the very colour of the lake itself?

Then again, that was exactly what she had been ranting about just now: the fact that she had no idea what a god incarnate could or couldn't do. Perhaps he *could* bleed. And if he could bleed, then surely he could bleed sufficiently to discolour an entire lake? After all, he was a god.

She clenched her fists tightly enough for her fingernails to dig into her palms, praying that the blood swirling about in the lake now was not Krishna's blood.

She started to pray to Lord Vishnu to protect her beloved friend, then realized the redundancy of that prayer.

She settled instead for praying to Lakshmi Devi, eternal companion and consort to Lord Vishnu.

Somehow, it seemed more appropriate.

13

Balarama had done as Krishna had asked: he had escorted all the people back to the village. The head of the long line was reaching the outskirts of the hamlet up ahead. He shouted to Nanda Maharaja and the other headsman of the clan that he was going back and turned.

He paused by his house for a moment, only to pick up something.

It was his plough.

It was the same one he had kept all these years, the one he had carried in his childhood as well. He liked the way it felt in his hands. It also made an excellent weapon.

He sprinted like the wind. Being heavy set, Balarama could not sustain a fast pace over long distances, but he could sprint short distances with greater power than all the other boys. The distance to the lake was a mere yojana, barely nine miles away. He could sprint that distance and barely break a sweat. He put his back and shoulders into it, roaring up and over the hills and down the dales, leaving a dust cloud in his wake that was visible for miles. Back at the hamlet, his mother Rohini saw it from her threshold and knew at once that it was her son sprinting back to join Krishna.

Balarama reached the top of the hill just in time to see Krishna break the surface. Radha was standing exactly where he had left her, staring down with her hands clasped in front, barely breathing. Her eyes were set intently on the lake below. Balarama fell to his knees, forcing himself to breathe steadily rather than gulp in great breaths. He had no trouble bringing his breathing under control in a moment. As he had expected, barely a few beads of sweat had popped out on his forehead and forearms.

He leaned on his plough and watched as the surface of the lake, now deep maroon from what could only be blood, boiled and seethed, the whirlpool still swirling with insane intensity yet lost for the moment under the chaos of bubbling spurting geysers of water.

Something was emerging, something that was so huge it was pushing great quantities of water above and ahead of it. Balarama held his breath as the water finally broke and the beast emerged.

Radha gasped and cupped both hands over her mouth in that peculiar way that girls had.

Why do they do that, Balarama wondered irritably. Do they mean to stop themselves from crying out? Why not simply cry out then? It wasn't as if there's anybody here to mind!

He rose to his feet, stunned at the sight.

The asura was a gigantic water serpent, jet black in colour. Its scales were glistening and shiny, a diamond pattern breaking the glossy blackness every few yards. Its torso was huge, though nowhere near as thick as Aghasura.

The earlier asura had been huge enough to resemble a gigantic cavern.

This water serpent asura was barely as thick as a few dozen banyan trunks banded together. It could probably swallow a small hillside but it was not a python or boa constrictor like Aghasura had been. This was a water serpent and its neck was slender and shapely, its mouth widening to an immense flattened head some three score yards long and one score yards wide, if Balarama's assessment was correct.

The mouth opened to reveal a dark red serpentine mouth with a long forked tongue that slipped in and out, and great fangs, some three yards long apiece, dripping viscous thick green venom.

But that was only the upper torso and main head.

As Balarama watched, the serpent continued to emerge from the water, the force of its momentum causing it to rise high in the air. As it rose, its upper body split into a myriad of heads, all identical to the first, all venomous serpent heads, but of varying sizes.

Some were almost as large as the main head, others much much smaller, probably no bigger than an asp, most comprising inbetween sizes. And there were so *many* of them!

Balarama tried to assess how many heads there were in all and gave up at once: it was hopeless to even try to count. There were easily a hundred, perhaps several hundreds. A thousand? Quite possibly!

He had never seen or heard anything like it before.

A giant water serpent with a thousand poisonous heads.

And riding atop the largest head was Krishna.

Balarama grinned proudly as he saw his brother standing on the hood of the great serpent's biggest head, attacked constantly from all sides by the other heads, lunging, striking, sinuously snaking around to attack from behind, from the sides, from above, from below.

He lost the grin as he saw that there were wounds on Krishna's body, several bleeding quite profusely.

As he watched, another head struck home, sinking its fangs into his brother's foot.

Beside him, Radha screamed.

Krishna bent down, dodging a large head that was lunging to bite his neck from behind, grasped hold of the head that had attacked his foot, crushed its neck, and tossed it away. Balarama saw it hang limply now, dead, and was pleased to see that several dozen other heads were similarly crushed and killed. But how many had struck their fangs into his brother's precious flesh? How many had injected their venom into Krishna's body? And how potent was that venom? Was it potent enough to do real harm to Krishna?

He saw now that the blood in the lake was all Krishna's. A copious amount of it. That could hardly be good. If Krishna had shed so much blood, he must have absorbed a great deal of venom as well. Whoever this asura was, he was no ordinary water serpent. His venom must be highly toxic, perhaps even toxic enough to harm a god. And with such immense quantities being pushed into his body, Krishna would certainly weaken at the very least.

He roared with fury, stamping his foot. He started downhill, intending to go to Krishna's aid at once, to leap into the water and start wrangling the serpent's heads, killing them one by one. He didn't care what his brother had said. He would not simply stand by and watch as his younger sibling was killed before his eyes by an asura. He would die before he let that happen. Besides, Krishna was clearly outmatched and outnumbered right now. If they couldn't fight back with one thousand heads, then at least two were better than one!

He prepared himself to run downhill and leap into the water to do battle—to the death, if need be.

But before he could start down the hill, Krishna began to dance.

KRISHNA felt the venom coursing through his veins. While his body was infused with brahman at the most basic level, the flesh was nevertheless mortal flesh. Gods did not possess flesh, blood, bones...not in the usual human sense of the term. The humanoid forms they appeared in during the rare interfaces with mortal beings were the closest approximations possible: their true forms were beyond the ability of mortal beings to perceive. It would be like attempting to see brahman itself, the force that pervaded, bonded and bound all Creation. Human eyes would only perceive a humanoid form, not the Deva parts and processes which were beyond human ability.

So his divinity was unharmed by the venom itself but he still experienced the suffering of his mortal flesh.

He knew that this body could not survive many more more injections of venom.

He was smashing and crushing and breaking Kaliya's heads—he had come to think of the serpent asura as Kaliya because, like Krishna himself, he was jet black in colour, an irony that was not lost on him—as fast as he could manage, but there were simply too many of them.

The more he killed the more appeared to take their place, lunging from every direction, sinuously slipping in under his guard and striking home with lethal accuracy. He felt his organs failing, his blood polluted, his heart in agony and knew that this asura had harmed him in ways that no other asura had been able to achieve until now. Kaliya, his namesake and brother in skin colour, had succeeded where all others had failed. The water serpent asura was winning this battle, Krishna was losing.

So be it.

So let me die.

And dying, go out in a blaze of glory.

When all else is lost, one may as well sing, raise one's voice in defiant song, not merely to voice a protest, but to make a statement:

You have beaten down my body and crushed my flesh, you have destroyed my physical form, you have demolished my earthly presence...and yet I survive. My aatma lives on, eternally. My soul outlives all crises. My will overcomes all reversals. My essence triumphs regardless. Even as I stand here dying, I sing to show that this being, this individual, this unique bonding of spirit and flesh, skin and soul, still exists and remains bloody yet unbowed, beaten yet undefeated, broken yet spiritually whole.

I am Krishna.

I am evergreen.

Hari! Hari! Hari!

And he danced.

His feet found purchase even on the slippery mobile hood of Kaliya.

They drummed out a syncopation of their own.

He danced with frenzy, with fury, with the exultation of dwindling life, with the white hot fire of tapas.

Shiva in his Natarajan form, dancing the dance at the End of Days to uncreate Creation, could hardly have danced more passionately or ferociously.

He danced and even the venom coursing through his veins, killing his mortal organs, destroying this fragile mortal bond he had with the earthly realm.

He danced, and the world seemed to realign itself to his rhythm, to rearrange her song to harmonize with his pattern, to provide accompaniment.

He danced, and the music of the spheres accompanied him, the songs of the earth, the sun, the moon blazed out in harmony.

He danced and sang his defiance of mortal death.

He was Krishna.

He was infinite.

If he must die, he would die dancing and celebrating his own death and rebirth.

He would embrace the darkness that was ultimately his own shadow.

He danced.

WATCHING him from the top of the hill, Balarama was stupefied. Radha was stunned. Both watched in gobsmacked silence as Krishna danced away atop the black snake's main hood. The serpent itself swayed, the lunging attacks of its myriad heads stalled for the time being as it reacted to this astonishing behavior.

It was obvious that the serpent could not make head nor tail of Krishna's dancing: was it a precursor to a new retaliatory attack? Was it itself meant to be an attack? Was it something godly incarnations did during battle? Its bewilderment was plainly writ as it swayed slowly, its frenzied movements ceasing until it resembled nothing so much as its normal earthly brethren, just a serpent swaying to the rhythm of a been-player, a snake charming musician.

'Look,' Radha said, pointing. 'It's dancing with Krishna!'

Balarama watched closely.

She was right.

Whether knowingly or instinctively, the serpent was mimicking the rhythm of Krishna's pounding feet. It was likely the serpent had only paused to try and assess this new behavior, not intending to move in rhythm with its enemy. But in observing Krishna's dance, it had fallen into the hypnotic pattern of his own footfalls.

As Radha and he watched, the swaying grew more and more pronounced, until Krishna's emphatic foot falls, marking the end of a bar or movement, were matched by noticeable jerks and sinuous shifts of the giant hood itself. What was more, even the other heads began to sway and dance in

syncopation, the smaller ones moving faster to keep double time while the larger ones moved slowly in a half-beat rhythm.

The overall effect was mesmerizing.

A magician seeking to charm and hold a snake's attention could not have performed a more elaborate trick.

'He's hypnotized it,' Balarama said in wonderment. 'He's hypnotized the asura with the rhythm of his dance.'

And so he had.

Krishna's feet were the only thing making contact with the serpent's body. And snakes, lacking hearing, could only sense sounds through physical contact, usually through vibrations felt in the ground on which they lay. Krishna's dancing was a constant rhythmic series of vibrations, transmitted to Kaliya through his hood, passing through his entire body. Somehow, Kaliya was understanding what Krishna was 'saying' through dance, and was listening intently. And in this manner, Krishna had succeeded in gaining control of the serpent asura through the means of rhythmic communication.

As they continued to watch, Krishna danced on.

Balarama realized that Krishna was doing more than simply controlling Kaliya.

He was also ridding himself of the venom the serpent asura had injected into his body: the more he danced, the more his blood pumped through his veins, the more his wounds bled. His body was covered with gaping wounds, all oozing, dripping blood. The blood pooled on the hood of the

serpent asura and dripped into the lake itself. The lake was stained blackish red now with the blood of Krishna.

Balarama's heart ached at the sight of so much blood, his brother's blood, being shed. How could Krishna even survive such a great amount of blood loss, let alone dance with such frenzied passion?

But that was the greatness of Krishna.

That was why he was God Incarnate.

While in this mortal form he might be subject to the limitations of the mortal form to some extent, but his spirit was divine and indomitable.

Even as his body died, his spirit drove it on relentlessly.

Krishna danced on.

16

Hours passed.

Still Krishna danced on.

The day became night.

Still Krishna danced.

Balarama and Radha sat down at last, exhausted from merely watching.

Slowly, the night went on, passing into day again. Still, Krishna's dance continued unabated.

As the days passed and Krishna's dance went on, the villagers ventured back to the lakeside.

In time, the hillside was covered with Vrishni, watching their brightest son performing yet another miracle.

Many of these same people had watched as Krishna had taken his first steps—then broken into an impromptu dance upon the corpse of his first attacker, Putana.

They had seen him grow and gain in strength and wisdom and love, and play mischief and get up to boyish pranks as well.

Now they watched as he danced out every last drop of venom from his own body and every last ounce of energy from the serpent that had come to slay him.

18

Eight days and eight nights Krishna danced.

And with each passing day, despite the prodigious loss of blood, he seemed to grow stronger, healthier.

It was miraculous to watch.

While with each passing night, the serpent Kaliya grew visibly weaker, paler, sicker.

As the epic dance progressed, it was evident to all who watched that this dance would end only with Krishna triumphing and Kaliya dying of sheer exhaustion.

Somehow, yet again, Krishna had turned certain defeat into unmitigated triumph.

By the end of the seventh day itself, it was evident that the great serpent Kaliya was near death now.

Attempting to match Krishna's ferocious energy—*compelled* to match it—the asura had depleted its life force. It had nothing more to give. It barely survived now and was fast fading into oblivion.

Just as Krishna had grown stronger and healthier with each passing day, it had grown weaker, sicker. Until now, it was dying.

And still Krishna danced on.

Now, it was no longer just a dance of death.

It was a dance of life for himself—and death to Kaliya.

By the end of the eighth day, everyone knew the inevitable was coming.

Kaliya would succumb at any moment. And Krishna would survive.

But before that could happen, someone intervened.

19

It happened on the Eighth Day.

Krishna was still dancing on Kaliya's hood. His wounds had healed completely, the bleeding had ceased, and he appeared whole and well again, even more vigorous than ever before. The blackness of his skin had always been tinged with a bluish aura, since birth, but now that bluish tinge was much more pronounced and as he exerted himself and exuded sweat and energy, he seemed to glow with a blue aura that pulsed and throbbed with his own heartbeat. Everyone took it as yet another manifestation of his divinity and praised him as Hari in human form.

Kaliya, on the other hand, was drooping and wilting like a dying flower. The once-powerful serpent asura, so energetic and seemingly capable of slaying gods, now appeared to be near-death. Its jet black scales were dull and lacklustre, its coat appeared to be shedding prematurely, grey wisps of dried skin peeling off to fall into the lake, and most of its heads appeared to have died from sheer exhaustion.

Even its main head hung much, much lower than before, almost touching the water now. It was evident that Krishna had the beast completely in his control. He could probably will it to drop dead at any moment, but clearly, he was enjoying the dance as well as taking the time to heal himself as well. It was only a matter of hours now, Balarama suspected, before Kaliya dropped dead and Krishna stepped back onshore, triumphant.

That was when it happened.

The water around Krishna and Kaliya thrashed and seethed, before erupting with sudden gouts of water.

Balarama rose to his feet, as did a number of other watchers. People gasped and pointed.

‘Balarama-bhaiya, what is it?’ Radha asked.

Balarama shook his head, silent. He didn’t know. He wondered if he should move the people back home again, to avoid any coming under threat once again.

He decided he would wait a moment or two to see what was happening before taking a decision.

It was logical for another asura allied to the first to attempt to attack the Vrishni while Krishna was preoccupied fighting their compatriot. If that was the plan, then it was better that the Vrishni were here too so that Balarama could protect them and Krishna could know at once.

The gouts of water hung in the air momentarily, then resolved themselves into a number of other water serpents. They surrounded the drooping body of Kaliya in a cluster, like a ring attack formation in battle.

Balarama hefted his plough.

He started to make his way downhill, turning only to shout briefly at his people.

‘Everyone stay here!’

He ran down to the lake shore.

As he ran, he saw the multitude of serpents raising their hoods, their malevolent black eyes hissing. They were all much smaller than Kaliya yet

if they attacked together they would probably be lethal. Like a pack of dogs attacking a lion. This time, he was determined that Krishna would not fight alone. Let him be angry with him later; Balarama would not stand by and watch as his brother battled for his life yet again.

But before he reached the lakeshore he saw that the cluster of serpents surrounding Kaliya and Krishna were not attacking.

They were praying.

KRISHNA looked down at the serpents surrounding him.

Their hoods were half-raised yet bent, their stalks curved downwards. He recognized the stance. It was the closest a snake could come to bowing or showing obeisance. His own celestial ally Anantha-Naga prostrated himself in exactly this fashion when greeting him whenever he returned home to Vaikunta-loka.

But who were these serpents and why were they bowing to him? The answer came to him as the serpents called out to his mind.

<Lord, we are the wives of the unfortunate one upon whose hood you stand.>

Ah, the wives of Kaliya. Naturally. Even demons had families. What did they want?

<Lord, you are infinite and eternal, all-powerful and all-dominating. You have proved your superiority over our lord and consort.>

‘I have no need to prove anything,’ Krishna replied. ‘He attacked me as an assassin. He sought to harm my people. He wounded me previously. What I do, I do only in self-defense and retaliation.’

<Yet he is no match for you. We see that now. He is at death’s door. He will surely die if you continue your divine dance.>

‘As he sowed, so must he reap,’ Krishna replied curtly.

He had no doubt that before Kaliya set out on this assassination attempt, leaving his subterranean watery cavern, these same wives would have encouraged and praised him, praying to their own deities for his success and triumph—namely, the death of Krishna and the destruction of the Vrishni. He had no sympathy for them or their ‘lord and consort’.

<We beseech you, lord. Spare him. You are great and merciful. What purpose will it serve you to take his life. Look at his condition. He will never harm any other living being again. At best, we could hope to nurse him back to a semblance of health and care for him the rest of his days. He is no threat to you or anyone else.>

‘No matter. He came to kill or be killed. He failed. Now he must die. That is how I must show my enemies that any who assault me or my people will suffer the same fate.’

Still, they wept and cried piteously. Their pleading continued for the rest of the day.

Krishna continued dancing relentlessly, Kaliya’s hood drooping lower and lower until it was evident that the serpent was facing his final hour.

Finally, the lamentation of the wives of Kaliya reached Krishna’s heart. He thought of his mother’s brother Kamsa and how cruelly he had dashed out the brains of the six new born children that had preceded Balarama and Krishna into the world. That heartless taking of life was one of the things that distinguished an asura from a deva. For an asura cared nothing about creating or giving to the universe, only about taking and destroying. If he killed Kaliya, would he not be the same as any asura, as Kamsa himself?

The thought itself slowed his feet. Gradually, his dancing ceased. He came to a halt. Took a moment. Then sighed.

After all, he was God Incarnate. Not Shiva, the Destroyer of Worlds. Or Brahma. Creator of the Universes. But Vishnu, Preserver and Protector.

His mission was to preserve, not kill.

Krishna finally slowed his dance, gradually coming to a halt.

He urged Kaliya to lower him to the lakeshore, speaking with his mind.

The great water-serpent obeyed, its immense hood and torso trembling with weakness and fear as it stretched out to reach the lip of dry land around the lake.

Krishna stepped out on solid land for the first time in days.

He sent a greeting and blessing to Bhoodevi, spirit of the earth, expressing his gratitude at being back upon her topsoil once again. A flock of parrots flew screeching into the sky, their green plumes fluttering like colored banners in the air, adding a festive touch. Trees showered petals. Wind blew soft and gentle aromas.

Yes, Bhoodevi was clearly glad to see him back safe and sound as well.

Then he turned and regarded the nemesis that had come close to destroying him.

‘Kaliya,’ he said grimly. ‘After the heinous manner in which you attacked my people and then myself, do you expect me to let you live? Speak! ’

Krishna faced the black snake. Kaliya's hood shook, trembling as much from exhaustion and sickness as from fear. For it was truly terrified of Krishna now, he sensed. He took no satisfaction in this fact. If anything, he felt sad for it.

<Never before have I faced any mortal, asura or deva such as yourself. Truly the legend is true then. You are Hari himself. Swayam Bhagwan. Praise be to you, mighty Vishnu-deva in Krishna form.>

'I have no desire to hear your praises. I only grant you this reprieve because your wives petitioned on your behalf and compelled me to feel pity for you. If you will not speak quickly and to the point, I will deny their petition and destroy you where you stand.'

<Forgive me, Lord. Confronted with your effulgence, I could not but show my respect for this divine darshan. I will waste no more of your precious time.>

'Speak then. How do you justify your assault on me?'

<I cannot justify it, Lord. I came to assassinate you. Had I been able to do so, I would have killed you without remorse or regret.>

'And if my people cried out for mercy, or lamented my loss? Would that have brought you to care enough to spare me? Or to spare their innocent lives?'

Kaliya's great hood lurched sideways before keeping itself upright with an effort.

<Nay, my Lord. I admit I would not have cared what they said or did. I would have killed you and all your people.>

‘Even the little children who could do you no harm?’

<Especially the little children. For the one who sent me on this mission is himself known as Childslayer. He takes special pleasure in the destruction of young lives.>

Krishna clenched his fists. ‘I should strike you down here and now as you stand. You are a brutal and heartless monster. You do not deserve to be spared.’

Kaliya’s wives cried out shrilly, their serpentine shrieks harsh and cloying. But Kaliya’s response was measured and without emotion.

<My Lord, I know now what I did not know before. I have two thousand eyes yet only now have I learned to see clearly. I know that I was a fool even to try to attack you. If you wish to slay me, do so. It shall be my good fortune to die at the hands of great Hari Incarnate.>

Krishna raised his hands, feeling the power of his Deva-shakti coursing through them. Above the lake, the sky grew dark and stormy of a sudden, and blue lightning blazed down through a cloudless sky to center upon Krishna’s raised hands, taking the shape of a gleaming golden disk.

Krishna’s eyes flared blue as well.

His voice boomed and gnashed like thunder in a closed chamber.

‘It would be a pleasure to slay you, monster! I should cut every head off your body with a single flick of my weapon.’

Kaliya’s wives were silenced. The great serpent himself stopped swaying and held still, sensing his imminent demise.

Suddenly, as abruptly as it had appeared, the lightning vanished, leaving only clear blue skies above. Krishna’s eyes flickered with blue light but were normal mortal eyes again. And his hands were a normal boy’s hands as well.

‘I should slay you. But I will not,’ he said. ‘I will spare you instead. You are to leave this mortal realm forever and return to the watery cavern whence you came, there to spend the rest of your meagre life in the company of your wives and young ones.’

Kaliya bowed to him, hood swaying drunkenly.

<My Lord, why do you spare me? There is no argument that I am an evil creature, that I sought to do you and your loved ones irreparable harm. If I were in your position I would not be as merciful as you are to me. Why then do you show mercy and spare my life as you are doing now?>

Krishna raised his hand, blessing Kaliya as well as bidding him farewell.

‘Because I am not you,’ he said. ‘I am Me.’

BALARAMA slapped Krishna on the back and hugged him hard. Krishna pretended to be panting and heaving when Balarama finally released him. ‘Brother, even Kaliya did not crush me as hard! ’

Balarama laughed and punched Krishna’s shoulder playfully. Then he hugged him again, squeezing him tight enough that Krishna could barely breathe.

Beside them, Radha smiled shyly and expressed her pleasure at Krishna’s safe return. Balarama, who was on the other side of Krishna, waggled his eyebrows provocatively. Krishna elbowed him hard. Balarama pretended to gasp and stagger briefly.

‘You spared your own assassin,’ Balarama said. ‘Do you think it will make the next one merciful towards you or your loved ones?’ He shook his head. ‘You are too easygoing with these asuras, bhraatr. They must be destroyed, exterminated from the earth.’

Krishna sighed. ‘You are probably right, bhaiya. Yet I do not see them as a species. I see them as individuals. Each is different.’

Radha nodded, agreeing with Balarama.

Balarama glanced at her and snorted. ‘Nonsense. All demons are alike. They are evil and wish to destroy all that is good and righteous in the world.’

Krishna shook his head. ‘I am not so sure. Some are merely forces of nature or tools wielded by other hands. They are not evil in themselves,

merely powerful means to some end.'

'And as long as that end is our destruction, that makes them evil!' Balarama retorted.

Krishna smiled. 'That is itself a fallacy, to assume that those who are against us are evil and only are the doers of good. What if it is the other way around.'

Radha's eyes widened. 'You cannot mean that, Krishna. How can you think of yourself as evil?'

Krishna sighed. 'That is not what I meant. I merely suggest that things are not always black and white and grey. Each individual is unique, like a shade of color in a rainbow palette of infinite colors. We cannot dismiss all asura as evil. Or assume all devas to be good. Sometimes, one force does a good deed while the other does a bad one, for reasons that seem logical at the time but when viewed dispassionately, can be regarded as questionable.'

Balarama scratched his head. 'How is killing innocent people questionable? It's evil, that's all!'

Krishna sighed and slapped Balarama on his meaty back. 'Let me show you what I mean. Even as we speak, a new crisis confronts our people. We must rush to their aid.'

Radha and Balarama both looked around, peering in the direction of the path that led back towards Vrindavan hamlet. The last of the people had vanished from sight over the rise by this time.

'What new monstrosity seeks to attack them this time?' Balarama said. He looked around for his plough. 'Let me tackle this one, bhraatr. I will dash

its brains out on the ground with my plough.'

Krishna smiled again, wistfully. 'That is exactly what I have been trying to explain to you. It is no monster that threatens our people. It is not an evil force or a demon from the underworld. Yet our people are in grave danger nonetheless. Come now, we must hurry. Running will be too slow.'

He put an arm around Balarama and gestured to Radha. Shyly, she stepped into the circle of his other arm. He clasped her shoulders, drawing the tiniest of sighs from her. Then, with as little effort as drawing a breath, he rose up into the air.

A brief moment as he tilted his head to point them in the right direction, then they were hurtling through the air, over the hilltop, down the next rise and up the next, following the undulating landscape over the few miles that separated them from the hamlet.

Before they could reach within sight of the hamlet, they came to a thick patch of woods. The path disappeared into the woods and the last of the people were visible on the path, approaching the shady overhang of the trees.

'Balarama, Radha,' Krishna said as they descended to earth, 'you must run and warn as many people as possible to turn back and come out of the woods. Head for open ground. They will be safe there.'

Krishna set Balarama and Radha down on the ground as gently as possible, then shot away like a flash.

'What did he mean?' Radha asked anxiously. 'What threatens them in the woods? Is it another giant snake?'

Balarama hefted his plough. ‘Whatever it is, we will take care of it. But first, let’s do as bhaiya said. Your shriek is louder than my loudest bellow, Radha, so run ahead and scream to everyone to turn back. I will guide the people to open ground as Krishna instructed. Go on!’

Radha needed no further urging. Running up the path into the woods, she screamed as loudly as possible. The sound rang through the woods as clearly as a temple bell pealing at midnight.

Balarama winced and followed.

What new demon was it this time? He wondered grimly.

23

But Krishna was right. It was no demon.

It was a forest fire.

Radha nodded and sprinted. From above, Krishna saw her lithe form race down the dirt road, easily catching up in moments with the stragglers then going past them and running up the length of the procession.

She shouted as she went, and heads turned as people heard and reacted. Krishna was gratified to see them increase their pace at once and urge their cattle and yoked beasts on faster. Even so, he knew, they would not be able to get out of the wooded area in time. That was the whole point of the attack, to make it impossible for him to save everybody. Like any general who was unable to eliminate his main enemy, Kamsa was now fighting a war of attrition. Kill as many Vrishni as possible, harm Krishna indirectly. For he knew that even a single life lost was as painful to Krishna as losing a limb.

That was why Krishna could not let even a single life be lost.

He descended to earth, stepping onto the forest floor. A pack of wolves fleeing the fire reacted in alarm to the unexpected sight of a human descending from the sky and ran even faster, dark fur blurring past in a flash.

He turned off the path, heading into the forest. Dry leaves and twigs cracked and crunched underfoot. Several small creatures passed him, running swiftly in the other direction, not the way the Vrishni were heading but the other way, down to the pasturelands and lake and brooks. There was water there and even the smallest living creature understood

instinctively that water provided a natural break for a forest fire. He saw a wildcat and a deer running alongside one another, temporary companions during this hour of crisis.

He heard heavy footfalls approaching from behind, making far more noise than he did. That would be Balarama, following. He still had that ridiculous plough in his hand, carrying it like a mace-warrior bearing his mace. Krishna shook his head at the thought. Balarama would always be Balarama!

By the time he reached the clearing he sought, the fire had grown rapidly. Already it covered a substantial part of the woods and as he had expected, it had already leaped across the road to begin consuming the far side as well. The sound and smoke were increasing with every minute, and he felt the scorching heat singe his face and eyes even from here.

Balarama came up beside him, hefting the plough.

Krishna glanced at it sideways. ‘What do you intend to do with that? Use it to put out the fire?’

Balarama looked down at the plough as if just remembering that he was still carrying it. ‘Why not? I could use it to dig up the ground and bury the fire!’

Krishna snorted. ‘Yes! That would work!’

Balarama squinted at him. ‘You have a better idea?’

Krishna nodded. ‘Watch.’

Krishna turned to the fire, leaned forward, opening his mouth, and began to inhale. He sucked in air slowly at first, then harder, increasing his

intensity until he could feel the searing heat of the air from the fire entering his lungs. It burned. He ignored the pain and continued, exerting superhuman force now.

Balarama exclaimed. ‘It’s working, bhai! You’re sucking the fire in! I can see it moving this way.’

Krishna continued, inhaling with enough force that the flames engulfing entire trees bent and swooped, flying towards him and entering his lungs. The heat was searing, the pain agonizing but he didn’t stop for even a second. He could hear the screams of the Vrishni as they raced to exit the woods before the fire consumed them and knew that he had only moments in which to work. He pulled in breath, sucking the very air from the forest.

Several moments later, Balarama clapped him on his back. ‘You did it, brother! You inhaled the entire forest fire. Everyone is safe and sound.’

Krishna coughed out a great puff of black smoke. Soot and ash settled before him.

Radha came running up, coughing and waving away the last vestiges of smoke. ‘Krishna, are you all right?’

‘What would happen to him?’ Balarama said. ‘I’m here, aren’t I?’

Radha ignored Balarama’s quip and looked at Krishna.

He coughed up another mouthful of black smoke.

‘I’m all right, Radha,’ he said. ‘Is everyone safe?’

She nodded briskly, beaming. ‘Every last man, woman, child, cow and calf.’

Krishna smiled, exhaling the last of the smoke. ‘Time to go home then.’

She slipped her hand into his hand. They walked back in the direction of the path, heading homewards.

Krishna heard Balarama mutter something behind them and then follow, hefting his plough and slapping it against his open palm, ready for whatever new threat might present itself next.

gargamuni beamed with pleasure as he sampled the first mouthful of food. ‘Sadhu! Sadhu!’ he exclaimed.

Nanda Maharaja smiled, then moved on to serve the next person seated cross-legged beside the preceptor. A line of servers followed him, each serving a different item of food, all piping hot and freshly prepared for the feast. The line stretched all the way to the end of the clearing and around to the other side. The feast day of Lord Indra was being held at the foot of Mount Govardhana, long considered to be sacred to Indra-dev and a holy mountain. Brahmins, Chandalas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, all varnas sat together and ate in brotherhood, shoulder to shoulder, consuming the same food, engaging in pleasant conversation.

While it was true that varna was often used as an excuse for discrimination in some places, it was not in itself the basis for discrimination. People who were biased could find any reason to regard others as different and inferior: class, wealth, position, nationality, ethnicity, regionality, religion...to the Vrishni under Nanda Maharaja, varna was merely a convenient division of labour, made by choice and passed on by birth only if desired. But to acknowledge the existence of caste-based discrimination and combat it, Krishna had suggested that this year’s Indra feast be dedicated to community sharing.

So everybody was eating together, not merely different castes, but also different classes—land-owners and workers, farmers and herders, rich and poor. And, in the ultimate levelling of differences, even the cows and dogs were being fed at the same time!

That was true proof of non-discrimination, Krishna said. ‘If we are agreed that all living beings are equal and entitled to equal rights, then why stop at varna, caste or class? Let us acknowledge the equality of even the four-

footed, the furred, the winged and the voiceless. Let us acknowledge all life itself as precious.'

Radha took one look at the long line of dogs sitting and waiting for their meals, none barking or complaining about the other's portion, and Krishna knew she sorely was tempted to make a comment about the patience and discipline of their four-footed friends versus the two-footed ones but credit to her, she kept the thought to herself.

After the meal was done, Gargamuni sought out Krishna and bent to touch his feet. Krishna stopped him at once. 'Swami, what are you doing? You are our preceptor and elder. It is I who must show respect to you.'

The acharya of Vrajbhoomi smiled in admiration, joining his hands together in supplication. 'Truly we are blessed to have your presence among us, lord. There has never been an avatar or amsa who displayed such power and humility both at once.'

Krishna clasped the guru's hands in his own affectionately. 'Be it power, wealth, strength or anything else, the more one possesses, the more humble one should be. For these are but gifts, not a birthright. One must be thankful for what one has been given, and enjoy it while it lasts. For nothing truly lasts.'

'Wisely spoken words,' the aging brahmin replied. 'Words to live by. And what you are doing today is a great example as well. Spreading unity and harmony among castes.' The acharya chuckled at the dogs who were wolfing down their food hungrily. 'Even among species.'

'We are all of the earth, all fellow sharers of the same resources. Only by living together in peace and harmony can we all survive. It is sad that some who dwell on earth choose to ignore these facts of life.'

Gargamuni and Krishna walked awhile, speaking of many things, philosophical as well as material. They passed a pair of brahmins who appeared agitated, lost in debate. They saw their preceptor and Krishna approaching and fell silent at once, rushing away.

Krishna noticed the guru appeared perturbed. ‘What is it, swami? Is there some disagreement among your brahmins?’

‘It is impossible to conceal anything from your sight, Krishna. Some of my followers and colleagues fear that by foregoing the usual sacrifice to Indra this year, the great lord of thunder and war may take offense.’

‘But we are still performing the ritual ceremony,’ Krishna pointed out. ‘All the oblations are being made and due procedure followed.’

‘Yes, that is so,’ Gargamuni said, his thin face drawn in long sad lines. ‘Yet instead of feeding only brahmins devoted to Indra, we are feeding brahmins of all faiths. Indeed, we are feeding not only brahmins but all varnas. And some have remarked that the feeding of cows and dogs may be seen to be a deliberate affront to the great King of the Devas.’

‘It is not intended as such,’ Krishna said. ‘Merely a demonstration of communalism and brotherhood of all living things. Surely as a great and powerful god, Indra will understand and appreciate what we are attempting here.’

Gargamuni looked at him silently. ‘Krishna, my child, my god. If only all gods could possess your wisdom and vision.’

A sound interrupted them. At once their eyes went to the skies.

It was the sound of thunder.

A storm was brewing at the peak of Mount Govardhan.

One of the brahmins who had been agitated spoke up dryly: ‘Perhaps Lord Indra does not share your sentiment, Gargacharya.’

THE rain pelted down relentlessly. The wind was increasing in fury with every passing moment. Everyone was gathered together in the relative shelter of the thicket beside the clearing where the ashram of Indra's brahmins was located. But Krishna could see that this meagre shelter would not serve as protection for much longer. Already the boughs of the trees were shivering violently in the gusts of wind and the rain seemed to be seeking them out under the eaves, splashing cold icy water in their faces with deliberate malice.

The storm had come out of nowhere, bursting from a clear sky. Thunder, lightning and torrential rain, all out of season.

Everyone was silent. The brahmins whom Krishna had seen arguing earlier looked vindicated, glaring proudly at the Chandalas and other lower castes huddled in common misery alongside the Vrishni. Krishna felt sure that they blamed this storm on the feeding of low castes on Indra's feast day. He resented such attitudes and biases. It made him angry.

He controlled his anger. The bigotted brahmins were not the cause of this crisis. *He* was. It was he who had chosen to feed all castes and communities and species today in a show of communalism. The only mistake he had made was to do so on Indra's Feast Day. Clearly the god of wind and rain and thunder and war resented this diversion of his day for such a purpose. And to have done so under the auspices of Indra's ashram in the shadow of his sacred mountain...obviously the king of the gods was enraged and felt insulted.

Krishna had always found Indra to be mean and spiteful, given to petty acts of vengeance and retaliation, not to mention his notorious philandering and penchant for launching military offensives at the slightest provocation. Had he not been upon the mortal realm right now,

engaged in a mission of vital importance, he would have shed this incarnation and gone to Indraloka in his true form, as Vishnu. Then he would have given Indra a piece of his mind. Even the king of Gods did not dare pick a fight with the Preserver himself, one of the holy Trimurti.

But that was not possible under the circumstances. He was Krishna. He had to stay here to fulfill the purpose of this birth. And he had to do everything as Krishna, the god-child.

And right now, that meant acting to save these people and creatures from the wrath of Indra.

The storm was only increasing in fury and intensity. Small bushes and trees were being uprooted and carried bodily away, as if by a hurricane. The sheer rage was evident in every aspect. This was no mere storm. It was an act of war.

Yet Krishna could not retaliate. How could one fight a storm? Wind? Rain? Lightning? No. He must put aside all thought of vengeance or retaliation and focus solely on protecting these innocents. He had a brief moment of pique when he thought perhaps he would leave those brahmins to suffer the storm, after all they seemed to take great satisfaction in Indra's fury, but of course, he could not knowingly harm or allow harm to come to them. Their only crime was ignorance and lack of true wisdom.

‘Krishna!’

Balarama fought his way against the wind, reacting as lightning struck ground only yards from where he bent over, struggling to make his way to the spot where Krishna stood, buffeted by the elements.

‘We have to do something.’

Krishna nodded. ‘Gather everyone close together and tell them to stay there. As close as possible.’

Balarama nodded and went back to do as Krishna had ordered, knowing better than to waste time and energy questioning or debating. This time there was no enemy for anyone to fight, only people to protect.

Krishna stepped forward, looking for a good foot-hold. He stamped his foot on the ground, searching. Yes, this seemed a good spot. The ground here was packed earth, no layers of stone for several yards down. He looked around. The neighbouring area appeared much the same, none of the red veins or streaks that indicated igneous formations or solidified rock underground.

The storm was growing insane with frenzy. He felt lightning strike him directly several times. It shook him, stopping his heart momentarily each time, and after the third or fourth time he thought he heard Radha cry out in concern, but perhaps that was only his imagination. The storm was too deafening to hear her cry, although he had no doubt she must be beside herself with anxiety for his well-being.

He stamped his foot, settling for a relatively smooth flat patch of ground.

This will have to do.

He offered up a brief prayer to Bhoodevi, asking her to lend her support. ‘These are your children I seek to preserve, Mother,’ he said. The wind tore the words from his lips before they could reach his own ears. But he knew that Mother Earth did not need words spoken aloud in order to hear them. She would do what she could by way of offering him support, both literal as well as figurative. The rest was up to him.

He bent down, pushed his fingers into the earth, digging them deep inside, as deep as possible. With a mighty effort, he pulled, taking hold of the

rocky base of Mount Govardhan and splitting it from the ground on which it lay. To his surprise, it broke away with far less effort than ought to have been possible. He knew then that Bhoodevi had indeed heard his prayer, was assisting and aiding him in his challenge.

With renewed hope and vigor, Krishna bent down again and picked up the mountain.

RADHA gasped in wonderment as she saw Krishna pick up Mount Govardhan. Everyone reacted. It was a sight to behold. A boy picking up a mountain. For a long moment, nobody knew what to say or do. Even the Indra priests, gloating with pride at their deity's vengeance, were stupefied.

As Krishna raised up the entire mountain on his palms, Balarama shouted to the people and animals huddled in the ashram clearing. 'Come closer together! Everyone.'

They did as he asked, huddling even closer together. The Indra priests found themselves being pushed towards the group of Chandalas and reacted at once. 'We will not pollute ourselves by standing near them,' shouted one brahmin.

Balarama ignored them and concentrated his efforts on the rest. If they wished to endanger their own lives by facing their own god's fury, that was their choice. He had to ensure that the larger number were brought within the umbrella of safety quickly, before the storm began taking its toll.

Soon, he had every man, woman, child, cow and dog gathered in a rough circle that extended over a considerable area. He understood now why Krishna had given that instruction. The sheer number of people and animals made them a substantial mass. Even Mount Govardhan was not infinite in size. The mountain would just about provide this large gathering with sufficient overhead shelter. If they were spread out farther apart, they would be subjected to the rage of Indra.

He heard shouts of wonderment and joy. Turning, he saw Krishna walking slowly in their direction. His brother carried the entire mountain upon the

palm of one hand.

‘Look at the ground,’ Radha shouted above the scream of the wind.

Balarama looked. With such an epic weight upon his hand, Krishna ought to have sunk deep into the ground. But he appeared to be walking normally, leaving only the normal footprints that any young boy would leave on such a surface. Others noticed this phenomenon and pointed it out to each other as well, marvelling at this new evidence of Krishna’s divinity.

‘It is Bhoodevi’s blessing,’ Balarama said to himself. ‘She is supporting Krishna and aiding her children.’

As they watched, Krishna carried the mountain to where they were huddled.

When he reached the place he had chosen, he stopped.

Everyone clustered around him, except for the Indra brahmins who were adamant in their refusal to be sheltered in the same space as low castes. Balarama saw Gargamuni attempting to appeal to their common sense and humanity but they would not be deterred. He watched as they deliberately stepped away from the shelter of the mountain held up by Krishna, bodies shuddering as they were buffeted by the powerful screaming winds and tearing rain.

He turned his attention to Krishna.

As he watched, Krishna hefted the mountain on the palm of his hand, the way Balarama himself liked to heft his plough, then lifted it upon a single finger, the smallest finger of his left hand.

He held it up with only a minor trace of effort—only a faint semblance of a smile twitching his left cheek.

He held it that way, taking up a position.

Then, with his free hand, he removed his flute from his waistband and put it to his lips. A gentle melody began to waft forth from his flute, audible even despite the torrent of the storm.

Here, within the shelter of Mount Govardhan, Krishna tended his flock.

There was little rest for the Vrishni and their Deliverer that year.

The assaults by Kamsa's assassins continued unabated.

Another rakshasa named Pralamba—bearing no relation to Kamsa's chief advisor of the same name—attempted boldly to attack Krishna in broad daylight and was despatched easily.

Another snake beast named Vyoma attempted to swallow Nanda whole while on a pious trip to a nearby shrine. Nanda called to his son for help. Krishna arrived at once and tore the beast to pieces.

Balarama finally had his chance to play hero when an asura named Baka attacked him from behind while returning home and attempted to pick him up bodily to throw him. Not expecting Balarama to weigh as much as he did, the asura was nonplussed when Krishna's brother increased his weight to the point where the asura was suffocating beneath the unbearable burden. Descending to the ground, Balarama then roundly thrashed the villain and despatched him to the afterlife.

There was another attempt by fire, apparently a perennial favorite when large populations were to be decimated, and once again Krishna thwarted the threat in exactly the same manner, by swallowing the fire whole and absorbing it into himself. If a method worked, there was no reason not to use it again after all.

Eventually, the assassins and attacks slowed then ceased altogether. A brief period of respite followed, expanding eventually into a whole season of rest, then a year, then several years.

Time passed.

The Vrishni began to believe that perhaps, just perhaps, the gravest part of the danger had passed finally. Perhaps the Usurper would finally leave them in peace.

Krishna knew better but said nothing. He made the most of the interval between bouts by spreading merriment and hope through his heart-melting smile and languorous flute-song.

He also knew what none of them knew, that the worst still lay ahead. That the real battle was yet to begin. All this, after all, was merely a foretaste of the real war that lay ahead. The mother of all wars, a conflict so terrible, so awesome, that it would pit every living able-bodied civilized soldier against his fellow soldier, brother against brother, kin against kin, and would end only when the population of the civilized world was all but wiped out.

He could say none of this to his people. Besides, it would do no good. This was not a coming storm that they could prepare for by taking shelter or securing hatches and fences and mending roofs.

This was the end of the Yuga. And the cusp of the bloodiest, most violent age of all in human history.

The Age of Kali.

It would come no matter what they, or he, or anyone else did, or did not do.

So he played his flute and danced the ras-garba with his fellow gopas and gopis and ate mangoes and swam in the lakes and ran through the fields, growing taller, broader, handsomer, as the weeks of peaceful respite

turned to months, and the months into years, and the boy became a man, and the god became a mortal for just a short while.

Between battles.

Before the war.

Just for a breath's breadth.

A pause between past and future.

And he played his lila.

RADHA laughed and splashed water on her fellow gopis. They screamed and laughed and splashed her back until the riverside resembled a waterfall with water and spray flying every which way. The gopis were in a boisterous mood this season; it had been a long time here in Vrindavan, in veritable exile. Idyllic as life was here, the awareness that they were perpetually under threat, a community hunted and condemned by the Usurper and his demoniac soldiers, had bred a stubborn fury within each one. They lived and worked and ate and slept happily enough, but beneath that veneer of normalcy there had begun to fester a sense of anger and frustration, a desire to throw off the yoke of oppression and live free. To go back to Vraj-bhoomi and walk the green grassy slopes of their homeland once again, to live free in Gokul, to travel, to meet their relatives and friends, to marry and love and procreate and proliferate. They were no different than a city under siege. All the water and food and supplies in the world could not make up for the lack of freedom.

All this translated into great quantities of pent-up energy. This came out in the rough house play of Balarama and the other gopas during the sports and other play. And with the gopis, expected to be demure and girlishly well-behaved at all times, it exploded at times such as these, when they were on their own, away from public eyes, playing together in this secluded glen, bathing in the river.

They splashed and screamed and ducked one another in the water until every last one of them was soaked through and through. Finally, Radha said, ‘We may as well put our vastra to dry and bathe properly.’

The others chorused their approvals. Discarding their garments, the gopis laid them out on rocks and low-hanging branches to dry in the late morning sun, while they went back to splash and frolic in the water. Even though it was late autumn, almost early winter, the day was unseasonably

warm, and the river relatively cool, especially in the shade of the riverside trees.

They had come here to the Kalindi river early that morning, to offer the ritual oblations to Devi Katyayani at the onset of the Hemanta season. They had already bathed once in the water at sunrise, then made an image of the goddess with sand. The effigy still stood on the riverbank, lovingly shaped and carved, adorned with scented flowers, garlands, offerings of agarbattis, mud diyas, fresh fruits and newly grown shoots, rice and numerous other offerings, some glinting gold, others of lesser monetary value but all equal in devotional worth.

It was only after the prayers to the goddess, after eating the ritual food prepared for the occasion and sitting for a while, that their talk had turned to more playful matters, leading to a little mild splashing of water, which quickly escalated into the all-out battle of water that drenched them one and all.

The gopis played for a while, as happy as gandharvas and apsaras and when they were tired, they lay in the water and talked about all manner of things.

One favorite topic of discussion was the one and only Krishna of course. At some point, every single gopi mentioned him, always with a wistful look in her eye and a soft sigh.

‘Katyayani Devi,’ one attractive gopi with a well-endowed form said aloud, clasping her palms together and addressing the effigy of the goddess on the rivershore. ‘Great Maya, maha-yogini, mistress of the universe, I pray thee make the son of Nanda and Yashoda mine in marriage.’

Giggling at first, the other gopis remarked that on such an auspicious day, it was said that the Devi actually granted the wishes of young unmarried

girls such as they if such wishes were made with sincerity and devotion.

After mulling on this for barely a moment, all the other gopis turned their attention to the goddess and began offering their own prayers.

It took Radha only a moment to realize that their prayers were all the same: every last one of them was asking the Devi to grant them a husband. And the husband desired by every gopi was the same.

Her Krishna!

Radha began to grow jealous. It was one thing for all the gopis to joke about Krishna, flirt with him, and even make coy advances on occasion. But this was serious. To pray to the goddess on her sacred day, that too in this manner, standing unclad in the Devi's Kalindi river, and ask for Krishna as their husband...it was too much!

What if the Devi heard their prayers? What if she granted them? Naturally, she could not make Krishna husband to them all. But what if she granted the wish of any one girl here? What if slender doe-eyed Chitralekha's wish was granted? Or if homely looking but nicely plump Sudhasattwa were to have her prayer answered? Or buxom Balini?

No. This was intolerable. She could not bear the thought of her Krishna marrying another woman.

Fuming, she made her way to the edge of the water and reached for her clothes. She had left them on a rock within reach of the water's edge so that she would not have to climb out unclad. Unlike some of these other hussies, she was not as bold about baring her body, even if this was a secluded glen where the gopis of Vrindavan were known to bathe and were therefore permitted their privacy.

She felt the cool smooth surface of the rock and patted it, stretching out as far as her arm would reach.

She could not feel her garments.

She frowned and peered up the length of her arm.

Her clothes were gone!

She issued a sound of exasperation.

It must be those monkeys. They could be very mischievous at times.

She looked around the trees, trying to spot the tell-tale red eyes twinkling in the shadows, or the flashing white teeth.

It took her a moment to realize that there were none in sight.

No monkeys.

And no clothes.

All their garments had vanished. Not just her own from the rock, but every single vastra belonging to every last gopi, left hanging from tree branches or laid out on stones to dry, had disappeared!

Radha screamed.

At the sound of Radha's scream, all the gopis left off their prayers to the goddess and came to see what the matter was.

'Asuras!' Radha cried.

At the mention of the dreaded word, every gopi started screaming as well. Pandemonium ensued. Once again, there was much thrashing about and panic as the gopis looked about and splashed in the water, trying to decide where the demons might be and what to do next. It took several minutes before everyone realized that no danger was visible and that the only harm that had befallen them was the pilfering of their garments.

'Is that all?' said one of them scornfully, 'Radha, you would leap off a cliff to avoid a mosquito! I thought it was a real demon attacking. Like Aghasura. Or Kaliya!'

'The monkeys must have taken our clothes,' said another gopi. 'They took Saraswati's garments once when she was bathing, remember? Come on, everyone look in the trees, the rascals must be hiding there.'

Everyone began to look about for monkeys in the trees.

It was Radha herself who spotted the familiar face peering down from a fork in a Kadamba tree. She gasped at first, unable to believe her eyes. Then slowly, a smile played across her pretty features and soon became a blush.

'I found the rascal,' she said aloud.

The other gopis clustered around her. ‘Where are the monkeys?’ they asked.

‘There,’ she said, pointing. ‘But it’s no monkey.’

They all looked where she pointed and saw the familiar face laughing from the Kadamba tree.

‘Krishna!’ they exclaimed. ‘It’s Krishna!’

At once, the sound of cat-calls and cries broke out from across the grove. Other gopas appeared, leaving their hiding places to come forward. They stood with their hands on their hips, grinning boldly.

The gopis blushed and screamed in embarrassment, covering themselves with their hands.

‘You took our clothes!’ they cried out. ‘Give them back!’

Balarama shrugged. ‘We had nothing to do with it. Krishna took them.’

Everyone turned to look at Krishna. He grinned, dangling Radha’s bright yellow upper garment. Radha blushed even deeper.

‘They’re telling the truth, dear gopis,’ Krishna cried out. ‘I have your garments! Don’t you want them back?’

‘YES!’ the gopis cried. ‘Please return them.’

‘Of course,’ Krishna said with mock-seriousness. ‘They’re of no use to me. You may have them all back at once.’

The gopis cried out with relief, staying low in the water to avoid being seen by the boys.

‘But you must come and take them from me, one by one,’ Krishna said.

The gopis looked at one another, round-eyed. Radha lowered her eyes, blushing redder than a gulmohur flower in full blossom.

‘Well, that is the only way you will get your clothes back,’ Krishna said.
‘By coming to me one by one and taking them from my hand.’

The gopis were struck dumb. None knew what to say.

It was Radha who spoke.

‘Don’t misbehave, Krishna,’ she said, her cheeks still flaming red. ‘Give us back our clothes. Otherwise, we will tell Nanda-Maharaja.’

Krishna raised his eyebrows. ‘Tell him what exactly? That you girls came to offer oblations to the goddess but decided to take off your clothes and prance around like gandharvas and apsaras in the water?’

Radha stared at Krishna. She looked at the other gopis. Krishna was right. It was they who had misbehaved, in a manner of speaking. As young unwed girls, it was not becoming for them to have frolicked unclothed in the river in this way.

‘We are sorry for our misbehavior,’ she said, ‘but—.’

‘But I am not sorry for my behavior!’ Krishna cried out. ‘In fact, I am only trying to teach you girls a lesson! The Devi would be very displeased if she saw you spent more time and energy in enjoying yourselves than in performing the rites to honor her. That is why Balarama, the other gopas and I came to see if all was well with you. It was Nanda-Maharaja himself who sent us, concerned for your welfare.’

All the girls looked around uneasily. What Krishna said was quite true: this was the Devi’s sacred day. They had passed much more time and energy in frolicking after the rituals and had lost all track of time.

‘And after all,’ Krishna went on in a gently chiding tone, ‘Were you not praying to the goddess to bring me to you?’

‘They were,’ said one of the gopas, ‘Every last one was praying to the Devi to make you her husband!’

Now all the gopis blushed, embarrassed at being found out. But none denied the charge, for it was true.

Radha was silent. She did not know what else to say.

‘I will return your clothes,’ Krishna said. ‘All you have to do is walk up here, one by one, and claim them from me. That way, we may find out which one’s prayers to the goddess will be answered.’ He paused and looked at each one of the girls in turn, immersed up to their necks in water. ‘You do want to know which one of you will have her wish come true, do you not?’

The gopis stared at him transfixed.

At once, their entire attitude changed.

They began moving towards the shore, eager to come to Krishna and learn whether what he said was true. Indeed, none of them doubted that he spoke the truth, for Krishna never lied. Rather, they were eager to know the answer to the riddle he spoke of: who among them would be the lucky girl chosen by the Devi to be Krishna's paramour?

But at the edge of the shore, they hesitated. For while all desired Krishna enough to be willing to walk unclad all the way to where he sat on the Kadamba tree, they had no wish to be seen by the other gopas in this state of undress.

'Krishna,' they cried out plaintively, 'ask the other boys to go away from here. We cannot step out before them.'

'Why not?' Krishna asked. 'They have already been watching you for a while.'

The gopis blushed. 'Watching us?'

'Yes,' Krishna said. 'We came here together, looking for you. We saw you frolicking in the water, then praying to the goddess for a suitable husband. At that time, you were all too absorbed to even notice us. So I told the boys I would teach you a lesson in modesty by stealing your clothes. After all, if you were willing to bathe without your clothes for the whole world to see, then what need did you have of them anyway!'

'We are sorry for being so shameless,' they said. 'We admit it was very wrong of us. But we cannot step out in front of all the boys of the village!'

'Yes, you can,' Krishna said, 'if you wish to have your clothes back. It is the only way.' His eyes twinkled with mischief.

The gopis had no choice. The day had suddenly turned cool and after all this time in the water, they were beginning to feel a chill. The sky had become overcast in the past hour and as they were talking a gentle wind began to blow from the north, making them shiver. They would catch cold if they did not exit the water and wear their clothes soon.

Left with no alternative, the gopis did as Krishna asked.

One by one, they came out of the water, covering themselves with both hands as best as they could, and walked up to the foot of the Kadamba tree where Krishna sat on the fork, his feet dangling.

Krishna handed each girl her garments. To take the garments, the girls had to raise their hands. As each girl took her clothes from Krishna, she bent forward and pressed her forehead against his dangling feet, sending up a prayer again to the goddess to grant her wish and make Krishna her mate for life.

Then she took the bundle of clothes and ran blushing into the woods, to dress herself.

One by one, each gopi came to Krishna, accepted her clothes, thanked him and touched his feet, and dressed herself.

Radha was the last to emerge from the water. She took her clothes from Krishna without comment. But then, instead of touching his feet as the others had done, she looked up at him and said,

‘Even the Devi cannot answer the prayers of every gopi in Vrindavan. Only one of us can find the husband she desires. Whom shall it be?’

Krishna looked down at Radha’s beautiful face, even lovelier than usual after bathing in the river, her hair damp and open and spread out upon her

bare shoulders, her complexion invigorated by the cool water and bracing wind.

‘The Devi is Arya, purity personified, and therefore goddess of chaste young girls. She grants every unmarried girl’s wish. Each gopi desired to be able to make me her husband. Today, by touching my feet while in that state of undress, each of you is no less than a wife to a husband. Therefore your wishes have indeed been granted by the Devi Katyayani. All of you have enjoyed touching me in a wifely manner. And as such, each one of you shall enjoy the lingering pleasure of my touch to the end of your days upon this earth. If this is not husbandry, what is it?’

Radha had no answer. She stared up silently at her beloved one. Then, doing as her fellow gopis had done, she bent her head and touched her forehead to Krishna’s feet, clasping Achyuta’s feet with her hands as well.

In addition, she kissed those feet of Damodaran with affection, before clasping her garments to herself and walking away with dignity and pride.

30

KAMSA returned to Mathura in a red rage.

He descended from Hathi-Yodha with a single leap. Ignoring the nubile young women waiting with the ritual ceremonial greeting thalis and flower garlands he stormed up the palace steps and strode to his throne room. The sabha was in session.

‘Get out!’ he roared.

The ministers and representatives left as quickly as their feet would carry them.

‘Shut the doors and don’t let anyone in,’ he said to his serving maids. ‘And fetch me soma. Quickly! ’

He was still drinking soma several hours later when a very nervous aide prostrated himself before the throne of Mathura. Kamsa threw the half-consumed goblet at the man’s head, opening a cut on his temple that spilled blood on the marble floor. ‘Fool! I said I was not to be disturbed.’

‘Sire, it is your father-in-law,’ the man blurted, certain his life would be ended any moment. He ignored the blood streaming from the cut on his forehead. ‘He is coming to see you.’

Before Kamsa could throw something more lethal at the man, the great doors reopened and Jarasandha strode in, accompanied by his entourage of Hijra bodyguards and closest champions.

‘Son,’ Jarasandha said shortly, dispensing with the usual formalities. ‘You took your time returning to Mathura. I arrived days before you did.’

‘I took a detour,’ Kamsa said. ‘I had some business to take care of.’

Jarasandha looked at him closely. It was evident the Magadhan expected to be told what that business was but when Kamsa offered no further explanation, he shrugged and gestured at the fallen goblet and splashed soma stain on the marble floor. ‘I see you are not in the best of moods.’

Kamsa looked at him from beneath heavy lids, slumped back in his throne, chin resting on his chest. ‘You know why.’

Jarasandha nodded, climbing the rest of the way up the royal dais. He took the seat near Kamsa which was intended for a preceptor. ‘The Deliverer has survived all your attempts and all our assassins have failed.’

‘Yes,’ Kamsa snarled. ‘Even our appeal to Lord Indra was a failure.’

‘In point of fact, our appeal was a success. Lord Indra believed the message we sent him, cleverly passed on through Narada-muni, that Krishna was attempting to convert his brahmins into Vaishnavites and raising a community of low castes in order to drive out the Indra-worshippers. Indra reacted just as we hoped. He attacked Vrindavan with great storm and fury. But the Deliverer protected his people yet again.’

“And after that he killed Baka, your great champion. And Sankhacuda whom we sent to kill Nanda-Maharaja. And Vyoma. Our last three asura assassins. All your plans have failed, Jarasandha.”

Jarasandha glanced sharply at Kamsa. It was the first time his son-in-law had called him by his name, openly to his face. It was obvious he wasn’t

pleased by the familiarity of usage. ‘Then perhaps you should take matters into your own hand.’

Kamsa looked at him. ‘How?’

‘Kill the Deliverer yourself.’

Kamsa stared at him. ‘I thought you said I ought not to do that.’

‘At the time, I also thought one of these several methods would work: attempting to kill the children of his adopted clan, or his adopted father or mother, or to destroy the whole clan by fire or natural calamity. But nothing has worked, has it? So I think it is time you stepped up and did your own fighting.’

Jarasandha stood up and placed a hand on Kamsa’s shoulder.

‘The time has come for you face the Slayer of Kamsa and prove the prophecy wrong.’

After Jarasandha had left, Kamsa sat for hours, pondering on his father-in-law's words. He waved away courtiers, ministers, even Pralamba who had urgent matters to discuss with him, spurned more wine and drink, and even rejected the advances of his favorite women. Hours passed, then days. He paced the corridors and halls of his palace.

Finally, he went down to the basement of the palace, down winding stone stairways and walls dripping so freely with moisture that they had turned lichenous green, spouting weeds in places. The doors here were of iron and most had rusted solid over the years, opening only reluctantly with a great deal of creaking and screeching. The guards were old and mostly lying drunk in stupors for they had no real work to do here, merely to stay on watch for the prescribed number of hours day after day. The work was so numbingly mindless, they turned to drink or gambling to while away the hours. Kamsa ignored them. Many were former aides or guards who had been penalized for errors by being sent to these postings. There was little point in punishing them further. Besides, no prisoner had ever escaped these lowermost dungeons: in most cases, most of the prisoners had never even been seen by the guards. So long as the food was eaten and the slop trays filled each day, they assumed the wretched souls were still alive. Other than that, nobody knew or cared.

In the lowermost level of the deepest, darkest dungeon in the kingdom, he made his way to the farthest end of a long deserted corridor. Stone walls bounded each side and a stone ceiling sagged noticeably from the weight of groundwater and rock pressing down. He had to duck his head in places to pass. Here, the doors were rusted shut and had to be forced open for him to pass - he tore them apart like paper with his dense strength, but normal human guards would not have been able to pass through. Indeed, none had: these deep dungeons were serviced by conduits on the upper levels. Food was placed in cloth bundles and thrown down from time to time. That was all the care these prisoners received. Whether they lived here or died,

nobody knew. In the ancient texts, it was said there were seven levels of Naraka or the hellish realms. If there was an Eighth, this dungeon would surely be it.

There were only two prisoners in this lowermost level of hell. As Kamsa reached the stone wall that marked the end of the passage, he stopped and looked up, holding the torch he had taken from a sconce on a higher level during his descent. The sound of water dripping irregularly on stone was the only sound in this place. The crackling of the mashaal counterpointed it now.

High up on the wall were a few niches, cut into the stone. They were just sufficient to allow a little air to pass into the walled compartment beyond. These niches and the conduits down which food bundles were thrown were the only access into the cell beyond this wall. He found that the torch sucked up whatever little air existed here, leaving almost nothing to breathe. Already, his head felt faint from the lack of aerial sustenance. To survive in that enclosed cell, the prisoners must have to breathe only marginally, the way tapasvi sadhus breathed in high Himalayan grottos, drawing in just enough for survival. There was no more than that to be had.

He decided to put out the mashaal. He dropped it on the floor which had squelched underfoot as he approached. The torch fizzled out instantly, leaving him in pitch darkness.

After a moment, he raised his palms, touching them to the wall of the cell.

He stood there a while, touching his palm to the cold stone wall.

He said nothing, did nothing else, just stood there.

Finally, he turned and left the way he had come.

The sound of his footsteps ascending the stairway echoed down in the deepest dungeon.

They could be heard inside the walled-in cell.

AKRURA felt a peculiar mixture of sadness and anger as he approached the palace complex of Mathura. The towering stone towers of the old palace had long since been subsumed by the gleaming new facades of the new one raised by the Usurper.

He felt worse as he rode his horse up the winding stone pathway that led uphill, designed to make it harder for invaders to approach and more effective to defend.

Once, he would have counted himself as being among the defenders, should Mathura ever happen to be under attack. Now, were such an event to occur, he would almost certainly be on this side of the great gates, leading a rebellious force of militia uphill to reclaim their stolen heritage and restore the Yadava nation to its former glory.

It had not been so long ago that he had come up this same winding paved path, accompanying his dear friend Vasudeva and so many other kith and kin. What hope had filled his heart that morning, what expectations he had carried aloft alongwith the cheerful kritha-dvaj banner of the Vrishni that he had held up as he rode. The watching crowds that had thronged these walled streets had shared that hope and expectation, filling the crisp morning air with their own shouts and cheers of encouragement and support. And within those great ancient stone walls, as Vasudeva and his counterpart King Ugrasena had crossed raj-tarus, how deafening had been the cheers then! Loud enough to carry across all Bharat-varsha, this great land of Jambudwipa, sub-continent of the Jamun tree, where the Bharata tribe had co-existed in relative harmony since the seminal battle fought by Trtsu Bharata King Sudas on the banks of the Parusni, the battle that won the Bharata nation the right to continue to inhabit and proliferate across this great realm.

Surely their ancestors had heard those cheers and smiled at their optimism, just as they must have shaken their heads and sighed as the historic peace treaty had been shattered within hours by King Ugrasena's own son, the then-Prince Kamsa.

Now that prince was King, Usurper to his father's throne. Vasudeva and his wife Devaki were in veritable exile of their own choice, calling it a life pilgrimage to neutralize the political implications of their years-long absence.

The Yadava nation was embroiled in the nastiest tribal politics and infighting since its inception by the great ancestor Yadu.

A semblance of peace hung over the nation like a reeking cloud of smoke over a cremation ghat, but beneath that obscurantist facade were the ugly faces of opportunists taking venal advantage of the atmosphere of exploitation and oppression. Those with capital in their fists and greed in their hearts thrived and grew richer and greedier. Those with only honest labour and the talent of craft, art or knowledge suffered and were misused by the capital-holders. It was the lowest a society could descend morally and still appear to be prosperous and vital, and it was all the result of Kamsa's kingship, supported, encouraged and artfully designed by Jarasandha.

Akrura stood against all that Kamsa stood for now. A far cry from that day of the peace treaty when he had stood side by side with the son of Ugrasena and prayed for peace. Today, he led the most widespread resistance movement against Kamsa's continuing oppression of the people, controlled a militia the size of a small army, and managed a network of refugees and migrants that moved across the Arya nations like a concourse of rivers and tributaries.

He represented the opposition, illegal, unofficial and responsible for more actions against the state and its governing head, Kamsa, than any of the hundreds of criminals rotting in the city's deepest dungeons or those

hundreds of thousands of protestors and opposers who had been despatched over the decades of Kamsa's long and cruel regime.

And yet, here he was, riding alone and unarmed up the last leg of the pathway that led to Kamsa's palace. In a moment, he would reach the great gates and pass through as he had that long-lost day of the peace treaty. Some time later, he would be taken before Kamsa himself and presented. And after that, it would be seen whether he was condemned and executed, tortured or torn apart.

His people had begged him not to go. They had pleaded, cajoled, urged, argued, fought and done everything else possible to make him stay.

Yet here he was. Riding into the demon's den. The asura's lair. The rakshasa's hellish homestead.

Why?

The reason was simple: Kamsa had summoned him. And he was curious.

Akrura reached the great gates of Mathura palace and passed through them unchallenged.

KAMSA grinned down at Akrura. Leaving his throne, he came down from the dais, surprising the entire court. At once, Akrura sensed people stepping back, cringing or wincing as they anticipated a bloody end to the royal visitor. He had heard tales of how Kamsa enjoyed using his newfound ability to despatch those who offended him in court, be they emissaries from foreign lands or his own people. It was said that he could crush a man's skull between his thumb and little finger, with no more effort than an ordinary man would need to squash a grape, and with similar results.

Akrura held his ground, keeping his palms pressed together in the same namaskaram stance with which he had just greeted Kamsa. He maintained the same pleasant look on his face and kept his head slightly bowed as a show of respect. But inwardly, he thought that if Kamsa had planned this as a means of crippling the militia and the resistance, he had certainly played this hand with more finesse than Akrura had anticipated.

He did not tense visibly as Kamsa stretched out a hand towards him, a hand that appeared quite normal if a bit thickened at the wrist as befitted a swordsman and wrestler, but which he knew was capable of feats of strength that elephants could not hope to match. Even the legendary Hathi-Yodha, recently retired from active duty due to age and ill health, had never been feared as Kamsa's strength was now. If even a tenth of the rumors were to be believed, the Usurper was as close to being superhuman as it was possible without aspiring to god status.

Akrura did not even need to credit rumors: he had himself watched more than one wrestling match where Kamsa had participated, observing incognito from the crowd as the Usurper had pounded and hammed opponent after opponent to bloody pulp. It had been a chilling sight and he

had been filled with greater respect for Kamsa than he would have believed possible.

It appeared that as Kamsa had grown in strength and ability, he had gained in self-control and maturity. While the old Kamsa had wildly struck out at anyone and everyone, using his rakshasa size and power to kill randomly, this Kamsa picked his fights and opponents carefully and kept his considerably enhanced strength well curbed, unleashing it only on the wrestling akhada. That was impressive and also a sign of a dangerous opponent. Beware the enemy who can control his power and unleash it only when unavoidable: he is more dangerous than the fool who lashes out at every provocation.

Now, as Kamsa's legendary hand reached out to Akrura, he tensed despite himself. One twist of those powerful fingers and the head of the resistance movement would be crushed, quite literally.

But the most feared fingers in the kingdom descended with surprising gentleness upon his shoulder, resting there with the weight of a normal man's hand.

'Bho! Bho!' Kamsa said, 'Well met, Friend Akrura. Well met indeed.'

'The privilege is mine, my lord,' Akrura said mildly.

'You do yourself a disservice,' Kamsa said loudly, clearly speaking for the benefit of the court. He turned theatrically and continued addressing Akrura even though he faced a chamber filled with those who represented the considerable wealth and prestige and power of the nation. 'You are among the most respected Yadavas in the land today. Do not even bother to deny it!'

Akrura did not deny it. He listened, as curious to see what new political maneuver was being unfurled.

Kamsa continued praising Akrura in language that sounded carefully rehearsed, perhaps even scripted. Akrura noted that the old minister Pralamba was present and appeared to be hanging onto every word spoken by Kamsa. Akrura resisted the impulse to smile openly. So Kamsa had asked Pralamba to prepare an eulogy for him and had memorized it word by word. Interesting. That was not typical Kamsa behavior. Which behooved the question: was this to be Akrura's last eulogy?

After several minutes of typical bombastic political wordage, Kamsa finally came to the nub:

'You are friend alike to the Bhoja and the Vrishni clans,' Kamsa said, now standing with one foot on the first level of the dais, knee bent, leaning with one arm on his own thigh. 'You act as spokesman for both clans, conveying delicate messages from one to the other with tact and diplomacy. Your neutrality is unquestioned. Your wisdom and loyalty to the Yadava nation as a whole beyond dispute. Most of all, you are famous for always acting in the best interests of others, even when the outcome may not be in your own best interests.'

Kamsa put the raised foot down, straightened himself and came towards Akrura once again.

Now, he will finally spill his guts, Akrura thought, or he will spill mine. He had already listened to more praises from Kamsa's lips than he had heard spoken aloud in such an august gathering from any of his dearest friends in his entire lifetime. Perhaps it was true what the wise said: *Nobody can praise you the way an enemy praises you...just before he slips the knife between your ribs.*

Now, he waited for the knife to pierce his skin.

Instead, Kamsa stopped before him and raised both hands, in a gesture that could be interpreted as welcoming as well as pleading: ‘Act now in the interests of all Yadavas everywhere,’ Kamsa said. ‘Do what is best for us all. Perform a small favor for this humble servant of our great nation.’

Humble servant of our great nation? Kamsa? Phuargh! Akrura was glad he had not eaten before coming to Kamsa’s court. If he heard one more sentence like that last one, he was sure he would regurgitate his stomach’s contents.

‘What is your desire, my lord?’ Akrura asked aloud, speaking in as pleasant a tone as he could muster. This was a play being enacted for the benefit of Mathura after all. He would play his part as well as Kamsa did. It was the reason why he had been tolerated and permitted to live in Mathura and stay alive all these years, while so many others as patriotic than he had been executed summarily or forced into exile.

Kamsa beamed a boyish smile, even though the first signs of grey were already visible at his temples. ‘Most charitable Akrura. Giver of gifts and doer of deeds. I ask you a boon just as a tapasvi asks a boon of the Devas after decades of penance.’

Akrura’s heart began to beat faster. Suddenly he thought he knew what was coming next. Some sixth sense gained from a lifetime in politics warned him. Yet when the actual words were spoken aloud they still came as a shock.

‘Go to Nanda-Maharaja, master of Vraj-bhoomi. Lord of the Vrishni. He has two sons, Krishna and Balarama.’

Akrura heard his voice speak as if from a great height high above his own body. ‘Yes, my lord, what of them?’

‘Bring them here to Mathura,’ Kamsa said, smiling. ‘Take my finest chariot. Return with them as fast as my horses will carry you there and back.’

Akrura swallowed to buy himself a moment, glanced around at the enraptured court. ‘Forgive me, but may I ask why, my King?’ he said, careful to make the question sound as innocuous and non-threatening as possible.

Kamsa grinned broadly. ‘So that I may kill them both.’

‘And then he said, after he had killed you both, he would slay every last one of your family members and relatives, even the most remote, distant of relations by blood or by marriage. And when he was done killing them, he would slay the entire Vrishni, Bhoja and Dasarha clans, followed by his father, the old King Ugrasena, his mother Padmavati, his uncle Devaka, and all other Yadavas who could threaten his power, now or in future.’

Akrura stopped speaking and remained silent as the roomful of people absorbed his words. Outside the door of Nanda’s house, the chariot in which he had just arrived was still visible, for he had given instructions that the horses were not to be unhitched as he would return within moments. The animals snorted and stamped their feet, flanks steaming from the heat of their long run. Barely a few hours had passed since he had stood in Kamsa’s court and heard those terrible words, yet the world had changed entirely since then.

‘It has come then,’ Nanda said sombrely, ‘the day we have long dreaded.’

‘We knew it would, father,’ Krishna said. ‘It is the only way this can finally end.’

Even at 15, Krishna was more than a young man. His face shone with the glow of a superior being. His pitch-dark face appeared almost deep blue, the blue of the sky at midnight in certain seasons. His crow-black eyes were soulful, intense, yet smoldering with a quality that was similar to human emotion yet transcended human emotion. A light gleamed deep within each eye, like the promise of lightning in a thundercloud, flashing deep within. Or like the threat of a gharial lurking deep within still waters, capable of rushing up and wresting away life before thought could comprehend the action.

His voice had deepened a little, though not as much as Balarama's, whose voice matched his bulk and breadth. Krishna's voice was still a tenor, a flute-player's voice, soft and clear. Yet the authority in that gentle voice was impossible to ignore: even the cows paused in their chewing to pay heed when Krishna spoke, as if they could understand his human words. Perhaps they could. Perhaps all creatures could.

Yashoda could not brook his meaning.

'You will not go,' she said, rising from the floor where she had been sitting cross-legged since Akrura's unexpected arrival moments earlier. Beside her, Rohini also rose, but said nothing, her face speaking volumes. 'I will not let you go, neither of you,' Yashoda said.

With age had come a greater dignity. Even as her features had thickened alongwith her waist, her maternal appearance had grown matriarchal. She moved and spoke with the authority of the legendary matrons that had founded the Arya clans in ancient ages, those great dams that had sired the more famous princes and kings who were more often the subject of portraits and epic ballads. At this moment, Yashoda's face and manner matched the mythic power of those legendary kings.

'Mother,' Balarama said in his deeper voice, placing a large fair hand on her back. 'It was foretold even in the prophecy of yore.'

'Then untell it!' she cried. 'Cancel the prophecy. Erase destiny. Forget the foretelling. Ignore the summons. Remain here. Just for a while longer!'

'How long, mother?' Balarama asked kindly. To Krishna and he, both Yashoda and Rohini were mother, as was Devaki whom they had seen but once in their lives. 'How long will we bide our time and wait and slay the asura assassins that come. First they only threatened Krishna. Now they come to do harm to all of you. Last time it was father Nanda's turn. Next time...'

‘Let the assassins come,’ Yashoda said. ‘We will fight them.’

Balarama shook his head. ‘Sometimes, one has to take the fight to the enemy. One cannot simply wait.’

‘But he has called you! You heard what Akrura said. This is his plan. To summon Balarama and you to Mathura and kill you both. After which he intends to kill everyone else.’

‘Yes,’ Balarama acknowledged. ‘And now that he has issued a summons in this fashion, publicly, before the court of Mathura and in full hearing of all the clans, we must go, or we shall lose face.’

‘But he is a demon of demons,’ Yashoda said. ‘A master of evil. What does it matter what he says or does? Ignore him. Stay home. You are safe here.’

‘What good is it if we are safe when Mathura remains unsafe for our people, mother?’ Balarama asked gently. ‘We must go.’

‘It is a trap. He tries to trick you into coming. His assassins have all failed so now he resorts to this last desperate effort. Because he lacks the courage to come himself and face you both. So he seeks to lure you into his domain where he can attack you in devious treacherous ways.’

‘Perhaps,’ Balarama agreed. ‘But still we must go.’

‘He has promised to kill you. He cannot go back on such a promise without losing face himself. He means to follow through this time. To destroy you both!’

‘Then we must give him the opportunity to prove his own promise right—or prove him wrong ourselves.’

Yashoda joined her hands together towards Balarama, then turned and gestured towards Krishna as well, tears spilling freely down her lined cheeks, dampening the strands of white hair that lay upon her face. ‘I beg of you. If you love me, do not go!’

Krishna came forward and clasped Yashoda’s hands in his own. ‘We love you mother, just as we love our mother nation. For the sake of our mother, we must go. All that Balarama has said is right. We cannot refuse this invitation. This is the very day for which we have both been waiting, for which we have prepared. For which we have been born and put upon this earth. This is our mission. This is the purpose for which we came. This is what we must do in order to rid the world of Kamsa’s evil.’

‘But you are still only two young boys, barely young men. He is a great and powerful rakshasa, surrounded by other rakshasas. He has laid a terrible trap for you. If you go to Mathura, he will use some deceit to overcome you. He will do everything possible to destroy you.’

‘That is how it must be,’ Krishna admitted. ‘It is how it has always been. But we have one thing that he can never have, has never had, and will never have.’

Even Yashoda was silent, wondering what Krishna meant.

Then, in the dialect of a distant tribe, the Marathas who inhabited a region farther South and on the westward coast of the Bharata sub-continent, Krishna said, ‘Aaichi punyaaii.’

Mother’s good karma.

And he bent low and touched his forehead to Yashoda's feet. Balarama did the same, both brothers prostrated before Yashoda and Rohini.

'Bless us, mother,' they said together.

Yashoda cried as she blessed them.

‘Krishna,’ she cried out.

Krishna paused in the act of climbing aboard the chariot. Radha came running barefoot down the central road that ran the length of Vrindavan hamlet. She stopped several yards away, as if afraid to come closer.

‘I will follow you, alongwith the rest of our people,’ she said. It had been agreed that all the Vrishni would go with their two best sons to witness the encounter and ensure that some fair balance was maintained, if such a thing was possible. Already, the hamlet was a bustling scene of chaos as people loaded uks wagons, dogs barked, children ran helter skelter, and men and women alike cried openly as they contemplated the possible end of their entire community and more heart-rending, the possible end of their two best-loved sons. After all, however remote the possibility, it could not simply be discounted. When a warrior went into battle, no matter how great a yoddha he might be, he could not presume himself invincible, he had to prove it so: that was the difference between a warrior and a trader of goods. A trader could promise anything and deliver another thing altogether and still get away with it; a warrior paid for over-confidence with his life and limbs. The atmosphere in Vrindavan was one of great alarm, as of a mighty disaster that had befallen the Vrishni.

Krishna turned and nodded to Radha, acknowledging her words. He waited for her to say more. She too waited for him to speak.

Finally, Balarama said, from atop the chariot. ‘We are ready, bhaiya.’

Krishna looked at Radha. She remained standing where she was, yards away. Children ran between them, dogs scampered, and even a calf bounded past. The whole world seemed to come between them.

‘Fight well,’ she said.

He nodded. ‘I shall do my best.’

She hesitated, then said, ‘I understand now what you tried to tell me once, on the hill overlooking the lake.’

He waited for her to continue. Balarama waited on the chariot for Krishna. Akrura waited for them both. Around them, the Vrishni hurried to leave for the greatest mass move of their community since the exile to Vrindavan.

‘You came here for a reason,’ she said, gesturing mildly, indicating the sky, the forest, the ground...the world. ‘To fulfill a purpose. Today, you go to complete that purpose. You belong to everyone, not just to any one person. I was wrong to want you only for myself. You cannot belong to me or to any one person. You serve a higher purpose, a larger karma. You are everybody’s Krishna.’

He looked at her for a long moment.

He said softly: ‘I am your Krishna too. I shall always be.’

Then he turned, climbed aboard the chariot and nodded to Balarama.

Balarama nodded to Akrura who started the horse team moving. The chariot began rolling away, down the pathway, up the long road to Mathura, away from Radha. Krishna stood with his back to the chariot, looking at Radha as he was drawn away.

She remained standing in the middle of the road, goats and calves and dogs and children and people running to and fro and around her. She

remained there, watching as the chariot drew farther and farther away, taking Krishna away from her. *Her* Krishna.

When he had gone too far for her eyes to see anymore, she followed him with her heart.

KAAND 3

1

TWENTY three years had passed since Kamsa had usurped his father Ugrasena's throne, fifteen since the birth of Krishna.

In that period, tens of thousands of Mathurans had fled the city-state and chosen voluntary exile over life under the yoke of tyranny. Others had joined the rebellion, either openly taking up arms against the Usurper and harrying his armies on the borders and other vulnerable areas, or choosing to join the forces of those who resisted Jarasandha's armies and the onslaught of the Magadhan empirical juggernaut; they preferred to die fighting against their mutual enemy rather than for a Mathuran army led by Kamsa.

The internal campaign had been led by Akrura who functioned as a militia commander as well as ambassador of sorts. Over time, politics makes bedfellows of everyone and even Kamsa had dealings with Akrura, sometimes to resolve disputes to achieve a mutual interest, at other times to parley settlements. Over time, Kamsa had acquired the art of diplomacy from Jarasandha, knowing when to use words rather than swords—and vice versa. He used Akrura when it was worth his while, never making the mistake of trusting the friend of Vasudeva, nor expecting trust in return.

Once Vasudeva and Devaki had embarked on their pilgrimage, it was easy enough to extend it indefinitely. There was no shortage of sacred sites to visit and without labelling their absence 'exile' they nonetheless managed to stay away from Mathura and out of their tormentor's reach. More than once, Devaki wished to return if only to be within visiting distance of her beloved Krishna and his brother Balarama. But Akrura convinced her that it would be too dangerous. Not only might Kamsa harm her and Vasudeva directly, Jarasandha would certainly use them as pawns in his larger game of empire building. Besides, once the Vrishni themselves went into exile, there was no way Krishna could risk leaving Vrindavan to meet her, nor

could Vasudeva and she chance going to Vrindavan themselves. Kamsa's spasas were everywhere, watching and reporting back to Mathura, and so were Jarasandha's spasas, watching and reporting back to Magadha. It was a dangerous era and alliances were constantly being made and unmade.

Complicating matters further were the growing disputes over ascencion in the great empire of the Kurus, the ancestral home of Yadu, son of Yayati, forebear of the Yadava line. Hastinapura, the legendary capital, was the prized epicenter of a great game of thrones raging between two lines of the Kuru dynasty. Both lines claimed their own birthright over the throne and dynasty, both disputed the other one's right. The issue was complex and required an understanding of Kuru history but the basic facts were simple enough: One hundred and one Kurus or Kauravas as they were better known, versus five sons of Pandu, or Pandavas as they were better known. The great patriarch of the dynasty, Bhishma Pitama and the aging matron Satyavati were both said to be silent on the issue—although other rumours claimed that each had their own favourite and it was with their backing that the dispute was being fuelled. As with all such matters, rumours and gossip dominated over hard truths, and all news was to be instantly distrusted and preferably discarded.

The one thing that seemed certain was that war was inevitable. It was only a matter of time before the dispute spiralled into open civil war between the forces of the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

Vasudeva's relationship with the Kurus ranged back decades, stemming from the fact that his own sister Pritha, or Kunti as she was known after marriage, had married the fair-skinned "Pandu" the White, which made the five Pandava boys his nephews. Naturally, his loyalty lay with his sister's son and if and when Vasudeva returned to the throne of Mathura as everyone assumed would happen inevitably, then there was little doubt that Yadava forces would fight on the side of the Pandavas.

For this very reason, Kamsa's resentment of his sister's husband drove him to show hostility towards the Pandava cause and espouse the Kaurava

claim instead. A warmonger to the core, Kamsa actively encouraged Duryodhana the eldest Kaurava, and assured him of full military support in the event of a civil war. Interestingly, Jarasandha remained aloof in this matter, biding his time. Observers of politics compared his role to that of the carrion crow who waited for the battle to end to pick at the spoils. It mattered little to Jarasandha who won, only how it affected his own plan of empirical expansion.

But on the day of the great wrestling tournament, even mighty Hastinapura was less concerned with their own internecine disputes than with the events unfolding in distant Mathura. Across the length and breadth of the civilized world, people debated the possible outcomes of the day. Many favoured Kamsa's chances of survival over all other options. The son of Ugrasena had surprised many by his longevity and unexpected ability to change from a demoniac tyrant into a ruthless but efficient ruler. A rakshasa he was, no doubt, and tales of his legendary appetites for violence and cruelty sent shivers up everyone's spine, but many believed that sometimes it was better to have a rakshasa as ruler than a weakling. Besides, war was a way of life to most and Kamsa never shied away from war or from settling his disputes through violence, as even his success and fame at the sport of Yadava-style wrestling had demonstrated. Ugrasena had been old and too weak to go to war any more, and Vasudeva was regarded as too ineffectual to rule. People were loathe to respect any king who permitted his own new born infants to be slain rather than fight back.

But these were the politicians speaking.

The people loved Vasudeva, missed Ugrasena, hated Kamsa, and longed for Krishna to save them.

Krishna, the Eighth Child of the Prophecy.

The Deliverer of the Yadava people.

Savior of the Vrishni.

Slayer of Kamsa.

Everytime a new wave of atrocities had swept across the land, the people had consoled themselves with the knowledge that one day the Deliverer would rise and avenge them.

And finally, after twenty three long years of suffering and faith, that day had come at last.

NOT since the day of the peace accord of Ugrasena and Vasudeva had Mathura seen such a turnout. Every citizen came out of doors to view the arrival of the Deliverer. People who had been in exile returned home, preferring to risk their lives rather than miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Wanted men, entire factions of banned political groups, armed militia and civil rebels, outlaws and fringe collectives, every imaginable group in the Yadava nation drifted into Mathura to view the long-awaited conclusion of the Prophecy.

Kamsa enlisted the aid of Jarasandha's Mohini Fauj to help maintain law and order and the bald gleaming pates shone at every street corner, as wickedly curved weapons and armour warned against any attempt to turn the day's sporting event into a political uprising. The Mathuran army was out in full force as well, the soldiers helmed and armoured as if for full battle, armoured elephants and horses and chariots arrayed at every square.

Mathura had grown accustomed to being a military state but where there had been simmering resentment or outright hostility towards the oppressor's army before, today there was an atmosphere of ridicule and laughter. Even little children made funny faces and boldly knocked on armourplates, warning, 'The Deliverer is coming to get you!' Even more unusual, the soldiers themselves seemed reluctant to suppress this insolence and seemed willing to tolerate even the most humiliating insults and behavior rather than resort to their usual crowd control methods.

Kamsa woke early that morning. He was in a good mood. He had slept well, better than he had slept in weeks. He was in excellent form physically, and he thought he might have achieved the peak of his abilities.

He could not see how he could be more powerful or destructive. He was now able to turn himself into the human equivalent of a solid iron ramrod, and there was nothing made of flesh that could withstand his combination of power and technique. He was the undisputed master of the wrestling field and his team comprised the most dreaded champions across the civilized world.

He had spent the night enjoying the company of both his wives at once and felt confident that either or both would conceive from that joining. It was about time too. Jarasandha was impatient for a grandchild and Kamsa himself now felt the need for an heir. Not because he desired a son or daughter. But because it was politically useful. Such was the game of kings.

He was leaving his chambers when he noticed the old minister Pralamba waiting silently outside. The aging mantri was keeping ill health and seemed half decrepit already. He jerked to alertness as Kamsa emerged.

‘Sire.’

‘What is it?’ Kamsa asked, less sharply than usual. It was a fine day and he was feeling fine too.

‘My Lord,’ the Minister said, somehow always managing to avoid using the word King when addressing Kamsa, ‘The old syce is dead.’

Kamsa frowned. ‘Who?’

Pralamba looked startled. ‘The old master of stables. I believe he was your friend and guru for a while. I thought you would want to be informed.’

Kamsa realized whom he meant. ‘Oh, that old relic.’

‘Aye, sire. His name was Yadu. Nobody seems to know exactly how old he was and for some reason, nobody knows of any immediate family or relatives he left behind. The rumour is that he migrated here from another country a long time ago and outlived all his immediate family.’

Kamsa shrugged. ‘Why tell me all this?’

‘Would you like to pay for his last rites, sire?’ Pralamba asked nervously.

Kamsa laughed. ‘Burn him and throw the ashes into the nearest ditch.’

He walked away without bothering to glance back at Pralamba. The nerve of the fellow, expecting him to care about some old idiot. Even if the man was *the* Yadu, actual forebear of the Yadava dynasty, Kamsa couldn’t care less how he was cremated. As far as he was concerned, the Yadava line began with his reign and he would father a new dynasty, one that would take his people to supremacy over all others in Bharat-varsha, then the world.

3

Akrura drove the horse team the last few yards to the top of the rise and stopped them. They whinnied with relief, their flanks steaming, nostrils flared, dewlaps white with froth and foam. Akrura had driven them hard all night in order to reach Mathura by morning. Now, he paused and leaned on the railing of the chariot, looking down at the view from the last hill on this side of the river.

Mother Yamuna was painted deep blue by the dim luminescence of dawn. The river flowed gently at this time of year, neither swollen with the full burden of the monsoons nor with glacial melt. The scene was peaceful and calm, the road winding its way downhill to the ferry crossing, then continuing on the far bank up the sloping approach to...Mathura.

Krishna stood beside Akrura, Balarama behind them. Together, they looked out at the sight of the capital city of their nation, admiring her towering structures and facades, the great house of the Yadava people built with the blood, sweat and tears of countless generations.

Finally, Akrura sighed and said, ‘My Lord, grant me leave to pause awhile and perform sandhyavandana in the river.’

Krishna said, ‘We shall perform the morning ablutions together, good Akrura.’

Akrura started the chariot. The horses neighed once in protest, already nuzzling at the grass that grew by the roadside, but trotted forward resignedly once they saw that the path ahead lay downhill. The royal chariot was heavy and festooned with more precious ornamentation than required in order to proclaim the king’s ownership, and it was with great relief that the weary horse team slowed by the banks of the river a few

moments later. Akrura leaped off the chariot and was about to tie the reins to a tree trunk when Krishna stopped him.

‘Free the horses,’ Krishna said. ‘They deserve a reprieve for rest and refreshment as much as we do.’

Akrura looked at the horses, white-eyed and foaming with exhaustion. ‘My Lord Vasudeva, if I release them now, it will be impossible to get them yoked and ready to ride again in time. There is not sufficient time.’

‘I understand,’ Krishna agreed. ‘That is why we shall walk from this point on.’

Akrura stared at him then looked towards the river, at the distant roofs of Mathura. ‘The palace grounds where I am to take you are a good mile away, sire. They are on the far side of the city, in the military cantonment.’

‘A mile is a hop, skip and jump to a gopa, good Akrura. Fret not, we shall walk and it shall be an enjoyable walk. Besides, it will give father and mother and the rest of our people time to catch up with us. They cannot be far behind but our broken-back uksan cannot ride as swiftly as your Marut steeds.’

Akrura shrugged. ‘If you say so, my lord. But they are not my steeds. They are Kamsa’s horses.’

Krishna grinned as Balarama and he began removing the elaborate and oppressive leather harnessing of the royal chariot’s horse team. ‘In that case, all the more reason to free them from the Usurper’s yoke!’

The horses stamped their feet and tossed their manes, turning their heads to look back down the length of their backs. It took them a moment to realize they were truly free. They whinnied with delight. Proud,

magnificent creatures each of them, they looked around with unbridled joy at the lush green grass of the Yamuna riverbank, the fresh water collected in numerous ponds around, and neighed loudly to show their appreciation.

The leader, a beautiful dark chestnut brown stallion, turned around once, then stopped before Krishna. Bowing down his head, he dipped it to touch Krishna's feet and licked them once in gratitude.

Krishna rubbed the soft fur between the horse's eyes and scratched his mane affectionately. 'Go in peace, good Marut. Bid the Ashwins my best regards.'

The stallion neighed meaningfully, then cantered off to lead its fellows down to the nearest pond. They splashed into the water with such abandon, the water splashed tens of yards away, startling a clutch of black ducks that rose from a dense patch of grass and took to the air, complaining loudly.

Akrura, Krishna and Balarama performed the morning ritual standing chest deep in a freshwater pool replenished constantly by the flow of Yamuna. Akrura's patron deity was Mitra and he performed his prayers to the great God with due diligence and all necessary ritual.

Afterwards, as they emerged from the water and came upon the grassy bank, Akrura began shedding tears freely. Balarama noticed and caught hold of their elder friend's shoulder, steadying him. Balarama gestured to Krishna with his eyes and Krishna turned back to Akrura, steadying him from the other side. All three of them sat on the grassy bank of Yamuna. Birds flew overhead, a fisherman poled his boat upriver, and a cluster of brahmacharyas waited by the ferry stand to cross over to the Yamuna side. The first rays of morning sunlight were slanting across the riverbank and a soft cool breeze blew, sending up a shirring from the grass and leaves of trees in the nearby grove.

Krishna and Balarama waited for their elder to regain control of his emotions. Finally, Akrura managed to gain some hold of his senses and began to speak.

‘Svaphalka my father, and Gandini my mother, both great personages of the Satvata, saw fit to name me Akrura,’ said the older man, still weeping freely. ‘Akrura means He Who Is Not Cruel. But in fact, I am the cruelest man alive today. For I am delivering you boys into the hands of your own murderous assassin, the wicked Childslayer Himself.’

Balarama put a hand on Akrura’s shoulder, comforting him. But Akrura was too greatly distressed to be easily comforted.

‘I have sent brave men to their death,’ he said, ‘all but condemned innocent women and children by choosing to resist the Usurper rather than bow down to his dictatorial oppression. I have endangered entire villages and tribes through my leadership of the rebellion. I have even put my own family and loved ones in harm’s way because it was required by the cause. But nothing I have done has made me feel this ashamed of myself as this action today. By taking you boys to certain death, I am condemning myself to eternal damnation.’

Krishna said softly, ‘Akrura, you are doing your duty. In this case, it happens to be your dharma. Your task was to come and inform us of Kamsa’s invitation. It was our decision to accept that invitation. No blame falls upon you.’

‘How can you say that?’ Akrura asked. ‘It is all my fault. I should have refused to do as Kamsa asked.’

‘Then he would have killed you,’ Balarama said. ‘On the very spot where you stood.’

Akrura nodded dumbly. ‘Death would have been better than damnation.’

‘You will not be damned, Akrura,’ Krishna said. ‘You will ascend to swargaloka itself, the highest level of the heavenly realms. Your great deeds and actions will speak for themselves in earning you great merit. I am certain of it. What say you, Balarama?’

‘I agree with Krishna,’ Balarama said. ‘Heaven reserves a special place for such as yourself.’

Akrura shook his head, unwilling to be convinced. ‘You do not understand. Kamsa invited you on a false pretext, pretending to have you attend the bow ceremony and some such excuse. In fact, he intends to challenge you before all Mathura to a wrestling bout.’

Krishna and Balarama both raised their eyebrows and exchanged a glance.

‘We enjoy a good wrestling match,’ Krishna said, ‘don’t we, Balarama?’

Balarama stretched out his meaty arms, interlacing his fingers and cracked his knuckles loudly. The sound was loud enough to startle a nuzzling hare into scampering away into the woods. ‘It would be my pleasure to wrestle Uncle Kamsa. I have some special moves I would like to show him.’ He grinned, his teeth predatory in his handsome face.

‘See? There is nothing to worry about, Akrura,’ Krishna went on. ‘Besides, you forget that we boys have a few tricks up our sleeves as well. We are not without power entirely. After all, that is how we have survived all the attacks by Kamsa’s assassins over the past years. In a way, you could say we were *weaned* on assassins!’

Balarama grunted, catching the reference to Putana.

‘You are boys yet,’ Akrura said sombrely, ‘you cannot understand what awaits you in Mathura. Whatever assassins Kamsa may have sent to harry you all these years, they are no match for the man himself. He is more powerful than any being alive upon this earth now...barring only Jarasandha, his own father-in-law. And he is surrounded by a coterie of other powerful men, each one of whom is a fighting force unto himself. I have myself witnessed with my own eyes the havoc these men can wreak upon a battlefield, facing contingents of armed and armored soldiers. Kamsa made mincemeat out of hundreds of soldiers in a few moments. They were as ineffectual as insects or ants against his power. No demoniac wet nurse with poisoned milk compares to the terror that is Kamsa unleashed.’ Akrura shook his head again. ‘No, no. You do not understand. This is beyond your ability to survive. Even the Great Deliverer cannot face up to Kamsa and his powerful demons in human form and survive. Perhaps once you are grown fully to manhood, it may be possible to wage a strategic battle and overcome them. Right now you are still but boys. It is too much to expect of you. I am only driving you to your own certain deaths.’

Krishna and Balarama glanced at one another. Balarama shook his head once, pursing his lips as if to say, *The man is fixed in his opinion. What can we say that will change his mind?*

Krishna bent to Akrura. ‘We will speak of this yet, if you wish. But first, go back to the river and wash your face, good Akrura. Then if you want to change your mind, we shall discuss the matter.’

Krishna rose to his feet and gestured to Balarama who followed his example. ‘We shall stand here on the chariot and await your return. If necessary, we can harness the horses again and ride back to Vrindavan if that is your wish. But first go and wash.’

Akrura took a deep breath, nodded, then rose to his feet. With heavy feet and a bent back he walked to the river and immersed himself once again, this time only venturing knee deep. Bending over he cupped water in his

hands and splashed it on his face, refreshing himself. He wiped his face clean with the corner of his own anga-vastra.

He glanced back and saw Krishna and Balarama standing on the empty chariot, waiting for him, limned by the light of the rising sun. They waved to him, smiling encouragingly and he smiled back wistfully, impressed by their youthful maturity and clarity of thought. They were indeed rare young men. That was what made it all the more impossible for him to lead them to certain death at Kamsa's hands.

A flicker of movement at the corner of his eye caught his attention and he turned back to see what it was.

5

AKRURA looked at the river and saw two men standing there, immersed in the water, yet fully visible. He blinked rapidly and rubbed away any vestiges of tears or water from his eyes and peered.

‘Why, they look like Balarama and Krishna! What are they doing there in the middle of the river?’

He turned, splashing water as he side-stepped for the current was strong and he was waist-deep. He looked back at the riverbank and there, beside the mound of grass where they had been sitting and comforting him only moments earlier, standing on the chariot, were Krishna and Balarama. They saw him turning and raised their hands and smiled, waving gently. He raised a hand to wave back then grew still.

He turned back to look out at the river once again. The two figures in the middle of the course were still there. He rubbed his eyes again and looked more intently.

There was no doubt about it. The figures in the river were also Krishna and Balarama.

Akrura was not a superstitious or overly religious man. He performed his rituals diligently, took his darshan of the deities whenever possible, praised the appropriate gods at the appropriate time, propitiated those that required propitiation at the opportune moments, and did his due diligence as prescribed by the sacred texts. He was a herder and a warrior and found himself more comfortable with a crook or a sword in hand than a seer’s staff.

Such a sight genuinely unnerved him. He did not know what to make of it. Clearly, this was a supernatural phenomenon. In this Age, there was no question of believing or not believing in such things: they existed, plain and simple. A person's belief did not make the planets turn in a different direction nor would it make the sun produce icy chill or the moon generate searing heat. The sun heated, the moon stayed cool, the planets revolved and rotated, and things that could not be explained by rational means co-existed with the stones, the mud, the rain, the flowers, the solid and tangible.

He knew this was one such event. He knew there was little point in trying to rationalize, explain or deny, or otherwise counter the vision he was witnessing.

Simpler therefore to attempt to understand it, to perceive whatever implications it had for him personally—he had heard enough about such things to know that if such a vision was being shown to his unschooled eyes it must serve a purpose. Best to focus on that purpose and put the rest aside.

He steeled himself and looked out at the river.

He saw that the two figures in the middle of the river were unmistakably Krishna and his half-brother Balarama. He was certain of this in a way that he could not explain. Therefore he accepted it. They *were* Krishna and Balarama and never mind how the two boys could both be in the river as well as on the chariot on the riverbank at the same time. They simply *were*.

But as he continued to look at the two boys in the river, he grew aware of the differences. Not in appearance or substance but in the other details. It was as if, when he first caught sight of them, they had been just as they were on the chariot, but the more he stared, the more details he saw...or the more details *appeared* around them. He could not say which. But there was no doubt that each passing moment that he peered at the figures in the

river, he saw new things that he felt had not been there a moment earlier. This continued for he knew not how long until at last the vision resolved into some form of solidity. At that point, it settled into a steady panorama of detail.

This is what he saw:

The river was no longer a river. Instead, its entire sinuous length, traversing the length of the sub-continent all the way up to its Himalayan glacial point of origin, was self-evidently a serpent. The greatest serpent of all, its length unimaginable, exceeding even the hundreds of yojanas visible upon the mortal realm, continuing up to the heavenly levels and beyond into the infinite ocean of milk.

This great serpent had a thousand heads. Each head ended in a serpentine hood, proud, bejeweled, magnificent, eyes glinting like dark rubies. Upon each hood rested a golden shaped crown. Its length was clad in deep blue vastras, contrasting beautifully with its fair scales which were the exact shade and texture of the fibrous substance of the lotus flower. It sat coiled, surrounded by countless asuras, gandharvas, caranas, and siddhas. All bowed in humility before the great Ananta.

Seated upon the lap of Ananta the great serpent was Krishna. Yet this was not the Krishna who stood upon the chariot on the riverbank waving gaily to Akrura.

This Krishna was a Being beyond easy description. He was no mere mortal. He was a God. He possessed four mighty arms, each holding an object or weapon. His color was the shade of a dark monsoon cloud, ganshyam, so darkly pitch-black as to appear almost bluish. Setting off his black complexion were resplendent yellow silk vastras. His eyes were red as lotus petals, half shut in an aspect of ecstatic relaxation, the unmitigated calm of eternal nidra.

He was Vishnu embodied.

Akrura found himself unable to stop admiring the ethereal beauty of Vishnu. Although ostensibly in the form of a human male, it was evident that the resemblance to mortal man was more a result of perception than the inherent reality. What he might in fact look like when viewed by other, alien senses, Akrura could not imagine. Yet with his limited human vision, this was all he could see—and it was still breathtakingly beautiful.

Those eyes, those eyebrows, the line of that nose, the earlobes, the cheeks, the lips, the chin, his flowing throat, his low navel, his flat stomach, his powerful thighs, slender hips, shapely feet and calves...his toenails were as red as his eyes, and the reflection of celestial light cast a reddish glow on his entire lower body...He was adorned with bracelets on the arms and wrists and feet, a crown upon his head encrusted with large precious gems, earrings, sacred thread, and a belt.

In his hands were a lotus, a conch, a disc and a club.

Upon his chest was the tuft of hair known as Srivatsa.

Upon his chest was also the Kaustabha jewel.

Around his neck was a garland of flowers taken from deep within a sacred grove.

Every detail was immeasurably infused with beauty and perfection. Even in his state of nidra, he nevertheless appeared to be laughing, at supreme ease, beyond all worldly anxieties or considerations, his eyes, lips, and entire face engaged in a smile that was infectious. Akrura felt his own heart lighten, all his anxieties wash away like dust washed by the river, a sense of great lightness and ease rise within him. It was an intoxication no soma could induce, a releasing of worldly cares. A dissolving of the

calcified accumulation of a lifetime of emotional carriage, all melted and washed away as easily as a grimy frozen crust in a warm current.

Laying upon Vishnu's broad chest was Sri, bracketed between his long arms. The goddess of fortune. She lay at his disposal yet possessed a dignity and pride of her own. She was a goddess in her own right. But the details of her appearance were not as clearly visible to Akrura. He could not understand why this should be so, but it did not matter. It was Vishnu/Krishna on whom his attention was fixated, as it was meant to be.

Then, as Akrura continued to pay darshan to the Lord of Lords, he saw that there were attendants close by, each paying homage to Vishnu depending on his mood. Sunanda and Nanda were at their head. Then there were Sanaka and others with Sanaka. Brahma was there. Rudra tatwa Shiva was present too. The nine twice-born brahmins who were sometimes seven, but here in the heavenly realms were nine, headed by Prahlada, Narada and Vasu.

There were others attending Vishnu too, Akrura saw, as his mortal brain began to absorb more of the infinite detail being portioned out.

Apart from Sri herself who represented Affluence, there was Pusti, Nourishment. Gir, Speech. Kanti, Beauty. Kirti, Fame. Tusti, Satisfaction. Ila, Earth. Urja, Vitality. Vidya, Knowledge. Avidya, Ignorance. Sakti, Power. And Maya, Illusion.

At this point, Akrura could absorb no more. His mere mortal mind was filled to the brim with devotional ecstasy and wonder. The hair on his body was standing on end, his eyes were weeping tears copiously. He was sweating from every pore. He felt as if his heart were filled with more love and devotion than it could contain. It poured out like the river itself, an endless current of ecstasy that could wash away all cares, worries, anxieties, doubt...

With a supreme effort, he regained his presence of mind, joined his hands in supplication, bowed his head and offered obeisance to the Lord.

6

AKRURA emerged from the river a different man from the one who had entered only moments earlier. To him, his vision appeared to have lasted an eon, infinite and timeless, just as the devotional ecstasy that filled his being seemed sufficient to fill the entire universe, yet he had spent only a few scant moments in the waters of Mother Yamuna. His eyes shone with joy, his face and body were moist, his complexion clear and aspect rejuvenated. He appeared ten years younger, invigorated as if infused with new energy and strength. All the gunas shone forth from his being.

He walked up the riverbank to where the chariot still stood and upon it, Krishna and Balarama. He folded his hands as he approached, bowing his head as if in devotion to Vishnu again—as indeed, he *was* bowing to Vishnu.

Krishna and Balarama exchanged a knowing glance then Balarama spoke. ‘What is it, Akrura? You seem altered.’

Akrura nodded. ‘I have seen a revelation in the river.’

Krishna smiled. ‘It must have been a wonderful revelation, judging by your aspect.’

Akrura turned his eyes up to Krishna, bowing before him in humility. ‘It was yourself I was privileged to be shown, my Lord. In your true aspect.’

Balarama glanced at his brother, smiling and said nothing.

Akrura went on. ‘Indeed, I see that it was both of you together, for while here upon Earth you appear as separate beings, in fact in your true state of

existence, you are both one, the Lord and the Serpent who is his constant companion and mate. If Krishna is Vishnu then you Balarama are Ananta himself, as much a part of the Lord's being as a brother is to a brother.'

Akrura continued speaking. 'Until now, I had only known from afar of the deeds and exploits of the Deliverer. And like all such things, they appear as distant dreams viewed by another. However fantastical one's own dreams are, they are nevertheless linked to oneself intimately, intricately, and one clings to them as an infant to sensations and sights and sounds it can experience but never wholly comprehend. True miracles are like another person's dreams. They can never be wholly accepted because they lack the personal details and interweaving of experience and memory that makes one's own dreams intimate. Thus I heard and acknowledged but never truly accepted the stories of your exploits. It was not that I doubt them, merely that I regarded them as perhaps exaggerated in detail, possibly even wholly made up. I did not doubt their veracity, merely their detail and substance. There was no doubt that you slew those demons, merely a question of how you did so, and whether the demons were indeed as fantastical as described. We of this earth are compelled to live among the dirt and grime of everyday reality. We are not built to easily accept that which we cannot touch, feel, see or hear with our own senses first-hand. Therefore we doubt. Therefore when I was bringing you to Kamsa, I believed I was carrying you to certain death. Now, having seen your true aspect, I know how foolish I was being. For you are Infinite, Incomparable, Invincible. Whatever struggles you have upon this mortal realm are struggles of flesh and blood, limitations of the physical form you inhabit. Yet in the end, you will triumph. For what can resist your power? I see that now. And I see how foolish and impetuous I was to want to turn back. This is destined. This is the prophecy of the Slayer. It must be fulfilled.'

Akrura went on in this tone for a while, praising Krishna in more detail than could be summarized quickly. The gist of it came to his acceptance of Krishna's divinity and invincibility. At the end, he prostrated himself upon the grassy field and paid homage to his Lord God.

Finally, Krishna bent down and raised Akrura to his feet.

‘Good Akrura, you served my father Anakadundubhi and mother Devaki well, you serve your people honorably, and now you serve me well. Your service will be rewarded. Come now, the time approaches for my encounter with the Childslayer. We must continue to Mathura.’

Akrura wiped his eyes clear of tears. ‘I shall harness the team and hitch the chariot at once.’

‘There is no need,’ Krishna said. ‘I meant what I said. We must go on by foot from this point. You may proceed with the chariot. We shall aid you in hitching and harnessing, then you must ride ahead and inform all of our impending arrival. We shall come on foot after you by and by.’

Akrura glanced at Balarama who was already harnessing the team, using his powerful muscles to compel them to return to their duty. Knowing they could not resist his strength and will, the horses submitted meekly. ‘But Lord, how can I ride when you walk? I was blind before but now my eyes have been washed clean. Permit me to take you to my house. Blessed shall we be by your presence. I shall wash your feet clean of the dust of the road and serve you refreshment and we shall be eternally graced.’

‘I shall come to your house,’ Krishna said, ‘and to every house in Mathura, but only after I have performed my dharma by killing the Childslayer and fulfilling the prophecy.’

Still Akrura found it hard to accept Krishna’s instructions but he did not argue further. Finally, somewhat dejected and sad, he bowed his head and joined his hands in acceptance.

‘I shall do as you say, Lord,’ he said.

With these words, Akrura mounted the ready chariot and turned the head of the team leader, riding back to the road and then down to the ferry. He looked back dolefully at the two figures on the riverbank, and his desire that they ride with him was palpable. But under the Lord's command, he continued on his way.

Vasudeva reached the top of the hill overlooking the Yamuna and paused the uks wagon. Beside him, Devaki clutched his arm. Both gazed down at the vista, enraptured.

Vasudeva was seeing the Yamuna for the first time since the night of his son Krishna's birth. Yet he recalled her colour, her fragrance and the sound of her voice as only a child can recall his mother.

He recalled the parting of the waters and the peculiar fish smell of the riverbed as he had carried his newborn infant across. He remembered the sight of fish and crustaceans trapped in the parted waters, still alive and swimming and gawking at the sight of Vishnu incarnate in human form.

He recalled wishing his newborn son could stay in Mathura, grow old enough to stand on his own two feet, run, play and swim like other Yadava children. He recalled thinking sadly that he would never be able to watch his Krishna do all those things and many more.

He remembered hearing from his friend Akrura about Krishna's first days in Gokul, how green and blue and beautiful the trees and sky were and how happy the little boy had been, how much he had loved this new world and wanted nothing more than to frolic and play and explore it. He had taken satisfaction in the knowledge that at least Krishna was safe and well and happy. If he and Devaki had to sacrifice the joy of parenting him in order to keep him from harm, so be it.

Yet he missed the years he had never spent as a father. And he knew that Devaki, seated beside him on the wagon, missed them too.

Not only had they had their first six children taken from them and destroyed by the heartless rakshasa Kamsa, they had lost the seventh and eighth voluntarily. Saved, yes. But lost as children to Vasudeva and Devaki.

The joys of parenting, the heartache of nursing a sick child, the sweet sad pain of watching the changes of growth and knowing that that stage, that age, was now gone forever and would never come again, of knowing that with each passing day, this being was becoming an independent person who would one day leave home and go about his own life and that the intimacy of those early years of childhood and parenting would then be gone forever...the thousand aches and joys, cares and pleasures of being a father, a mother, a guardian.

He had been deprived the opportunity to experience those feelings forever. As had Devaki.

That was one of many things Kamsa had to answer for today, apart from the reign of terror he had brought to Mathura from the very first day. Those atrocities against the people inspired great anger in Vasudeva as well. He thought he had left that anger behind when Devaki and he had departed Mathura and gone on their years-long pilgrimage, a veritable exile of sorts. But now, looking down upon the great city of the Yadava nation, he found them rising in his breast again.

Yet in the end, it was not vengeance he craved, but peace.

He had never truly stopped feeling those things and a part of him still wished the fighting and warring and crises could just end, once and for all, and all beings live in peace, enjoying the fruits and repast of their shared world. Why was it so hard for living beings to understand that together, they were one whole being symbiotically interlinked through food, weather, biology, and a thousand other intricate interdependent systems, while individually they were nothing but strays, incapable of sustaining or surviving? Why did beings like Kamsa even exist? Why had they been

created? Why was it necessary for a Slayer to be born at all? Why could the Creator not avoid creating cruelty and pain and violence and war? Why could the gods, in which category he knew his own Eighth Child himself was included, not rid the world of such things forever?

But these were questions for gods and seers, prophets and pundits.

He was merely Vasudeva of Vraj. Once King Vasudeva. Now merely husband to Devaki.

And birth father to Krishna.

Today, here, he was present in his capacity as father to Krishna, Slayer of Kamsa, come to face his nemesis at last, and he had returned with Devaki as soon as they had received the news brought by one of Akrura's trusted associates.

Today, the history of the Yadava nation would change forever, thanks to their son Krishna.

An entire nation looked to his son to Deliver them from evil.

A world watched, holding its breath as it waited to see if the devas still held sway over the mortal realm or if they had finally surrendered it to the asuras, abandoning their creations and children.

Finally, it was Devaki who wiped her face clean of tears and looked at him.

‘Come, Vasu,’ she said, touching his arm. ‘Let us go meet the Usurper and witness the end of this tale. I am impatient to meet our little Ganshyam after this long while.’

Nanda wiped his face roughly in the manner of a man who is not accustomed to crying openly or showing much emotion.

He nodded silently and restarted the uks wagon, urging the animals to move forward and downward, down the long trundling raj-marg.

‘SENAPATI Bana, the Vrishni are entering Mathura,’ cried the captain of the outer gate.

General Bana of the Imperial Mathuran Army already knew the Vrishni had entered the city. He could hear the roaring of the crowds. It was so immense, it seemed to come from everywhere, from all around the world. Even on this narrow street, people had filled the houses overlooking the way that the procession would pass, crowded the rooftops and were leaning out of windows, eager for a glimpse. He had never seen Mathura so excited and happy in all his years. Not even the day of the peace accord had witnessed such a turnout or such adulation.

The Deliverer was here.

The same child who had been born in this very city, under lock and guard, heavy sentry watch, surrounded by a hostile army and a demoniac king who had killed his earlier born brothers.

He had returned now to wreak his vengeance and fulfil the prophecy.

Bana felt the stirring of emotion in his own heart as well. He had never failed to feel it each time he heard the people speak of the Deliverer. He had felt it when a condemned man prayed to the Deliverer at the moment before his execution, when a child had died of yellow fever with the name “Krishna” on her lips, when he saw the misery and suffering and pain inflicted by Kamsa and all those who served him these past twenty three years.

The day the Deliverer had escaped Kamsa’s grasp was as fresh in Bana’s memory as if it had happened this very day. For that was also the day that

Kamsa had compelled Bana to put his own newborn twin sons to death, before his pleading sobbing wife.

And then, because he knew she would never forgive him and, more importantly, he would never forgive himself so long as she lived to remind him of his unforgivable crime, he had killed her as well. Slaughtered his own family with the same sword he still carried in his sheath even today.

All for what? To serve a master who was more rakshasa than human? Who cared for nobody, respected nothing? For dharma? He could almost spit into the dust of the street at the sound of that word spoken. Dharma! It was not his dharma to slay his own loved ones. If that was dharma then the concept of dharma itself was wrong, twisted, insane. No act of violence could be justified or condoned by dharma or any religious precept, however rigorous the argument. Murder was murder, plain and simple, no exceptions, and he had murdered his family only because he feared Kamsa's wrath.

And it had all been for nothing. All those newborns slain, other children slaughtered, so many more innocents killed...for what? To slake the bloodlust of a demon king. To protect a powerful rakshasa from the divine vengeance that was due to him. To try to delay the judgement the gods had pronounced on Kamsa for his many, many crimes on earth.

And he, Bana, was a part of those crimes.

He deserved the punishment of the gods almost as much as Kamsa did. For he had done the evil overlord's bidding. And in doing so, he shared equal blame and responsibility.

But perhaps today, he would find some way to redress that long history of wrongdoing. If not redeem himself entirely, at least he might seek to balance the scales a little.

He turned his horse into a side alley. The roaring of the crowds were muffled by the close walls of the two houses that stood next to one another. Waiting in the alley was a man with his face cloaked, despite the warmth of the day. He watched as Bana approached and dismounted at the point where the houses stood too close together to ride through.

Bana walked the rest of the way, admiring the choice of location for this tryst. Only one man could pass through here at a time, that too slowly or else he might dislocate both shoulders. But then, Akrura was a clever man. Years of leading the Yadava rebellion against the Usurper had seasoned him into a shrewd and effective leader of men. In a way, Bana understood men like Akrura better than men like Vasudeva. He could never fathom Vasudeva's principles of self-denial and pacifism. How could you fight beings like Kamsa and Jarasandha without resorting to violence? He respected Vasudeva greatly but he felt that such times demanded men like Akrura.

He stopped at the place where the houses grew too close together to pass through. Akrura stood on the other side. Between them was a narrow gap large enough to see one another, but not enough for a grown man to pass through, even slipping sideways. Bana wondered idly if the house builders had deliberately designed these two residences to serve this very purpose. Why else would these walls curve this way?

'It is arranged,' he said curtly. 'All the men loyal to me in the Mathura army will lay down their arms and surrender to Krishna if he defeats Kamsa in the tournament. It will be upto you and your supporters to ask for Krishna to be declared king.'

Akrura nodded. 'We will take care of our part. You take care of yours. What of those not loyal to you?'

Bana shrugged. 'Who can say? There may be some fighting. I'm sure you have the stomach for that.'

Akrura was silent a moment. ‘If it is the only way, yes. How will my people know which soldiers are loyal to Krishna and which are not?’

‘They will not. You will just have to wait and see the outcome.’

‘What of the Mohini Fauj? There are few of them but they are each deadlier than a dozen of your men.’

Bana bristled at the comparison but knew he could not argue the point. ‘I cannot speak for them. Or for the Magadhan forces encamped within a day’s ride from Mathura. If Jarasandha chooses to make his move and assert his claim on the city as an imperial holding, even our army and your militia combined will not be able to hold him back.’

Akrura frowned. Now it seemed it was his turn to bristle at the comparison. ‘I think you over-estimate the power of Magadha...’ he began.

‘I think you under-estimate it,’ Bana said curtly. He glanced back. ‘I must return to my post. The procession will come this way very shortly. May our great ancestor Yadu look over you.’

Akrura said something that Bana ignored as he sidled carefully through the narrow gap, then strode back more confidently to where he had left his horse. He mounted the animal and turned its head, riding back to the street. From the approaching cacophony of dhol drums and trumpets and singing and chanting, he estimated that the procession would reach this place shortly.

It was then that he registered what Akrura had said at the last.

Yadu is dead.

What had he meant by that? Yadu, their ancestor, founder of the Yadava nation, was dead? But surely he had died long ago, centuries earlier? Perhaps Bana was referring to the legend that Yadu was immortal, cursed with immortality in fact, because he had refused his suffering father Yayati's request to exchange bodies with him. And that he could choose the day and time and place of his death. Did Bana mean that the real Yadu was here somewhere in Mathura and had chosen today itself to die? How...strange! That was the only word that came to mind. He did not know if it could be called auspicious, for Yadu was a Pitr. But the choosing of this day and time suggested a larger meaning. Perhaps it was auspicious after all, or ominous. Only by the end of the day would he know for sure.

Bana sighed and returned the way he had come for the assignation, using his thighs to urge the horse up the sloping street.

It was time to ring in the Age of Krishna and ring out the Age of Kamsa. No matter what that transition might cost.

He gritted his teeth, remember the look on his sons' faces when he had killed them...and the look on his beloved wife's face...He hoped to see a look akin to that when Kamsa died today.

For Kamsa would die, *must* die.

Or else all Mathura would die.

THEY came walking at a steady pace up the avenue. Soldiers in full battle armor lined both sides of the raj-marg, keeping back the swelling crowds. At first, nobody recognized the two young men on foot. Nobody in Mathura knew what the Deliverer looked like in person. And they had all been expecting a grand procession, a great chariot or carriage drawn by a magnificent horse team, festooned with jewels and bearing colorful krtha-dvaaj. Not two young adolescent boys walking briskly barefoot on the dusty road, clad in the simple vastras of Gokul govindas!

For this reason, they entered the city without any fanfare. It was only after they passed that the word rippled down through the crowd. ‘Akrura said they were coming on foot. That must be them!’

At once, the crowds ahead were alerted: ‘Krishna and Balarama have entered Mathura! They are coming up the king’s avenue now!’

The crowd was enormous, the mood jubilant, the atmosphere electric with anticipation.

As Krishna and Balarama came around a curve in the road and were seen by the first groups of people who actually understood them to be the Deliverer and his brother, the response was immediate. A great roar went up, heard all across the city.

‘KRISHNA!’ shouted the people.

The soldiers fought to keep back the crowds. Only the presence of elephants, horses, and an unwavering line of cruelly pointed spears and shields prevented the populace from surging forward. But for once, there was no eager wielding of spears or clubbing of heads as was usual:

General Bana's instructions had been clear. Today would in all probability witness a change of regime. The Imperial Army needed to prove that it was not hostile to this change. Or else civil war would be a certainty and the army itself the first casualty of that war.

Krishna and Balarama continued up the broad avenue, dust flying in their wake as they walked faster, not anxious about the crowds, merely eager to reach their destination and face their nemesis. They had come here to settle a score and were eager to get to it.

Out of the press of people, a young man with a hunchbacked older woman came forward, clearly eager to have closer contact with Krishna. The hunchbacked woman was too stooped over to even look over the heads of the people in front. She might never have even seen Krishna, let alone come close to him, had someone in the crowd not started a scuffle with a guard. The scuffle caused a horse to panic and the beast lashed out and kicked at a soldier, knocking him down and injuring another soldier's shoulder. The guards beside them were forced to move aside and help in securing the panicked horse before it ran amok and excited the other animals.

As a result, for a few scant moments, a small gap in the line of spears was left unguarded. Just enough for an old woman to slip through—and she did.

She ran out onto the road, raising her hands in supplication. At once, an officer on horseback spotted her and barked an order. Immediately, half a dozen ready soldiers raised their weapons, prepared to wound the woman in order to force her to return to the crowd.

The old lady sensed the danger and cried out in alarm, raising her withered hands in despair. 'Krishna, help me!'

Krishna saw her plight and diverted his direction. He strode to where the lady stood bent over and took her by the shoulders gently.

‘Maa,’ he said, ‘you called for me?’

The soldiers on foot and the officer on horseback approached at once, ready to do whatever was needed to punish the woman for breaking the ranks of the crowd and set an example. But Krishna raised a hand, not even bothering to look up, and they hesitated at once.

The legend of the Deliverer was a powerful one. And even Kamsa’s orders had been clear: The visitors were not to be touched or harmed in any way. They were to be brought directly to him, unmolested.

The officer barked a curt order and the soldiers kept their distance, watchful but making no further aggressive moves.

Krishna took the old woman’s shoulders and raised her up gently.

Slowly, by degrees, the woman straightened up, up, up until she was standing normally, her back upright, her hunch dissipated. She looked around, feeling for her hunch with her hands by reaching around.

From behind her in the crowd, a younger man who had been accompanying her, exclaimed and reacted. ‘It is a miracle! My mother’s hunchback is gone!’ Others around him agreed and shouted their amazement.

At once the cry rose from the crowd. ‘Krishna cured the old woman’s hunch.’

Tears were streaming down the woman’s face. ‘My life ambition is fulfilled,’ she said. ‘I have seen Hari with my own eyes.’

Krishna embraced her warmly. ‘And he has embraced you, mother. Go in peace.’

A great roar of approval rose from the crowd. The news rippled through the city. ‘The Deliverer has come and he has performed his first Miracle at Mathura!’

Suddenly, the mood changed. From ecstatic joy and cheering, the sounds of the crowd died away momentarily as everyone grew aware of some significant change or imminent threat.

Slowly, as the crowd sounds faded away, a new sound replaced them: the pounding of heavy feet, approaching at a relentless pace.

It was accompanied by a shrill terrible shrieking sound that only vaguely resembled an elephant’s normal trumpeting.

Another officer of the guard came galloping down the avenue, shouting to his fellow soldiers as he came.

‘Airavata!’ he cried. ‘He is on the rampage.’

The crowd reacted at once.

‘Hathi-Yodha!’ they shouted. ‘He has gone mad at last. He will kill us all.’

A loud roar of dismay rose from the crowd. People began to turn to one another, unable to decide what to do. None wished to leave the sight of the Deliverer yet all feared the dreaded mount of Kamsa, the bloodthirsty killer of so many of their own brethren over the years. The battle elephant’s kill score was only matched by that of his master, Kamsa.

Krishna raised his arms and spoke to the crowd, projecting his voice: ‘Stay where you are. I shall deal with this threat.’

At once the crowd subsided. Everyone grew quiet as the pounding sound increased in volume and the mad elephant approached. Even the guards and their command officers stayed as far back as possible, one with the crowd in their fear of the dreaded elephant. For once maddened, Airavata did not care whether he crushed friendly or enemy skulls and bones. It was all the same to him.

Krishna spoke softly to Balarama who sighed but nodded and stepped aside.

Krishna stood alone in the center of the wide open avenue in the morning sunshine, awaiting the arrival of his first challenger in Mathura.

10

Radha was running alongside Nanda Maharaja's wagon when she saw Krishna standing in the middle of the avenue. She had been too excited to ride once they entered Mathura and had run from wagon to wagon, greeting each family and passing on messages. The crowds and buildings were overwhelming. Nothing in her rustic life in Gokul-dham or Vrindavan hamlet had prepared her for such an experience. So many people all gathered together in one place! Such magnificent buildings. She had been certain the very first building she saw was the palace itself; it had been a shock to learn that it was only the gatehouse of the city! Since then, she had been seeing one extraordinary sight after another.

But the only thing she truly longed to see was the sight of Krishna. She had been aching for him ever since he had ridden away on Akrura's chariot. Every yard of the way, she had hoped they would catch up, even though she knew that a chariot traveled much too quickly for an uks cart to match, and they had started off hours later in any case. Still, she had hoped and prayed. After all, her heart had no idea of the difference between the speed of an uks cart and a horse chariot. Her heart only knew that it longed for Krishna.

She saw him now. And was overjoyed.

‘Krishna!’ she shouted, her voice drowned in the sudden roar of the crowd. The roaring had a peculiar tone to it, not the overjoyed happy roaring and cheering to greet the arrival of the Deliverer that they had heard until now. This was ominous, frightened almost.

Then she realized that the crowd wasn't cheering Krishna's arrival, they were cheering him on.

He was about to face some enemy.

Radha had seen enough fights with asuras to know when Krishna was under attack again. The only difference was that this time it was taking place in Mathura city, not Vrindavan hamlet. And there were great numbers of people standing by and watching.

Good, she thought, they will see the strength and wit of my beloved as he faces this new challenge.

But another part of her, the same part that could not tell the difference between an uks car and a chariot, cried out silently. *Krishna! Take care, my love!*

Both parts of Radha collided together, even as Krishna and Hathi-Yodha collided.

It was a giant among elephants, he saw, a great white beast.

It was old too, its eyes rheumy and heavily wrinkled. Its hide was scored in a hundred places with scars of old battles in which it had fought: spear marks, lance scratches, sword cuts, javelin holes, arrow punctures...it was impressive that the beast still lived, let alone had such energy and strength.

It moved with the ponderous gait of a large heavy beast, and he estimated it must weigh twice or thrice as much as most local bull elephants. Its enormous ears flapped like fans held by royal servants serving a king. Its eyes were red and blazing with feverish rage, its mouth slobbering, its enormous tusks yellowed with age but still whole, still sharp enough to gore and kill.

Several Mathuran Imperial guards followed in its wake, trying to subjugate it and failing, and as he watched, the beast turned its head disdainfully and gored another one, the poor man crying out as he was impaled on one deadly tusk, then trampled underfoot as the elephant freed itself of his body. He lay in the dust of the avenue, bleeding out pitifully.

It had already killed several others, he saw. Their blood was smeared on its tusks and armour. The armour itself was designed to drive fear into the hearts of its enemy and bristled with sharp jagged metal points and edges. Clearly, even friendly soldiers must stay far from this beast in battle, or else they risked being cut to ribbons on its armour inadvertently. Krishna could easily imagine Kamsa riding atop this monster, matching its destructive power with his own killing rage. And being Krishna, in a flash, he saw the entire life-history of the beast pass through his consciousness, every act it had committed since leaving its mother cow elephant's womb decades ago.

Airavata raised his trunk and trumpeted at the sight of Krishna approaching. The sound rang out across the city like a war horn announcing the start of battle. The immense crowds that had thronged the streets to greet the procession had fallen silent as news of the mad elephant travelled through the city. Krishna knew that people were watching from behind him, and would pass on every detail of what happened next to be spread by word of mouth like wildfire.

Hathi-Yodha reared up and thudded back to earth with a force that even Krishna felt, dozens of yards away. It made the ground underfoot shake, and plaster dust fell from the walls of the buildings on either side of the avenue. With the crowds on either side, he could not afford to tempt the animal into turning head, for it would then rampage through the people and cause terrible casualties.

Either Krishna had to come forward and face the elephant or turn back and be seen retreating.

There was no question of retreating.

He came forward slowly, walking as if he were walking in Vrindavan by the lake, along the pastures, overseeing his father's herd.

The elephant trumpeted its displeasure at this insolence, lowered its head, and charged.

Krishna stopped walking and faced the elephant. Behind him, he could hear Radha's cry, as well as the voices of Yashoda and his aunts and uncles all voicing their concern. He had known they had arrived long before Radha had set eyes on him. He knew their concern was not entirely misplaced.

After all, even if he was a god and would eventually triumph, he did feel pain and trauma and more than once in his battles with asuras he had come close to having his mortal form destroyed—everyone understood this now and knew that 'invulnerable' was only a word used by those ignorant of the laws of nature. All that was born must die. All that is created can be destroyed.

Hathi-Yodha bellowed like a bull as it charged, head lowered to aim its deadly tusks at man-level. Its feet pounded the dirt road, raising a cloud of dust. Its fury was prodigious. It meant to kill or be killed, there was no mistaking that fact.

Krishna neither moved nor budged. He stood his ground and let the elephant charge directly at him. Every pair of eyes in Mathura was watching. It was important to send a message loud and clear. Krishna would not be intimidated or turn away from threat. He was here to make a stand.

The elephant's pounding caused the ground beneath his feet to shudder as if in the grip of a tremblor. The great white body loomed before him, moving at the speed of a horse's fastest gallop, and those massive deadly tusks pointed straight at his belly and vitals.

Man and beast met in a head-on collision.

11

RADHA suppressed a scream by stuffing her fist into her open mouth. She bit down on the knuckle hard enough to draw blood. In the wagon beside her, Yashoda and Krishna's aunts reacted in similar ways. All down the road, those watching reacted as well, shaken by the sight of a man standing still before a charging elephant—then at the sight of that elephant colliding with the man.

She watched as the great white bull elephant rammed straight into Krishna with all the strength and power it could muster.

And nothing happened.

Krishna remained standing exactly where he was. He did not budge an inch, not even when one of the elephant's tusks struck his abdomen with a force enough to punch through a solid brick wall. Instead, the tusk itself broke off with a resounding crack that could be heard several streets away. People exclaimed with wonderment.

The elephant's entire body shuddered at the moment of impact, as if it had indeed struck a brick wall, but one so thick that even its formidable weight and power in that headlong rush could not overcome. It uttered a bleating sound, almost like a dog's yelp, and backed away, shaking its head and rolling its eyes. It was stunned by the collision. Nothing in its long life had prepared it for such an experience. To charge at a mere man and to meet resistance greater than a stone wall was not something it had expected nor knew how to deal with.

After a moment, it turned around on its four legs, clearly too stunned to walk straight, then sat down on its hind legs as it bleated again. The loss of

its tusk had evidently caused it some distress for it kept rolling its head and waving its trunk around, seeking out the missing trunk.

The trunk itself was in Krishna's hands. He held it up for the elephant to see. It had snapped off cleanly almost at the point where the root emerged from the elephant's body. Barely a few inches of its base were left on the animal. The entire length of it, all one dozen or more feet of ivory tusk as thick as a wrestler's thigh, lay in Krishna's hands.

Krishna waved the tusk, showing the elephant that he now possessed a part of its body.

The elephant remained seated on its hind legs, resembling a dog that had received a sudden blow to the tip of its nose. Its eyes watered profusely, issuing a whitish gummy substance that Radha thought might be masth or something similar.

Krishna stepped forward, walking over to where the elephant sat. Radha held her breath as she watched. The elephant reacted at once: seeing its intended prey still alive, still hale and hearty, approaching, it rose up, shaking off the stupefaction that had overcome it, trumpeted once again, although nowhere near as confidently as before, and reared up on its hind legs, bringing the mighty fore legs and the weight of its upper body down on Krishna with bone-powdering force.

Krishna raised a hand and took the weight of one elephant foot entirely on that hand.

The elephant's foot bent and broke.

The sound was unmistakable, the sight distinct.

The elephant bleated in distress, then fell back at once, breathing heavily.

It hopped on three feet, trying to put the fourth foot down and bleating at the pain.

Krishna looked up at the elephant and spoke. Radha was too far away to hear what he said clearly but it sounded more like a gentle conversation rather than an angry threat. What could Krishna possibly be saying to the elephant?

After a moment, the elephant trumpeted at Krishna, clearly rejecting his offer. It attempted to use its trunk to strike at him, then waved its head to try to stab him with the other whole tusk.

Krishna stood his ground, neither avoiding nor fending off the blows. This went on for several more moments, during which the elephant seemed to force himself to overcome the agony of the injured foot and stomped about on all four feet again, trying its best to smash, crush, gore, and harm Krishna in every way possible.

Krishna smelled the madness in the Hathi-Yodha's blood and sweat and knew that the creature was in great torment. He reached out a hand, not actually touching its hide but making a gentle stroking movement to show he meant it no harm.

'I know you,' he said softly. 'Your true name is Kuvalayapida. You were reborn in this form to serve Kamsa against your will. Your rage and violent temperament stem from your desire to be killed quickly and be rid of this chore you did not desire.'

The elephant listened with suspicion in its eyes.

‘He treats you cruelly, so that you may treat his enemies cruelly as well. That is a tyrant’s way, the asura way. Even though you are an asura now you were not one always. You resent being forced to enact this violent behavior. You seek to return to your old peaceful way of life. Like an elephant in the wild, you are not violent in spirit, and seek only to feed and love and live out your life in serenity. I can free you from this cycle of misery. I can liberate your soul so you will return to the great grasslands of your true home. Is this what you desire?’

The elephant had raised his trunk and curled it, reaching out with it to sniff at Krishna’s face. He snuffed at Krishna, pushing out a blast of rancid breath. Krishna didn’t wince or grimace, even though the smell was awful. He knew that this was Hathi-Yodha’s way of replying in the affirmative.

‘Then rise up and attack me one last time so that you may die with honour in this life. Attack me with all your might and prepare to be liberated from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth forever.’

At once, the great white bull rose up, standing on all fours as if his injury did not matter, and attacked again.

As he had done before, Krishna permitted the beast to strike at him several times, then, when the opportune moment came, he raised the elephant’s own broken tusk, and stabbed it beneath the forelegs, hard enough to punch through the tough hide and formidable breastplate, piercing its aging heart. The animal released a sigh of deep relief, then sank to the ground, blood spreading from its fatal wound and dampening the dust. It lay down on its side and died in moments, eyes turned to Krishna in baleful apology.

‘I understand,’ Krishna said. ‘You are forgiven for all the lives you destroyed. Now go. Take moksha and be free eternally.’

The elephant's trunk curled around Krishna's wrist weakly, releasing one final puff of rancid air. Then it lay still.

Krishna turned and raised his hands in the universal gesture of triumph.

He did so with no desire for self-aggrandizement or glory. It was necessary to let the people see and know that the Deliverer they had awaited for so long was real and effectual. That he was here and ready to fight. And that they had a chance at last to free themselves of tyranny. If nothing else, it would compel them all to focus their energies on letting him deal with today's challenges rather than take matters into their own hands. The situation in Mathura was volatile and could explode into civil violence at any instant: Krishna wanted to let them know that he could and would resolve the problem of Kamsa on his own, thereby defusing that volatile situation.

The immense roar of jubilation and support he received told him that he had accomplished one part of the challenge. He had won the people's approbation and trust.

Now all he had to do was kill Kamsa.

MATHURA held its breath as Krishna entered the wrestling grounds on foot. Even now, after the news of his defeat of Hathi-Yodha, the miraculous cure of old Ambavati the hunchback, and numerous other stories of his fantastical feats in Vrindavan, Vraj and even earlier, there were many who still wondered if this slight short dark-skinned cowherd could in fact be the Slayer of Kamsa. How was it possible? This slip of a boy who had never held anything but a govinda's crook, was weaned on curds and buttermilk and had spent his youthful years idling in the hills and fields, romancing gopis and playing at ras-lila? Could he truly be the Deliverer? The one to end Kamsa's long tyranny and free Mathura of the yoke of formidable foreign powers like Jarasandha? It seemed unlikely and the skeptical could be forgiven for doubting.

Yet there was no mistaking the easy confident gait with which the boy from Gokul-dham walked into the wrestling field. He did not have the over-confident muscled swagger of the typical mud-wrestler. Nor the cocky belligerence of the soldier bully, accustomed to using his strength and force to get his own way. In fact, he was a type never seen before: a young slender lover with a sweet smile that he flashed readily, even directing it at the royal tent where Jarasandha and Kamsa and their allies and champions sat in shaded luxury, sauntering in as if he was here for a game of marbles rather than a champion bout with the most fearsome demonlord of this part of the world.

The lad even had the audacity to raise his hand, wave and grin at Kamsa's tent! Titters of nervous laughter broke out when he did this, some within the royal tent itself. Nobody had ever seen a wrestler with such a carefree attitude. It was unheard of. And clearly, it was no act, for the boy continued to wave and grin at all assembled in the field, the pick and crop of Mathuran nobility and powerbrokers, the rich, beautiful, powerful and privileged. This ill-clad little boy with the dusty feet, waving at them as if he was their prince returned to claim this crown!

And what was that tucked into the waistband of his dhoti? Could it possible be...a flute?

Yes. A shepherd's flute. The kind that govindas played in the wide sprawling meadows of Vraj so that their herds would not stray too far away, the sound itself shepherding them homewards at dusk.

What sort of wrestler carried a flute?

The crowd assembled in the arena did not know what to make of this purported Deliverer, the legendary Slayer of Kamsa, the alleged Eighth Child of Devaki and Vasudeva, raised in secret in the distant rural village of Gokul by Nanda and Yashoda. But in their hearts, each and everyone of them hoped and prayed that they were wrong, that this flute-playing, slender-hipped cowherd was everything the prophecy said he would be, that he would be able to somehow face and fight Kamsa and by some miraculous means, overcome him.

For the alternative was too terrible to contemplate.

To the Vrishni, assembling now in the large roped pavilion of space reserved for them, the mood was more sombre. They did not doubt or question Krishna's ability, merely that of his opponent. For word of Kamsa's great powers was well-known by one and all. And those who had witnessed first-hand the encounters between Krishna and some of the deadlier asuras who had come to assassinate him knew that while his spirit was certainly divine, his body was still flesh and blood and subject to the vagaries of mortal failings. He could be destroyed, perhaps even defeated.

And today, if he died, he would not die alone. The Vrishni would all die as well. Nobody doubted that. The very manner in which they were placed, seated prominently with an excellent view of the wrestling akhada, but

also surrounded on all sides by enemy champions, wrestlers, Magadha's Mohini Fauj hijras. Cleverly hemmed in.

They had no doubt that the instant the fight ended, if the outcome was against their interest, they would be massacred without hesitation. They had been compelled to leave all weapons and potential weapons outside the gates of the city, on the pretext that it was a friendly match. But they saw now that everyone else appeared to be carrying arms, some discretely, others openly. No doubt, the pretext was that Magadhans had to carry arms to protect themselves from potential attackers, or that Kamsa's guard had to bear arms to defend their king in case of assault.

Whatever the flimsy reasons, the fact was that the Vrishni were boxed in, unarmed, and defenseless against attack. Even knowing that the Imperial Army would aid them in the transition as much as possible was no comfort. For the Imperial Army was spread throughout the city, while they were alone in here. If they were attacked by Kamsa and his allies, even General Bana and his soldiers could not reach them in time to save them.

To add further fuel to the fire, all the leaders and chiefs of all the main tribes and clans in the Vrishni line were present, including several who were banished, banned or exiled. There were Vasudeva and his wife Devaki who were seated beside Nanda and Yashoda in the front row, as were Akrura and the rest of his captains of the once-secret rebellion: Brihadbala, now the spitting image of his father, Chitraketu, Kannar chief of the Kannars, Uddhava, Satvata and even the old and decrepit Kratha, leaning heavily on his crook, peering through rheumy eyes yet determined to be present with the rest of the Sangha to witness the most fateful event in the history of their race to date.

The only chance they had lay with Krishna and Balarama. Only those boys could save them now. By fighting and laying down their own lives, or by triumphing and defeating Kamsa and his champions.

The conch shells sounded, announcing the imminent start of the first bout. Soon, the judgement would be pronounced on all the Vrishni. Live. Or Die. It was out of their hands now.

13

Kamsa laughed as Krishna strolled about the field, smiling and waving at everyone. ‘I will crush him before he knows what has happened,’ he said to Jarasandha conversationally as his aides massaged his body with oil.

Jarasandha affected a hint of a smile. ‘I wish you would,’ he said. ‘But do not underestimate him. He did despatch all our assassins, starting with your great hope, Putana.’

At the mention of Putana in such a tone, Kamsa’s smile vanished. Had it been anyone else other than Jarasandha, he would have killed the man instantly for daring to speak thus of his lost friend. Because it was Jarasandha, he only let his pique show in the tartness of his response: ‘I think it’s you who underestimate me, father dearest. As you always have.’

Jarasandha turned and glanced at Kamsa. He had a gleam in his eye. The tip of his tongue flickered briefly between his lips. ‘That, I do not deny. But you’ve mostly given me cause to do so. I am hoping that today, you will prove me wrong once and for all. Defeat the great Deliverer of the Vrishni, and I will declare you Emperor-in-Waiting of all my domains.’

Kamsa was struck silent. He had not expected such an offer. Jarasandha was not a generous man. For him to offer such a proposal meant that he was deadly serious. It also meant that he wanted Kamsa to win very badly, or he would not dangle such an enticing reward. ‘Emperor-in-Waiting,’ he said slowly. ‘That means that after you die—’

Jarasandha chuckled. ‘In the *event*, unlikely as it may be, of my demise, yes, you will be crowned Emperor in my stead. That is precisely what it means.’

Kamsa stared at Jarasandha. Nobody had ever showed such generosity to him. He took hold of Jarasandha's hand and kissed it. 'I will not fail you today, father. You will be proud of me.'

Jarasandha nodded. 'It would give me great pleasure to see you break the back of that little cowherd. Nothing else would give me such great pleasure, I have to admit.' He hesitated, glancing across the field at the slightly figure still making its way around the pavilions. 'Something about the very sight of him turns my stomach. For the first time in my life, I find I have no appetite. He makes me sick, this so-called Deliverer! Crush him, break him, twist him like a rope, tear him apart into shreds, crack him open like a betelnut, grind him like a whetstone, cut him like a rusty blade...do what you will, but do not let him walk off that akhada alive. And in return, you will have of me whatever you desire, for as long as you desire it. All that I possess shall be your's.'

Kamsa nodded grimly. 'It shall be done.'

He was about to say something else when suddenly all those assembled in his pavilion began to mutter and laugh.

'What is it?' he asked, looking around. He saw Jarasandha staring too, his thin eyes narrowing to slits as he saw something that did not please him.

Then he heard the sound of the music. A simple reed instrument.

Krishna was playing his flute.

Akrura shook his head in embarrassed delight as Krishna played his flute, walking around the field as if he owned it, then took up a stance with one foot crossed over the other one, arms crossed as well, head tilted just so, flute applied to the side of his mouth, a perpetual smile playing on his handsome dark face, and played a song sweeter than any that had been heard before.

‘Truly he is the Lord of Lords,’ he said to himself. ‘Who else would dare come to a house of swords armed with only a flute.’

He saw the reaction in the royal pavilion, saw Jarasandha and Kamsa glaring furiously, exchanging words that left no doubt about their state of mind and agitation.

Devaki leaned forward, speaking across Vasudeva who sat between them. ‘My Lord Akrura, why do you laugh and mutter to yourself?’

Akrura smiled sheepishly. ‘My Lady Devaki, I confess that until this morning I did not truly understand the power of your son. But a vision was unveiled to me that showed me how little I knew. Now, I see wonderment in his every gesture, mischief in his every action. It is a great delight to watch him toy thus with the demon Usurper before they fight. Never before have Kamsa and Jarasandha been treated in this fashion by even the most powerful opponents and enemies. Yet there is Krishna, a mere cowherd boy, embarrassing them before all of Mathura. It is a sight to behold!’

Devaki smiled faintly, her eyes filled with tears of an unnameable emotion. She looked at Vasudeva who took her hand and squeezed it comfortingly. Vasudeva turned to Akrura. ‘I hope he knows what he is doing.’

Akrura nodded. ‘I am quite certain he does.’

He saw an aide leave the royal pavilion and come toward the Vrishni pavilion, clearly despatched with a message to deliver. The man seemed somewhat confused about whom to approach. Unlike his masters, the Vrishni did not have a simple hierarchy: every chieftain was king in a manner of speaking. Technically, Vasudeva was still King and representative of the Sangha, but it had been so long since he had been able to represent his people at any formal event that the very courtiers of Mathura, like this aide, had all but forgotten him. Akrura stood and motioned the man forward. He came with evident relief and spoke his message to Akrura.

Akrura turned to the others, who were wide-eyed and expectant.

‘The matches for the tournament have been announced,’ he said. ‘The team for the royals versus our best champions.’

They had been asked to submit the names of their fighters earlier, so everyone was already aware of their own champions. It was the other team they had not been able to identify for certain. Now they knew.

Many anxious looks were exchanged. Old Kratha started to rise, trying to raise his crook to wave it in protest, but Brihadbala stopped him and calmed him down.

‘It is an outrage,’ Kratha still managed to blurt out, his words slurred by age and palsy. ‘They have pitted their strongest, most experienced and renowned fighters against our two young boys. How can Krishna and Balarama alone fight so many champions at once?’

Akrura shrugged. ‘It is how it must be,’ they say. ‘They have the right to call the draw. And to be quite fair, it was we who only put forth two names.’

‘Why?’ asked someone else. ‘Why not a whole team?’

‘Because we chose to make it so,’ Balarama said, coming up to the pavilion. ‘Even our greatest wrestlers cannot stand a chance against their fighters. They are not human anymore, they possess supernatural strength and shakti. To fight them will require superhuman skill as well. Therefore Krishna insisted that he and I alone represent our side.’

Everyone was silent. Nobody knew what to say. There was little to be said.

The conch shell announcing the start of the tournament sounded. It was time for the Slayer of Kamsa to face the Childslayer himself.

KAMSA slapped his thighs and rubbed his palms over his well-oiled body. He raised his hand, rubbing the excess oil on his finely twirled moustaches, stroking the ends till they extended far outwards from his face. The crowd had been bustling with noise, like an ocean roaring near a rocky shore, then had suddenly fallen silent. A deathly quiet had come over the arena. Nobody spoke a word. Even Jarasandha, watching from the front row on Kamsa's side, did not smile his usual half-faced smile. The Hijras flanking him on either side were as impassive as ever.

On the Vrishni side, though, there were visible emotions on display. Kamsa was pleased to see the obvious concern and anxiety on the faces of Krishna's adoptive mother and father and other relatives. And there was that young girl who had shown unsisterly affection for him earlier, fussing and cooing around him. Who was she? A pretty young thing, she was. She almost made him wish they were playing for spoils as was often the case in Jarasandha's wrestling tournaments. Winner takes all: wealth, women, wine, wheat. Then again, he remembered, he was Lord of Mathura. If he won, he would be taking everything the Vrishni possessed, starting with the lives of Krishna's entire extended family, down to the last remote cousin and his dogs and dogs' whelps. Not one would be spared. So that pretty young girl was as good as his, if he desired her.

But that was a matter for later.

Right now, he had a fight to win. And a Slayer to slay.

Kamsa slapped his own chest and stood up in his corner of the wrestling rectangle, taking up a stance, legs apart, arms open wide, welcoming. He felt better than he had in his entire life. He was stronger than he had ever imagined he could become. He felt indomitable, indestructible, invulnerable. He was certain of victory. All that remained were the details:

how he would maim and make his opponent suffer before finally killing him. How he would deliver the ultimate killing blow. He had a myriad of ways thought out, any one of which would be agonizing and cause the strongest-willed men to die screaming and voiding their bowels as they departed this world. He had used every one of those holds and blows umpteen times. This would be the first time he did so to a god.

He imagined it would not be very different. After all he was not much less than a god himself, Jarasandha had repeatedly assured him. Nobody could withstand him now.

Certainly not this slip of a boy, his body so slender, his arms and legs so lean, no visible slabs of muscle, no excess padding, nothing to cushion the opponent's blows or provide strength for the powerful holds and grips and blows that were essential to victory in this rectangle.

Krishna looked so out of place in this wrestling ring, it was difficult to believe that this was the Slayer himself. The one Kamsa had been dreading for twenty three years. The prophesied Deliverer of the Yadava people!

He moved forward, ready to end the Prophecy and prove it wrong.

Radha watched wide-eyed as Kamsa and his team took the field. 'Dear Sri in Vaikunta,' she said softly, pressing her hand to her mouth, 'they are not men, they are giants made of stone and iron!'

As Canura, Mustika, Kamsa and the others took the field, their captain gave them terse instructions.

‘Let’s make this quick and brutal,’ he said. ‘Mustika, you go for Balarama. Canura, you take care of Krishna.’

Mustika, who was not known for his agility of thought, frowned at the two boys on the far side of the playing field, his famous crooked jaw which had earned him his nickname jerking to and fro as he tried to guess. ‘Which one is which?’

Canura slapped him on the shoulder. The impact was loud enough to rival a small thunderclap. ‘The fair one’s Balarama, dark-skinned lad’s Krishna.’

‘Don’t worry, Crooked Jaw,’ Sala called out. ‘If you have difficulty grabbing hold of the slippery bugger, I’ll trip him over and sit on him till you come get him.’

Tosalaka snorted. ‘Sala, if you sit on him, there won’t be anything left for Mustika to get.’

‘Childslayer,’ said Kuta scornfully, ‘I thought you said this would be a fun fight. From the sight of these two children, it’ll be over before I have time to fart.’

Kamsa shook his head at the widest man imaginable, almost a full yard wide at the chest—and almost as wide the rest of his body. ‘Kuta, your farts alone are enough to kill them both. Maybe we should all retire and leave you to it, huh?’

Everyone laughed.

‘All right, now let’s warm up,’ Kamsa said.

‘What’s the point?’ Mustika asked. ‘This fight will be over in less time than the warm-up!’

‘Tradition,’ Kamsa said. ‘We have to give the crowd what it expects. We are champions of the world.’

Mustika shrugged. In the center of their side of the field, aides had set up chopping blocks. Each block was a solid yard thick chunk of lohitwood, the famed ironwood that grew in the forested region between Ayodhya and Mithila. Sharp axes could barely drive a crack in lohitwood. The aides had set three chopping blocks on top of each other.

Mustika raised a hand and brought it down in a chopping action on the topmost block.

It splintered with a sound like a twig snapping.

All three blocks lay cracked and broken into pieces.

Mustika raised the hand he had used, waving it sideways to show it was empty. The crowd roared with approval, cheering him on. While the rest of the city might have been filled with citizens eager to sight the Deliverer, there was little doubt about the composition of the crowd in the playing field itself—apart from the Vrishni contingent, they were all loyal to Kamsa.

There were many other items ready for demonstrations of strength and power by Kamsa’s team. The Vrishni fighters had declined to give any such demonstration.

Radha had heard most of the banter between Kamsa and his men and it chilled her heart. Still, she could have dismissed it as mere man-talk. But

when she saw the demonstrations, she knew that it was much more than just talk.

She leaped over the side of the pavilion that kept spectators from the playing field and ran to the sidelines. Nobody bothered to stop her. Kamsa had seen no reason to place security around what was essentially a field of battle now. He had no reason to fear any attack on himself and his team—and if anyone wished to harm Krishna and Balarama in the brief time they had left before dying, they were quite welcome to do so!

Radha stopped near Krishna's position. He was standing in a relaxed posture, waiting for the first match to begin.

'Krishna,' she said, trying to attract his attention.

He turned and frowned at her. 'Radhey? You should not be here. It is not safe for you.'

'You must stop this fight. It is not a fair fight. Those men are superbeings of some sort. They mean to crush you and Balarama the way they are crushing those blocks and metal bars and other things now.'

Krishna nodded. 'What you say is true.'

'Then stop the fight. You have ample grounds for objection.'

'Such as?' Krishna asked.

'There are only two of you against so many of them.'

'They have said that they will ensure that only one of their fighters engages one of our fighters in each round. It will be a man-on-man bout.'

Radha shook her head impatiently. ‘Even so, you are only boys. They are great big men, experienced fighters.’

Krishna smiled. ‘Balarama and I are grown me in terms of age. We are entitled to the same rights as any of them. Besides, Radha, we have fought our share of opponents too, remember? We can hardly claim lack of experience!’

‘Then say the truth: they are not merely men. They are demons. Beasts!’

Krishna shook his head. ‘All of Mathura saw me fighting and slaying one of the most feared animals in the land. The dreaded Hathi-Yodha himself. Single-handedly, unarmed. On what grounds can I make such a claim? Besides, this is what it is, Radha. Ever since time immemorial, this is how it has always been. Many against few. Strong against the apparently weak. Powerful against the disempowered. Rich against poor. High caste against low caste. Upper class against the uncultured. That is what society has always done: Separated, divided, put us into different categories and ranks. I wish to end that. And the only way is to do it by proving that even I, a boy, a cowherd, a Vrishni, can confront and best the most powerful demon king of our age. Go back to the pavilion, Radha. I have work to do now. This is my dharma.’

Radha stared at him for a long moment. The conch shells blew again, announcing the imminent start of the actual bout.

She backed away wordlessly, then ran back to the pavilion and resumed her seat. Krishna had said everything there was to be said. All she could do now was watch and pray.

The tournament began with a tossing of dice to decide who would start first. Kamsa's team won the toss and chose to defend.

'All right, Chanura,' he said, 'now remember, you are to take him alone. The rest of us have to stay out of the way. Those are the rules. Man-on-man.'

Chanura snorted. 'You mean man-on-child! This isn't a fight. It's a massacre.'

The final conch shell signaling the start of the fight sounded. A hushed silence fell across the vast field. Outside the field, across Mathura, the crowds that still thronged the streets, filled the houses and courtyards and even camped by the riverbank waiting for word, all fell silent, waiting to hear what happened next. Even the birds of the sky hovered overhead, watching the field below, like carrion birds over a battlefield. The animals of the woods, the insects of the earth, the fish of the river, all seemed alert and expectant, awaiting the next several moments.

Krishna started forward, crossing the line even as he said aloud, 'Gokula!' Then turned the word into a chant recited constantly in order to show that he was not taking a second breath. 'Gokula-gokula-gokula-gokula-gokula,' he went on as he entered the enemy side of the field.

The quadrant was guarded by a full team of sixteen men. But as per the agreed-upon rules, only one man, Chanura, could engage Krishna. Therefore Krishna entered the chalk-marked rectangle in which Chanura stood waiting. Only if and when Krishna got past Chanura could the others engage him. Mustika was guarding the rectangle right behind Chanura's,

and from the snarl on his disjointed face, he looked as if he wished Krishna would somehow slip past and come to him.

Chanura was wearing a garland of flowers that some woman had put around his neck. He was enjoying the cloying sweet scent of the flowers and thinking of the woman and how he could put his arms around her neck afterwards and make himself a garland for her! He watched Krishna approach with derision, unable to believe that this stripling of a boy even had the temerity to come face to face with him.

Krishna approached Chanura, making no effort to sidestep, dodge, avoid, or any of the usual tactics employed by players in the sport. It was obvious that he had either never played the game before or did not care for its rules. All he did was walk right up to Chanura, muttering his chant softly.

Under the rules of man-on-man, the players could stop chanting when they were physically engaged with each other: this was to permit the man-on-man bouts to continue until defeat, not merely depletion of breath. But until Krishna touched or otherwise engaged an opponent, he had to keep chanting or he would be disqualified.

Chanura hoped the boy wasn't careless enough to make such a mistake. He wanted to beat the boy, but not by a technical fault.

He wanted to break him into two halves over his knee!

As Krishna came within reach, Chanura spread his arms and grabbed hold of him. He had once uprooted a lohitwood tree this way, by grasping it and yanking upwards in a single motion. Then he had thrown it two score yards away, at an oncoming enemy battalion, wiping out most of the battalion with one blow. After that, he had used the uprooted tree as a club to smash the rest of the enemy.

He grasped hold of Krishna and squeezed.

‘Ho, boy,’ he said, grinning. ‘I hope you drank plenty of your mother’s breast-milk this morning, for I mean to squeeze every last drop out of you and drink it myself now!’

Krishna stared back at him impassively. ‘Really? In that case, you need to use more strength, don’t you? The force you’re using wouldn’t squeeze milk out of a pregnant cow’s teat!’

Chanura lost his smile. It was true he was exerting just a little force, barely sufficient to crush a body and make it spill its contents. That was because he wanted Krishna to suffer, to cry out in agony and scream as he died, not simply burst like a crushed grape.

But Krishna’s body wasn’t yielding as most bodies did. This much force should have shattered even the most powerfully muscled man’s backbone and ribs and caused blood to spurt out of his mouth and other orifices with considerable force.

Krishna was merely standing there, looking at Chanura.

‘That’s a pretty garland you have there,’ he said conversationally. ‘Did you mean to give it to me after you’re done hugging?’

Chanura roared with anger and squeezed with all his force. He forgot about his intention to squeeze slowly and make Krishna scream in agony. He squeezed hard enough to crush a tree trunk into powder.

Still, Krishna just stood there and looked unimpressed.

Chanura blinked and released his hold. He opened his mouth, taking in a fresh breath himself. He stared at Krishna in disbelief.

‘I used all my strength. You can’t still be standing! It’s impossible.’

Krishna cocked an eyebrow then waggled both eyebrows. ‘Really? Maybe you didn’t do it right. Here, let me show you how it’s done.’

He sang out gaily, ‘My turn!’ and took hold of Chanura in the exact same grip, squeezing hard.

Chanura gasped.

Then he screamed.

Then he felt as if his spine was melding with his ribs, and his ribs were being forced inwards to pierce his lungs, and his arms bent to touch each other—through his torso. It was excruciating. He had never felt anything like this before. Was this how his opponents felt when he crushed them in this grip? Was this what it felt like for a tree to be crushed? It was unbelievably painful.

He blacked out and lost consciousness for a moment.

When he regained his senses, he was lying on the ground, in the dust, the afternoon sun piercing his eyes, a dull red thumping pain where his chest had been before. Krishna was grinning down at him.

‘Enough?’ Krishna asked, chuckling. ‘Or would you like me to show you again?’

Chanura roared with rage and kicked out at Krishna’s lower abdomen, striking his enemy’s softest part with the hardest part of his own body, his heel. He felt the heel strike home, expecting it to rip through Krishna’s body and emerge from out his back as usually happened.

Instead, he felt his own heel shatter, the bone crushed and fragmented, and the shards sent back into his own flesh.

His roar of rage turned to a whimper of agony.

He screamed again.

Krishna pounced on him, grabbing him with both hands. Krishna's teeth suddenly flashed bright white in his dark face, predatory and menacing.

'I like your garland, my friend,' Krishna said. 'Let me pick some of the flowers.'

Krishna reached out and snatched a flower from the garland, tearing it out of the string and holding it up. He pressed it between his fingers and smelled the pressed petals. Even Chanura could smell the fragrant scent of the marigold blossom. 'So refreshing, isn't it?' Krishna asked. 'And so soft and gentle and easy to take apart, petal by petal. The way you took apart so many hundreds of opponents, using your superior shakti to cheat them of a fair fight, using superhuman strength against ordinary brave warriors.'

Chanura snarled and struck hard at Krishna's elbows with the strength of desperation. He hoped to crack the bone and cartilage there, disabling his opponent. It had worked for another fellow strongman who was equally as empowered as himself. With both hands broken and dangling from the elbows, the man could hardly fight back effectively. Chanura had then proceeded to make mincemeat of him.

Krishna reached up and rubbed his elbows at once, making a face in reaction.

Chanura grinned, pleased at his own presence of mind. So! The invulnerable Deliverer had a weak spot after all. Two of them in fact! Now, it would be easy as pie to turn the tables. Even with a shattered heel, he could still take care of this slip of a lad on his own.

Krishna dropped his arms and grinned. ‘Just fooling you!’ he said, moving his arms to show that his elbows were fine. ‘Now where were we?’ he said, frowning, then remembered. ‘Ah, yes, flowers.’

He reached down. ‘I was saying, it would be quite fitting, given the way you made so many of your opponents suffer in the past, to treat you like this garland of flowers, and take you apart, piece by piece. What do you think?’

Chanura kicked out and struck out blindly, roaring and fighting as hard as he could, knowing now that this was his last chance, that he was indeed fighting for his life.

His blows battered a body as hard and invulnerable as he had once believed his own to be. They had no effect. Or if they did—for he did see Krishna grimace once or thrice—then his opponent must possess the ability to knit broken bones together at once, or somesuch miracle. For Krishna took everything he had and more.

Finally, it was Chanura himself who gave up, ceasing his rain of blows and kicks, sobbing with exhaustion and fear. ‘Spare me,’ he cried out, weeping openly, not caring that everyone could see his humiliation. ‘Mercy, lord, mercy!’

‘Of course,’ Krishna said, ‘the same mercy you showed all those who begged you for mercy. Once for each life you destroyed.’

And Krishna reached out and plucked the flowers of Chanura’s life, one by one, piece by separate piece, tearing them out as easily as he had plucked

the marigold blossom from the garland around Chanura's neck.

16

Balarama felt each blow that fell on Krishna's body as if it had struck his own body. He felt the pain of impact, the agony of tearing tissue, muscle, tendon, the excruciating pain of broken bone, cracked cartilage, everything. It was no less than if Chanura had been striking him. In a sense, it was worse because while Krishna could feel anger in response and act on that anger, Balarama was standing on the field and forced to watch without acting. He could not violate the rules of the game. It was vital that they played this out exactly as Kamsa dictated and still triumphed. It was not enough merely to win, but to win fairly and squarely. That was dharma.

But when Chanura lashed out mercilessly at Krishna, Balarama was hard-pressed to put dharma aside and go to his brother's aid. For the sheer agony of the blows was unbearable. How was Krishna tolerating it? The same way he had tolerated the attacks and blows and bites of asuras in the past. By enduring. Knowing that his super-mortal divinity would repair the mortal flesh and bone, restore it in moments to its former state of perfect vigor and health. It was only the pain they must endure and survive. Although to call it 'only' the pain was itself an euphemism. For there were times in battle when the pain of the wound was worse than the wound itself. If Balarama felt such pain, then how much worse must Krishna himself be feeling?

Still, Balarama had no choice. He stood his ground and gritted his teeth discretely as he watched his brother take the blows of his opponent, knowing that Krishna could have despatched the man in the first strike or two but was deliberately giving him fair chance to fight back so that all would see and know that the game had been played out fairly and squarely. Such was dharma, such were her demands.

Now he watched as Krishna's turn finally came to strike back and he went in for the kill. As promised, he all but tore the man apart into pieces. It was a horrifying sight, mitigated no less by the fact that the man being torn apart was a demon in human form, a rakshasa among mortals who had wreaked terrible suffering and punishment on numerous innocents as well as other warriors by taking advantage of his unfairly produced strength, the result of Jarasandha's arcane potions and sorcery.

Balarama wondered if anyone who had been related or cared about any of Chanura's former victims was present to watch the man's brutal end. He hoped so.

For his part, he watched to the very end, dispassionate and calm. The reactions he had felt to Balarama's injuries had dissipated instantly, as quickly as Balarama's wounds had healed.

He saw a flicker of movement to one side and saw one of Kamsa's team rush forward at Krishna who had his back to that side.

It was the tall powerfully built giant with the oddly shaped face, the one they called Crooked Jaw. Mustika. Apparently, he could not bear to see his mate torn apart by Balarama and with a roar of fury he flung himself at Krishna.

Kamsa watched with utter disbelief as the Deliverer took one of his best men and dearest friends apart, piece by piece, quite literally. He could not believe that this slender stripling of a boy possessed such shakti. How was it possible?

Because he's Vishnu incarnate, you fool! said a voice in his head. It was the voice of Yadu, his old stable-hand, royal syce, and sometime trainer. The man who had become his guru and transformed Kamsa after Putana's death into the most formidable man-on-man fighter in the entire kingdom.

Suddenly, Kamsa wished Yadu was here, telling him what to do, how to handle this, what moves he might use that would counter this brutal attack by the Slayer.

But Yadu was dead of course. Died only recently. And he, Kamsa, hadn't bothered to grant him so much as a decent cremation.

Kamsa was jolted out of his stupor when Mustika roared in fury and charged forward. Either Crooked Jaw had forgotten that this was strictly a man-on-man bout, or he did not care. He had been a dear friend of Chanura, and apparently he couldn't bear the sight of his team mate torn to pieces by this young cowherd. He knew and cared nothing about the Prophecy or the Deliverer. To him, Krishna was just an opponent who had killed a team mate and friend and must be destroyed.

Kamsa watched hopefully as Mustika threw himself at Krishna. Perhaps Mustika would fare better than Chanura. And that would mean the end of Krishna.

But as he watched, Krishna did not defend himself against Mustika's assault. He merely side-stepped smartly, letting Mustika's own weight and momentum carry him forward.

That was the amazing thing. How could Krishna be so thin-limbed, slender-bodied, agile and athletic, yet capable of withstanding the full force of Chanura's blows? It was beyond Kamsa's comprehension. All he knew was that a person could make himself denser, packing his cells closer and tighter together even as they expanded, until they were as hard as iron itself, or even harder. Or he could loosen them, allowing himself

flexibility. Like a scale ranging from Black to White, Kamsa could range across the various shades of gray, choosing to make his body denser and less flexible in movement, or less dense and more flexible in movement. The same held true for all his team mates who had been empowered by Jarasandha's potions.

But Krishna was not subject to the same limitations. He was apparently stronger and denser of body than any of them—or more than Chanura at any rate—while remaining as agile and flexible as any normal man.

Kamsa watched as Mustika turned around with some difficulty, trying to charge at Krishna again. But Krishna danced around behind Mustika, managing effortlessly to keep himself behind Crooked Jaw as the giant turned round and around, seeking his vanished opponent. Krishna even waggled his eyebrows and made faces at Mustika's back as they went round and round together, sending the crowd into splits of laughter and dissipating the mood of horror that had greeted the slaying of Chanura.

Then Balarama entered the field. Since Mustika had joined the fray, it was within Balarama's right to do so. Kamsa thought of protesting then stopped himself. Instead, he turned to Sala.

‘Sala, you take Krishna. Go on.’

Sala glanced at him sideways, then flexed his powerfully muscled arms and moved forward, building up speed as he reduced his body density for the attack.

Meanwhile, Balarama came before Mustika who stopped trying to turn around and grab hold of Krishna and directed his fury at Krishna's brother instead.

Sala came running fast at Krishna, so fast that even Krishna, who was briefly distracted by Balarama's arrival, failed to notice him until the last

instant.

Balarama saw Sala bearing down on Krishna, and called out, ‘Bhai!’

Even as Balarama took the instant to call out, Mustika swung his upper body and struck out at Balarama as hard as he was capable.

Both Balarama and Krishna were struck by Mustika and Sala at the exact same moment. The sounds of impact were like explosions of lightning striking tree trunks.

The crowd gasped in reaction, the Vrishni rising to their feet.

Kamsa grinned and laughed aloud.

Balarama felt the blow by Mustika like the kick he had once received from Donkey Asura, except that Donkey Asura's kick had sent him flying several dozen yards. Mustika's blow spun him around and off-balance, feeling as if his skull had shattered into fragments and every bone in his face and neck had cracked into pieces. In a sense they had. But due to his divine essence, they knitted together almost immediately. Even so, for the fraction of a moment when the bones were shattered, the sensation was indescribable. It disoriented Balarama for a moment.

At the same instant, Krishna was struck from behind by the charging Sala. The wrestler's rock-solid head was lowered and it struck Krishna's spine with the force of a giant battering ram striking a castle gate. It shattered Krishna's spine into two halves and each half into splinters, and Sala's head ought to have continued through Krishna's body, tearing a hole in it the way a flung javelin would tear through stretched canvas. But Krishna's divinity caused his body to heal instantly, preventing Sala's stone-hard skull from penetrating farther and doing further damage.

These two attacks, brought simultaneously, almost ended the fight that day for the brothers. Nobody would ever know for certain how close they had come to defeat in that particular instant. Radha, who was watching intently, suspected, but she was reacting emotionally, fearing so much, that she thought every blow that struck Krishna would harm him beyond recovery. So she could not tell that this one was the very blow that almost killed her beloved. Because she was watching only Krishna, and did not realize that Balarama was being struck as grievously at the exact same instant.

What caused the crisis were not the blows themselves but the fact that they came at the exact same instant, and that both brothers were looking at one another when they came.

Krishna was so preoccupied with warning Balarama and Balarama with warning Krishna that they both forgot about their own selves for an instant. Even though their bodies healed of their own accord, they continued to watch one another out of concern, in case the other should require help.

In that instant, had Kamsa also attacked them, either one of them, he would have had an upper hand.

He might even have injured one sufficiently to cause him serious harm. Permanent harm.

Or worse.

But Kamsa was afraid by then. Afraid of the Slayer's power. Of the prophecy. Of the assassins who had been sent to defeat the infant Krishna, then the child Krishna, and had failed.

And so he remained where he was and watched instead.

And so Krishna and Balarama both had a moment to recover, and each had only one opponent to fight back against. And each one saw that the other was hurt but could survive and fight back.

And the moment of vulnerability passed.

And then both were back in the fray.

Balarama was furious at being struck unawares by Mustika and struck back with his open palm, literally slapping the giant. Because of the considerable difference in their respective heights, he could not slap the

giant's face or shoulders or back. Instead, his slaps landed on Mustika's backside. He slapped giant again and again and again, relentlessly, intending to show that his open hand alone was sufficient to fight this opponent.

Krishna in turn was angry that he had almost let himself be bested in that moment of vulnerability. As a result, he struck out with a single kick at Sala's head. Krishna's foot struck Sala's forehead. In fact, only the tips of two of Krishna's toes struck Sala's head.

They were sufficient to decapitate Sala.

The crown of Sala's head was smashed to a pulp and torn from his head and body. It splattered across the dust of the field.

Sala's body stood swaying for a moment. Then collapsed like a sala tree chopped at the trunk. It fell, spewing brains and blood into the dirt.

Balarama's slaps shattered Mustika's thighbone, hip, ribs, legs.

The giant roared with pain and fell to his knees.

Balarama continued slapping him relentlessly.

Mustika's shoulders were shattered, his collarbone broken, his chest punctured and reduced to a pulp.

Then Balarama slapped his jaw, smashing the legendary Crooked Jaw to smithereens.

That was the end of Crooked Jaw Mustika.

Both Krishna and Balarama turned and looked at the remaining opponents.

Tosalaka was directly ahead of Krishna, in the next rectangle. Krishna charged at him.

Kuta was confronting Balarama and filled with foolish fury. He saw Balarama charging and charged back at him.

All four fighters met in an explosive collision on the field.

Balarama struck Kuta with his left fist, a single blow. It tore through Kuta's body, shattering the petrified flesh to pieces. Kuta's corpse sprawled on the ground.

Krishna caught hold of Tosalaka by the waist in a wrestler's hug, moved his hands so one was gripping Tosalaka's upper body and the other hand Tosalaka's lower body, and literally tore the man into two halves.

Densified by the unnatural power, Tosalaka's body broke rather than tore. Krishna threw both pieces aside disdainfully.

Then he looked at the rest of the fighters on the field.

One by one, each of them turned and looked at one another, unable to believe what they had just witnessed.

Some looked to Kamsa, others to Jarasandha.

But there was no help to be had from either one.

They made their decision instantly. They decided they would rather be labelled cowards for the rest of their lives than die right here and now.

They turned and ran, heavy feet pounding thunderously as they left the field.

They sounded and looked like a herd of baby elephants fleeing from a pair of angry lions.

In moments, only the dust of their passing remained to mark where they had stood.

Slowly, the dust cleared.

Only Krishna and Balarama remained on the field now.

And Kamsa.

Balarama looked at the wrestlers running away from the field and laughed. ‘I thought they were fighters. It seems they are runners as well, bhai.’

Krishna grinned. ‘So it seems. Who would have thought elephants could run that fast!’

Both brothers laughed, relieved at their narrow escape as well pleased as their victory. Hearing their laughter and seeing their change of mood, the crowd began tittering as well. The tittering spread across the field until it burst forth as full-blown laughter. Even the supporters of Kamsa laughed, embarrassed at how easily two stripling cowherd boys had defeated Kamsa’s greatest champions.

Far too many had watched these same champions strut arrogantly on the field of play as well as the field of battle, killing and maiming indiscriminately. They took satisfaction now in watching the arrogant champions themselves killed and maimed.

As one, the crowd rose to its feet, cheering the winners and shouting and celebrating. Assuming the tournament was at an end, the royal musicians began playing a merry tune which in turn led the crowd to dancing. Court dancers, groomed to come on the side field and dance for the audience’s pleasure the instant the game was over, came out and danced, adding to the festive mood.

The news of Krishna’s and Balarama’s success spread throughout the city. But those who waited in the streets, like the Vrishni contingent, did not rise to their feet and dance and celebrate. Not yet.

The Usurper was still alive. The Childslayer. The Demon King of Mathura.

Kamsa still stood on the field, very much alive, seething with rage and impotent fury.

As the dancers danced around him and the musicians played, he roared. At once, his aides passed on his commands, and in another instant the music stopped, the dancing ceased and everyone resumed their seats nervously, for nobody dared ignore Kamsa himself. Not so long as he lived.

‘Enough!’ Kamsa thundered. ‘Enough of this despicable spectacle.’

He stepped forward. ‘Seize those two murderers. They have violated the law of the land. I want them arrested and executed within the hour.’

He waited for the Imperial Army to do as he commanded. But no soldiers came forward. Nobody saluted or barked orders, following through on his command.

Instead, General Bana stepped forward, almost casually. ‘Apologies, my Lord,’ Bana said, loudly enough to be heard and for his words to be passed on to those too distant to hear them directly. ‘But the Imperial Army has chosen to join the movement to restore the rightful King to his throne. King Ugrasena, your father.’

Kamsa raised both fists in anger. Had Bana been close enough to strike, he would have smashed Bana to pulp with a single blow for his impudence. ‘I demand that Ugrasena be executed at once as well. He is clearly siding with these rebels against the Empire!’

Akrura stepped forward, showing himself. ‘Ugrasena has no part in this. We the citizens of the land support his cause of our own accord. It is we

who wish that he be released and restored to the throne as is his right.'

Kamsa pointed an accusing finger at Akrura. 'You traitor. I will see to you afterwards. Right now, I will show you what it means to oppose the might of Kamsa and the Magadhan Empire.'

Kamsa turned to face the royal pavilion. 'Emperor Jarasandha,' he called out. 'My father-in-law and father in truth, I ask that you unleash your Mohini Fauj upon the ungrateful citizenry of Mathura to teach them a lesson. Even my own Army has turned against me, clearly seduced by this Vrishni rebellion. Wipe them all out! Kill every last Vrishni man, woman and child. Exterminate the clan from this earth. Do all this and Mathura is yours, a part of your great Magadhan Empire!'

Jarasandha rose from his seat and turned to go. All his aides and advisors followed him without so much as a backward glance at Kamsa.

Kamsa's face crumpled. 'Father!' he cried. 'Where are you going? I have need of you! Please stay. Help me quell this rebellion. We shall achieve all your plans!'

Jarasandha's chariot, clearly readied and kept waiting for just this moment, came briskly to a halt before the royal pavilion. The Magadhan paused and glanced scornfully at his son-in-law. 'Mathura's troubles are not Magadha's troubles. You have made your bed here. Now lie in it.'

Kamsa's face showed that he had never expected such treatment, not in a thousand years of imagining. 'But you want Mathura! I know you do! It is the jewel in the crown of your empire. You said so yourself only last night.'

Jarasandha nodded. 'So it shall be. And I shall have it. But in my own way, at my own time. Soon. Very soon. But first, I shall leave you to sort out your internal political disagreements on your own. My daughters, your

wives, have already been sent ahead to their summer palace. They shall await you there, in case you are still able to come visit them after this issue is resolved. If not, then I shall return soon enough to continue my plans with Mathura.'

Jarasandha mounted the chariot. Kamsa lost all sense of dignity. He ran after the chariot, crying out. 'But I am your son-in-law. You love me as a son!'

'And now, I leave you to stand on your own two feet, my son,' Jarasandha said. Then with one sharp crack of his whip, he spurred his horses forward, and raced the chariot away, leaving Mathura through the deserted army cantonments, the only route not crowded by citizens and militia and Imperial Mathuran troops who were all on duty throughout the city today.

Kamsa watched Jarasandha leave and even in the shape of his back, Krishna saw his uncle's entire strength leave him.

By the time Kamsa turned, he was already a broken man.

But he was a broken man with the power of a supermortal and the strength and fury of a rakshasa.

'YOU,' he cried out in a voice that boiled the air like thunder. **'YOU ARE THE SOURCE OF ALL THAT AILS ME...PRESERVER OF MORTALKIND. SO YOU ARE A GOD INCARNATE. NOW LET US SEE IF YOU CAN FACE A VERITABLE GOD AMONG ASURAS.'**

And as all Mathura watched with horrified astonishment, Kamsa began to grow larger, larger, and still larger. Until he once again stood with his head high among the clouds, bigger than he had ever been before in his early transformations as a rakshasa. But still as dense and powerful as he had

learned to make himself with the help of Jarasandha's potions and Putana's Haihaiya poison.

'COME NOW, VISHNU,' he roared as he raised his foot and stamped down hard upon the royal pavilion, crushing every last one of his own entourage without caring if they were still loyal to him or not. **'LET US SEE IF YOU CAN FULFILL YOUR PROPHECY BEFORE I FINISH DESTROYING MATHURA AND KILLING EVERY LAST YADAVA IN THE CITY!'**

MATHURA was in chaos. Kamsa towered above the city, enlarged to such an enormous size, his head could barely be seen from the ground. He stamped about the cantonment area, smashing and killing everyone he could reach. For some reason, his anger was directed at his own supporters and followers—perhaps because of their betrayal.

‘Bhai,’ Balarama said, ‘We should move the people to safety before he turns his attention to them. I shall do it.’

Krishna turned to thank Balarama for taking the initiative without argument but Balarama was already racing to the pavilion, shouting instructions. Krishna knew there was not much more he could do there. His presence was better put to use against that tower of destruction on its rampage.

He needed no more than an instant to think the situation through. Kamsa’s enlargement had come as a surprise, but not a shock. After all, Krishna had known that his uncle had once possessed the ability to expand and reduce his size. He had also known that Kamsa had acquired the ability to use the same power to make his body denser while remaining the same size. Somehow, Kamsa had found a way to combine both in secret and had waited until this day to reveal his full ability.

If he lived up to his word, as he would no doubt, all of Mathura could be destroyed by his rampaging. The only way to avoid further casualties was to remove him from Mathura. And in order to do that, Krishna would have to make him take this fight elsewhere. Which left only one place to go.

Krishna flew up, rising up in the sky until he hovered high enough to be noticed by Kamsa. Then, using his power to project his own voice, he

addressed his uncle.

‘Uncle Kamsa!’

Kamsa had just finished pounding most of the court’s nobility and aristocracy to bloody pulp. Krishna had no sympathy for the rich and overbearing overlords who had aided and abetted Kamsa in his reign of atrocities and abuse all these many years, but it was still sickening to see people trampled thus mercilessly. Tearing apart a supermortal wrestling champion in a bout was one thing. This, on the other hand, was simple murder.

Kamsa turned at the sound of Krishna’s voice. He grinned down at the tiny figure hovering in mid air.

‘MY NEPHEW! DID I SURPRISE YOU? YOU DIDN’T KNOW ABOUT MY ABILITY TO DO THIS, DID YOU? HOW SURPRISING. IT SEEMS THE GREAT DELIVERER IS NOT OMNISCIENT AFTER ALL!’

Krishna ignored the taunt. ‘Uncle. I shall give you one final chance to surrender and live. Only because of our blood relation. Yield now and I shall have you arrested and imprisoned for life. It is more than you deserve and you know it.’

Kamsa chuckled. With his enormous size, it sounded like echoes of a thousand waterfalls crashing down cascades after the monsoons, echoing off a deep ravine’s walls.

‘LIFE IMPRISONMENT? WHY BOTHER. LET’S SETTLE THIS RIGHT HERE AND NOW. IT’S ABOUT TIME. I’VE BEEN WANTING TO FACE YOU, VISHNU, EVER SINCE MY MOTHER RAISED ME ON STORIES OF YOU TAKING REBIRTH TO

DESTROY EVIL ON EARTH. MY MOTHER WAS THE SISTER OF THE GREAT LORD RAVANA, DID YOU KNOW THAT? THAT WAS WHEN MY NAME WAS KALA-NEMI, AND YOUR'S WAS RAMA CHANDRA. I ALSO REGRETTED THE FACT THAT WE NEVER GOT TO CONFRONT ONE ANOTHER FACE TO FACE. FINALLY, I HAVE MY CHANCE AND I INTEND TO MAKE THE BEST OF IT. COME ON, FACE ME NOW. OR STAND ASIDE AND WATCH ME DESTROY YOUR PRECIOUS CITY AND PEOPLE!'

‘So your plan is to fight me and in the process destroy Mathura as well?’

‘YES. BRILLIANT, IS IT NOT? EVEN IF YOU WIN, THE FIGHT WITH ME WILL CAUSE SO MUCH DESTRUCTION THAT I WILL HAVE TRIUMPHED BY DEFAULT. FOR I DON’T CARE A WHIT FOR THESE WRETCHED MORTALS. BUT YOU DO. SO WIN OR LOSE, THEY WILL DIE ANYWAY.’

Krishna sighed. ‘Then you leave me no choice.’

He flew directly at Kamsa.

KAMSA cried out in anger as he staggered, the backs of his heels crushing a line of heavily laden carts loaded with weapons for the Imperial Army. Spears and swords snapped and crackled under his giant feet. He snarled and slapped at his own head, swatting at Krishna like a man might swat at a troublesome mosquito. But before he could get hold of him, Krishna had taken hold of Kamsa's hair and was flying upwards. Kamsa had expected him to attack and fight but instead, all Krishna intended was to take hold of the giant rakshasa and fly him in the one direction where nobody would be injured by Kamsa's gargantuan size and wicked intent: upwards.

Kamsa roared with fury as he realized what was happening. But Krishna was already lifting him bodily up in the air, rising higher and higher. Kamsa's feet flailed as they left the ground, narrowly missing striking a building. Crowds roared below as tens of thousands of Mathurans turned their faces upwards, watching the battle with rapt attention, less afraid for their own lives as eager to witness the fight for which they had waited 23 long years.

Kamsa continued to swat at his head. But it was near impossible for any man to strike the top of his own head while being carried upwards. Still, he struggled and flailed mightily. It was only when he was several hundred yards up in the air and still rising that he stopped flailing and froze still.

Krishna sensed understanding flood through his giant brain.

'I SEE NOW WHAT YOU MEAN TO DO! BUT YOU CANNOT. YOU MUST NOT. I WILL NOT LET YOU DO IT. I WANT A FIGHT. I WANT THE BATTLE I DESERVE. I WILL NOT BE DROPPED DOWN LIKE A RAW EGG TO BREAK ON THE EARTH. I WANT

MY FAIR DUE IN BATTLE. FIGHT ME, VISHNU. PUT ME BACK DOWN AND FIGHT ME FACE TO FACE.'

Krishna said grimly, 'Uncle, you lost your right to a fair fight when you slew newborns by dashing their brains out. You lost it when you ordered the execution of thousands more innocent children. You lost the right when you committed a hundred thousand other atrocities over the past 23 years, not to mention those you had committed even before revealing your true rakshasa nature. Back on the field, there was a moment when you could have attacked me and had your chance at a fair fight. You failed to take it. Now, this is the only fight you get. It is the only one you deserve.'

'NO, KRISHNA, NO,' Kamsa cried, bellowing loud enough to be heard by all Mathura. **'YOU CANNOT DO THIS TO ME. I AM A WARRIOR AND SO ARE YOU. FIGHT ME LIKE A WARRIOR FACE TO FACE. IT IS MY RIGHT. AND IT IS YOUR DHARMA.'**

'I am a warrior, yes,' Krishna said sadly. 'That is the only reason why I had to wait this long and allow so many other innocents to suffer and die before facing you today in combat. If I was not a warrior and not bound by kshatriya dharma, I would have crept into your palace as a babe and slaughtered you as you slept. But this is as far as my dharma will allow me to bring you. To this certain death. It is the only way you deserve, the only end for one such as you. Just as a mad elephant or beast must be put down instantly, without hesitation or thought, so must your life be ended now. If you have any last words, speak them now, before I release my hold on your body and let it fall to its death on the earth below.'

Kamsa made begging and pleading sounds but they were of no avail. Finally, seeing that he could negotiate no further advantage, he snarled. **'RELEASE ME, THEN. BUT KNOW THIS BEFORE I DIE. YOUR REAL STRUGGLE ON EARTH HAS NOT EVEN BEGUN YET, VISHNU. YOU HAVE FAR MORE SUFFERING TO ENDURE AND FAR GREATER BATTLES AND STRUGGLES TO OVERCOME BEFORE YOU ACCOMPLISH YOUR TASK IN THIS**

INCARNATION. THIS IS NOT THE END, IT IS ONLY THE BEGINNING.'

Krishna said sadly, 'This too I know.'

And then he released Kamsa, letting the giant fall.

He took several moments, during which time all the watching tens of thousands held their breath. Krishna had been careful to carry Kamsa's gargantuan form farther north of the city, to the wastelands where nobody resided, the sprawling wadis and ravines of uninhabited desolation where Kamsa had once come to practice the use of his newfound abilities. Where he had pounded his fists and body time and again on rocks and boulders, testing his new shakti, taking pride in it. Where he had killed animals just to vent his rage or fury.

He fell into that wasteland. And the earth itself seemed to harden to receive him. As if Bhoo devi, Mother Prithvi, whatever you choose to call her, suffering for so long under the cruel yoke of Kamsa's tyranny, resolved that this time, she would be harder than Kamsa's dense muscled body and sinew and bone. And so, as the giant Kamsa struck the ground, his body was shattered into a thousand pieces, fragmented and fragmented again, until even the smallest fragment broke apart into dust.

A wind rose from nowhere and carried this dust away into oblivion.

And across Mathura, a million liberated souls cheered. And only one word was on their lips.

'KRISHNA!'

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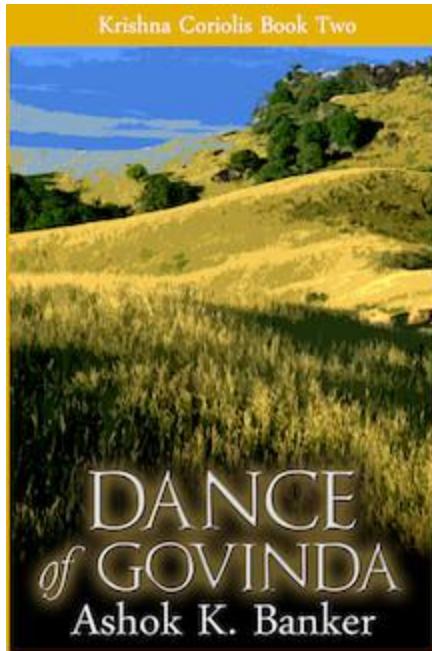
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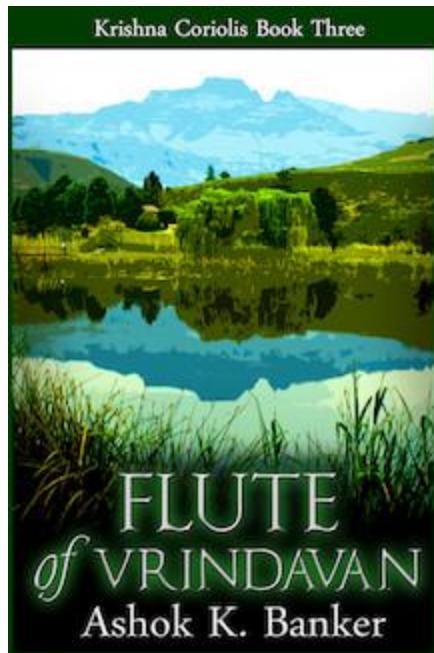
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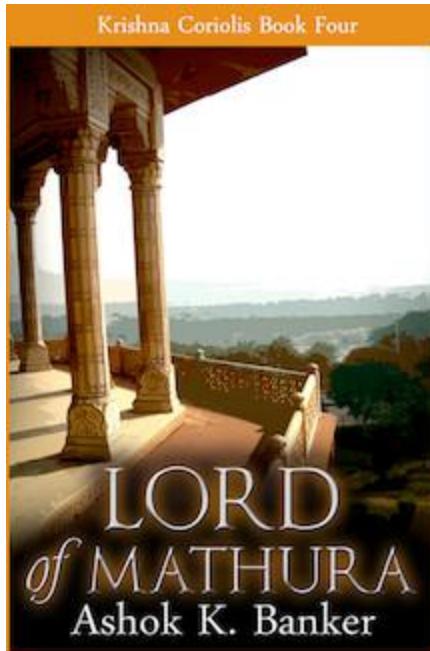
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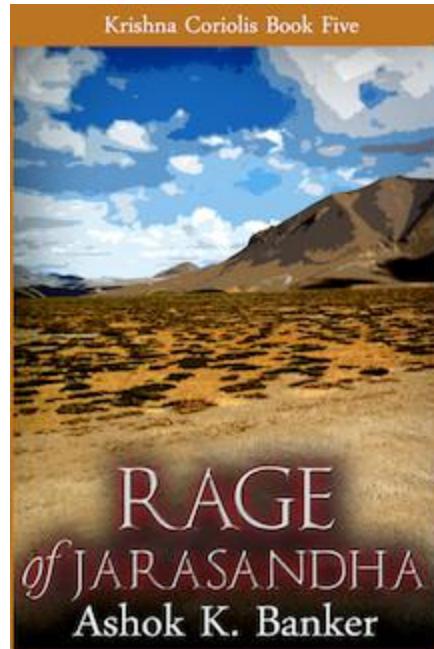
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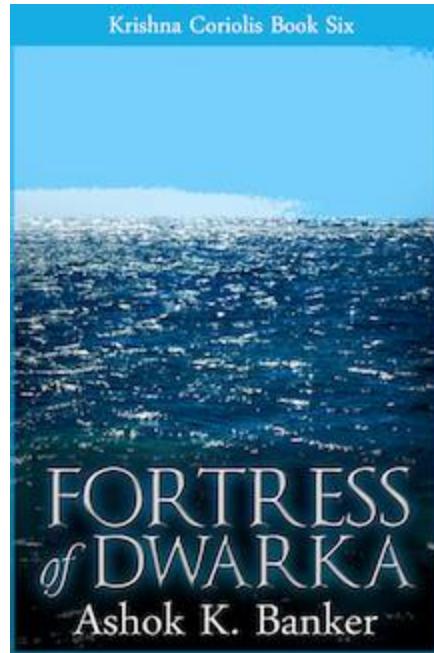
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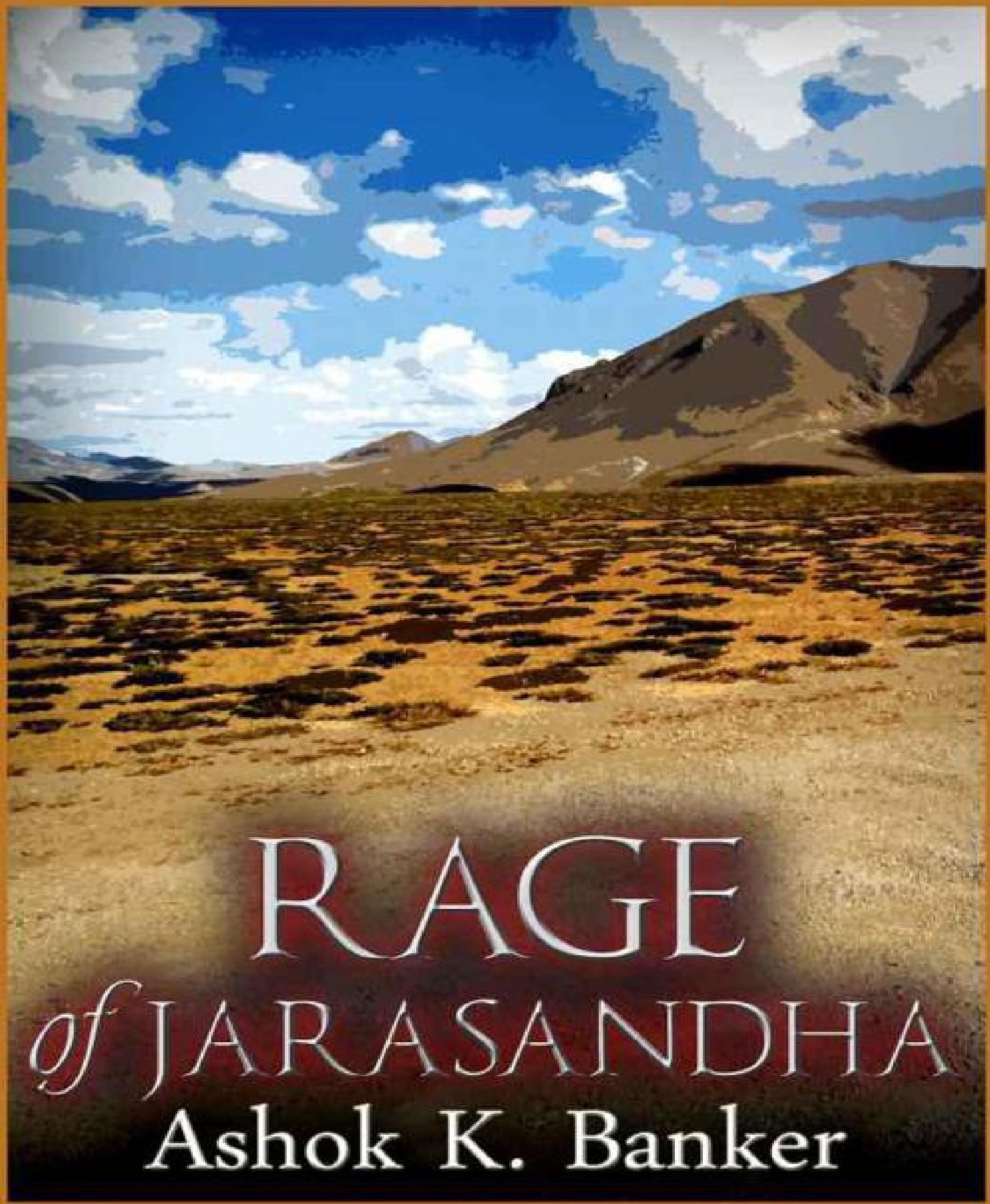
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Krishna Coriolis Book Five



RAGE
of JARASANDHA
Ashok K. Banker

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RAGE OF JARASANDHA

Ashok K. Banker

KRISHNA CORIOLIS
Book 5



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About Ashok

Ashok Kumar Banker's internationally acclaimed *Ramayana Series®* has been hailed as a 'milestone' (*India Today*) and a 'magnificently rendered labour of love' (*Outlook*). It is arguably the most popular English-language retelling of the ancient Sanskrit epic. His work has been published in 56 countries, a dozen languages, several hundred reprint editions with over 1.2 million copies of his books currently in print.

Born of mixed parentage, Ashok was raised without any caste or religion, giving him a uniquely post-racial and post-religious Indian perspective. Even through successful careers in marketing, advertising, journalism and scriptwriting, Ashok retained his childhood fascination with the ancient literature of India. With the *Ramayana Series®* he embarked on a massively ambitious publishing project he calls the Epic India Library. The EI Library comprises Four Wheels: Mythology, Itihasa, History, and Future History. The *Ramayana Series®* and *Krishna Coriolis* are part of the First Wheel. The *Mahabharata Series* is part of the Second Wheel. *Ten Kings* and the subsequent novels in the Itihasa Series dealing with different periods of recorded Indian history are the Third Wheel. Novels such as *Vertigo*, *Gods of War*, *The Kali Quartet*, *Saffron White Green* are the Fourth Wheel.

He is one of the few living Indian authors whose contribution to Indian literature is acknowledged in The Picador Book of Modern Indian Writing and The Vintage Anthology of Indian Literature. His writing is used as a teaching aid in several management and educational courses worldwide and has been the subject of several dissertations and theses.

Ashok is 48 years old and lives with his family in Mumbai. He is always accessible to his readers at www.ashokbanker.com—over 35,000 have corresponded with him to date. He looks forward to hearing from you.

PRARAMBH

1

AS one, the crowd rose to its feet, cheering the winners and shouting and celebrating. Assuming the tournament was at an end, the royal musicians began playing a merry tune which in turn led the crowd to dancing. Court dancers, groomed to come on the side field and dance for the audience's pleasure the instant the game was over, came out and danced, adding to the festive mood.

The news of Krishna's and Balarama's success spread throughout the city. But those who waited in the streets, like the Vrishni contingent, did not rise to their feet and dance and celebrate. Not yet.

The Usurper was still alive. The Childslayer. The Demon King of Mathura.

Kamsa still stood on the field, very much alive, seething with rage and impotent fury.

As the dancers danced around him and the musicians played, he roared. At once, his aides passed on his commands, and in another instant the music stopped, the dancing ceased and everyone resumed their seats nervously, for nobody dared ignore Kamsa himself. Not so long as he lived.

‘Enough!’ Kamsa thundered. ‘Enough of this despicable spectacle.’

He stepped forward. ‘Seize those two murderers. They have violated the law of the land. I want them arrested and executed within the hour.’

He waited for the Imperial Army to do as he commanded. But no soldiers came forward. Nobody saluted or barked orders, following through on his command.

Instead, General Bana stepped forward, almost casually. ‘Apologies, my Lord,’ Bana said, loudly enough to be heard and for his words to be passed on to those too distant to hear them directly. ‘But the Imperial Army has chosen to join the movement to restore the rightful King to his throne. King Ugrasena, your father.’

Kamsa raised both fists in anger. Had Bana been close enough to strike, he would have smashed Bana to pulp with a single blow for his impudence. ‘I demand that Ugrasena be executed at once as well. He is clearly siding with these rebels against the Empire!’

Akrura stepped forward, showing himself. ‘Ugrasena has no part in this. We the citizens of the land support his cause of our own accord. It is we who wish that he be released and restored to the throne as is his right.’

Kamsa pointed an accusing finger at Akrura. ‘You traitor. I will see to you afterwards. Right now, I will show you what it means to oppose the might of Kamsa and the Magadhan Empire.’

Kamsa turned to face the royal pavilion. ‘Emperor Jarasandha,’ he called out. ‘My father-in-law and father in truth, I ask that you unleash your Mohini Fauj upon the ungrateful citizenry of Mathura to teach them a lesson. Even my own Army has turned against me, clearly seduced by this Vrishni rebellion. Wipe them all out! Kill every last Vrishni man, woman and child. Exterminate the clan from this earth. Do all this and Mathura is yours, a part of your great Magadhan Empire!’

Jarasandha rose from his seat and turned to go. All his aides and advisors followed him without so much as a backward glance at Kamsa.

Kamsa’s face crumpled. ‘Father!’ he cried. ‘Where are you going? I have need of you! Please stay. Help me quell this rebellion. We shall achieve all your plans!’

Jarasandha's chariot, clearly readied and kept waiting for just this moment, came briskly to a halt before the royal pavilion. The Magadhan paused and glanced scornfully at his son-in-law. 'Mathura's troubles are not Magadha's troubles. You have made your bed here. Now lie in it.'

Kamsa's face showed that he had never expected such treatment, not in a thousand years of imagining. 'But you want Mathura! I know you do! It is the jewel in the crown of your empire. You said so yourself only last night.'

Jarasandha nodded. 'So it shall be. And I shall have it. But in my own way, at my own time. Soon. Very soon. But first, I shall leave you to sort out your internal political disagreements on your own. My daughters, your wives, have already been sent ahead to their summer palace. They shall await you there, in case you are still able to come visit them after this issue is resolved. If not, then I shall return soon enough to continue my plans with Mathura.'

Jarasandha mounted the chariot. Kamsa lost all sense of dignity. He ran after the chariot, crying out. 'But I am your son-in-law. You love me as a son!'

'And now, I leave you to stand on your own two feet, my son,' Jarasandha said. Then with one sharp crack of his whip, he spurred his horses forward, and raced the chariot away, leaving Mathura through the deserted army cantonments, the only route not crowded by citizens and militia and Imperial Mathuran troops who were all on duty throughout the city today.

Kamsa watched Jarasandha leave and even in the shape of his back, Krishna saw his uncle's entire strength leave him.

By the time Kamsa turned, he was already a broken man.

But he was a broken man with the power of a supermortal and the strength and fury of a rakshasa.

‘YOU,’ he cried out in a voice that boiled the air like thunder. **‘YOU ARE THE SOURCE OF ALL THAT AILS ME...PRESERVER OF MORTALKIND. SO YOU ARE A GOD INCARNATE. NOW LET US SEE IF YOU CAN FACE A VERITABLE GOD AMONG ASURAS.’**

And as all Mathura watched with horrified astonishment, Kamsa began to grow larger, larger, and still larger. Until he once again stood with his head high among the clouds, bigger than he had ever been before in his early transformations as a rakshasa. But still as dense and powerful as he had learned to make himself with the help of Jarasandha’s potions and Putana’s Haihaiya poison.

‘COME NOW, VISHNU,’ he roared as he raised his foot and stamped down hard upon the royal pavilion, crushing every last one of his own entourage without caring if they were still loyal to him or not. **‘LET US SEE IF YOU CAN FULFILL YOUR PROPHECY BEFORE I FINISH DESTROYING MATHURA AND KILLING EVERY LAST YADAVA IN THE CITY!’**

Mathura was in chaos. Kamsa towered above the city, enlarged to such an enormous size, his head could barely be seen from the ground. He stamped about the cantonment area, smashing and killing everyone he could reach. For some reason, his anger was directed at his own supporters and followers—perhaps because of their betrayal.

‘Bhai,’ Balarama said, ‘we should move the people to safety before he turns his attention to them. I shall do it.’

Krishna turned to thank Balarama for taking the initiative without argument but Balarama was already racing to the pavilion, shouting instructions. Krishna knew there was not much more he could do there. His presence was better put to use against that tower of destruction on its rampage.

He needed no more than an instant to think the situation through. Kamsa's enlargement had come as a surprise, but not a shock. After all, Krishna had known that his uncle had once possessed the ability to expand and reduce his size. He had also known that Kamsa had acquired the ability to use the same power to make his body denser while remaining the same size. Somehow, Kamsa had found a way to combine both in secret and had waited until this day to reveal his full ability.

If he lived up to his word, as he would no doubt, all of Mathura could be destroyed by his rampaging. The only way to avoid further casualties was to remove him from Mathura. And in order to do that, Krishna would have to make him take this fight elsewhere. Which left only one place to go.

Krishna flew up, rising up in the sky until he hovered high enough to be noticed by Kamsa. Then, using his power to project his own voice, he addressed his uncle.

'Uncle Kamsa!'

Kamsa had just finished pounding most of the court's nobility and aristocracy to bloody pulp. Krishna had no sympathy for the rich and overbearing overlords who had aided and abetted Kamsa in his reign of atrocities and abuse all these many years, but it was still sickening to see people trampled thus mercilessly. Tearing apart a supermortal wrestling champion in a bout was one thing. This, on the other hand, was simple murder.

Kamsa turned at the sound of Krishna's voice. He grinned down at the tiny figure hovering in mid air.

'MY NEPHEW! DID I SURPRISE YOU? YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT MY ABILITY TO DO THIS, DID YOU? HOW SURPRISING. IT SEEMS THE GREAT DELIVERER IS NOT OMNISCIENT AFTER ALL!'

Krishna ignored the taunt. 'Uncle. I shall give you one final chance to surrender and live. Only because of our blood relation. Yield now and I shall have you arrested and imprisoned for life. It is more than you deserve and you know it.'

Kamsa chuckled. With his enormous size, it sounded like echoes of a thousand waterfalls crashing down cascades after the monsoons, echoing off a deep ravine's walls.

'LIFE IMPRISONMENT? WHY BOTHER. LET'S SETTLE THIS RIGHT HERE AND NOW. IT'S ABOUT TIME. I'VE BEEN WANTING TO FACE YOU, VISHNU, EVER SINCE MY MOTHER RAISED ME ON STORIES OF YOU TAKING REBIRTH TO DESTROY EVIL ON EARTH. MY MOTHER WAS THE SISTER OF THE GREAT LORD RAVANA, DID YOU KNOW THAT? THAT WAS WHEN MY NAME WAS KALA-NEMI, AND YOUR'S WAS RAMA CHANDRA. I ALSO REGRETTED THE FACT THAT WE NEVER GOT TO CONFRONT ONE ANOTHER FACE TO FACE. FINALLY, I HAVE MY CHANCE AND I INTEND TO MAKE THE BEST OF IT. COME ON, FACE ME NOW. OR STAND ASIDE AND WATCH ME DESTROY YOUR PRECIOUS CITY AND PEOPLE!'

'So your plan is to fight me and in the process destroy Mathura as well?'

'YES. BRILLIANT, IS IT NOT? EVEN IF YOU WIN, THE FIGHT WITH ME WILL CAUSE SO MUCH DESTRUCTION THAT I WILL HAVE TRIUMPHED BY DEFAULT. FOR I DON'T CARE A WHIT FOR THESE WRETCHED MORTALS. BUT YOU DO. SO WIN OR LOSE, THEY WILL DIE ANYWAY.'

Krishna sighed. 'Then you leave me no choice.'

He flew directly at Kamsa.

KAMSA cried out in anger as he staggered, the backs of his heels crushing a line of heavily laden carts loaded with weapons for the Imperial Army. Spears and swords snapped and crackled under his giant feet. He snarled and slapped at his own head, swatting at Krishna like a man might swat at a troublesome mosquito. But before he could get hold of him, Krishna had taken hold of Kamsa's hair and was flying upwards. Kamsa had expected him to attack and fight but instead, all Krishna intended was to take hold of the giant rakshasa and fly him in the one direction where nobody would be injured by Kamsa's gargantuan size and wicked intent: upwards.

Kamsa roared with fury as he realized what was happening. But Krishna was already lifting him bodily up in the air, rising higher and higher. Kamsa's feet flailed as they left the ground, narrowly missing striking a building. Crowds roared below as tens of thousands of Mathurans turned their faces upwards, watching the battle with rapt attention, less afraid for their own lives as eager to witness the fight for which they had waited 23 long years.

Kamsa continued to swat at his head. But it was near impossible for any man to strike the top of his own head while being carried upwards. Still, he

struggled and flailed mightily. It was only when he was several hundred yards up in the air and still rising that he stopped flailing and froze still.

Krishna sensed understanding flood through his giant brain.

'I SEE NOW WHAT YOU MEAN TO DO! BUT YOU CANNOT. YOU MUST NOT. I WILL NOT LET YOU DO IT. I WANT A FIGHT. I WANT THE BATTLE I DESERVE. I WILL NOT BE DROPPED DOWN LIKE A RAW EGG TO BREAK ON THE EARTH. I WANT MY FAIR DUE IN BATTLE. FIGHT ME, VISHNU. PUT ME BACK DOWN AND FIGHT ME FACE TO FACE.'

Krishna said grimly, 'Uncle, you lost your right to a fair fight when you slew newborns by dashing their brains out. You lost it when you ordered the execution of thousands more innocent children. You lost the right when you committed a hundred thousand other atrocities over the past 23 years, not to mention those you had committed even before revealing your true rakshasa nature. Back on the field, there was a moment when you could have attacked me and had your chance at a fair fight. You failed to take it. Now, this is the only fight you get. It is the only one you deserve.'

'NO, KRISHNA, NO,' Kamsa cried, bellowing loud enough to be heard by all Mathura. **'YOU CANNOT DO THIS TO ME. I AM A WARRIOR AND SO ARE YOU. FIGHT ME LIKE A WARRIOR FACE TO FACE. IT IS MY RIGHT. AND IT IS YOUR DHARMA.'**

'I am a warrior, yes,' Krishna said sadly. 'That is the only reason why I had to wait this long and allow so many other innocents to suffer and die before facing you today in combat. If I was not a warrior and not bound by kshatriya dharma, I would have crept into your palace as a babe and slaughtered you as you slept. But this is as far as my dharma will allow me to bring you. To this certain death. It is the only way you deserve, the only end for one such as you. Just as a mad elephant or beast must be put down instantly, without hesitation or thought, so must your life be ended now. If

you have any last words, speak them now, before I release my hold on your body and let it fall to its death on the earth below.'

Kamsa made begging and pleading sounds but they were of no avail. Finally, seeing that he could negotiate no further advantage, he snarled. **'RELEASE ME, THEN. BUT KNOW THIS BEFORE I DIE. YOUR REAL STRUGGLE ON EARTH HAS NOT EVEN BEGUN YET, VISHNU. YOU HAVE FAR MORE SUFFERING TO ENDURE AND FAR GREATER BATTLES AND STRUGGLES TO OVERCOME BEFORE YOU ACCOMPLISH YOUR TASK IN THIS INCARNATION. THIS IS NOT THE END, IT IS ONLY THE BEGINNING.'**

Krishna said sadly, 'This too I know.'

And then he released Kamsa, letting the giant fall.

He took several moments, during which time all the watching tens of thousands held their breath. Krishna had been careful to carry Kamsa's gargantuan form farther north of the city, to the wastelands where nobody resided, the sprawling wadis and ravines of uninhabited desolation where Kamsa had once come to practice the use of his newfound abilities. Where he had pounded his fists and body time and again on rocks and boulders, testing his new shakti, taking pride in it. Where he had killed animals just to vent his rage or fury.

He fell into that wasteland. And the earth itself seemed to harden to receive him. As if Bhoo Devi, Mother Prithvi, whatever you choose to call her, suffering for so long under the cruel yoke of Kamsa's tyranny, resolved that this time, she would be harder than Kamsa's dense muscled body and sinew and bone. And so, as the giant Kamsa struck the ground, his body was shattered into a thousand pieces, fragmented and fragmented again, until even the smallest fragment broke apart into dust.

A wind rose from nowhere and carried this dust away into oblivion.

And across Mathura, a million liberated souls cheered. And only one word was on their lips.

‘KRISHNA!’

2

RADHA yelled and yipped with joy. She jumped up and down, arms raised, turning round and round. All across the playing field, thousands were showing their joy in much the same way. In the Vrishni enclosure, she could see and hear all the other gopis shrieking themselves hoarse. Across the city, the roars and cheers were deafening. It was as if the entire world were rejoicing and exulting in Krishna's triumph. For it was everyone's triumph. Krishna had slain the Childslayer, the prophecy had been fulfilled at last. But it was they who had been set free of the tyrant's yoke.

She saw that even Kamsa's own soldiers were hammering their weapons against their shields and raising their voices. The only exceptions were the other fighters on Kamsa's side. These poor fellows, Radha saw, were quickly making their exit, scurrying away faster than stray dogs from a wild elephant.

And Krishna was no less than an elephant today. Magnificent in his youth and dark beauty, he stood on the akhada field, arms on his hips, grinning happily at the crowd. He had landed only moments ago, returning from the North where he had carried Kamsa high up in the air and dropped him to his death. Even from the sound and bone-shuddering impact felt all the way here, Radha knew that Kamsa's body was surely broken into fragments from such a terrible fall. The instant Krishna had returned, flying lithely back to the akhada field, the cheering and shouting had erupted. Now he simply stood there, basking in the adulation and approbation, with that familiar mischievous smile on his handsome face.

Not far away stood the hefty Balarama, displaying the twin to Krishna's smile. Radha stopped jumping and began running barefoot across the dusty ground. She was going to leap at Krishna, hug him more tightly than he

had ever been hugged before in his life...well, in *this* lifetime at least...and never let go!

But even as she began to run across the field, a strange thing happened.

The world went dark.

One moment, there was bright sunlight shining down from a clear blue sky with only a few wisps of cloud here and there, the next instant it was dark as a stormy night. Yet it was like no night Radha had ever seen before: the sun was still in the sky, as were the wisps of cloud here and there, birds were still flying though they seemed agitated by the sudden change. It was as if a veil had fallen across creation. The sun's light had not dimmed. It still burned as brightly as ever but now it exuded deep midnight blue light instead of its normal luminescence. The sky had been dyed a darker shade of the same color. Not only that, the very air seemed to have turned darker, bluer. It was as if someone had dipped a cloth into a pool of clear water and the water had been stained deep blue and Radha and everyone else was immersed in this inky blue water. A distinctive deep midnight blue.

Almost the same shade as Krishna's own skin when the moonlight falls upon it.

The thought came to her unbidden along with a memory of Krishna bathing in a moonlight stream not long ago, as she had watched from a tree, shyly. She had seen Balarama and he setting out one night by chance and had followed curiously. As it turned out, they hadn't been up to very much; just a midnight swim in the nearby stream. But she had watched as avidly as if he had been battling Kaliya again! And as she watched, embarrassed to be spying yet unable to look away, she had noticed this phenomenon. His skin, pitch black in daylight, had appeared almost bluish in the moonlight. Almost as if deep blue light exuded from the pores, glowing. Then she had looked around and see the blue light staining the undersides of leaves on the tree hanging over the stream and the bank and

rocks and realized that it was no trick of the light. Krishna was *exuding* deep blue light. A kind of energy that flowed from his very essence and spread outwards. The blue light of brahman.

The next day she had visited the same spot and found that as best as she could make out, every leaf, rock, tree, and insect that had been touched by the light exhibited vigor and life, in stark contrast to all around it. Even the rocks appeared beautiful somehow, smooth, polished, gleaming. The implication was clear: Krishna's brahman shakti could empower everything around him, living or inanimate.

Now, it was as if Krishna's body had exploded, engulfing the whole world with his brahman light. Yet, he was not the source of the light itself. It appeared to be omnipresent. Suffusing the whole of creation.

The roar of the crowd had died out as everyone looked around, bemused and a little unnerved by this strange phenomenon.

Radha had slowed but now she continued running towards her beloved Krishna, picking up pace as she approached the spot where he still stood.

Krishna was still standing exactly where he had been a moment ago.

But he no longer had his hands on his hips or a grin on his face.

Instead, he was peering upwards, looking as puzzled as anyone else.

Radha could hear whispers around her from the enclosures to either side as people began talking, wondering aloud what this meant. Was this some new attack by an unknown force? Was it a natural phenomenon—or an unnatural one? Or was it Krishna's doing?

She already knew it wasn't her beloved Achyuta's work. He wouldn't look so surprised had he done this himself.

She covered the last several dozen yards to where he stood and slowed.

He turned to glance towards her. 'Radhey, you should not be here,' he said sharply. 'Go back.'

'What is it, Krishna? What does this blue light mean?'

He looked around, frowning. In this odd light, he almost vanished when seen against the backdrop of the sky, so perfectly did his own skin color match the peculiar light itself. It was only by dint of his movement and the flash of his eyes and teeth in his face that she could make out his expressions and actions. 'Go back, Radha. There may be danger—'

He stopped and she heard a sharp intake of breath.

'What is it, my love?' she asked, not even aware she was referring to him with that term of endearment, so naturally did her heart turn to such motifs and feelings. 'What do you see?'

'I sense...' he said slowly, in a tone she had never heard him use before. 'Someone...or *something*...is coming.'

Then, before she could ask another question or say another word, a great hole ripped open in the fabric of the air above them and something came through with a deafening explosion of light and sound.

3

KRISHNA felt as if a hole had opened in his own chest and something had torn its way out. In a sense, this was true because as god incarnate, he contained all creation within himself. Not literally within himself in this mortal body but in his divine form. This, however, felt as if his very frail mortal body were bursting open, releasing the object that came tearing now into existence. But when the thing came, it emerged not from his chest, but from a rip in the fabric of existence itself. Like a slit cut into the empty air, about ten yards above ground and another one score yards from where he stood. The slit appeared white against the deep midnight blue light of brahman that suffused the world, and when it widened, the light within was pure whiteness, brilliance so overpowering, mortal eyes could not look directly at it. A sun at its youth, powerful enough to blind mortal eyes that even glanced once at it, could hardly be brighter. Yet the light did not blind anyone, it simply forced all those present and within sight to shut their eyes or turn away. Only Krishna, by dint of his superhuman nature, was able to adjust in a moment, and merely by blinking and willing himself, possess the ability to stare directly at the slit.

The slit in the fabric of time and space was perhaps three yards high. It opened like an ordinary slit in an ordinary cloth curtain, widest at its center, oval in overall appearance. Just large enough for a man to step through. Not a mortal man, of course, but a fellow immortal being.

Right enough, a man came through. The bright light behind him made it impossible to see where he came *from*. And so sharply did the bright backlight throw his frontal body and features into relief, it was impossible to see his face clearly. This lent him a sinister aspect. Yet the man himself was not sinister: he was known to Krishna.

How Krishna could know this without actually recognizing the man or being able to see his features was a matter that had to be credited to his

divinity. All he could say was he knew this man.

He was one of the saptarishis, the seven great seer-mages ordained at the beginning of Creation.

His name was Narada.

He looked down at Krishna and took a step or two forward before halting.

He was standing on thin air yet appeared to be as solid-footed as if he were standing on the same akhada field.

Krishna.

Krishna looked up, trying to see the face of the being that stood above him. ‘Narada-muni?’

I do not have much time. I must speak swiftly. I beg your indulgence, Lord. Permit me to speak my piece.

Krishna shrugged. ‘Very well. Say what you must.’

Balarama came striding closer. Krishna raised a hand to assure him that all was well. Balarama slowed but stood with his arms akimbo, leaning forward slightly, head lowered. It was the stance of a predator ready to attack. Krishna knew that Balarama recognized Brahmarishi Narada just as he did. It was just that Balarama less trusting than he. Perhaps that was not such a bad thing after all. What Krishna lacked, Balarama compensated. Right now, for instance, who knew what this being’s true motive or agenda might be? Krishna listened with an open mind and a closed fist. The mind was his own, the fist Balarama.

It was originally thought that you were to take this rebirth in order to slay the Childslayer Kamsa.

‘So I thought as well,’ Krishna admitted.

However, circumstances have arisen that require you to stay in this mortal form longer than intended.

Krishna frowned. ‘How much longer?’

The being standing upon thin air, barely more than a silhouette against the bright light streaming from the oval slit, seemed to hesitate.

I cannot say at the present time.

That was an odd diplomatic answer. Did ‘cannot say’ mean ‘will not’ or ‘do not wish to’ or ‘do not know’? Then again, Narada was a brahmin and brahmins could speak in the most evasively dogmatic responses at times.

‘Very well,’ Krishna said. ‘Then I shall stay here.’ He was not disappointed. After all, even a whole lifetime in mortal years was but a blink of a deva’s eye. Besides, he had only now reached a point where he might be able to pursue his feelings for Radha to the next stage.

However, there are conditions, my Lord.

Krishna frowned. ‘Conditions? Laid by whom?’

By circumstances.

Ah, that old mainstay of political diplomacy. Circumstances. Of course, what would diplomats and politicians do without circumstances to justify their actions or words?

‘I see. What are these conditions?’

Balarama raised a hand. ‘Krishna, I do not like this. Something is amiss. Let me—’

The being suspended in mid air paused and looked back over his shoulder before turning back to face them. There was a moment when his face was turned fully back towards the brilliant white light from the slit in the air. At that instant, Krishna ought to have been able to see his features clearly. Yet he could not. The man’s face was as much a cypher. That was odd indeed. It meant that the man’s features weren’t hard to see because of the odd light. They were shielded from view deliberately, by use of brahman shakti. Why? And how? Who would use brahman shakti against a god incarnate? And why would Narada do so? Unless he was not Narada? Yet everything Krishna saw, heard and sensed told him this was Narada. In which case, the shielding did not make any sense at all. Also, it was considered rude, even arrogant of anyone to stand above a deva, looking down on one as it were. Even if Narada-muni had been unable to control where he appeared, it was still highly irregular to be speaking thus to his ultimate lord and master.

Narada’s next words mitigated this offense to some extent.

I do not have much time. If he finds me here... I am not supposed to speak to you thus, Lord. Forgive my haste and lack of proper protocol. I beg your indulgence to permit me to finish quickly before I am discovered.

Krishna frowned again, this time more concerned. ‘Discovered by whom? Who do you fear will see you speaking to me, Narada-muni? When I am

here, you need fear no one. But you already know this well. No deva would dare to assault or harm you, least of all in my presence.'

The being that was Narada-muni shook his head vehemently. **It is not a deva I fear. It is...** He gestured. **Time is short. Allow me to finish. I was saying that you must stay longer in this lifetime and to do so, you must ensure that nobody knows that you are swayam bhagwan.**

'What?' Balarama sputtered, taking two steps forward and raising his clenched fist. 'That's absurd. It was another matter in the last lifetime. There we were reincarnated as Rama and Lakshman and their two brothers. Mortals subject to mortal limitations. It was of the essence that nobody know our true identity in order for us to fulfill our mission. For due to the boon granted by Brahma, Ravana could only be slain by a mortal. Therefore, it made sense that not even our avatars in that incarnation could know that we were Vishnu reborn. But in this lifetime, we are Vishnu incarnate. God himself. Swayam bhagwan, as you yourself just said. Our mission now is to root out the last of the adharma that remained on earth after the death of our Rama Chandra and Lakshman avatars. It is to our advantage to be seen and known as swayam bhagwan, to shine the torchlight of dharma in the darkest corners of the mortal realm and root out the evil of adharma, whatever form it may take. How can we do that if we disguise our true nature?'

Nevertheless, certain circumstances make it vital that you do so. You must continue to live out your lives now as mortals, albeit mortals possessed of extraordinary gifts and skills. Only at certain vital moments can you reveal your true divine nature. And then only for a brief moment. Thereafter, once you have exposed your true self to those on the mortal realm, you must erase all knowledge of your divinity from their minds. You must do this each and every time you use your powers.

'So even our own families and loved ones cannot know our true nature?' Krishna asked. 'This will put great stress upon our relationships. We are

what we are. How can we hide our true natures from those we love and still remain as close? All trust is based on honesty.'

What you say is true but nevertheless these are the conditions of your continued existence on the mortal realm. The mortals you interact with, be they loved ones or strangers, may be granted knowledge that you are God incarnate when it is unavoidable, for instance during times of combat, but after that event is over, you must erase their memories of that knowledge. They cannot carry that awareness in their minds, nor can they be permitted to speak of it freely.

'But why?' Balarama asked and this time, he spoke Krishna's mind as well.

The why and wherefore would take time to explain and time is the one thing I do not have, my Lords. Now, I must take your leave. Remember my words and abide by them. Or all your work upon the earthly realm in this lifetime will be for naught. Jai Shri Hari Hari. Narayana Narayana!

And before either Balarama or Krishna could act or speak, the being turned and reentered the slit. At once, the aperture closed behind him, leaving only a midnight blue sky once again.

VASUDEVA and Devaki had watched, mesmerized, as their son performed the feat that had been foretold decades earlier. Devaki cried out as Kamsa died. A few moments before his demise, before he had expanded his body and launched that final desperate bid to battle his nemesis, Kamsa's eyes had sought out Devaki in the Vrishni pavilion. She had seen the light of life fade from his eyes and the expression within those fierce grey orbs change from its lifelong look of enraged fury to a peculiar melancholy resignation.

It would be too much to expect that Kamsa, in his last dying instants, had sought out his sister and begged her forgiveness with his eyes—forgiveness for all the pain and suffering he had caused her and her husband, by humiliating them, imprisoning them, and most of all, by murdering their newborn children year after year in order to prevent this very child from being born. The prophesied Eighth Child. The Slayer of Kamsa. But that was as close to it as he could ever come. That was the nearest to an apology Kamsa had ever come—and yet, oddly enough, it had been enough. It was more than Devaki had ever expected to get in her lifetime. She sent up praises to Devi, praying for her brother's lost soul, praying that Krishna would make his death quick and as merciful as possible under the circumstances.

And now he was dead. His giant body shattered to pieces in the wilderness beyond the city. Unmourned and unmarked by anyone. Left to rot.

The cruellest tyrant in Yadava history—perhaps even the cruellest in Bharat's itihasa—was dead at last. Slain by the very boy who had been prophesied to slay him. Devaki's own flesh-and-blood, her beautiful wonderful Krishna.

As the bout ended and the crowd rose to its feet as one body, filling the air with their resounding cheers and cries of jubilation, Devaki remained seated. Beside her, Vasudeva stood instinctively, cheering with the rest, then realized that she was still seated and resumed his own seat as well. He had put an arm around her, comforting her. Of all people present here, only he truly understood what she felt, the conflicting emotions of a sister who had watched her brother slain by her own son, his own nephew, and the peculiar mingling of utter desolation and furious joy she now experienced. For it was so strange, so oddly *wrong* to exult in the death of one's own blood-kin. And yet, when that blood-kin happened to be *Kamsa*, it felt so right.

So necessary.

‘It is done,’ Vasudeva said softly to her, his voice a whisper afloat upon an storm of cheers. ‘The tyrant has fallen. Our son has fulfilled his promise. Our part in this is over now.’

She leaned her face on his shoulder and wept softly. They were tears of catharsis, the anticipation and expectation of 23 years released in a single flood.

Then came the strange light. And the phenomenon in the sky above the akhada field. And the appearance of the strange being who appeared to be a man in brahmin’s garb yet whose face remained inscrutable. The sound of his voice was like distant thunder: she could sense the vibrations and faint rumbling that indicated he was speaking but could hear not a single coherent word or syllable. Her Krishna’s voice was audible but only as a voice: he spoke too softly for her to make out the words.

Then, even that odd exchange was over. And the man in the sky vanished, along with his akashvani missive.

And only Krishna was left on the field, as before, Balarama beside him.

The blue light remained though, as if the world were suspended in a strange limbo between past and future, as if something were yet to occur before normalcy could be restored.

She sensed something just beyond the edge of understanding. She rose to her feet. ‘Devaki?’ Vasudeva asked. ‘What—?’

‘Come, my husband,’ she said. ‘We must go to him.’

Moments later, they halted within speaking distance of Krishna and Balarama. The brothers were conversing softly, apparently discussing the appearance of the man in the sky and his akashvani message. The sound of bare feet slapping on the hard flat mud field approached rapidly and Devaki recognized the pretty young cowherd girl whom she had seen earlier talking to Krishna, cheering him on from the sidelines. The girl’s feelings for Krishna were more than evident. In this moment of heightened sensation, Devaki could not help but glance at her momentarily and found herself thinking: What a pretty young thing. And so energetic and vivacious. She would make such a good wife for our Krishna.

Then Krishna was turning to her and Vasudeva and she put all other thoughts out of her mind.

‘Maatr,’ he said softly, ‘Pitr.’

And he dropped down, clasped their feet to his head, touching his forehead to the soles of their feet. Beside him, Balarama did the same.

‘No, no,’ she protested. ‘It is we who should prostrate ourselves before you, before both of you. You are swayam bhagwan. God incarnate. Vishnu in mortal guise. It is our blessed fortune to have parented you into this world.’

Krishna rose to his feet, tears brimming in his warm brown eyes. ‘No, maatr, the blessing is always mine and Balarama’s. Would that we could be born as your children a thousand times. What you have endured in order to fulfill these roles are a greater accomplishment than all that we can do, have done and will do in these mortal bodies.’

Vasudeva embraced both his sons, kissing them on the foreheads. ‘Would that we endure the same suffering a thousand times, if only to be your parents each time. We are proud of you today. For you have done what you were sent here to do. You have accomplished what no other could accomplish. You have set our people free and ensured the survival of our race and civilization. Your names will be echoed throughout history. From now to the end of days, the names of Krishna and Balarama shall stand for freedom from tyranny and the ideal avatars of god upon earth.’

Krishna and Balarama bowed to acknowledge these lavish yet well-deserved blessings. But as they did so, Devaki saw them exchange a glance that was as eloquent as anything Vasudeva had just said.

‘What did that being desire from you?’ she asked. ‘Was he not the same one who spoke the akashvani prophecy that foretold this very day’s events?’

Krishna nodded. There was an aspect of sadness in his face, she saw. At once, she guessed that he had just received some tragic news.

‘What did he say, my son? Was it a new prophecy? For though we have lived these 23 years in anticipation of this very day, none of us know what to expect after this anticipated event. Did the saptarishi say what will happen next?’

Krishna nodded once again. ‘He did, maatr.’

She caught hold of his shoulder, feeling concern wash over her, tainting the joy and relief she felt in this moment of triumph. ‘What did he say? Tell us, Krishna. We are your parents. You can confide anything to us.’

Krishna glanced at Balarama, then sighed deeply. He turned back to Devaki, then glanced at his father. ‘He told us that we must make you forget.’ He gestured at the crowd all around, at the city, and beyond. ‘All of you. All who regard Balarama and me as avatars of God incarnate on earth.’

Devaki’s hand flew to her mouth. Beside her, Vasudeva frowned. ‘I don’t understand, son. What do you mean, make us forget? What are we supposed to forget?’

Krishna glanced at Balarama again. Balarama nodded. Together, they raised their hands, Krishna his right, Balarama his left, and as Devaki watched, their hands merged to form a single hand, palm facing towards Devaki and Vasudeva, even as brilliant blue light exploded from that palm. The world went dark around her for a moment and she felt something pass across her mind, like a cloud across the sky—or a hand rippling calm waters. It caused something to happen within her brain.

The last thing she heard and remembered was Krishna-Balarama saying with a single merged voice:

‘Everything.’

PRARAMBH

Reprise

1

MATHURA watched with bated breath as Krishna stepped onto the akhada field to face his next opponent. The future of every man, woman and child in that proud nation depended on the outcome of this bout. Rich or poor, brahmin or sudra, Yadava or pardesi, everyone's attention was set intently upon that rectangular field in which the wrestling bout was taking place. Never before had this humble akhada attracted such attention. Never again would it host a match that rivaled this encounter in importance.

Krishna himself felt nothing as he stepped forward to meet Kamsa's first attack. Not fear, not doubt, not confidence, not anger...nothing. There was only a blankness in his mind that he felt certain nothing could possibly fill. An emptiness, a void, into which he could pour anything, create an entire world if he desired. This moment was a blank slate on which any future could be written.

He sensed Kamsa's great self-confidence. The Childslayer clearly felt certain of victory. It was writ large on his fair features, in the way he took his time stepping around the akhada, in no hurry to attack, yet showing no concern at the outcome. He grinned at Krishna and the grin was more a leer, promising pain and agony and a slow, tortuous humiliating death.

Then Kamsa charged.

It was exactly like the elephant's charge.

Krishna simply stood his ground.

Kamsa slammed into the much slimmer, much more slender boy with enough force to quash a stone wall. Even Hathi-Yodha was nothing compared to Kamsa in his present state. The elephant was ultimately

mortal, merely stronger and bigger and better armored than most of its kind. Kamsa, on the other hand, had been built into a juggernaut killing machine through decades of drug consumption and training. He was a finely honed murder machine.

Yet when he charged at Krishna, it was like striking a stone wall mighty enough to withstand even his greatest force.

The shoulder that had pulverized boulders the size of a house struck Krishna's chest and chin and was shattered.

The back that had provided power enough to lift entire quarries of stone and heave them scores of yards away now cracked and broke under the impact of that charge.

The arms broke, the joints gave way, the heavy bones of the legs and hip shattered, the muscle that was harder than iron was pulped and turned to bloody mash.

Kamsa bounced off Krishna and collapsed in a heap on the dusty ground of the akhada.

A roar of exultation rose from the Vrishni ranks.

On Kamsa's side, everyone looked on in stunned silence.

Kamsa moaned. For the first time in a decade or more, he felt pain. Not merely pain, but true agony. Blinding piercing shooting pain in every joint, bone and muscle group. So intense, he broke out sweating all over his body.

Somehow, impossibly, he forced himself to regain his feet. He himself hardly knew how he accomplished it but he was aware that he could not

remain supine. Staying down itself constituted defeat and he would not be defeated.

He could not be defeated.

He was Kamsa.

Lord of Mathura.

King today, emperor tomorrow.

He rose to his feet, staggering and blinking at the shock of the pain coursing through his nerves. He had never thought such agony was even possible, let alone that he could experience it.

He willed his injured bones to knit, his damaged flesh to heal, his body to grow even more denser than ever before. And he succeeded: the injuries reversed themselves, the healing was astonishingly rapid, and the body that was like iron now became even denser and stronger.

He faced his opponent again. ‘I will—’ he began, snarling.

Before he could finish the threat, Krishna came at him.

The boy leaped at him, grabbing hold of his head in the triangular space of his left arm, throwing Kamsa backwards.

Even though the boy was but a stripling and should not have been able to bring Kamsa’s much heavier, denser weight down, yet Kamsa was thrown back in a crashing fall, landing with a punishing thud on his back.

Krishna's arm was in a choke hold on Kamsa's throat.

Kamsa felt he could break free of the chokehold easily. All he had to do was—

...was...

...was...

He felt the world fade, the day grow dark, all thought, vision, touch, smell, sound, recede to a distant point.

Then he heard the sound of his own neck being broken. It was an impossible sound. Even the strongest wrestlers in the world, bodies enhanced just as his own, had tried and failed to break that neck. To break that neck would require a force greater than that required to move a mountain.

Yet it broke.

And he heard it distinctly.

And felt the shameful, crushing humiliation of his own defeat.

And then he died.

The sound of Krishna breaking Kamsa's neck was loud enough to carry to the ends of the crowd thronging the wrestling field, several score yards away. The thousands-strong audience watching the match were dead silent

for another breathless moment, then, as one they rose to their feet and let forth a roar of such exultation that the entire city of Mathura heard it and responded with echoing cries and roars and cheers.

Sitting astride his horse in the cantonment, General Bana heard the roar and knew that it was over at last. He signalled to his men to do what had been agreed. They did so without question: like himself, they had all seen too much bloodshed and suffering, much of it inflicted by themselves acting under Kamsa's orders. They laid down their weapons gladly and with hearts filled with relief and hope. As one man, the entire Mathuran Imperial Army disbanded and disarmed itself. The people surged forth, no longer under curfew, no longer restricted. They danced in the streets. They sang the praises of Krishna. They celebrated.

Krishna stood on the field, looking down at Kamsa's prostate body. Balarama's shadow approached and merged with Krishna's shadow on the ground. His brother's larger hand fell on his shoulder.

'It is done,' Balarama said. 'Again!'

'Yes,' Krishna said.

The sound of the crowd cheering and exulting in the triumph erupted across the field and across Mathura. Balarama glanced up and saw a familiar feminine form come sprinting barefooted across the sidelines, crying out, 'Krishna! Krishna!' as she came.

'So now their memory is erased,' Balarama said. 'They remember nothing of what really happened. Only... *this*,' he finished scornfully.

'It is victory.'

‘It is nothing. We are more than mere wrestlers. You fought longer and harder and more ingeniously when battling Kaliya than in this bout. This was over before it even began.’ Balarama shook his head in disgust. ‘Like the killing of Ravana. A single arrow to the navel, and he just stood there and took it.’

‘That was ordained. We were given our instructions. As we were this time as well. We did as we had to, in order to maintain the balance of brahman.’

‘Phuaagh,’ Balarama said, hawking and spitting off to one side. ‘So we did. And now? We have to continue in this lifetime but as mortals? How are we supposed to do that when we possess the power to create and destroy entire universes! Are we supposed to go about masquerading as meek mild cowherd boys, assume alter egos to hide our true superhuman abilities?’

‘If we must, yes,’ Krishna said firmly. ‘I will not argue about this, Balarama. We did it last time because we had to, and we shall do it again. We serve a larger purpose, remember that.’

‘Yes, well, maybe I’m tired to serving the larger purpose. Maybe for once I just want the satisfaction of true victory.’ He shook his head in disgust. ‘Why is it that the rakshasas and asuras get to do whatever they desire, act out all their evil cruelties for so long—millennia in Ravana’s case, decades in Kamsa’s case—and yet, when it comes to us, we are denied even the satisfaction of showing the world who we truly are, what we are truly capable of? Why is that, Krishna?’

‘Because mortals are incapable of comprehending the truth about us, Balarama,’ Krishna answered patiently. ‘Even our own parents would live in fear of us if we did not veil their minds in this fashion. No. Narada-muni’s instructions were for the best. If we are to continue in this lifetime then we had best do so as mortals, not gods. This veil of maya we cast over

reality is necessary to protect the mortal mind. For to see reality as it truly is would drive almost all mortals insane beyond cure. Who could live knowing that gods and demons co-exist with them constantly, waging eternal wars in their own backyards? It is all for the best, Balarama. You know that as well as I do.'

'Perhaps,' Balarama admitted bitterly. 'But it doesn't mean I accept it.'

'Our acceptance or denial plays no part in it, bhraatr,' Krishna said sorrowfully. 'We are merely soldiers of dharma following orders.'

Balarama shrugged helplessly and walked away without further argument. Radha had reached within hearing distance. She ran to Krishna, her face glowing with excitement and love.

'Krishna! You were magnificent.'

Krishna smiled at her. 'Radhey. You are twice as magnificent, always.'

Radha blushed.

Balarama snorted as he walked away.

Krishna smiled impishly.

2

JARASANDHA and his Mohini Fauj managed to slip away immediately after Kamsa's defeat. They were seen leaving but as they did so peacefully, nobody attempted to stop them, on Akrura's orders. The rebel leader's militia had moved out across the city, taking over the position that the Army had occupied, not to tyrannize and control but merely to police and protest.

Vasudeva and Devaki had been watching the wrestling match incognito and once Kamsa was slain, they came forward and greeted their long-lost Eighth Child with great emotion and love. It was a tearful reunion.

Old king Ugrasena and his wife Padmavati, imprisoned in that subterranean dungeon for over two decades, had been sustained and kept alive through the shrewdness of Akrura and their other supporters. Unknown to Kamsa, that rat-hole of a prison had been policed by Ugrasena's loyalists and the king and queen had been nourished and kept safe and healthy through constant care. Now, they were carried through the streets in a jubilant procession and reinstated on their rightful thrones. Ugrasena immediately declared Vasudeva king, and Vasudeva in turn declared Krishna as Lord of Mathura, heir apparent in the technical sense but king to all intents and purposes. The people celebrated for weeks.

In time, Jarasandha and his imperial ambitions brought the armies of Magadha to the doorstep of Mathura itself. Deprived of his son-in-law and ally, he felt compelled to protect his interests and stake his claim by force. He besieged the city-state and attacked Mathura in an all-out war that raged for over a decade and united the divided Yadava clans into one cohesive fighting whole. Krishna led the armies of Mathura in a great campaign that repulsed the Magadhan forces time and again, fighting more fiercely than any nation Jarasandha had attacked thus far. But the Magadhan's sheer scale of power and military might and his relentless

ambition caused Krishna to consider other options. Eventually, he and his associates, with the blessing of the elders, decided that too much blood had been spilled in Mathura already and that a new city-state capital was called for. They built this city by the sea in the far western edge of the land and named it Dwarka. During this same period, Krishna also found himself involved perforce in the long-standing dispute between the Kauravas and Pandavas and when the inevitable war broke out for the throne of Hastinapura, he and the armies of Mathura were compelled to join in as well. There followed many other wars and campaigns and battles and demoniac attacks.

But those were other stories, other times.

Right now, there was a new Lord of Mathura.

His name was Krishna.

3

KING Ugrasena raised aloft the rajtaru of the Sura nation. Shaped in the form of a cowherd's crook, the solid gold rod gleamed in the morning sunlight. The precious gems studded in the handle glittered, sending a flurry of scintillating reflections across the sabha hall. They flickered across the smiling faces of the largest crowd ever assembled in that vast chamber. Even a calico cat curled in a nook squinted at the flashing reflections with an expression that resembled nothing so much as a pleased grin.

There was much to be pleased about. The 23-year long reign of Kamsa the Usurper had finally ended and the rightful king was restored to his throne. King Ugrasena might be withered and age-worn, and with the pallid anemia of a man imprisoned for over two decades, but he was still strong enough to hold the rajtaru aloft with a steady hand and in the Yadava tradition, so long as a cowherd could hold his crook steady, he was fit to herd his flock.

No flock was happier to welcome back its herder than the people of Mathura today.

Standing beside King Ugrasena upon the royal dais, King Vasudeva smiled happily. He raised his own rajtaru and was greeted with just as loud and enthusiastic cheers as the elder liege. Both kings embraced warmly, bringing back memories of a day 23 long years ago when both had crossed rajtarus and sealed a peace pact that had carried such hope and promise.

Finally, the third liege standing on the dais stepped forward as well, raising his own rajtaru. This was King Bhoja, ruler of the third major Yadava nation and a powerful chief in his own right. During the years of tyranny he had provided shelter to hundreds of thousands of immigrant

Vrishni and Sura Yadavas fleeing the tyranny of Kamsa and had often faced the aggression and hostility of the Usurper as well as his allies as a result. Many of the lords and ladies present here today would never have survived the long pogroms of Kamsa had it not been for the support of Bhoja. As his wide mustached face creased in a wide grin, his rajtaru touched the kings-rods of his brother kings, marking the formal onset of a triple alliance.

The crowd's cheer was a deafening roar, drowning out even the robust chanting of the purohits reciting the Sanskrit shlokas. The sound of cheering boomed and echoed around the palace complex and across Mathura. All across the capital city, citizens of all ages and ilk celebrated the end of the tyrannous Usurper's reign and the restoration of their monarch. Everywhere in the city and nation, faces were smiling and voices were raised in unmitigated prayer and praise.

Peace had been absent a long while from the Yadava nations. She had been sorely missed.

As the celebrations and feasting began, the three lieges moved to a more private chamber where they sat and received the congratulations of the most influential noble families across the Yadava nations—and other nations as well, for in times of war, one never knew when a powerful force like the Yadava people might prove a valuable ally. Although the Imperial Mathuran Army was disbanded in name, the last loyalists and spasas working for Jarasandha and Kamsa put on trial, the combined armies of the three major Yadava nations were still a formidable force in the sub-continent. When a new sun rises, everyone turns and pays it homage. In this case, it was an old sun re-risen but all the more impressive for that: Ugrasena's very survival and return to power was heralded as a miracle in itself. Indeed, it was no less than a miracle.

So great was the uproar from the crowds outside and the chanting of the purohits that all three sovereigns were able to converse freely on the stage without their words being heard by the nobles who paraded onstage, paid

their verbal dues and departed. The three lieges were friends as well as distant relatives and they took the moment to exchange a few sincere words of joy at this happy reunion. The rush of events since the death of Kamsa had been so overwhelming that this was the first time they were actually sitting together and able to speak freely.

‘Old friend,’ King Vasudeva said warmly, ‘words cannot describe how glad I am to be with you on this dais again.’

King Ugrasena looked sorrowfully at his fellow Yadava chieftain. ‘No more than I am to be beside you, my dear friend. You have been a true friend through all that has transpired. I shall never forget that.’

Ugrasena was referring to the manner in which Vasudeva, at grave risk to his own life, had had the old king and queen’s hellish dungeon secretly cleaned and made inhabitable by the two prisoners, as well as ensured a daily supply of fresh water and clean wholesome food for their sustenance, not to mention smuggling in vaids when required by the aging, often ailing king and other minor but vital creature comforts.

Vasudeva waved away the thanks magnanimously. ‘I did very little. The risk was borne entirely by my good friend Akrura, champion of the Yadava cause. It is to him and the closely trusted friends who risked their lives to care for yours that you owe your thanks.’ He did not mention that several of those trusted friends had in fact lost their lives when caught sneaking into or out of the royal dungeons at various times over the 23 years-long imprisonment, or that Akrura himself had lived daily under the constant threat of imprisonment, execution or torture.

Ugrasena gestured at his royal consort, Queen Padmavati, sitting beside them and chatting with Vasudeva’s wife Devaki and Bhoja’s wife. ‘Indeed, my Queen and I shall thank good Akrura as well. But I know that it was on your authority that he undertook the mission of keeping alive support for my monarchy even when the nobles whose greed brought them over to Kamsa’s fold spread rumors of my own demise or abandonment of my

responsibilities. If not for your support, Padma and I should have died in that dungeon years ago...decades ago. We would not have survived the first year itself in that terrible wet and filthy prison. Thanks to your brave effort in keeping our prison habitable and a supply of nourishment constant, we were somehow able to endure the unendurable.'

At the very thought of the long suffering, Ugrasena's own eyes brimmed with tears. 'Although I will not deny wishing myself dead more than once these past many years. For a father to discover that his own son and heir is not the son of his body and then to be imprisoned so cruelly and unjustly while that bastard child unleashed a reign of terror on the people...would that I had died rather than seen such days. Even the news I received from your compatriots of Kamsa's wicked acts all but broke my heart.'

A delegation of oddly clad aristocrats, wealthy merchant-lords from a foreign land who had stayed on in Bharat-varsha, offered precious gifts to the three Yadava kings. Ugrasena, Vasudeva and Bhoja smiled pleasantly, thanked them, then resumed their conversation.

Vasudeva placed a hand gently on the older man's shoulder, comforting him. 'Do not berate or blame yourself, my friend. None of this was your fault. It was all the work of the evil Kamsa. Every last man, woman and child in the Yadava nations knows that nothing done by Kamsa or his minions or allies was by your bidding or acquiescence. He was solely culpable for all the terrible crimes committed during his dark reign. That was why he had to be destroyed.'

Beside them, Bhoja nodded. 'He was an evil force that needed to be purged. Would that it had been done sooner.'

Vasudeva replied sagely. 'That which must happen happens when it must.'

Bhoja shook his head, smiling. 'Vasudeva, philosophical as ever.'

Vasudeva turned to Ugrasena. ‘If I was able to aid you in some small way these past years, then we must both thank our brother sovereign Bhoja. For it was he who granted my Queen Devaki and I sanctuary when we needed it most. Though Akrura’s militia provided us with able protection, had Jarasandha brought the full force of his imperial might to bear upon us, it would have taken Bhoja’s entire army to repel them.’ Vasudeva paused. ‘Although, from what I heard of his Mohini Fauj as well as his champions, even an entire army might not have been sufficient.’

Bhoja quailed at the mention of Jarasandha’s champions. ‘I am a warrior myself and willing to face any force in battle. But Jarasandha possesses sorcery that makes it impossible for any mortal army to defeat him. I have seen his forces in battle. The Mohini Fauj are formidable but they are still mortal warriors, possessed of fearsome skills and unorthodox methods but capable of being cut or pierced or crushed. His champions on the other hand...’ Bhoja shuddered.

‘His champions can be cut, pierced and crushed as well,’ said a fourth voice. ‘It just takes the right knowledge, that’s all.’

All three kings looked up at the person who had spoken.

4

“Krishna!” exclaimed all three, almost with one voice. They rose to greet the dark-skinned young man with the impish grin who stood before them, accompanied by his fair-skinned young brother with the imposing physique. ‘And Balarama! Well met. Come, come, be seated with us. Both of you.’

Ugrasena raised a withered hand in a gesture. Pradhan Mantri Pralamba, ever vigilant, instantly responded, sending courtiers on the dais with comfortable seats befitting the two brothers. The courtiers placed the seats beside the thrones on which the three kings were seated, offering them to the newcomers.

Krishna looked around, raising his left eyebrow. Standing on his right, Balarama raised the other eyebrow.

‘We cannot sit with you upon the royal dais,’ Krishna said. ‘What will all these richly dressed aristocrats think?’

Bhoja snorted. ‘Think? The only things they are capable of thinking are *How Much* and *How Much More!* Besides, you two are the true saviors of the Yadavas. If not for you, we would all be facing Kamsa’s swords instead of celebrating this feast day. In my sabha hall, champions mingle with nobles and both have learned to like it! I am sure my good King Ugrasena here wishes you both to share this platform with us.’

Ugrasena raised both hands in a swagatam gesture. ‘Please, you are as my own sons. Grace us with your presence.’

Krishna and Balarama sat. Their very presence energized the guests thronging the hall. Diplomats, emissaries, kings, princes, merchants, all stared curiously at the two young men on the dais, exchanging words in a manner that suggested gossip more than diplomacy. More than one elegantly turned out young woman shot the two young men looks that were less than diplomatic as well, and even the older women were not embarrassed to show their admiration for the two heroes. Correction: *Handsome* young heroes.

They received many genuine visitors as well. Fellow Yadavas, clansmen and kinsmen from the Yadu, Vrishni, Andhaka, Madhu, Dasarha, Kukura, Satvata and other clans came to offer thanks and celebrate the end of Kamsa. For all these years, they had lived under the cruel reign of the Usurper or, like the Vrishni, had fled to foreign lands. There, though they had found shelter and lack of persecution, yet many had suffered greatly from other calamities. Entire tribes had been debilitated and decimated. Clans had become impoverished and lost their homelands to foreigners who had been gifted those provinces by Kamsa as reward for their loyalty or simply because his father-in-law Jarasandha had demanded it.

There was much accounting to be done and Krishna and Balarama aided and counseled the three kings in this accounting. The giving back of wrongfully taken lands and provinces, the gifting of means to those who were impoverished, the doling out of the immense wealth accumulated by Kamsa under Jarasandha's control. If not for the presence of the Heroes, it was likely that many clans and tribes would have fought bitterly for larger portions or shares, or simply to demand more because it was there to be taken. But the formidable presence of the Slayer and his brother kept such avarice in check.

Consequent to Narada's warning, Krishna and Balarama had erased the memory that all had of the true events of the wrestling bout and their real identity. No longer were people aware that the two brothers were god incarnate, swayam bhagwan. But they were still the Slayer of Kamsa and his brother and that was formidable enough.

The question of succession had arisen and been quickly settled. Many clans might have laid claim to the throne of Mathura. For the clan that sat on that precious throne ruled all the Yadava nations. Again, it was Krishna who reminded one and all that the Yadus could never rule, no matter how righteous they may believe their cause had been. This was due to the ancient curse of Yayati, father of Yadu, founder and forebear of the Yadava nations. That was why Balarama and he, as Satvatas of the Vrishni clan, could not assume any vestige of power whatsoever. And when he proposed Ugrasena's name none dared oppose it. For who had greater claim than the illicitly deposed king himself?

Thus Ugrasena sat on the throne of Mathura and with Vasudeva and Bhoja on either side, like muscular healthy arms replacing the withered limbs that hung by his own sides, and Krishna and Balarama like two strong feet able to kick the most uppity claimants to kingdom come, he began his rule uncontested and unchallenged. Thus did the tenuous time of transition pass without mishap and soon all accepted the new order, for all had been enriched in some way or other. The Yadavas were a contentious lot given to bitter infighting and clan wars. But they had seen enough violence and war in the past two decades to sicken the strongest warrior's stomach. They willingly accepted a compromise for the sake of peaceful existence.

They had no way of knowing at the time that sadly, tragically, this peace too would not last.

KAAND 11

1

Nanda and Yashoda had tears in their eyes. They had given away cows to brahmins as promised on Krishna's and Balarama's last birthday. They had given copious quantities of the famous Gokul milk products—the curds that Krishna had thrived on as an infant and as a child—cream, butter, ghee. They had received numerous gifts in turn from Krishna's blood parents Vasudeva and Devaki and their uks wagons now groaned under the weight of ornaments, finely shaped metal vessels, rich garments and much else. All formalities and rites had been performed and all obligations fulfilled. The days of feasting and celebration were finally over. Now the time of parting had come, the time for them to return home to Vraj-bhoomi, back to Gokul-dham where they could resume their lives at last, free of the shadow of the tyrant.

They said their farewells to Vasudeva and Devaki, who had showered them with great affection and generosity for raising Krishna and Balarama as their own these many years. Yet, as Nanda had pointed out, it was not a task for which they deserved to be rewarded or compensated. Bringing up Krishna and Balarama...indeed, merely being in their presence for so many wonderful years...was reward enough. Every gopa and gopi assembled there at the gates of the palace was tearful and heart-broken. The thought of returning to Gokul without their two most beloved sons was a burden too heavy for all their wagons and uksan together to bear.

Radha stood nearby, weeping too copiously to speak. She was loathe to interrupt the family farewells but her grief at parting was perhaps greater than everyone else present on that occasion.

Finally, Nanda, Yashoda and Rohini kissed and embraced their two best gopas, climbed on the wagon carts and turned homewards. One by one, all the rest of the Vraj procession followed. Despite their gaily colored garments and belongings, the procession resembled a funeral march. Even their responses to the energetic waves and cheers of all the Mathurans on

the streets were desultory. The Vrishni of Vraj had gained great fame as the ones who had sheltered and raised the Deliverer in secret all these years. But to the Vrishni themselves this fame was a double-edged sword for by doing so, they had sacrificed their two most loved sons.

They had not gone far when the song of a flute came to their ears. Radha was the first to hear it and knew at once its source.

‘Krishna!’ she cried out, leaping up lightly and standing backwards on the cart’s bed. The uksan drawing the cart protested with mournful lows.

All the Vrishni listened, their weeping silenced as the song of the flute wafted over them. It brought back memories of the days of Krishna’s and Balarama’s first exploits, as if the scenes were unfurling and displaying themselves on the cloth sidings of their wagons like living memories.

The shattering of the uks cart by the infant Krishna, barely more than a newborn at the time and the wild theories dreamed of by Nanda and the gopas.

The suckling of Putana’s poison milk and the slaying of the giantess, followed by Krishna’s mad divine dance upon her prone corpse.

The mischief of the dahi handis and the copious amounts the two rascals had consumed in their divine greed.

The letting free of the cows and calves from the enclosures, and Krishna always blaming Balarama for the act.

The time when Yashoda had tied Krishna to the plough and he had dragged it between the two trees, shattering both mighty trunks in his eagerness to follow her.

The numerous encounters with the asuras and the gradual revelation of his true nature...although much of the details now seemed occluded, hazy when viewed from the vantage point of memory. Were the asuras truly demons? Perhaps they had merely been very skilled assassins in elaborate disguises. Even so, for a mere child to confront and overcome them was a formidable act.

The slaying of Pralamba, Dhenuka, Arista, Trnavarta, Baka, Kaliya...so many others. Both by Krishna himself and by Balarama as well.

Balarama's constant caring for the Vrishni as Krishna was occupied in fighting the assassins.

The numerous close encounters and narrow escapes and near fatalities averted solely by the intervention of the two boys and their supermortal prowess in combat.

The flute song brought memories of happier occasions too: The ras lila in the fields. The feasts. The celebrations. The festivals. The family occasions. Weddings, births, naming ceremonies, betrothals, thread ceremonies.

The migration to Vrindavan. The beauty of those lush heavenly pastures and groves.

The peaceful idyllic days in the center of the storm of attacks. The moments of careless abandon stolen from the claws of incessant anxiety and violence.

The heartache and intensity of first love. The powerful surges of attraction and fulfillment. The gentle beauty of romance.

The titillating mischief of the stolen garments and the teasing of the gopis by the Kalindi river.

The coming of age of the boys and girls, like blossoms flowering in the wilderness.

All the beauty and madness and unforgettable rapture of the years with Krishna and Balarama passed through the minds of the Vrishni, evoked by the flute song that followed them all the way out of Mathura, across the Yamuna and even as they travelled the slopes of Vrajbhoomi. It was impossible that Krishna's flute could be heard all the way there. Yet though the world might have had its knowledge veiled of Krishna's and Balarama's divinity and true nature, the Vrishni knew in their hearts that the two boys were not merely boys. That the flute song was not merely a reed flute being blown by mortal breath to produce melodic sounds.

They heard the secret truth locked within the melodic notes of the flute song.

The heart song within the audible song that unlocked the doors of inner perception.

For the song belongs to they who listen. And the Vrishni knew how to listen when Krishna played.

He played the song of their lives. The song of life itself. Geeta Govinda.

They allowed themselves to be comforted by its beauty and evocation. For they understood that their time with the Lord incarnate had passed. The flute song helped them accept their loss, their sacrifice.

By the time they reached home, their tears had ceased and they returned to work and daily life as before, a happy and boisterous clan that set an

example to all Yadavas.

The flute player was gone from their midst.

The peacock had left the garden of paradise.

The prize calf had moved on to other pastures.

But somewhere in their hearts and minds, the flute played on and would always play on, eternally.

Krishna was gone. But his song remained forever.

2

GURU Sandipani beamed with pleasure at his two newest pupils. ‘Shishya,’ he said proudly, ‘I will admit that when Gargacharya brought you here, I had my doubts. In my hometown Kashi I am known as the terror of shishyas for I did not permit laxity of discipline in any respect nor would I tolerate any lapses in learning. Ever since coming here to the sunny city of Avanti, I have had many good pupils but never a pair as unlikely as you two.’

Krishna and Balarama exchanged identical impish smiles. They knew well what the guru meant. Seated beneath the peepal tree in the courtyard of the gurukul, they had experienced a similar speech from the preceptor when they had arrived here to start their education as brahmacharyas. The guru had not been beaming then, nor had his voice been filled with as much pleasure and pride as it was now. If anything, he had expected the worst of the two of them.

‘I cannot say that I expected the best of you two,’ he admitted now. ‘For after your formidable reputation and your numerous adventures and episodes of derring-do, I was certain that your kshatriya experiences would dim the light of learning in your minds. I have seen it often before with princes and princesses who have achieved great feats in sport and hunting or even in battle at a young age. They cannot fathom the need to sit beneath the tree of wisdom and partake of its not-always-sweet fruits. The urge to leap onto a horse and ride off with sword in hand overpowers the urge to master the vedas. Rarely do such pupils last more than a few moon months.’

Sandipani smiled again, shaking his head in wonderment as he consulted the palm leaf scroll laid out on the balsa wood lectern before him, leaning forward in his cross-legged posture to confirm his mental calculations with his customary thoroughness. ‘Indeed, most do not even last as long as you two have, but with far, far lesser results.’

He looked up at them again, admiringly. ‘Sixty four days. A mere two full turns of the moon around our world. Three score days. I have seen spoilt princes ride in and ride out in as much time or even a few weeks more with not one fraction of the knowledge acquired.’

He gestured with a subtle nod at both boys, seated cross-legged as he was, listening attentively and with smiling yet faultless expressions. ‘Yet in these sixty four days, the two of you have mastered the entire Vedas and Vedangas, as well as the Upanishads and all the knowledge of warfare, the smriti shlokas and secret tactical manuals, the literature of dharma, the processes of logic and philosophical debate, and the complete knowledge of polity. In short, you have acquired a perfect knowledge of all the six major kinds of learning.’

The brothers exchanged another glance, silently congratulating each other on their accomplishment.

‘And you have done this with a spotless record. Not once did I have to reprimand, discipline or even remind you of a single chore or task. You were perfect students from start to finish. So much so that I wish that I could have you as my shishyas for the rest of my life, so I might continue sharing the fruits of my knowledge with two such eager and bright young pupils. For you are like perfect pools mirroring everything I teach, and by teaching you, I myself find my own store of knowledge and insight growing prodigiously. Every question you raised, every new observation, every analysis was a masterpiece of function and form. I can honestly say that I perhaps learned as much you did these past sixty four days. Would that I could continue this teaching for decades more.’

He chuckled softly, a rare sound from that perennially stern voice. ‘Yet, the truth is that I possess nothing more of value to teach you! You have learned all that I know and then more as well. So perfect is your mastery and memory and grasp that I have spent the past few days thinking of reasons to keep you here longer—without success. The truth of the matter

is that you have gained all that it is possible to gain from me. It is time now for you to return to your lives and put all this newly acquired knowledge to good use. As I know you shall. Rise now, both of you, and take my blessing.'

They did as their guru asked, touching his feet and taking his aashirwaad. When all due respects and formalities were done, they asked him what he desired by way of guru-dakshina. Kshatriya dharma demanded that on graduating from a gurukul, the shishyas fulfill their guru's last request.

Sandipani sighed. 'If only I could ask that you stay here forever and share the light of your intelligence and wit with me. It would make my passing years a delight. I cannot think of a better guru-dakshina.'

'Say the word and we shall do as you bid, gurudev,' Krishna said. 'The pleasure we have felt in serving you is incomparable. If you command us, we shall do so to the end of your days.'

Sandipani shook his head ruefully. 'Nay. I cannot deprive the world of your light. Besides, the purpose of a guru is only fulfilled when his students go out into the world and achieve their own goals. I would be remiss if I kept your considerable talents to serve my own selfish purposes.'

Balarama and Krishna had come to love their preceptor so much in this short time that they would have done his bidding, no matter what he asked. They folded their hands before him and said again: 'Is there not something we can bring you or some service we can perform that would please you? No matter how impossible or daunting, you have but to speak the words and we shall consider it our binding duty to fulfill your demand. It is our dharma to offer you guru-dakshina.'

Sandipani glanced behind them at the still form of his wife, standing beside the doorless entranceway of the simple thatched hut in which he lived. 'There is one thing. Yet I hesitate to ask it of anybody. You boys are

young and have your lives ahead of you. Should my demand prove too dangerous, I should never forgive myself.'

Krishna smiled. 'Gurudev, you have known us but a short while yet in a sense you have known us all your life. You should know that no matter how dangerous or daunting the task, it will not prevent us from achieving fruition.'

Balarama joined his voice to that of his brother. 'Pray, speak your request. See if we are not your able pupils and worthy of the name of Sandipani Guru.'

Reluctantly, at last, after further urging, Sandipani Guru revealed his secret request to Krishna and Balarama.

They looked at one another brightly, grinned again, and rose to their feet. 'Then we shall take your leave, gurudev. We go now to fulfill your request and shall not return without your guru-dakshina.'

Sandipani Guru blessed them profusely and spoke all the appropriate shlokas to aid them in their task. But as he watched them board the two-horse chariot on which they had arrived sixty four days ago, he found himself wondering if he had done right by them.

After all, the guru-dakshina he had asked for was no simple chore or task. It was a mission so formidable that in all his decades of imparting knowledge to thousands of able pupils, he had not once dared to ask a single one to accomplish this particular task.

His wife came to stand beside him as he watched the brothers ride away. 'I shall pray for their success,' she said.

‘We shall pray together,’ he said. ‘They shall need all the possible help they can get.’

3

The chariot ground to a halt on the packed sand of the top of the beach. Krishna disembarked, tying the reins to the post of the vehicle.

‘We cannot risk bogging down the chariot in soft sand,’ he said. ‘The horses could injure themselves.’

Balarama nodded. ‘They have carried us this long way, let us set them free to roam.’

Krishna nodded, patting the flanks of the horses. The beasts were visibly exhausted from the long journey. ‘You’re right. Keeping them tethered could cost their lives. We don’t know how long this might take. But setting them free could mean losing them.’

Balarama shrugged. ‘If that happens, we’ll fly back.’

Krishna elbowed him gently. ‘You know we can’t do that. We’re supposed to act mortal, remember?’

Balarama made a low growling sound. ‘Mortal, my backside. I’m tired and bored of being mortal. After cramming a whole fifteen years worth of studying into two months, we deserve to be let loose ourselves. We need to be let off the reins once in a while too, you know.’

Krishna shrugged. ‘Who knows. If this doesn’t go as planned, you might get your wish.’

Balarama slammed his right fist into his left palm. ‘I hope so!’

They started down the sloping scrub border to the main beach. The ocean filled their view for as far as the eye could see, the beach itself curving like a long crescent with them just off the center of the innermost curve.

‘So this is Prabhava,’ Balarama grumbled. ‘You’d think they’d have a pathway in this bloody sand.’

‘They weren’t expecting us,’ Krishna said. ‘I’m sure if they knew you were coming they would have laid out a red carpet with dancing girls to strew petals for you to walk on.’

Balarama shot him a dark glance. ‘Don’t joke about things like that. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen any dancing girls. I don’t need to be reminded of the fact.’

Krishna slapped his brother’s boulder-like back. ‘It’s been a long time since we’ve seen *any* girls, dancing or otherwise. We took vows of celibacy when we became brahmacharyas, remember?’

‘Yes, but I thought that was only until we graduated from Sandipani Guru’s gurukul.’

‘That’s true. But we haven’t graduated yet. Not until we finish this task and bring him back his guru-dakshina.’

Balarama glanced at Krishna in alarm. ‘You mean if we don’t do it, we would remain brahmacharyas for the rest of our lives? *Celibate* brahmacharyas?’

‘Exactly,’ Krishna said. ‘Now you know what’s at stake.’

‘Yes,’ Balarama said sourly. ‘Our entire adult lives!’

In the course of this exuberant banter, they had reached the shoreline. Krishna paused short of the surf foaming on the shell-strewn beach and looked out to sea. It was a pleasant evening, the sun low in the western sky —over to their left—and sea gulls flew overhead from the rock formations just offshore.

‘So this is Prabhava,’ Krishna said. ‘Seems like a nice enough spot.’

Balarama scowled. ‘So nice that it stole Sandipani Guru’s only son! Come on, enough admiring. Let’s kick this ocean on its backside.’

Krishna frowned. ‘How exactly should we do that? Where *is* the ocean’s backside? Where’s its frontside, for that matter?’

Balarama waved at him dismissively and strode out into the surf.

He waded into ankle deep water, then halted.

He joined his palms together and meditated for a moment. Krishna knew he was chanting vastras silently, shlokas that summoned up the power of brahman to accomplish things that defied the very laws of the natural order.

Krishna glanced around. The beach was deserted as far as the eye could see. It was just after the monsoon season and the sea was too rough to frolic or swim in for sport. There were no fishing villages in the immediate vicinity and no boats out to sea. They were far from the nearest marg.

Nobody was around to see Balarama and he use their supermortal powers.

He shrugged and strode forward, joining his brother in the surf. The water was cool upon his feet and ankles, the foaming surf kissing his feet

gingerly then receding quickly.

Krishna joined his palms as well and began uttering the same shlokas Balarama was using.

Almost instantly, the sky darkened, the air fell deathly still, and all birdsong ceased. The pounding of the surf died away entirely.

A deathlike stillness fell across the panorama.

The very ocean seemed to hold its breath and pause between waves.

Balarama and he bent down together as one man and with their four hands working as two, they grasped hold of the ocean water itself.

At first Krishna's fingers began to slip through the water as would normally happen.

Then he focussed his energies, directing the vastra at the ocean's very substance, and the water stiffened in his grasp, turning into a carpet of solidified fluid.

The largest "carpet" in existence.

Grasping the edge of the "carpet", Balarama and he pulled as one, and the entire ocean heaved up in the air and crashed down again with a resounding boom that reverberated throughout the world. He thought perhaps that boom might have been audible on the moon itself. It was certainly visible. Because, for an instant, they had actually lifted up the entire ocean and then dropped it crashing down.

They waited a moment. Nothing happened. The world had shuddered to a halt, shocked at their action. Even the sea gulls flying overhead were not visible anymore. He didn't bother to look up to see if they had frozen in mid-flight or merely landed and taken shelter somewhere out of fright.

When another beat or two passed without anything happening, he bent down again. Balarama bent as well, moving in perfect harmony with him.

They grasped hold of the lip of the ocean once more, lifting the "carpet" like two men taking hold of a rug that needed a good dusting.

Once again, they heaved the ocean up several inches, then let it drop with a booming crash.

This time the sound was a sonic boom that seemed to echo long after they had released the ocean.

This time, something began to happen.

4

Something emerged from the ocean floor, rising up high above them, towering overhead. It swayed like a gigantic tower, water cascading from its sides, even a whale or three dropping off in shocked surprise to fall into the ocean below. The world resumed its normal pattern: the sky grew light again, the wind began to blow, the birds to fly, and the waves to move as usual. The surf at Krishna's feet felt warmer though, almost like water in a hot spring spa.

The being that towered above them bent its head. Unlike the artistic depictions hanging on palace walls, the real lord of the ocean was not a handsome man with the appearance of a guru or deva. It was a hideous distorted amalgam of species, mashed up together to produce a whole that was almost unbearable to look at. There was nothing humanoid or even animalistic about it. It was wholly a thing of the deep ocean. Instead of two eyes, it had numerous tentacles and feelers and suction cups. Instead of a head, it had undulating blobs of flesh. It had no limbs, merely a mass of flesh that stuck out this way and that way at irregular intervals, forming a whole that did not resemble anything seen by mortal eyes anywhere on earth.

Even its voice was not a voice but a representation of human speech. Its true sounds were made by the ocean waves themselves, rolling and crashing and thundering in a pattern that made no sense to any other being, but which Krishna and Balarama could interpret as clearly as if the lord of the ocean were speaking chaste unaccented Sanskrit.

Vishnu Mahadeva.

Or at least, that was the equivalent of the ocean sounds that it made. In reality, the sound more closely resembled a giant sink-hole draining a few thousand litres of ocean water and fauna.

‘Lord of the ocean,’ Balarama said curtly. ‘You took your time showing yourself. Perhaps we ought to have displaced you entirely from your bed and moved you elsewhere.’ He nodded his head at the sky above. ‘Another world perhaps. There are several that lack water.’

Forgive me. I thought you were merely enjoying sport. It is well known you are here on earth for your own amusement and play...The proper term, I believe, is...Lila.

Balarama grimaced and turned to Krishna. ‘I told you to stay serious and keep away from those gopis. Now everyone thinks we’re just here for fun and flirtation.’

‘Bhraatr, compared to our real work in swargaloka, this *is* just fun and flirtation.’

How may I serve you...Lord?

Balarama sighed and turned back to the ocean lord. ‘You possess something that belongs to someone dear to us.’

Name this...something...please.

‘He is a young boy, a child really. The only child of our guru Sandipani. He was taken by a great wave from this spot a long time ago.’

Taken? You mean...he died...drowned in my embrace?

‘Call it what you will, we ask you now to return him. He was dearly loved by his father and mother and their lives have never been the same without

him. They wish him to be returned exactly as he was the day he was taken from them, unharmed and perfectly alive and normal.'

That is something I cannot do.

Balarama flexed his hands, interlacing his fingers and cracking them loudly. 'Or we can start relocating you to another planet where your waters may be of more use. I believe the third planet from our sun, our red neighbour, is quite parched and in need of some fluid replenishment.'

Balarama and Krishna bent as one again, reaching to grasp the lip of the ocean.

Wait. You do not fathom my meaning. I do not mean to refuse your demand, Lord Vishnu twice-born. I merely mean to say that it was not I who took him therefore it is not within my power to return him.

'Not you?' Krishna looked perplexed. 'What do you mean? If you didn't take the child, then who did?'

It was a mighty being named Panchajana. He normally assumes the form of a conch shell and travels through my being. On this occasion, he saw the boy and fancied him as a prize to store within the center of his shell-form. It was he who swept up on shore in the guise of a giant wave and sucked in the mortal child, stealing him away. I played no part in that abduction. It was all Panchajana's doing.

'Mistook him for a pearl, did he?' Balarama said grimly. 'Well, he'll have to answer for that. Where can we find this fine fellow?'

Within my belly. I can provide you with guides to direct you to his lair. But he will not be as respectful or cooperative as I am. He is a surly

fellow who keeps to himself. He enjoys eating young mortals whole. When he sees the present physical incarnations you inhabit...Let us just say that he would rather eat you than talk to you.

‘Sounds like a friendly bloke,’ Krishna said cheerfully. ‘Well, looks like we’re going to have to get our feet wet after all, bhraatr. Shall we proceed?’

Balarama sighed. ‘I suppose so. I wish I had known earlier. I would have carried a change of clothes and something to eat. Swimming always gives me an appetite.’

Several shiny-backed finned mammals popped their heads above water. Some leaped in the air, circumscribing perfect crescents before sliding smoothly back into the sea.

These are your guides. They will lead you close enough to Panchajana’s lair. Be warned though, my Lord. He is not a being to be trifled with.

‘Neither are we,’ Krishna said grimly. He waded out into the ocean, then dived. Balarama followed suit.

5

Panchajana's lair was dark and forbidding. The two brothers could barely see one another. Balarama used his brahman shakti to light the pores in his body. Krishna did the same. From the light that exuded from their bodies, they could see their way now. They worked slowly through the labyrinthine network of undersea caverns that led to the creature's lair.

Finally, far at the back of a dark grotto-like hole in the rocky wall, Krishna spied the gleaming white of conch. He put a finger on his lips to warn Balarama not to make too much noise. Balarama issued a snorting sound, air bubbling from his nostrils and drifting upwards slowly. Even though they were possessed of mortal bodies, they could breathe underwater indefinitely by making the air in their lungs replenish itself.

The being named Panchajana was asleep within the conch shell. The shell itself was his lair, a great gigantic formation that must have taken millennia to form. Both marveled at its porcelain perfection and smooth undulating curves. Deep within its heart, they found the being sleeping. His body was pinkish black and hairless like that of a snail. At the sight of him, curled up and asleep, they felt sorry.

There appeared to be no need for violence. Balarama woke Panchajana by prodding him and once awake, the creature straightened its body and twisted and turned several times in shock and awe. Finally, it was able to come to terms with the realization that it was face to face with god incarnate Himself in human form.

'Where is the boy you took from the shore?' Krishna asked. He drew his finger through the water, forming an image of the boy upon the molecules of water. Panchajana peered in amazement at the floating image and made sounds of denial.

Meanwhile, as Balarama rooted through the conch shell, he saw a peculiar thing. There was a portion of the shell that remained unfinished as yet. This portion, unlike the rest of the shell, was imperfect and ragged, with shards and sharp edges sticking out. Suddenly, Balarama understood why the conch shell was so gigantic and so unusual. He swam back to the spot where he had left Krishna and Panchajana conversing.

‘Krishna,’ he cried out. ‘He is lying! The conch shell itself is shaped by him from the bones of creatures he kills!’

Krishna grasped hold of Panchajana. ‘Is this true?’

The being sputtered and struggled. ‘It is my work! I sculpt living bones into a living home. The shell serves me well for shelter and travel. Look at it. Is it not perfect? I am an artist.’

‘But you kill innocent beings to build it. That makes you a murderer, not an artist!’

The being’s stalk eyes wavered craftily. ‘What worth are human lives? Better they serve the glory of art by contributing to my work. In my hands, they are commemorated forever.’

Then he tried to slash at Krishna with a hidden weapon. Krishna struck back once. Panchajana died instantly.

‘He was a weak, sad creature,’ Krishna said. ‘I did not wish to kill him. But he was taking innocent lives for his art.’

‘You are too sentimental at times, bhaiya. He deserved to die. He had no sense of morality. He did not even understand that what he was doing was wrong.’

‘Neither does a force of nature that sculpts a mountain ridge into a beautiful facade or cause a great cataract to fall in a lovely glade. Nature is cruel. The world itself is cruel. That does not mean we should destroy it.’

Balarama shrugged. ‘In any case, you stopped him from killing more innocents. Surely you cannot argue with that?’

Krishna nodded silently. ‘But we still have not retrieved Guru Sandipani’s lost son.’

Balarama glanced up at the conch shell in which they stood. ‘He is now a part of his work of art.’

‘Perhaps. But if he died then his eternal aatma will be elsewhere. If we go and appeal to the Lord of that place, we may still retrieve him.’

Balarama frowned. ‘You can’t possibly mean...?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you mean to go and bargain with...?’

‘Yes.’

‘No, Krishna! We cannot do that.’

‘We must. This is our guru-dakshina. We cannot return to the Guru without completing this mission. Nor can we go ahead with our lives.’

‘There must be another way.’

‘There is none. This is the only way.’

Balarama sighed. ‘You are right, as always. Very well. Let us go then. How shall we access that place?’

Krishna looked around. ‘We might as well do it from the bottom of the sea. It’s as good a place as any. After all, Samyamani is not a place in the physical realm. It is a Lokaloka.’

‘A place that is not a place,’ said Balarama grimly. ‘Yes, I know. But it will still involve a lot of walking—or swimming. And that traveling will involve real effort on our part. Surely we could find a means of transport to get us there with less exertion.’

Krishna patted his brother’s belly. It was hard as stone but still protruded. ‘You could do with some hard walking—or swimming. But a ride will not be amiss. We may as well use our own chariot and horses.’

Balarama was about to ask how they could do that and still travel undersea when he heard the whinnying sound of horses and saw their chariot appear before them. The horses were wide-eyed from the sight of their unfamiliar environment but the bubbles of air escaping from their nostrils showed that Krishna had imbued them with the ability to breathe underwater.

‘Your chariot awaits, brother,’ Krishna said.

Balarama shook his head in protest but got onto the chariot.

Krishna took the reins. ‘You know. If we were merely riding I might have preferred to walk. But I love driving a chariot. Sometimes I think I should have been born a sarathi in this life, rather than a cowherd.’

‘There’s time yet,’ Balarama said laconically. ‘There’s nothing to stop you from changing professions even now.’

6

SANDIPANI Guru was tending to his vegetable garden when he heard the sound of the chariot arriving. He did not turn or hurry his work for the sound of chariots and horses were not uncommon in his ashram. His reputation here in Avanti and parts farther away as well brought many young shishyas to learn. Many of them tended to be young princes and princesses or the sons and daughters of rich kshatriya chieftains possessed of fine things. They could while a few moments while he finished tending to his garden.

It was the sound of his wife's voice that distracted him. For far too long, she had been melancholy and pensive, rarely speaking except to say what she must. A singer possessed of a rare beautiful voice, she had ceased singing as well. It had saddened him for he was her constant listener and when the singer ceased to perform, it was the listener who suffered. But he understood and shared her grief too well to change her mind. He knew that in time she would either sing again or not.

Now, for the first time in years—nay, decades—he heard the sound of her voice raised high. Laughing! Talking! That beautiful melodious voice. He had not heard such joy in her tone since...since...

He left his implements and rushed out.

The sight of the young boy clasped in his wife's embrace almost brought him to his knees.

He stood a moment, hands muddied from the gardening, and stared.

Krishna and Balarama stood beaming proudly by their chariot, watching, as the Guru's wife embraced their son and showered him with kisses.

The boy himself appeared exactly as he had been the day he was washed away by the wave while playing on the shore of Prabhasa.

He turned his head and looked at his father from around his mother's waist. His eyes lit up with joy at the sight of his father. His hand stretched out, calling Sandipani to him.

With a cry of joy, Sandipani Guru ran to his son and wife.

This time, he did fall to his knees. He embraced and showered his son with kisses as well, and joined his own happy voice to that of his wife's.

Krishna and Balarama looked on, beaming.

Vasudeva rose from his seat and came to embrace Krishna and Balarama with joy. ‘My sons, it has been too long that you have been away from us. We have sorely missed you! ’

‘It has been less than three months, father,’ Krishna said smiling. He greeted his mother Devaki respectfully, and Balarama followed suit. ‘But it seems like years. I have missed you both too.’

He looked out the window at the city laying peacefully in the late morning sunshine. ‘I have missed Mathura as well.’

‘Come,’ Vasudeva said, putting his arms around both of them. ‘Let us sit and speak of many things. There is much I wish to consult with you on.’

They sat and spoke for a while. Finally, after having discussed matters of state and polity they turned to less formal matters.

‘Your adoptive father and mother and relatives in Gokul miss you even more than we do, Krishna,’ Vasudeva said.

Devaki leaned forward as well. ‘Imagine the heartache they must feel, having been with you all their lives and now suddenly wrenched apart? I can well imagine their suffering for it echoes my own pain at being parted from you two all these many years.’

Krishna nodded thoughtfully, his handsome face creased by concern. ‘It is true. I miss the groves and fields of Vraj too. I would want nothing more than to return there today itself and slip back into my idyllic life of herding and flirting all day.’

‘Not so idyllic,’ Balarama reminded him. ‘There were always asuras around the corner, remember?’

‘Even so, I would fight all those asuras all over again just to be able to enjoy the pleasures of life in Vraj,’ Krishna said then stopped. ‘But I cannot. Already, Balarama and I been away from Mathura for three months. This was unavoidable as we had to acquire the full education we could not have gained in Vraj.’

‘And you did it in three months?’ Devaki exclaimed. ‘While others take their entire childhood and youth to acquire the same knowledge!’

‘Actually, it was sixty four days, mother,’ Balarama said proudly. ‘The rest of the time we spent fulfilling a favor for our Guru Sandipani.’

‘It was our Guru-dakshina to him,’ Krishna said. He did not explain further. To have done so, would have meant describing feats and things that no mortal beings could have accomplished. Being intelligent enough to master a full education in sixty four days was prodigious; being able to travel to the bottom of the ocean and to the land of the dead was divine.

‘And now,’ Vasudeva said. ‘You have many tasks to undertake. Your presence is sorely needed here in Mathura, Krishna. For one thing, Akrura is waiting to see you and his business is most urgent. But before that, I have a suggestion for how to appease your family in Vraj.’

‘We feel their pain of parting from you keenly,’ Devaki admitted. ‘We would not see them suffer as we did, barely knowing what you did or how you lived. Therefore we would suggest that you send an emissary on your behalf.’

‘An emissary?’ Krishna said.

‘A friend, rather,’ Vasudeva said. ‘You know him well already. His name is Uddhava.’

‘Uddhava!’ Krishna said, turning to Balarama who nodded, smiling. ‘Of course. He is a good friend and a good man.’

They summoned Uddhava into the chamber and there was much exchange of warm greetings and clasping of hands and clapping of backs.

‘You continue with your talk,’ Vasudeva said. ‘Your mother and I must attend to other matters. We shall see you presently.’ And Devaki and he left the three young men together to talk of old times and new.

8

Uddhava conversed with Krishna and Balarama about numerous things for a while. Finally, Krishna looked at Uddhava and said, ‘My friend. I wish you to do me a great favor.’

Uddhav smiled. ‘There are no favors between friends. Only gestures of love gladly given. Ask me to swim to the moon and I shall do it but not as a favor. And no thanking me for doing it either, understood?’

Krishna smiled. ‘Understood. Very well then. Consider this something I would do if I could spare the time but since I cannot, it is done just as well by you. Go to Vraj and meet with everyone on my behalf.’

‘Everyone?’ Uddav asked, his eyes sparkling mischievously, ‘Or just *someone*?’

‘Her too,’ Krishna admitted as Balarama chuckled. ‘But when I say everyone, I do mean everyone. All you have to do is pass on a certain message to them.’

Uddhav shrugged. ‘I shall do as you say, brother gopa, but it will not appease them. Their eyes long to see you, not me. Their ears await the sound of your flute not my nasal tones!’

‘Even so,’ Krishna said, ‘when you pass on this message I give you, their hearts will be appeased, their longing satisfied.’

Uddhav frowned. ‘What message could do so much?’

Balarama clapped Uddhav on the back. ‘A message from Krishna. It can make the world go round and swallows fly to the edge of the universe and back.’

Uddhav shrugged. ‘If you say so, then I shall. But I have my doubts. For I know how much they cry for you in Vraj and how much your mother misses you. Why, even the cows have stopped yielding rich milk, and the cream...’

Krishna leaned forward whispered a mantra into Uddhav’s ear. At once, Uddhav sat rigid, frozen still. Then, only a fraction of a second later, he continued moving and speaking as before, as if unaware of the brief stalling. ‘...the cream is only half as good as it used to be...’ He stopped short and looked around. A strange beatific smile came over his face, erasing every crease of concern. ‘But now they shall all be as before. Once I pass on your message, all care and anxiety and heartache shall be wiped from their hearts. They shall be joyful and energetic again. And never again will their longing for you cause them suffering or sadness. You are right, Balarama, a message from Krishna is enough to make the whole world break into song!’

Balarama shrugged and made an expression that said, Told you so!

Krishna smiled and clapped his friend on the back. ‘Thank you, fellow gopa. If there is anything else I can do for you in return, you have but to ask.’

Uddhav paused, looked around, then glanced at Krishna. ‘Actually, there is this one small thing. A girl named Trivakra...’

He let his voice trail off, looking down shyly.

Krishna smiled. ‘You desire her?’

Uddhav nodded.

‘Then what is the problem?’

Uddhav sighed. ‘She desires you.’

Balarama groaned. ‘Every woman desires Krishna. That does not mean they can have him.’

Krishna replied seriously: ‘If their desire is genuine, then why should they not have me?’

Uddhav spread his arms in a gesture of helplessness. ‘I am not jealous of you. Who can be jealous of Krishna? It would be like being jealous of the Sun or the Moon. But so long as she has eyes only for you, she will not even see me.’

Krishna thought for a moment. ‘Then perhaps there is a way for her to get what she desires as well you to get what you desire.’

Balarama rolled his eyes. ‘Another classic Krishna quote. What does that mean? How can both of them get what they want?’

Krishna smiled. ‘By transferring her love for me into love for Uddhav.’

Uddhav’s eyes grew big and round. ‘But how can this be done? Would it require some yagna or tantric ceremony? I am scared to dabble in supernatural matters. It does not seem right.’

‘Not to worry, good Uddhav,’ Krishna said warmly. ‘It is a simple matter. All I shall do is go to this woman Trivakra and persuade her that you are the better lover.’

Balarama raised one eyebrow, then the other. ‘Now that is a solution. If anyone can persuade anyone else of anything, it’s Krishna.’

Krishna clapped Balarama on his meaty shoulder. ‘Another classic Balarama quote.’

9

Akrura was the next person they met with and he was as happy to see them as they were to see him. ‘Boys, you look well,’ he said happily.

‘And you, uncle Akrura, are getting fat,’ Balarama said good-naturedly. Akrura was anything but fat but it was true that he no longer had the gaunt haunted look that he had sported for decades. His sunken cheeks had filled out a little, replacing the lupine look with a friendlier aspect. His garments too had changed from the nondescript vastras he had worn to blend in and avert attention. He now sported better clothes and brighter colors than they had seen him wear in their short lifetimes.

He laughed at Balarama’s quip and patted his flat belly. ‘Well, it’s about time, your aunt would say. She’s tired of worrying each night whether I would come home alive or the door would be knocked down by Imperial Guards. Ever since the death of the Usurper and good king Ugrasena’s return to power she does nothing but cook and pray and try to spend every penny I possess on clothes and fine things.

He gestured at his garments. ‘I told her if she kept making me dress up in these fashions, I would soon be mistaken for a noble at court. So you know what she says to me? She says, “You are a noble! A true Arya! That’s what ‘noble’ means after all.” What do you say to a woman like that?’

‘That she’s right,’ Krishna said. ‘You are a better man than all the aristocrats who rush to pay homage to the new king. Never mind that for 23 years when he was buried in the deepest dungeon, none of them even cared to ask whether he was alive or well. Now, everybody’s his well-wisher! But we know the truth. Only a handful remained truly loyal. And you, good uncle Akrura, are the forefinger of that handful.’

Akrura smiled and patted Krishna's cheek affectionately. 'You do me too much honor, son. It was you who slayed Kamsa. If not for you and Balarama here, good king Ugrasena would still be in that deepest dungeon and those nobles would still be standing in line daily to kiss Kamsa's—'

They laughed boisterously. The guards at the doorway and servants passing by smiled at the sound of their unbridled laughter. It had been a long time since such laughter had been heard in these hallways. It had been even longer since there had been anything worth laughing at here.

Eventually, they came to the main meat of their conversation.

'Hastinapura,' said Krishna, steering talk to that topic. 'Let us speak now of the city of elephants. How is my dear aunt Pritha and her family?'

Akrura sighed. 'She is known there as Kunti, of course. After her adoptive father's name, Kuntibhoja, as you know already. And she was widowed when her husband Pandu died as a result of a curse from a forest hermit.'

'Yes,' Balarama said, munching on some figs as he listened. 'We have heard of our aunt's many travails and suffering in exile with her husband Pandurang and his other wife Madri. We know about the birth of their five sons in the forest and how they were raised there by the rishis and sadhus. And then, when the boys were aged 15 their mothers brought them home to the city of their father and ancestors to claim their inheritance and ascend the throne as Pandu's lawful successors. Surely they must be ascended to the throne of Nagpur by now?' Balarama referred to the capital city of the Purus by another one of its many illustrious names, for it was as well-known as the City of Snakes or Nagpur as it was known as Hastinapur or City of Elephants, and other names besides these two.

'They ought to have been, it is true,' Akrura admitted. 'For they are rightful heirs to Pandu, attested by the rishis and Pandu's wives. But the

blind king Dritarashtra denied them their heritage and refused to grant them kingship over the kingdom of Purus.'

Krishna listened intently as Akrura explained the complex politics of the Puru race and the numerous complications that had prevented Krishna's and Balarama's five cousins—known collectively as Pandavas after their father Pandurang—from claiming their inheritance and ascending the throne of the Puru race.

'Some of these conflicts date back as far as the war of Dasarajna,' Akrura said. 'The fabled battle wherein Ten Kings battled against our ancestor Sudas.'

Krishna nodded. 'And for which Sudas and his descendants were branded Shudras and relegated to the lowest level of the four castes by the brahmins, instigated by Brahmarishi Vishwamitra. Yes, it is a long and tangled history of conflict. But what concerns me now is the plight of our paternal aunt and our five cousins. What is to become of them now? Is there no recourse under law for them to pursue?'

Akrura shrugged. 'To be honest, we were so preoccupied with our own crises here in Mathura, I have not kept pace with the latest news from that part of the civilized world. In fact, it has been a long while since I even traveled that way. And because the Purus are our blood kith and not antagonistic towards us, there was no cause to travel there on diplomatic grounds for some time now.'

'Even so, you are well known as a diplomat and arbiter of disputes. It is my request that you travel to Hastinapura as soon as you are able and enquire with my aunt as to her condition and that of her sons. If there is trouble brewing and we can be of any help, bring word back to me at once.'

Akrura chewed his lip thoughtfully for a moment. ‘The trip is one I would be happy to make. Gathering information on powerful ally kingdoms is an essential part of my life and it is no less important now that Mathura is free at last. But there are issues to be considered, Krishna.’

‘What issues?’ Balarama asked, crunching on an apple. ‘We are enquiring after the welfare of our aunt and cousins, what’s wrong with that?’

Akrura grimaced. ‘It is a sensitive political situation. To side with the Pandavas may be seen as challenging the power of the reigning family.’

Balarama glared at Akrura. ‘The reigning family is the Puru dynasty. And our cousins are the rightful heirs of that dynasty!’

‘Exactly my point. You regard your cousins as the rightful heirs. But King Dritarashtra sits on the Elephant Throne and he favors his own sons as the rightful heirs. In fact, he has proclaimed his eldest son Duryodhana king-in-waiting.’

Krishna and Balarama exchanged a sharp glance. ‘All the more reason why you must go there and learn as much as you can,’ Krishna said. ‘We know you will handle your visit with impeccable diplomacy. As for us, we shall refrain from making any official statements or proclamations or even to send any official gifts with you. You shall go purely as an individual on general business. That should pose no challenge to anyone.’

Akrura nodded slowly. ‘Yes, that would be wise.’ He looked at Krishna with renewed respect. ‘You are as wise as you are gifted, young Vasudeva.’

He pronounced the name with a long ‘a’ instead of the short ‘a’ in Krishna’s father’s name. *Vaasu-deva*, which meant ‘son of *Vuh-su-deva*’ in Sanskrit.

Krishna smiled. ‘I have wise teachers to learn from,’ he said.

Akrura’s smile broadened. ‘I shall report to you as soon as I return from Gajavahya.’ He was using yet another name for Hastinapura. ‘I shall leave in the morning.’

10

dARUKA reined in his horse and dismounted. He knew this terrain well enough to recognize that the winding path up ahead continued for a few more yojanas before it joined the main raj-marg that led to Mathura City. That meant he was only about half a day's steady riding from his destination. He stopped because he had glimpsed a grove of trees that indicated there was running water close by.

He found the water quickly and easily and made sure to water his horse first. She was a strong roan mare that had served him well for many years and he made it a point to first tend to her needs before his own. He stroked her forehead and the soft downy fur between her eyes when she was done drinking, before offering her a small apple from a pouch on his side-saddle. She took the little red fruit between her foreteeth as elegantly as a lady picking up a savory and popped it in, crunching happily. She rolled her eyes at him in that way she had which showed her affection.

‘Yes, yes,’ he said tenderly, ‘I love you too, my faithful companion. We shall both eat when we reach Mathura.’

She whinnied softly and stamped her foot once, not demanding, merely agreeing with him.

‘Yes, my work there is very important,’ he said. ‘I go to seek employment with a new master. Someone very special.’

She raised and lowered her muzzle twice.

‘His name is Krishna,’ he said, stroking the side of her neck. ‘He is Lord of Mathura in all but name. Some say he is a deva in human form. It was

he who slew the Usurper and Tyrant Kamsa and liberated the Yadavas from the reign of terror.'

Sri listened with head lowered, her wide open eyes and upraised ears indicating her alertness at the sound of her master's voice.

'Yes, he is a great man. That is why I desire to work for him. I would serve him in any way he wishes. Just to be able to touch his feet and perform a service for him daily, any service, would be a blessing.'

Sri dipped her muzzle once, snorting softly.

'Yes. To serve one who does great work is the best dharma possible. Soon we shall reach Mathura and I shall seek him out and pray that he finds me worthy of his service.'

Sri stamped her foot again, once, emphatically.

'It is good of you to encourage me thus. I hope you are right and he hires me on the spot. I am very optimistic about this job.'

He glanced back at the risen sun. 'That is why we have ridden all night to get to Mathura. Even now, the sun is already above the horizon. We must ride swiftly so that I can see him today itself.'

He mounted the mare who tossed her head proudly once before setting off down the path. She set a steady strong pace without needing to be prodded once. Daruka prided himself on the fact that he had never needed or used a whip or spur or any device to urge an animal to obey him. His gift was the ability to talk beasts into action and obedience willingly. He had yet to find one who would not comply. Dogs, horses, bulls...all came to love and respect him in time, most within moments of meeting him. He did not

know if this gift could serve the great Lord Krishna in any way, but if not, he was willing to do whatever the good Lord required.

‘So long as I can serve him,’ he prayed then bent his head to aid Sri in her journey.

They rode steadily in silence for the next hour or so. Then, as they came around a winding curve that bypassed a rocky upcrop, he saw something odd to the east.

A dust cloud.

No ordinary dust cloud either.

This was a great huge one.

Daruka had traveled widely enough to have seen dust clouds before. Like most good horsemen or charioteers—both of which had been his profession oftentimes before—he could estimate the size of a group by the dust cloud raised in its wake.

He had never seen a dust cloud this large before.

The closest he had seen was a gigantic dust cloud raised by an army on the march.

This one was at least thrice that size. It seemed to be growing steadily by the minute, rising to fill the entire western sky.

What could possibly be raising such a cloud?

He paused, keeping a light touch on Sri's neck to indicate to her to wait a moment as he contemplated his next move. If he turned westward to investigate the cause of that cloud, it would take him several hours out of his way. Yet if he ignored it and rode on to Mathura, the memory of this sight would nag him all the way.

Besides, if he was not mistaken, the dust cloud appeared to be moving in the direction of Mathura.

He swallowed nervously, his throat suddenly parched even though he had only just consumed fresh water at the brook when he had stopped.

His decision made, he touched the side of Sri's neck again, indicatin which way to go. Without question, she turned and made her way off the beaten path, riding up the rocky upcrop, heading westwards.

It took the better part of the morning before he reached a vantage point which showed him the source of the dust cloud. By then, he had watched the great mass looming in the distance long enough to be certain of its cause. No other mobile group could raise such a cloud. Not a grama train, not even a dozen grama trains.

His instinct was right.

He came over a rise and looked down at a flat plain that was sprinkled with large boulders and a few solitary scrubs.

The source of the dust cloud lay visible below. Not entirely visible, for it was too vast to be seen in its entirety at a single glance, even from this vantage point. For that matter, it probably could not be viewed entirely except from a high mountain. It was that large and spread out.

Daruka stared at it and felt his heart grow cold. He watched the juggernaut move steadily across the plain until there was no doubt that it was headed towards Mathura.

Then with a nudge of his knees, he turned Sri's head and broke into a trot, then a canter and then a gallop. 'Ride, my beauty, ride,' he whispered in the mare's ears. 'Take me to Mathura as fast as you can. A million lives may depend on it.'

10

KRISHNA and Balarama heard the commotion and came out on the balcony of their bedchambers. They were not yet asleep but were preparing for bed. They stood on the verandah and looked down at the palace courtyard. The guards appeared to be restraining a man. The man appeared to be very agitated and trying to convince the guards to let him into the palace.

‘Who is that man?’ Balarama asked. ‘I don’t recognize him. Do you?’

‘Me neither,’ Krishna replied. ‘But from the dust on his clothes and the foam on that mare’s muzzle, he’s been riding hard to get here. Whatever his message it must be important.’

‘Perhaps it’s word from Hastinapura,’ Balarama said.

‘Perhaps,’ Krishna said non-committally. ‘Let’s go see for ourselves.’

They emerged from the palace foyer into the courtyard moments later, just as the soldiers were dragging the man back to the gate. Another soldier was leading the man’s horse away as well. They were clearly evicting the stranger.

‘Halt,’ Krishna cried out to the guards.

At the sound of Krishna’s voice, the guards stopped at once. They waited as Balarama and he approached and saluted him smartly.

‘Who is this person?’ he asked. ‘Why does he seek to enter the palace so urgently?’

‘My Lords Krishna and Balarama, he is a stranger, a foreigner no less,’ said the Captain of the palace guard derisively. ‘You need not concern yourselves with his kind. He probably thought to slip in on a false pretext and ask for some gratuity or pilfer something or other. We found him trying to slip past the gatewatch.’

‘No,’ cried the man. ‘I am no thief. I only tried to get past the guards because they refused to let me see you. Lord Krishna, Lord Balarama, I am an honest man with an urgent message.’

Krishna and Balarama frowned.

‘Stand aside,’ Krishna said to the guards. ‘Captain, let the man speak. I would hear what he has to say.’

The captain did not argue. But he stood close by the foreigner, ready to restrain him if he made any threatening move. Unlike Kamsa’s soldiers, these men would give their lives to protect their Lord Krishna—whether or not he needed protecting.

‘Who are you?’ Balarama asked curtly. ‘What is your business here at this time of night?’

‘My Lords, my name is Daruka,’ said the man in an accent foreign to Yadava dialects. ‘I am a speaker to animals.’

‘A *what*?’ Balarama asked.

‘I have a gift for communicating with animals.’ He indicated the horse whose reins were held by the soldier a few yards away. ‘I have worked as a courier at times, a trainer of prize horses, prize bulls, even a charioteer on occasion.’

‘Interesting,’ Krishna said. ‘What brings you and your gift to Mathura?’

He glanced up suddenly at Krishna with an expression of such intense adoration that the Captain of the guard stepped closer. ‘My Lord Krishna, you did.’

‘I?’

‘I came to serve you.’

Balarama raised one eyebrow, Krishna the other. ‘Serve me how?’ Krishna asked.

‘In any way you please, sire. I have heard so much about you and your great work. It would be my life’s blessing to serve you to the end of my days.’

Krishna paused thoughtfully, ‘And this was urgent enough for you to attempt to steal into the palace?’

‘No, my Lord,’ said the man named Daruka. ‘On the road to Mathura I saw a terrible sight. Something so awful I had to bring you word immediately. That is the reason for my urgency. Something is about to happen that will be disastrous for Mathura.’

Balarama frowned. ‘What did you see that was so awful?’

Daruka glanced at the Captain, glowering down at him, then at the guards beside him. ‘I do not know if I should speak this in public, sire.’

‘If it concerns Mathura, then there is no need for privacy,’ Krishna said. ‘Speak freely. What did you see on the road to Mathura that was so terrible?’

Daruka looked at Krishna. ‘An army on the march.’

Balarama sucked in his breath sharply.

‘From which direction was this army approaching?’

‘From the west.’

Krishna and Balarama exchanged a glance.

‘Magadha,’ Balarama said tersely. ‘I knew it! We should never have let Jarasandha leave alive that day!’

‘We had no cause to harm him.’

‘And now he returns with an army.’ Balarama turned to the rider. ‘Captain, release him. Step away.’

The captain and the guards did as Balarama said.

‘How large was this army, Daruka,’ Balarama asked. ‘And by when is it likely to reach Mathura in your estimation?’

‘It is traveling slowly due to its sheer size,’ said Daruka. ‘It will be at the gates of the city by daybreak if not sooner. I rode exceedingly fast to reach here. The army was traveling by a remote route, avoiding passing near any

of the usual trade routes and margs. Even I only happened to notice the dust cloud and went to investigate out of curiosity.'

'God bless your curiosity,' Krishna said, without a trace of irony. 'How large do you think the army might be?'

Daruka tilted his head, thinking. 'I could not see it entirely, for it was spread across a great area. But based on what I saw and was able to estimate, I will admit I have never seen such a large force before. It was at least thrice as large as the largest army I have seen. And that was some 7 akshohini.'

'Thrice as large as a force of 7 akshohini,' Balarama repeated slowly, looking stunned. 'Mathura's entire army is barely 6 akshohini! Three times 7 akshohini would be...'

'21 akshohini,' Krishna said. 'And he believes it is more than thrice times 7. So let us assume 22 or 23 akshohini.'

Balarama looked at Krishna. 'If it is Jarasandha and he is marching on Mathura to besiege us, that means we shall be outnumbered by 4 times!'

'Yes,' Krishna said grimly. 'And we have but a night to prepare ourselves for his arrival.'

Daruka looked from one to the other, his own dust-covered face mirroring their anxiety as he waited for their next words and actions.

12

JARASANDHA quaffed up the last of the blended concoction and tossed the solid gold gem-encrusted goblet aside, not caring to see if one of his many aides ran to retrieve it. The goblet was less valuable than its contents. The drink it had contained was a new blend he had invented himself after several dissatisfactory attempts. It involved the organs of various exotic creatures from foreign lands and numerous alchemic powders in varying dosages. But the key ingredient was derived from mortal organs—the glands to be exact. It was a potion designed to expand time-consciousness not dissimilar to the one he had secretly ordered Kamsa dosed with many years earlier.

In Kamsa's case, by changing the mix, he had introduced an element of disorientation, causing the drinker to experience each transition as a fugue-like state wherein he remembered nothing that he saw or heard or did. This was the perfect mix: Jarasandha would be acutely aware of every passing moment and every word and action. To him, time would pass so slowly he would feel as if each blink of an eyelid was a minute, each minute ten, each day a score of days.

This meant that in battle he would be able to move and act and react at what would be perceived as lightning speed by his opponents. For in the time it took an enemy to swing his sword at Jarasandha's neck, for instance, Jarasandha would be able to decapitate that enemy as well as move on and kill another dozen or two even before the first man's lopped head struck the ground and began rolling. Similarly, he would experience an hour of battle as days, accomplishing as much in that hour as would take his enemy days to attempt.

It was a battle potion given to his champions on numerous occasions—that was how the blend had been perfected, through trial and error. A fair number of aspirants had died due to the potion's side effects or the experimental blends of dosage Jarasandha had given them. But it was all

in the service of alchemy and he now knew exactly how much of each ingredient to blend in order to achieve certain results. He had given the champions under his command a different blend from the one he had just consumed. This one was special, specially adapted to Jarasandha's own unique physiology and needs.

Across the field, his vaids were moving from champion to champion, handing them their potions and checking to make sure that each one consumed their share. Some of the champions grew too proud to want enhancements and began to refuse them, insisting that they were powerful enough to function without the potions. Jarasandha could not afford to tolerate any trace of independent volition. If he ordered a potion drunk, it had to be drunk. That unshakable sense of discipline was essential to maintaining an army this size. Nobody could question any order.

As he watched, one champion shunted aside the goblet offered by a vaid with the back of his hand. The vaid, a skinny physician who, like the rest of Jarasandha's vaids, was himself dosed with a potion that enhanced mental agility at the cost of physical strength, was almost knocked over by the casual gesture. He recovered his balance and tried again, bowing his head obsequiously to avoid giving any offense.

This time, the champion backhanded the goblet and the vaid both, with a swat that broke the vaid's jaw and skull and sent him and the goblet flying several yards away. He crashed into the rear of two other vaids, causing them to spill their trays of goblets and potions as well. That was unfortunate. The vaid was merely a lackey with his intelligence enhanced through the giving of potions, as were all Jarasandha's physicians. He was expendable and replaceable. Jarasandha didn't care what happened to him. He hated to see his potions wasted. They cost a great deal of effort and time to concoct, and even more effort and time and expense went into gathering the exotic ingredients. The champion, on the other hand, was an otherwise good warrior with the quick reflexes and physical qualities that had made him a suitable candidate for recruitment to the league of champions. Formidable though he was in battle, he had only taken a year or two's worth of potions and training to develop.

Jarasandha strode slowly through the ranks. He saw other vaids coming quickly with goblets to resume the task that had been interrupted; regardless of what happened to their fellow physicians their job had to go on. He gestured to them to hold off momentarily. They did so at once, continuing to administer the potion to other champions further down the ranks.

The rows of champions on either side towered above Jarasandha. These men were selected partly for their considerable size and bulk and muscularity. Whatever physical qualities they had not possessed when they were recruited, they developed through the process of dosing and training. Not a single one among them was under two yards in height, most were two and half yards high or even three. Compared to most soldiers, including the bulk of Magadha's own army, they were giants plain and simple.

Even without the enhancements, they would be formidable opponents in battle. *With* the enhancements and special training as well their self-knowledge of the power they possessed, they tended to develop the belief that they could face anything. Anything at all. The blend of potions administered to them was partly responsible for that feeling of supreme overconfidence: just as ordinary armies administered opiates and intoxicants to their best soldiers before sending them into hard combat, Jarasandha's league of champions was kept well-drugged to make them feel euphoric and confident of victory, invulnerable even. Unlike ordinary soldiers, they *were* often invulnerable.

The problem was, just as ordinary soldiers almost always grew addicted to the drugs given to enhance battle performance, the special battle potion also caused chemical changes in the champions. In some cases, it caused them to believe that they didn't require the drug at all. That is to say, they had become so addled by the effects of the potion, they believe that they were invulnerable even without it!

That appeared to be what had happened to this particular chap.

‘Siddhran,’ Jarasandha said as he approached the champion who had refused the potion.

Siddhran was chuckling at the plight of the vaid whose head and jaw he had crushed, glancing around and commenting to his fellow champions. Some of them were chuckling as well but the instant they saw and heard their master approaching, they snapped their eyes away. Immediately they began shuffling sideways and forwards and backwards, creating a wide space between themselves and the offending man. Siddhran saw them moving away and ignoring him and stopped chuckling.

He turned and glowered down at Jarasandha as he approached.

‘You didn’t have your potion,’ Jarasandha said mildly.

Siddhran turned and loomed threateningly over Jarasandha. ‘I don’t need your stinking potion.’

13

JARASANDHA smiled thinly at the much larger man. ‘But you do.’

Siddhran laughed and flexed his muscles. Jarasandha saw the exposed skin on the warrior’s face and arms and chest change in hue and texture. The man was hardening his density, preparing to assault Jarasandha. Really? Either he was a bigger fool than Jarasandha had assumed at first or the potion had completely addled his brain at last. It happened with a few subjects, an acceptable risk considering the overall success rate.

‘I have seen you fight once, Jara,’ the man said mockingly. ‘You possess the power to turn your body into a whip and lash at your opponent. Like a horse tail with the sting of a scorpion. I do not think you possess enough strength to endure a direct attack by someone as strong as Siddhran! ’

And without further ado, the champion slammed his bunched fists directly into Jarasandha’s chest.

The impact of both fists so close together at such a vulnerable point, moving that quickly, was something Jarasandha had not expected. The champion hit him with a weight of perhaps a half ton striking at great velocity. The impact would have shattered a granite boulder. Or bent a foot-thick iron stanchion.

Ironically, it was a move he himself had taught his champions. It was intended to be used against an armored elephant, killing the beast with a single blow while driving its corpse back several dozen yards to wipe out the foot-soldiers who invariably followed behind the armored elephant. The move was designed for efficiency but also for its awe-inspiring nature. It was a stunning sight to see a man strike a single blow and wreak such damage. It required a fine balance of speed and power and it required

months of careful practice for his champions to learn how much to harden their arms for the power of the impact while keeping their torsos supple enough to swing fast.

Now, that same technique had been used against him.

He felt it as a hammer pounding his chest.

With a horrible wet sound, his chest was shattered.

His body was rent apart into two separate pieces.

Divided cleanly at the center, as if a knife had sliced him from head to groin, the two halves came unstuck and flew yards away to land on the dust of the field.

Asunder.

The word derived from his own name: Jarasandha. Wherein the ‘asandha’ literally referred to his ability to split into two parts.

Siddhran roared with laughter. He turned and faced his fellow champions, clapping his own hands together, biceps and pectoral muscles bulging prodigiously.

‘You see, bhraatr? He cannot withstand my power and skill! The great Jara is good only at giving orders from his high seat, with his minions to enforce those orders. But when faced down in single combat he can be defeated as easily as any warrior. He is no match for Siddhran! I have broken Jar-asandha!’

No laughter came from his audience. The vaids dispensing the potions turned and stared wide-eyed for a moment—not at the fallen parts of their master, but at the gloating champion. Several of them sniggered and turned away, shaking their heads as they continued their work. Even the Emperor's personal Mohini bodyguards remained where they were by his umbrella-covered throne on the promontory, watching impassively.

Siddhran gestured up to them. 'I killed your master with a single blow! Now I am coming to claim his throne, his women, his possessions. Siddhran shall be the new Emperor of Magadha!'

He laughed and took a step forward. The champions closest to him sucked in their breaths. Some gasped openly, faces blanching. They shuffled farther away from him.

He sneered. 'What? Are you afraid of Siddhran now? Cowards! Unable to stand up to a skinny tyrant. Your oppressor is dead, like his protege Kamsa. At least Jarasandha had the honor of dying at Siddhran's hands. Kamsa was felled by a mere boy, broken by a stupid fear of an old prophecy. I wish he had lived long enough to face me in combat at least.'

He took another step forward then saw something in the faces of his fellow champions. It occurred to him that perhaps they were not exclaiming and blanching out of fear of Siddhran, but on account of something behind Siddhran. He turned his head, listening, then swung around.

The two halves of Jarasandha's body were crawling towards each other.

Each half was using its hand to reach out and claw the ground then pull itself forward, aided by the leg of that half and guided by the eyes which looked toward each other.

The eyes stopped and looked toward Siddhran as he stared down at them.

He grinned.

‘How pathetic! Crawling across the ground like a common half-dead animal with a crushed spine. Even if you join together again, what will you achieve? I will tear you apart once again, and again. Or perhaps I shall tear you into little pieces, and fling each to the horizon. Let us see how you come together again then, hey!’

The two halves resumed their crawling towards one another.

Siddhran laughed again and strode forward. He reached the two halves just when they were inches from each other. He kicked one to the left, the other to the right and looked from one to the other, grinning again. The eyes of Jarasandha’s severed halves rolled wildly before settling again on their counterparts.

‘Now what?’ Siddhran asked. He stood precisely between the two halves, separating them. ‘Even if you come together, I shall not let you join into one body. What will you do then?’

There was a momentary pause as if the two halves were considering their next move. The other champions exchanged glances nervously. On the promontory the Mohini bodyguards remained where they were, guarding an empty throne. The vaids had finished dispensing the potion to the last of the champions. They glanced briefly at Siddhran, standing between the two sundered halves of their master, and retreated to their tent behind the marching lines. They shot pitying glances at the champion as they went.

Siddhran waited to see what would happen next.

Several moments passed without anything happening. Even the two halves of the Magadhan remained as they were, no longer trying to creep or crawl towards each other.

The champion laughed, resting his hands on his hips. ‘So. It seems Siddhran has killed Jarasandha with a single blow. So much for his legendary reputation of being unkillable!’

Suddenly, with the swiftness of a whiplash cracking out—or a cobra striking—the two halves of Jarasandha flew at one another. Specially empowered as he was, Siddhran glimpsed them coming at him and braced himself at once, hardening his body to maximum density. It took him but the speed of thought to accomplish this feat, so skilled was he in this technique by now.

In the fraction of a second that the two halves of Jarasandha’s body took to fly at him, Siddhran’s body was hardened to the consistency of solid stone.

The two halves slammed into Siddhran’s stone-solid body with the force of iron hammers. They shattered him like hammers striking stone, smashing his rock-hard body into smithereens.

The champions watching raised their hands instinctively, covering their eyes and turning away as the fragments of Siddhran’s shattered body exploded outwards in all directions. But except for a few pieces the size of pebbles, most of what fell onto them was mere dust. The dust of flesh solidified to the consistency of stone.

The instant the dust fell to ground, it lost the consistency that had been induced by the living body, returning to its natural state as human tissue, blood, bone fragment, and similar material.

The other champions were spattered with the blood and fragments of Siddhran's body.

In the spot where Siddhran had stood, Jarasandha now stood, rejoined. There was an instant during which the crack where his two halves met was very slightly out of joint. Just a fraction. The disjointing was most evident in his face, where his eyes were one marginally higher than the other.

He adjusted himself with a shrug of his shoulders. And both halves meshed perfectly with a liquid sticky sound.

Then he grinned, his divided tongue flickering forth from his mouth sibilantly as he surveyed the spattered remains of his challenger.

‘And that, boys, is why I tell you to take your medicine without complaining.’

14

Balarama slowed the chariot to a halt, stopping it at a sideways angle to the cliff edge so Krishna and he could have a better view unobstructed by the horses. They looked down at the large empty plains that bordered the end of Mathura province. They were less than a yojana from the capital but like any large city, Mathura was surrounded by outlying farms and properties. As they had ridden out of the city, those outlying properties were already being evacuated, their occupants making their way hastily to the city proper where they could seek shelter within the high walls. But there were still some who chose to remain out of compulsion or choice: cowherds who could neither leave their herds nor expect there to be room enough for them within the city walls.

For too long, Mathura had been the source of martial aggression, not the target. Kamsa had not paid any heed to building defenses. If anything, he had willfully ignored them, taking pride in the knowledge that no enemy existed who was strong enough to challenge the might of Mathura under his rule. This was not foolhardiness, it was quite literally true: the only challenger to Mathura's might in this part of the world was Magadha. And Magadha was not only a friend and ally, its interests were intertwined with those of the Yadava nations, through marriage as well as through trade, governance and polity.

All that changed the minute Kamsa was killed. Jarasandha had left the city quietly, withdrawing his emissaries and other representatives. And at the time, they had thought that he was busy on other fronts, continuing his empirical expansion. But it was clear now that he had been preparing to return from the very minute he left. The retreat had been tactical, as was the return.

They looked down now on a sight guaranteed to chill even the hardiest hearts.

An army was arrayed on the plains outside Mathura. An army so vast, they understood what the foreigner Daruka had meant when he reported never having seen such a large force before. But while Daruka was a simple man unschooled in matters of warfare, Krishna and Balarama were well enough educated in those details to make an accurate assessment of its exact size.

Owing to the division of the army into akshohini, each akshohini in turn comprising the four parts of a complete fighting force, it was possible to make such an assessment using the following principle:

Each akshohini consisted of chariots, elephants, cavalry and infantry in the ratio 1:1:3:5. The base figure was 21,870. So one akshohini had 21,870 chariot, 21,870 elephants, 65,610 cavalry and 109,350 foot-soldiers, and was led by a senapati or general.

These senapatis were represented at the head of an army by krta-dhvaja or banner carriers. Flag men. By counting the colorful krta-dhvaja flapping on poles arrayed at the front of an army, one could easily count the number of senapatis or generals, which in turn indicated the number of akshohini in that army.

Krishna and Balarama counted the colors of 23 akshohini on the plains below. Their banners flapped in the wind, each mounted on a pole before a tent which housed their senapati. Behind these 23 banners and tents was one enormous tent with a great banner unfurled before it: this displayed the markings of the Magadhan Empire.

By the use of Vedic mathematics, both brothers were able to estimate the total number of enemy forces in the field. An akshohini's total count amounted to 210,870 individual units - one counted an elephant as well as its mahout rider as a single unit, just as one counted a chariot, its horse or horse team, its charioteer and one or more archers who rode with the charioteer all as a single unit too. 23 akshohini in the field meant there

were a total of 50 lakh, thirty thousand and one hundred fighting units at play.

Just over five million enemy in all.

Krishna and Balarama arrived at the figure together and exchanged a glance. This was the largest threat ever faced by the Yadava nations, singly or collectively. It was so much greater than any force that had ever gone to war against Mathura that there was nothing to compare it to. While Mathura was a prize city that any invader might lust after, it was situated too far inland to be easily approachable. One would have to fight one's way through far too many other powerful kingdoms just to get here. This was why Mathura had never been fortified heavily or had its defenses built up, the way other border city-states had, particularly after the legendary destruction of Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and other borderline cities in ancient times.

But the threat to Mathura had not come from the border or beyond it. It had come from within the Arya nations themselves. From the Empire of Magadha, a great and powerfully ally to Mathura for the past 23 years.

It was one thing that Mathura was not built to defend itself against foreign invaders.

Against an ally this powerful and close, it had no defense at all.

Especially not with a force of five million enemy already at its doorstep, ready to attack within the day.

15

Vasudeva shook his head despairingly. ‘How could this happen without our receiving some notice?’ he said. Balarama and Krishna had just returned from their inspection of the enemy forces. The news had spread throughout the city. People were arriving in droves from outlying areas, seeking refuge within the city walls. As Krishna and Balarama had driven through the streets, the atmosphere had been one of barely suppressed panic. People had shouted out queries to the brothers as they rode past, many had prayed openly to them to save Mathura from this new calamity. In the palace complex, the mood was grim. Even the Mathuran Army forces that had been amassing and drilling had looked stunned.

‘After the Death of the Usurper, nobody expected any further threat to rear its head,’ said an old advisor. He was one of those who was imprisoned and tortured after Kamsa had usurped his father’s throne. Somehow, he had survived the long imprisonment and torture as well as the numerous mass executions and purges by Kamsa and had kept abreast of goings on in the kingdom thanks to Akrura and the rebels. He could barely walk but his knowledge was invaluable. ‘The spasas were all loyal to Magadha anyway, they were planted here by Jarasandha to serve his own ends. Besides, we had no reason to expect Magadha to invade and when they did, they came like lightning.’

Old Pralamba, the only major court minister who had served under Ugrasena before Kamsa and was serving him again now, passed a hand across his lined face. ‘Jarasandha must have planned this down to the last detail. Nobody moves an army of 23 akshohini all the way from Magadha to Mathura in mere days.’

‘He did not move it in days,’ said Ugrasena. The old king’s voice was faltering but his will was strong and his intelligence undimmed. ‘These are active frontline units he has kept in play against other kingdoms. He simply diverted them from different places and brought them to converge

on Mathura. That is how he was able to move them so close so quickly without anyone suspecting. Magadha has been invading and fighting with numerous kingdoms for decades in its unending quest for empirical expansion. Everyone is accustomed to seeing their akshohini shunted from one place to another all the time.'

Ugrasena indicated the chaupat board laid out before him on a wooden table. He moved pieces representing the four parts of an akshohini, wooden blocks carved to resemble elephants, chariots, horse cavalry and foot-soldiers as he explained. 'All Jarasandha did was pull out four or five akshohini from here and move it in this direction, another half dozen akshohini from here and move it that way, and so on, until even spasas watching each region carefully would see only units moving in one particular direction. Nobody was in a vantage point to view the whole picture.'

He moved numerous units in criss-crossing directions. 'And then, when he had brought them all within a few days travel from Mathura, he turned their heads and converged them all.'

Ugrasena's wrinkled fingers pushed all the pieces on the chaupat board together in a cluster. 'He must have given the word for them to converge barely four or five days ago. By the time our outliers and outposts put two and two together and figured out what was happening, they must have been overrun by this juggernaut of an invading force.'

Pralamba nodded sadly. 'Our outposts are all overrun. We can be sure of that. Otherwise they would have gotten word to us by now. King Ugrasena speaks wisely. Nobody knows the geography of those territories better than he does with a view to military troop movements.'

'And he should at that,' said the old war minister. 'There was a time when he planned such maneuvers and movements himself, back when he dreamed of expanding the Yadava Empire.'

‘The Yadava Empire?’ Vasudeva said. ‘Then you once planned to expand our nations as well? Through military conquest?’

Ugrasena sighed and leaned his forehead on his fist. ‘I was younger and more ambitious then.’ He added self-critically: ‘More foolish as well. I grew to see the folly of my ambitions. When all nations live together in peace as sister kingdoms, there is no need for empires and conquests.’

‘Unfortunately, Jarasandha does not share your enlightened way of thinking, grandfather,’ Krishna said grimly. ‘To him, war and conquest are a way of existence. He knows nothing except the rule of sword and reign of blood.’

‘From the state of preparedness of the army,’ Balarama said, ‘They could invade Mathura tomorrow itself.’

Vasudeva made a puzzled gesture. ‘Is it not customary to issue a threat beforehand? Or at the very least present a list of demands?’

Pralamba shook his head. ‘Jarasandha is known for simply invading and overwhelming kingdoms with superior forces, often conquering and subjugating before the kingdoms in question even realize they were under threat. He regards his proclamation of two and a half decades earlier as sufficient notification to one and all.’

The chief minister was referring to a declaration some twenty five years earlier when Jarasandha had proclaimed himself the Emperor of the Known World and demanded that all kings regard themselves as subordinate to his power and surrender arms to him if they wished to avoid being overrun and conquered. By default, any king or ruler who did not comply with this demand was declared an enemy and therefore subject to conquest, invasion, destruction, as Jarasandha saw fit.

‘But Mathura was allied to Magadha all these years,’ Vasudeva pointed out. ‘Kamsa was his son-in-law.’

Ugrasena spoke wearily. ‘Indeed. And Kamsa’s wives Asthi and Prapthi, my own daughters-in-law, were left widowed when their husband died. Under Arya law, they had no choice but to return home to their father, severing all ties with the House of the Andhaka Suras. They are now relegated to lives of misery and humiliation as a result.’

Everyone contemplated this for a moment. Under Arya law, dharma demanded that childless widows of a deceased kshatriya were no longer considered part of their husband’s family. This was intended mainly to help in the estimation of estate inheritances and wills, since a childless widow might then remarry and take the family’s wealth with them, leaving the dead husband’s remaining family bereft. But some aristocratic families, willfully misinterpreting this statute, chose to turn childless unfortunate widows out of doors, forcing them to eke out their lives in humiliation and abject poverty, or take up prostitution to survive. This abuse of the law of inheritance was one of many minor and major ills in Arya society that Vasudeva had once promised to correct before Kamsa and far more pressing crises pushed all other concerns aside.

‘Kamsa’s widows are not going to become street whores,’ the old war minister said hoarsely. ‘Their father will care for them as he always did. They will live out the rest of their lives in debauched luxury like the princesses they are.’

‘Even so,’ Ugrasena said, ‘It provides Jarasandha with a good excuse to find fault with Mathura and consider the alliance officially ended. He can use a father’s anguish at the plight of his childless widowed and homeless daughters to justify this invasion.’

Vasudeva spread his hands in despair. ‘I never asked Kamsa’s widows to leave. In fact, I would have let them continue to stay here to the end of

their lives had they wished. And I know King Ugrasena would have sided with me on that point.'

'Without a doubt,' Ugrasena said. 'But the point is moot now. Whether Jarasandha himself summoned his daughters back home or they left and ran home to spread false claims of mistreatment and abuse does not matter any more. They are gone and will never return. We can be certain of that. They were always pawns in this game of thrones and one way or other they were being used to further their father's own selfish interests.'

'I agree with my old friend Ugrasena,' said the ancient war minister. 'He cuts to the quick. Discussions of causes or motives are irrelevant at this point. All that matters is that the wolf is at the door and will be at our throats in a flash of an eye blink. What are we to do to save Mathura?'

'I wish Akrura were here,' Vasudeva said. 'He is the best diplomat among us. Perhaps he might gone to Jarasandha and spoken for us.'

'Akrura will be at the doors of Hastinapura Palace by now,' Pralamba said. 'Even if we send word to him and he gets in a few days, it will be too late for talk by the time he returns. But the idea is a good one. We are better equipped to talk than fight at present.'

Balarama looked at the chief minister. 'What is our fighting strength and state of preparedness?'

Pralamba sighed. 'The Imperial Army was disbanded after Kamsa's death. Your and your brother's absence these past few months left a void. Good kings Ugrasena and Vasudeva had their plates full simply dealing with matters of administration. 23 years of misrule is not easily remedied in a few weeks. We had not even begun reassembling the new army. Many hundreds of thousands of forcibly conscripted Yadavas chose to go home at last, after years spent serving a cruel tyrant. Who knows how many of

those may never wish to return to active combat after the abuse they were forced to mete out to their fellow Yadavas?’

Krishna said gently, ‘Even so, pradhan mantri, you must have some figures to give us.’

‘Perhaps three akshohini, mostly reserves and new recruits who signed on with a desire to serve under you, Lord Krishna,’ said the chief minister. ‘But many are not trained fully, some are not even effectively equipped or armed. Our resources are diverted into dispensing medical aid and food rather than military mobilization.’

‘To put it bluntly, we’re about as ready for war as a wingless bat is ready to leap off a tree,’ said the laconic war minister.

Ugrasena sighed. ‘And that is not even taking into account our lack of defenses in the city itself. Kamsa changed the very geography of Mathura during his reign. We have virtually no fortifications. The majority of the citizens will be exposed in the event of a siege.’

Vasudeva nodded sadly. ‘Worse. There are yawning gaps in our defensive walls. If Jarasandha surrounds and besieges Mathura, his forces can be inside the city within hours. We will be fighting with our backs to our own homes and in the streets.’

Everybody was silent as they considered the horror of this possibility. There was no worse nightmare for a king than to have the enemy within his walls, his citizens forced to fight to defend their homes and families. It was a king’s job to keep the enemy outside and at bay at the very least, if not prevent him from invading at all.

‘Then it is clear,’ Krishna said grimly. ‘We must attempt to parlay with Jarasandha first, before he attacks. Attempt to find some way to settle this without outright war or siege. And if that fails...’

‘If that fails,’ Ugrasena said in his faltering voice, ‘Then God help us all.’

Balarama raised an eyebrow as he looked at Krishna.

16

DARUKA saw the familiar dark form of his lord emerge from the vaulted archway entrance of the main palace building and came forward eagerly. At once, the palace guard lowered their spears suspiciously. Everyone was on high alert and nervous enough to strike without thinking twice. Daruka joined his hands together in a gesture of submission, lowering his head. ‘I seek only to speak with Lord Krishna, he knows me.’

Krishna saw him and came over. ‘Daruka, the speaker to animals,’ he said, with barely a trace of a smile on his face. ‘I trust you have not brought further bad tidings to Mathura?’

‘Nay, my lord,’ said Daruka, stricken by the fact that Krishna associated him with the bringing of bad news. ‘I am only waiting to know how I may serve you next. I came to Mathura for this sole purpose. My life will not be fulfilled unless I serve you loyally. Pray, grant me leave to work in your employ.’

Krishna looked around. A sarathi from the royal stables was bringing his chariot around. The sarathi appeared to be having some trouble. The horses were rearing, apparently made nervous by the number of armed soldiers gathered in the courtyard and the air of general anxiety. ‘I have enough servants, Daruka. You would be best advised to find work elsewhere.’

‘Please, my lord,’ Daruka said, falling to his knees. ‘I will do anything you ask. I have skills that may be of use to you. Just give me an opportunity to prove myself.’

The horses were kicking now, white-eyed and panicky. The sarathi was having difficulty holding onto the reins. As Krishna watched, the horses kicked out, narrowly missing the sarathi who leaped out of the way just in

time, but tripped and fell sprawling. A company of soldiers marched around him, in too much haste to slow or divert their progress.

‘Then tell me this,’ Krishna asked. ‘What ails my horses? Why are they reluctant to ride today?’

Daruka turned and looked at the horses harnessed to Krishna’s chariot across the courtyard. He raised his nose and sniffed the air several times, turned his head this way then that, studying the horses keenly from afar. ‘They are not reluctant to ride, my lord. They are merely eager to carry you into battle. They sense the impending war and wish to serve you alone. That is why they reject anyone else who attempts to come near them. They wish to proclaim that they are loyal to Krishna and only Krishna, on pain of death.’

Krishna looked at the man named Daruka. ‘You can tell all of that just by looking at the horses from three score yards away?’

Daruka shrugged. ‘I smell what they smell, hear what they hear, see what they see around us. I share their desire to serve you exclusively. I know a war is coming. It is not difficult.’

Krishna smiled. ‘Most men would disagree. But then, most men don’t think and feel like horses. Can you interpret the feelings of other animals too?’

‘Not all,’ Daruka replied seriously. ‘Dogs of course are very easy. They are like people at their best, open-hearted and generous of spirit. Predators are simple enough too. But some are more complex and not as easy to interpret. Elephants in particular...’

Krishna raised a hand, indicating a pause. ‘Can you drive a chariot?’

He gestured at his own chariot. ‘Into battle? Under fire? At threat to your own life?’

Daruka shrugged. ‘Life is work. And work is worship. When one ends, the other must end as well. I could ride a chariot like that one when I was five years old, my lord. Now, if you wish to test my abilities—’

‘I wish to see you ride my chariot,’ Krishna said. ‘Go fetch it for me and drive me to my destination. Can you do that?’

Daruka blinked. ‘Now, sire?’

‘Unless you have another interview with another lord for the same position.’

Daruka smiled at Krishna’s jest. ‘No, my Lord. I shall fetch your chariot at once.’

He sprinted across the courtyard, dodging marching soldiers and officers on horseback. Krishna noticed that he managed to touch the horses as he ran past them, and they tossed their heads and gave off peculiar expressions that did not seem threatening. Daruka reached the chariot and spoke quickly to the sarathi who had regained his feet and was staring tentatively at the reluctant team. The sarathi looked in Krishna’s direction and Krishna waved to indicate that Daruka had his permission.

Moments later, Daruka brought the chariot smartly to a halt right in front of Krishna. Krishna had but to take a single step to climb aboard. He did so. He looked at the foreigner. Standing at the reins, caressing the haunches of the horses, Daruka looked perfectly in control, a man in his element.

Yes, this man really does speak to animals. More importantly, he listens as well and understands what they feel. It was no coincidence that it was he who brought the news of Jarasandha's invasion.

‘Where shall I take you, my Lord?’ Daruka asked. His voice was calm yet the eagerness was palpable.

‘To the enemy camp,’ Krishna replied.

Jarasandha's daughters came running, squealing, into their father's tent. Jarasandha was in the midst of a discussion on strategy with his senapatis and he did not take kindly to the intrusion.

'Father, father,' said Asthi. 'The Lord of Mathura himself comes to beg your forgiveness.'

Jarasandha smiled thinly. 'How do you know it is the Lord of Mathura? And how do you know it is forgiveness he seeks?'

'Because his chariot carries the krta-dhvaj of Krishna, and everyone knows Krishna is the true Lord of Mathura in all but name,' said Prapti. 'And why else would he come to your tent on the night before battle?'

Jarasandha smiled and embraced his daughters, one on each side, with as much affection as he could muster. In fact, whatever little affection he was capable of displaying was reserved for these two. They clung to him adoringly, looking up at their father's face.

He recalled what one king with a ready wit had commented on their features: "*One looks as if she is about to sneeze, the other as if she has just sneezed.*"

Jarasandha had made that particular royal wit suffer a long screaming series of tortures to which the unfortunate man had eventually succumbed. The fool's words were harder to erase. At unguarded moments, looking at his daughter's features, he had to admit to himself, secretly, that the fellow had been right. They did have somewhat unfortunate features.

Still, at least they had buxom and shapely bodies that compensated for their facial shortcomings. For Kamsa that had been more than sufficient compensation, especially since he had been well-dosed with Jarasandha's potions when the marriage had taken place.

But eventually, even that compensation seemed to have proven insufficient. Despite all his macho bravado and apparent virility, Kamsa had left his daughters childless widows. It was the worst possible fate for a young princess. And now, they would have to live their lives as widows, for no self-respecting prince or king would want to take them as wives. They were already the gossip of the royal grapevine: Kamsa's Widows!

Jarasandha's fingers curled around his daughter's shoulders, drawing cries of protest. 'You're hurting us, father!'

He released them at once. 'Remove yourselves from here.'

'Please, can we watch from behind the curtain?' Prapti asked plaintively.

'Please, father!' Asti piped in.

'Very well, but remain silent. Only observe.' He hesitated. 'And keep your faces veiled as well.'

They made groans of protest. He had showered so much affection on them as children growing up, both sincerely believed they were the most beautiful princesses in the world. He had even convinced them that their odd facial expressions only made them all the more attractive to virile young men. He guessed that they had hoped to reveal themselves to the visitor, catch his male eye, perhaps even seduce him a little. It was a widow's only means of restitution.

He caught their hands before they could leave. ‘No matter what happens, remember, I will ensure that you both live as queens all your lives. Empresses even!’

They smiled at him with the same adoring glow that had lit up their faces as children before turning and running to place themselves behind the hanging translucent curtain that divided the private section of the tent from this public chamber.

He turned away to look at the Hijra bowing his bald head at the entrance of the tent. ‘Great God-Emperor, forgive the intrusion, there is a visitor from Mathura who wishes to see you. He says his name is Krishna.’

18

Krishna heard the faint sound of feminine laughter as he entered Jarasandha's tent. Like everything else Magadhan, the tent was an aggression demonstration of Magadha's wealth and power, excessively so for a war commander's tent on a field of battle. He guessed that there was an element of over-compensation in this vulgar display of luxury and ostentation.

Like all kings who rose from humble origins, Jarasandha clearly wished to let the world know that he had arrived. The luxury did not bother Krishna. It was deliciously decadent, sensual even. He admired the figurines and embroidered upholstery as he was escorted through more passageways and corridors than he would have believed possible in a tent. The oblique approach to the main chambers was obviously designed to thwart assassins but he still found it amusing to be marching left then right then left again endlessly, surrounded by a phalanx of massively built eunuchs with shaven pates.

Finally, the parade of bald heads ended and they emerged into a shockingly large chamber. Was this still within a tent structure? In the darkness, he had not guessed at its sheer size. This place was large enough for elephants to turn somersaults. Nor were the high vaulted ceilings left bare: there were sensual wisps of silks and precious fabrics hanging everywhere, and works of art displayed wherever one turned. The art all shared the same motif: War. Krishna suspected that the paintings used more than paint to capture those excessively realistic shades of violence and that the sculptures were formed of more than mere stone and metal.

'Lord of Mathura,' said a deceptively normal voice from behind him. Krishna turned, momentarily disoriented at seeing Jarasandha behind rather than before him. Had the Magadhan been following in his wake all this while? More likely he had stepped through some side-curtain to continue the process of deception. That way, even a visitor who sought to

memorize the route into the tent could not be certain how Jarasandha might be reached.

‘Jarasandha of Magadha,’ Krishna replied.

Jarasandha smiled wanly to acknowledge the lack of use of the words ‘Emperor’ or ‘King’. Jarasandha of Magadha could be used to address even an ordinary craftsman yet it was not inherently disrespectfully or ironic. He did not comment on the greeting and instead gestured to luxuriant seats.

Krishna sat. Jarasandha, seemingly surprised, sat as well.

Krishna was offered food and drink but declined politely. ‘Perhaps later,’ he said.

Jarasandha smiled as if silently asking the question whether there would be a ‘later’.

‘So,’ Jarasandha said into the silence that followed. ‘You have come to parley.’

Krishna raised his eyebow. ‘Parley?’

‘Yes, I presume that is why you visit me on the eve of battle?’

‘Not at all,’ Krishna replied. ‘I have come to ask your daughters to come home.’

He thought he heard a sharp intake of breath by someone behind the veiled curtain at the far end of the chamber. He saw shadows moving behind the

curtain and guessed that the ladies he spoke of were observing this entire conversation. All the better for what he intended to say.

Jarasandha leaned back, sipping from an odd shaped goblet. It took Krishna a moment to register the fact that it had been carved from a human skull—a very small skull, just large enough to fit in a man's cupped palm. 'My daughters are home. They are with me, their father.'

'They are daughters of Mathura by marriage. Their home is in their husband's family residence. Their father-in-law and mother-in-law miss them dearly. There is much work to be done, much planning and service to occupy their time, many decisions that require their attention. I have come to escort them home.'

Jarasandha was silent. In the silence, the unmistakeable sound of women whispering excitedly could be heard from behind the curtained section of the chamber.

'That will not be possible,' Jarasandha said at last. 'You see, my daughters were left widowed and childless. Under Arya law...'

Krishna broke in. 'Arya law does not forbid them from staying in their husband's home. It merely removes any legal requirement for his family to continue to support them or share any part of his inheritance.'

Jarasandha raised his hands to chest level. 'You speak my mind. The law itself fails to recognize them or grant them their legitimate rights—in their own home, no less.'

'So then you acknowledge that it is their home.'

Jarasandha folded his hands across his chest. 'What I acknowledge, or you proffer, is irrelevant. The law casts them off as heartlessly as discarded

garments after use. That is the legacy of millennia of brahmin-dominated culture! The law itself is designed to suit the interests of brahmins at the expense of so-called ‘lower’ castes.’

Krishna smiled. ‘Perhaps you forget. I am not a brahmin. By birth I would have been a kshatriya at best. But by upbringing I am a vaisya. I have no vested interest in serving the so-called ‘brahmin-dominated’ culture as you put it.’

Jarasandha snorted. ‘You? You are not even fit to sit here in my chambers and speak with me on these matters.’

Krishna was dead silent for a moment. Then with careful calmness he asked, ‘That is a rude thing to say to a visitor.’

Jarasandha rose from his seat and strode over to the table where several dozen varieties of liquid refreshment were available. He waved back a eunuch who stepped forward to help. ‘I am being overly gracious merely by receiving you...Slayer.’ He turned to look directly at Krishna. ‘That is what they call you, is it not? The Slayer of Kamsa? And who was Kamsa? The same late husband to my widowed daughters? My son-in-law and beloved protege? Your own maternal uncle?’ Jarasandha snorted again. ‘Slayer of Uncles, they should say.’

Krishna leaned forward. ‘I did not hear of you protesting thus when Kamsa killed my six newborn brothers years ago. Or ordered and participated in the execution of thousands of other infants as well. Childslayer is what they called him for that very reason.’

Jarasandha shrugged. ‘What he did, he did. It does not justify your doing the same. Is that your rationale for murdering your uncle? Is that what you call *dharma*?’

‘Dharma is a word best left unspoken by you,’ Krishna said, rising to his feet slowly. ‘I came here with an offering of peace. I am still willing to take your daughters home to their husband’s family where they will be treated with great respect and love to the end of their days. They shall even be offered the opportunity to remarry if they so desire and if they choose to remarry, they shall be given handsome dowries of property and possessions to take with them to their new homes.’

Jarasandha waved his empty goblet dismissively. ‘My daughters don’t need your dowry or your charity, whatever you choose to call it. Nor are they interested in being turned into royal whores to serve the political interests of Mathura. They are Empresses of the Magadhan Empire. They are Queens of the World. Come tomorrow, they shall step on the ruins of your proud family’s palace and build their own empresses’ palaces on that very spot.’

Krishna bit back a retort then said more calmly. ‘I see that you are not amenable to peaceful discussion.’

Jarasandha laughed. ‘I don’t speak with low-castes like yourself. I may have been born in your wretched brahminical caste system but I freed myself from the chains of that spiritual oppression along with millions of others. I look down on low men like yourself, murderers of their own kith and kin. You are nothing but a Gupt!’

The term was intended to be a double insult: a vaisya merchant who eked out his living by taking a portion of other people’s earnings as well as ‘one who remained *gupt* or hidden’ for Krishna had remained hidden from Kamsa for the first fifteen years of his life.

Krishna took a step towards the entrance of the chamber. ‘Nevertheless, you shall face this Gupt on the battlefield tomorrow since you leave me with no other choice.’

Jarasandha shook his head vehemently. ‘Never! I shall not fight you, boy. It would be beneath me to even acknowledge you on the field of battle. At best, I may be willing to face your bhraatr Balarama. I hear impressive things about him as a warrior.’

Krishna nodded slowly. ‘In that case, it will not trouble you that he too is *gupt* like me?’

Jarasandha was about to say something when Krishna gestured and Balarama appeared, approaching not from the entranceway where Krishna had entered, but from the interior of the chamber. Jarasandha started, eyes popping. The Hijras in the chamber all drew their swords, alert and shocked.

Balarama made no threatening gestures or actions. He merely stood beside Krishna, looking steadily at Jarasandha.

‘To face me is to face Krishna,’ he said. ‘We fight as one.’

‘Where...how...’ Jarasandha gestured at his guards. ‘Remove them! Remove them at once!’

The Hijras moved forward aggressively, swords drawn, converging on Krishna and Balarama. There was commotion behind the veiled curtain as Jarasandha’s daughters parted the curtain to see more clearly.

Krishna raised his left hand, Balarama his right, cautioning the approaching Hijras. ‘It would not be good for your army’s morale if we were to kill you all and leave your master’s tent in shambles,’ Krishna said. ‘But if you wish us to do the honors...’

The Hijras hesitated, glancing back at their Lord.

Jarasandha flung the goblet across the chamber. It struck a sculpture of a man writhing in the rictus of a horrible death and shattered to pieces. ‘Let them leave,’ he said, gritting his teeth.

Krishna and Balarama made their way toward the entranceway. ‘We can find our way out by ourselves, thank you,’ Balarama said. ‘As you saw, we had no trouble entering.’

Krishna paused to look at Jarasandha one last time. ‘You have said much tonight, Magadhan. Perhaps too much. Fortunately for you, I do not heed the words of those who are about to lose a battle or be killed. The rest shall be said without words on the battlefield tomorrow. Magadhans, vaisyas, guptas or kshatriyas, on the battlefield we all speak the language of the sword. Let us see how eloquent you are in that dialect of steel.’

Krishna turned and exited the tent with Balarama.

19

The people of Mathura cheered as Ugrasena, Vasudeva and the other aging ministers rode through the streets, dressed in full battle armor. The mood was one of nervous anticipation. Ugrasena and Vasudeva spoke few words as the carriage wound its way to the city walls. When they reached, both men dismounted in similar silence.

‘Father,’ Krishna said, greeting Vasudeva. ‘Grandfather.’

Balarama and he both sought the blessings of their forebears in a ritual public display. The watching spectators and soldiers cheered lustily.

‘Would that we had time to wait for Bhoja to arrive with his army,’ Ugrasena said regretfully. ‘His seven akshohini would help balance the odds.’

‘We cannot wait, grandfather,’ Balarama said. ‘Therefore we must fight.’

‘You mean Jarasandha will not wait,’ said the old king. ‘That tyrant has no sense of dharma. If I were forty years younger...’

‘Then we would lack your maturity of vision and great store of wisdom,’ Krishna said gently. ‘Do not fear, grandfather, we shall teach the tyrant a lesson in dharma today.’

Ugrasena patted both young men emotionally then retired to the pavilion where he and the other elders would monitor the progress of the battle and oversee the management of the city’s defenses.

Vasudeva took hold of Krishna as he regained his feet. ‘My son, I shall ride with you into battle.’

‘Nay, father,’ Krishna said. ‘There is no need. Balarama and I shall deal with this nuisance ourselves. Besides, you must remain in Mathura to oversee the city defenses in the event that some of the Magadhan forces break through.’

Devaki looked concerned as the boys took her blessing as well. ‘I shall pray for a miracle, for that is the only thing that can save us.’

Balarama comforted her. ‘Maatr, do not fret. Krishna and I shall take care of Jarasandha.’

She smiled through eyes brimming with tears. ‘You make it sound so easy, son.’

‘But it is,’ Balarama said sincerely. ‘All in a day’s work!’

They took their leave of the elders and strode over to their chariots.

‘How are we to fight this battle without revealing our true forms?’ Balarama asked.

Krishna sucked in a deep breath and released it slowly. ‘We cannot.’

‘But then...’

‘We shall do whatever needs to be done to win this battle,’ Krishna said. ‘With the odds against us, it is the only way.’

Balarama nodded in agreement. ‘For a mere six akshohini of unprepared, half-trained Mathuran to face 23 akshohini of battle-hardened Magadhan would be suicide. We would be wiped out to the last man.’

‘Or worse,’ Krishna said. ‘Remember that Magadha takes slaves, brain-washes them into joining its cause and then integrates them into their own forces.’

Balarama winced. Jarasandha’s method was to separate families and marry a wife off to another husband, a husband to another woman, give a son to a third family, a daughter to a fourth, and so on, while simultaneously punishing those who attempted to regroup with unspeakable torture and abuse. He called the process ‘integration’.

‘If their forces take the city,’ Balarama said. He didn’t need to spell out what would happen. Magadha was notorious for erasing all trace of entire kingdoms and nations, then using the local populace as hard labour to raise entire new metropolises. Mathura would be turned into another Magadhan city, all traces of Yadava culture stamped out forever.

‘That can never happen,’ Krishna said grimly. ‘When we go into battle, you shall keep one eye on the city. Your job is to ensure nobody breaks through into Mathura.’

Balarama shrugged. ‘As usual. Protect the people. What about you?’

‘I shall try to lead the fight away from the city.’

‘How will you do that?’

This time it was Krishna’s turn to shrug. ‘I’ll find a way.’

They continued walking the rest of the way to their chariots. Daruka was waiting before Krishna's, looking calm and relaxed. Balarama glanced at him.

'I hope you trust your new sarathi,' he asked Krishna in a soft tone so his voice would not carry.

'Yes,' Krishna said.

'You do know he is a foreigner, not a Yadava,' Balarama pointed out archly.

Krishna smiled. 'Even our ancestor Yadu was a foreigner when he was exiled from his father Yayati's house and came to reside here. Mother Yamuna did not turn him away, did she?'

Balarama sighed, shaking his head. 'Your heart is bigger and softer than Mother Yamuna's.'

He climbed aboard his chariot.

Krishna did the same with his own chariot. Daruka already held the reins in his hands lightly yet with a sharp look of alertness.

Balarama's charioteer waited for Balarama to give the word to ride. Balarama waited for Krishna's chariot to move. Daruka waited for Krishna to give the word to move.

Krishna waited several moments, glancing up at the sky.

Finally, he nodded. 'Ride,' he said to Daruka.

His chariot shot forward. Balarama's followed.

Vasudeva and Devaki watched their chariots ride to the city gates and exit. The gates were shut behind them and barred, and then a number of defensive items were placed to bolster the gates and block any ingress. Several company of foot-soldiers and elephants stood behind these defenses, ready to take on any enemy that broke through.

Mathura waited.

9

Daruka was impressed by the quietude of his lord as they rode along the winding raj-marg through the royal forest preserves that surrounded the city. The field of battle was perhaps half a yojana from the main city walls. During the ride, he could not help glance at his master's face and admire the calm he saw there. Finally, sensing his frequent glances, Krishna smiled and turned to him.

'If you wish to ask me something, Daruka, you have but to speak.'

'My Lord,' Daruka said, turning the team deftly around a sharp curve. The road to the city gates was designed to prevent riders and chariots from approaching too quickly and was a winding one. 'Forgive my curiosity. I was only admiring your calm in the face of such certain destruction.'

Krishna grinned broadly at the sarathi's choice of words. 'Destruction is certain only when Lord Shiva opens his Third Eye. All other calamities may well be avoided.'

Daruka thought on that a moment. 'Yet our forces are so drastically outnumbered. Even King Sudas with the aid of Indra could not turn the tide in this battle.'

He was referring to the great battle of Ten Kings, the story of which was taught in the Vedic teachings.

'Sudas had a few thousand against ten times as many,' Krishna said. 'We are only outnumbered three to one.'

Daruka chuckled. 'You make it sound as if those are not difficult odds at all!'

Krishna shrugged. ‘All odds are difficult...until you win.’

Daruka had nothing to say to that. He only smiled.

‘How many battles have you been in, Daruka?’

The charioteer shook his head at the notion of him being in battle before.
‘This is the first time, sire. I am not a man of violence.’

‘Yet you are close to animals. Is not the animal world a violent one?’

‘Not truly, lord. Animals live for the most part in peaceable harmony. For that is nature’s normal state. Without lasting peace there can be no growth, no progress, no beauty. Animals only resort to violence when absolutely essential—and only those animals that have no choice but to kill in order to survive. The vast majority shun violence.’

Krishna nodded. ‘If only we mortals could learn from them. But then, as Pashupati once said, “Animals are what people should aspire to be yet can never become.”’

Daruka nodded slowly, musing on that thought. ‘It is a profound thought, my lord. Lord Rudra understands that it is we who appear civilized and educated who are the real animals in this world. Whereas they, even without the benefit of education, religion or civilization and its laws, can co-exist indefinitely in perfect harmony.’

Krishna placed a hand on Daruka’s shoulder. ‘Well spoken, Daruka. That is why, despite our great pride in our religion, civilization, laws, education, society, we still invoke violence and we still go to war.’

They rode in comfortable silence the rest of the way. Balarama's chariot brought up their rear, the well-oiled chariot wheels spinning smoothly on the well-planed king's road. A mile or three farther, the sound of the wheels altered significantly as both chariots left the raj-marg and turned off the highway towards their destination.

Moments later, they came within view of the great plains. The angle at which they approached brought them between the two opposing forces. On the Mathuran side was the army of the Yadavas, their back to the forest preserves that encircled the main city walls. They formed a line barely one score thick, because all six akshohini were spread out to encircle the whole city in a great defensive ring. It was the only way to prevent the Magadhans from breaking through but it meant that the line of defense was barely enough to hold back an elephant regiment.

In contrast, the Magadhan line was three score thick and circled the entire city as well. Jarasandha had deliberately set up this battle formation, thereby forcing the Mathurans to defend their capital on all fronts in a gigantic circle. With 23 akshohini at his command and 23 senapatis to lead those 23 akshohini, he could afford to place his leaders at precise intervals around the great circle of attack. But for Mathura, with Krishna and Balarama the only two commanders at the helm, it appeared impossible that they could defend the city on so many fronts.

Even Daruka could see that all Jarasandha had to do was press forward on the full circle at the same time. It was inevitable that Magadha would break through in several places at once and no matter how diligently Krishna and Balarama and their deputed lieutenants rode and led, it was physically impossible for them to monitor or defend so many points at the same time. And once Jarasandha's forces broke through, they had only to repeat the same tactic while breaking into the city. With every last fighting man outside the walls and great gaps and omissions in those walls themselves, the city was virtually indefensible.

The battle would be over in a matter of hours.

Mathura would be overrun and taken within the day.

And there appeared to be nothing Krishna, Balarama or any of their elders and associates could possibly do to prevent it.

Even so, Daruka did not panic or fret. He felt utterly confident in his lord's ability. He knew that Krishna was no ordinary man.

He believed in him.

21

Jarasandha laughed at the sight of the Mathuran forces. Encouraged by their Emperor's rare good mood, his soldiers laughed as well, the sound traveling along their ranks to carry all the way around the great circle of attack. Only the Mohini Fauj, their ranks aligned in perfect rectangles on either side of Jarasandha's own retinue, remained impassive and emotionless.

'It is an insult to Magadha,' he said, his words passed on from man to man all the way around the great ring, most of them heard by the Mathurans as well in the process. 'We have faced great enemies, worthy opponents. Now, we are reduced to slaughtering untested novices and spineless reserves! See how Mathura's standards have fallen after the death of Kamsa.'

The Magadhan army voiced its agreement hoarsely. The sound was loud enough to be heard miles away. Entire flights of birds diverted their path to avoid flying directly overheard the tumult. All except the birds of carrion, who converged eagerly, their circular flights crisscrossing as they awaited the feast at the end of battle.

'I say "death" but it was murder,' Jarasandha continued. 'Murdered by his own nephew no less. That spineless coward Krishna who dared not even fight him fairly on the akhada field. For how else could a mere stripling of a boy have brought down the greatest wrestler of the civilized world?'

They roared in agreement. In the Mathuran ranks, men glanced angrily at each other, frustrated at hearing their beloved champion called such names. But they did not break rank or disobey their orders which were to wait until told to attack.

‘Last night the same murdering nephew of Kamsa came to my tent to beg mercy and forgiveness. He even offered to marry my widowed daughters but they spurned him out of hand. Enraged, he threatened me in my own tent after I had received him hospitably. His brother skulked around in my private chambers like a common thief.’

The Magadhan army booed and hissed at these reports.

‘And today, those same two thieves and skulking spies are on this battlefield, presumptuous enough to challenge the might of Magadha... with that!’ Jarasandha pointed at the meagre lines of the Mathuran defense. ‘They might as well have drawn their swords and fought me in single combat last night itself, and saved their people undue suffering.’

He paused, watching as two chariots approached from the direction of the city. He didn’t need his spasas to bring him word that those two cars were bringing Krishna and Balarama.

‘But because of their arrogance and stupidity, today Mathura will burn to the ground. Every last man will be killed. Even last child enslaved. Every woman appropriated. Every house burned. These are my commands. Because my beloved son-in-law Kamsa was murdered here unjustly, I will not annex Mathura to my empire. Instead, I hand over its possessions to all of you, my soldiers, as spoils of war. Take what you will, for your yourselves. Land, belongings, slaves, valuables. Whatever you find is yours. Whatever you do not desire, you shall burn or put to the sword on the spot. No mercy! Death to the killers of uncles! Death to the murderers who slay their own kin! Death to Krishna and every last Vrishni.’

‘DEATH!’ returned the Magadhan army. And even in the heart of the city, the single word could be heard, like a bell tolling.

‘But I have decided that due to his actions against his own blood kin, Krishna is not worthy to face me in combat. I shall not fight one who

murders his own family. It would be beneath me. Therefore, the rules of war shall be relaxed for today. Instead of leaving the Lord of Mathura for me to kill, he shall be fair game for any and every man here today. Consider it your mission, your duty, your dharma, to slay the Slayer of Kamsa on this battlefield and avenge my murdered son-in-law. And he who avenges Kamsa's death by slaying Krishna shall have the hands of both my daughters in marriage, with a dowry to boot! All he has to do is bring about Krishna's death!'

'DEATH!' roared the army with even greater vigor for now the prize was rich indeed. To be married to the Emperor's daughters? To secure a dowry? To be son-in-law to Jarasandha himself? It was beyond imagining. Every man in that great circle of attack turned his eyes to the Mathuran side, seeking out the chariot of Krishna. Those who were within sight of it eyed it greedily, seeing in that dark form the possibility of their own future transformed.

Jarasandha turned the head of his horse to face Mathura. 'Leave only one Mathuran for me to kill by my own means. And that is Balarama, bhraatr to Krishna. I will fight him today if he dares to face me in battle. I shall take great pride and pleasure in slaying him before his brother's eyes. Let Krishna watch as Balarama's body, riddled with my arrows, ascends to the celestial realms. For he will not leave this battlefield alive today. Leave only him for me. The rest of them all, give them death.'

'DEATH!' cried the Magadhan army one final time.

Jarasandha raised his hand, preparing to give the signal to start the battle.

Balarama cursed loudly and instructed his sarathi to bring his chariot closer to Krishna's. 'I cannot stand by and listen to that liar spout insults at us,' he said. 'Give the word and I shall crush him like I crushed Kamsa's champions on the akhada field that day.'

Krishna looked as calm as ever. 'Warriors who resort to words must not trust their own swords,' he said. 'Why trouble yourself over a few insults? He is only trying to rouse his own troops into a battle frenzy. It's a common tactic.'

'Well, he's succeeded. Look at that Magadhan line. They're chaffing at the bit to come at us, like winter wolves on the mountain with the scent of nubile calves. Our forces cannot withstand such numbers. And once our line breaks...'

'Our men know what is at stake better than we do,' Krishna said. 'They will fight to the bitter end.'

'And that bitter end will come in moments,' Balarama said. 'And after they are dead, the Magadhan forces will roll over their corpses like an elephant wading through a stream and smash Mathura. You heard Jarasandha's words. No mercy. He will not accept a graceful surrender now. He means to slaughter every last one and enslave and abuse the rest. We cannot stand by and let this happen, Krishna.'

'And we shall not.' Krishna said. He gestured at the sky. 'Look, bhraatr, our chariots approach.'

Balarama frowned, squinting up at the sky. 'We already have chariots... what do you mean...?'

He trailed off, staring from beneath his palm which he held up to shield his eyes from the morning sun.

From that burning orb itself came two specks that grew larger rapidly. As the specks resolved into recognizable objects, both their charioteers exclaimed softly. The Mathuran soldiers who saw the approaching objects reacted as well, exclaiming and pointing.

Even the Magadhan forces stopped their self-rousals and turned their heads to peer suspiciously at the newly risen sun. They gaped as well.

Two chariots flew out of the sun and descended on the field, just before Krishna's and Balarama's chariots.

They were like no chariots ever seen on earth before. Golden in hue, gleaming all over, bejewelled and studded with glittering gems, each had a weapon. Krishna's was drawn by two beautiful sleek black mares, Balarama's by two resplendent white steeds.

Daruka exclaimed. 'I have never seen the likes of it before.'

'Nor will you ever again, not on earth at least,' Krishna said. He snapped his fingers and in a blink of an eye they were standing on the celestial chariot.

Daruka gasped and looked down at the golden reins in his hands and at the new garb he was wearing. 'My Lord!' he cried. 'I do not know how to drive a celestial chariot.'

'It is a chariot, Daruka. Fly it the usual way.' Krishna patted the man's shoulder. 'I am sure you will master in moments. Just remember that it also goes up and down.'

Balarama and his sarathi had transferred to the other chariot at the same time as Krishna. He picked up an object which was leaning against the well of the chariot. It was a great mace studded with precious gems and stones. ‘I shall show that rascal why I was named Balabhadra,’ he said. He swung the mace around his shoulder, testing it.

Daruka exclaimed and bent down to pick up an object lying in the well of Krishna’s chariot. ‘My Lord, it is a bow...’ He started then controlled himself and handed it to Krishna with an effort before rubbing his hands and examining their palms. ‘It feels like...living...fire.’

‘It is,’ Krishna said, testing the pull of the bow. ‘The fire of Brahman. This is the legendary celestial bow Saranga.’

Daruka looked at it with awe. ‘But there are no arrows with it, Lord. Shall I go fetch your quiver from the other chariot?’

Krishna grinned. ‘There will be no need. Prepare to ride out when I blow the shell.’ He turned and gestured to Balarama. ‘Bhraatr, shall we begin?’

Balarama put down the mace, face already sweating from working the heavy weapon. ‘Anytime you are, bhai. But tell me, does this not defy Narada-muni’s instruction?’

‘It does. But we have no choice. I will not stand by and watch Jarasandha slaughter the Vrishni, enslave the Yadava nations and destroy our culture. This is the only way we can fight back.’

Balarama grinned. ‘You will not get any argument from me, bhai. But will not the brahmarishi be very angry at us? Or rather,’ he added as after-thought, ‘won’t the forces he serves be angry at us?’

Krishna spread his hands. ‘Whatever the consequences, they cannot be worse than watching our people and civilization destroyed. Are you ready?’

Balarama hefted his mace. ‘Readier than I’ve ever been in my life before. To hell with asuras. Let’s kill some Magadhans today!’

‘Not just some,’ Krishna replied. ‘Let’s kill all of them. We have to make sure Jarasandha is so thoroughly beaten that he does not dare to raise a finger against us or Mathura ever again.’

Balarama nodded. ‘Works for me. Slaughter as planned...but them, not us. Ready when you are, bhai.’

Krishna placed his hands before his lips as if holding a conch shell, and blew. To Daruka’s astonishment, the outline of a conch shell appeared out of thin air. The more Krishna blew, the more clear and solid the shell appeared. Krishna blew a long sounding note on the shell, the sound trumpeting around the battlefield and carrying all the way across the city and the far side.

As soon as Krishna stopped blowing, the shell vanished back into thin air. Daruka swallowed and took up the reins of the celestial chariot. Even the silken ropes felt as if energy were coursing through them.

Krishna raised his hand and pointed in front, at the Magadhan lines. ‘Attack!’ he said.

Daruka started the chariot. He gasped as, instead of racing forward as expected, it rose up into the air.

23

JARASANDHA watched in rising anger as Krishna's and Balarama's chariots started forward then rose sharply in the air. So they intended to use divine powers against him after all. That meant that his information had been incorrect. He had been told explicitly that the brothers were forbidden to use divine powers or astras or reveal their divinity in any other way. He had predicated his entire plan based on that information. Yet here they were, summoning celestial chariots and weapons at the very last moment, defying their orders. It angered him beyond measure. This was one of the many things he despised about the race of Devas: they followed laws when it suited them and defied them when they pleased. So much for their great rule of dharma!

But he was still not overly troubled. If they possessed supernatural powers, so did he. All they had done was level the playing field, balancing one great advantage he had had earlier. He still possessed other advantages: his forces still outnumbered the Mathuran defenses considerably. All he had to do was keep Krishna and Balarama engaged in battle while his army broke through the cordon of defense and overran the city. Once Mathura was taken, the battle was as good as won. He didn't care whether Krishna or Balarama ended up dead or wounded or not, all that mattered to him was destroying Mathura and breaking the back of the Yadavas forever. With Kamsa gone he could never have the Yadava nations as his allies and if he could not have them then nobody would.

He would wipe out their entire race. As Yayati should have done instead of simply exiling his son Yadu. He would correct that error and erase the name and memory of the Yadavas from the face of this earth. And by enslaving and bonding their women and children through his tried and tested process of integration, he would use their genetic line to strengthen his own dynasty.

He started his chariot team forward, giving the gesture for attack at the same time. So suddenly did he charge forward that even his ensign took a moment to give the order. The trumpeter sounded the charge but by then Jarasandha was several dozen yards ahead, riding downhill towards the approaching chariots.

‘Balarama!’ he bellowed. ‘Fight me! ’

He had the satisfaction of seeing the chariot drawn by white horses turn and dip downwards again, heading towards him instead of towards his lines. That was exactly what he wanted. He meant to engage Balarama in single combat until he killed the Yadava or until his troops broke through, whichever came first. That left only Krishna to defend the line. And even Krishna and his celestial chariot and bow could hardly hold back a cordon of attacking soldiers this size and strength!

Besides, Krishna would have his hands full defending himself. Jarasandha had seen to that already.

He charged at Balarama whose chariot had descended and was running on solid ground again, no doubt to meet the challenger in a fair clash without the undue advantage of flight. Jarasandha grinned to himself. The fool. They thought to fight fairly against him? They had no idea what was in store for them!

He focussed his energy on the chariot, transforming himself as he charged at Balarama.

Balarama watched with vexation as Jarasandha's chariot suddenly altered shape and form without slowing its headlong pace. What manner of sorcery was this? It looked like...like the chariot and horses were all melding together then exchanging parts to form...something else altogether. The chariot was a strangely constructed one to begin with, like no chariot Balarama had seen before. It was too massively dense and appeared too heavy for quick movement. Which was why he assumed it required an eight-horse team. But the size of such a large team itself reduced the maneuverability of the vehicle on a battlefield, outweighing any advantages of armor or bulk. He could not fathom why anyone would want to use such a bulky impractical vehicle in war. Now he knew why.

It was not just a chariot. It was some kind of sorcerous device. When positioned in a certain way, it resembled a chariot drawn by eight horses. But at the utterance of a mantra—he presumed—it transformed into a different vehicle altogether. Not only that, the new form it took incorporated a place for its master—and for the horses as well. As he watched, the chariot's heavy armor plating swung up and sideways and around with a clanking and shirring of metallic parts, even as the horses were assimilated into this metallic structure. It was gruesome and disturbing to watch because at a glance it appeared as if the horses were being chopped and cut into myriad parts and the parts positioned in the metal structure to form a grotesque melding of metal and flesh. Balarama assumed that the mantra made it possible for the horses to be chopped up this way and reformed while keeping them alive. But from the pitiful equine cries and shrieks, he guessed that the process of transformation was not a pleasant one for the horses.

In moments, the transformation was complete. Where Jarasandha had been driving a chariot towards Balarama, he was now riding a vehicle of a kind Balarama had never seen in his life before, or even imagined possible. It was a horrific mishmash of horse parts and metal plates and wheels and

spokes and numerous sharp edged blades and points all across its exterior, a kind of giant metallic-horse-porcupine device, with Jarasandha seated in the center, controlling it all with a handful of reins which he pulled on and twisted. The whole contraption continued to roll towards Balarama at the same pace, increasing in speed now that its transformation was complete. It roared and whinnied and shrieked as it came, and the sound itself was enough to make him want to turn around and flee.

He stood his ground, not literally, but by continuing his charge while instructing his charioteer exactly what to do next. In the normal course of things, Balarama and Jarasandha would have charged at one another, then passed close by, firing arrows as they went. But there seemed to be no point in even loosing an arrow at this armored beast before him. It would be like throwing pebbles at an elephant. Which left the only other thing to do with a chariot.

‘Ride straight at him,’ Balarama instructed his charioteer.

The man did as he said, adjusting the team to put them on a direct collision path.

‘When I say the word, jump clear,’ Balarama ordered. There was no point in the sarathi dying as well. ‘Tie the reins to the stanchion before you do.’

The sarathi shook his head. Nervous though he was, he looked at Balarama squarely. ‘I am your sarathi,’ he said in a quavering voice. ‘I ride with you wherever you go.’

Balarama looked at the man. He nodded, grinning without humor. ‘Good man. Ride on at them with all the speed you can muster. Smash into him.’

The charioteer did as Balarama said.

Jarasandha leered down from his seat in the center of the bizarre vehicle that only vaguely resembled a chariot now. He seemed to know and to welcome Balarama's tactic. 'Come, Mathuran,' he roared. 'Come embrace your death!'

Balarama grinned back, raising and opening his own arms wide in the gesture of an embrace.

With a resounding impact, both vehicles met and collided like stars smashing into one another.

25

KRISHNA flew at the oncoming lines of Magadhan troops charging downhill towards Mathura. His chariot passed just over the heads of a company of elephants, startling the beasts. They trumpeted their anger, rolling their small red eyes wildly at the creature that had evaded them so closely. *Come down to earth and face us, they seemed to cry out. Fight us face to face.*

‘I shall,’ Krishna said grimly. ‘I shall fight every last one of you. But first, I must secure the safety of my people and loved ones.’

He turned to Daruka. The charioteer was white-faced from the speed and height at which they were flying. Krishna felt sympathy for the man. He was doing the best he could under the circumstances. In fact, he was driving the chariot itself perfectly.

‘Take us higher, Daruka,’ Krishna said. Daruka complied, causing only a single wobble when the chariot hit an air pocket and was shunted sideways a yard or so. He recovered at once and regained control of the vehicle, steering it artfully if somewhat jerkily upwards at a genial rising trajectory.

Krishna noticed the sarathi glancing sharply sideways at something in the sky from moment to moment and turned his own head, frowning, to see what Daruka was looking at. He could see nothing at first then noted the presence of the carrion birds, circling above the battlefield. He understood at once: the charioteer was watching the pattern of the birds to gauge the direction and force of the wind, thereby improving the flight of the chariot. Krishna nodded, impressed. That was sharp thinking!

‘This is high enough,’ he said after a moment. ‘Hold her steady and take her in a circular pattern, follow the lines but remain in the center.’

Daruka did exactly as he said. From time to time a gust of wind buffeted the chariot, trying to push it out of its chosen path, but the sarathi made subtle adjustments to the horse team, coaxing one, then the other with brilliant timing to keep them on track.

Krishna looked down from the chariot. They were just about a hundred yards above ground now. The two lines of opposing forces resembled hand-carved wooden toy soldiers at this height. The Magadhan lines were fast approaching the Mathuran lines. In another moment, they would clash—and almost certainly break through. Krishna had given orders for the Mathuran defenses to hold the line, not to charge. He had hoped that perhaps Mathura might hold off a few charges before falling back to reform the line, repeating the process and reducing the enemy numbers through steady attrition: a charging army usually lost more soldiers than a defending one, if the defenders were well equipped.

But Mathura wasn't equipped at all for this attack. There had been virtually no time to dig defensive ditches or a moat nor to place siege defenses around the city. All that stood between the Magadhans and the city was a pitifully thin wall made up of human muscle, flesh and bone and the weapons that wall of bodies possessed.

It would not hold up to a single assault, let alone a battery of charges.

If that line of Magadhans charging at the Mathuran forces struck them in the next few moments, they would break through the defensive line and carry on into the city. After that, there would be no defense at all left. The city would be lost.

Unless Krishna could prevent the Magadhans from smashing into the Mathuran defensive line altogether.

‘Hold us steady now,’ he said to Daruka, raising the bow Saranga. ‘Keep us as still as possible.’

Daruka swallowed visibly, clearly wondering if such a thing was even possible with a flying chariot. But credit to the man, he spoke to the horses in his cajoling soothing voice, and held the reins lightly but firmly in place.

Krishna waited as the chariot slowed and remained steady, watching as the Magadhan frontline drew closer to the Mathuran defenses. If that charge struck, it would be too late. This tactic could only be deployed before they struck. He had only one shot at this and he had to make it count. Each passing instant seemed to measure off the time Mathura had left before certain destruction.

‘Steady!’ called Daruka at last. The chariot was rock steady. Even Krishna would have been impressed by the charioteer’s ability to accomplish such a feat the very first time he had flown. But he had no time to lavish compliments.

He summoned up the missile he desired, using Saranga’s power.

At once, the device appeared, a golden spinning disk that spun at unimaginable speed, producing a keen singing sound. Its surface gleamed and shone, reflecting the sky above, spinning so fast that the light striking it was instantly refracted into a multitude of rainbow hues. Krishna’s face, hands, the chariot, the charioteer Daruka, all were bathed in the rainbow light of the divine weapon.

He basked in the light, relishing the sense of power and comfort he felt in the presence of the disk. He longed to reach out and touch it, so hypnotic and enticing was its beauty, but he knew that at this speed, the disk could not be held or deployed by hand. That was why he had required the bow Saranga.

‘Sudarshana,’ he said, addressing the chakra by name.

The chakra’s spinning song changed melody, acknowledging its master’s voice.

‘Fly straight and true now,’ Krishna prayed. ‘You are Mathura’s only hope.’

And then, with a flick of the bow string, no differently than loosing an arrow, Krishna deployed the Sudarshana Chakra.

KAAND 2

1

JARASANDHA roared with exultation as his vehicle collided headlong into Balarama's celestial chariot. He had been prepared for the usual exchange of arrows and maneuvering of chariots round and round as was usual with most mortal warrior kings. But this was wonderful! He was weary of that slow tedious maneuvering and gentlemanly arrow fighting. This was the kind of fighting he enjoyed: head-banging full-impact no-restraints!

The two vehicles smashed into one another with such force, he felt his teeth jarred in his mouth and his two halves shudder and almost split apart at the joint. That had never actually happened to him before: he didn't think it was possible for him to come apart merely from a harsh impact. The nature of his two halves and the way they clung together, sharing bloodflow, organs, bones knitted together, muscles, and so much else, meant that there was a cohesion between the halves that could not be easily broken. It took great strength to physically tear them apart and he had not encountered more than one or two enemies who could do it.

But even though the collision did not actually tear him into his two halves, it was still a tremendous impact. He felt the metal plates of his vehicle shatter and buckle and bend in obscene ways, severing horse limbs and torsos and splashing blood and body fluids everywhere. The melding of living horses and the metal plates of his chariot was accomplished through asura maya, of course, and though it kept the pieces of the eight horses alive until reconstituted back into their normal forms, it did not render them invulnerable and immortal. The individual parts, though alive and sentient, could still be crushed, maimed, severed and otherwise destroyed.

The collision killed all the eight horses on the spot, mashing the whole of his vehicle into a mangled heap of crumpled metal plating and slaughtered horse flesh. Somewhere inside that mangled bloody heap, Jarasandha himself was buried, upside down and with limbs sprawled, pinned into

place by various metal angles and sharp edges, as well as horse limbs and bones and even the entire set of lower teeth of one horse embedded in his left bicep.

He laughed. Ah, this was true sport!

He took hold of the metal on either side and wrenched it apart, tearing it as easily as any strong man tears a length of fabric. He ripped his way out of the mangled mess and emerged into the morning sunshine. Ripping up a handful of kusa grass, he rubbed assorted unguent horse fluids and offal off his limbs.

Then he laughed again merrily.

Balarama's chariot lay upside down, jammed into the remains of Jarasandha's vehicle. It had not been crushed or destroyed as Jarasandha's had been but the plating was buckled in spots and there were any number of dents and dings all around. But that was not the reason why it couldn't be ridden: two of the horses were dead and another one was injured, lying on its side and whinnying pitifully. The fourth was standing on all four legs but seemed dazed and lost. The charioteer who had been driving Balarama's chariot lay sprawled on the grass beside the surviving horse, clearly laying where he had been flung from the impact and just as clearly dead on impact.

Jarasandha didn't care about horses or chariots or charioteers. He was only interested in one thing.

'Balarama!' he bellowed. 'Finished so easily? I haven't even begun to fight yet!'

A sound from behind alerted him. Jarasandha swung around to see Krishna's brother rising to his feet, picking up the golden mace he had been wielding earlier.

‘What are we waiting for then?’ Balarama asked, and ran forward, swinging his mace.

2

DARUKA heard his lord speak to the spinning chakra before he deployed it. Daruka's entire attention was focussed on holding the chariot rock steady in the sky as instructed. He dared not glance sideways or risk doing anything that might cause even the slightest motion. But he could hear well enough. The way Krishna spoke to the disk, calling it by name, made it evident that he knew the weapon. That it was a celestial weapon, he had no doubt. The way it had appeared, its gleaming perfection, the speed at which it spun with no visible cause, the rainbow light it gave off, all made it obvious that this was a weapon of gods. And Krishna was God incarnate, after all. Daruka had heard many express doubts about this last fact, some even wonder aloud whether Krishna had possessed divinity only upto the time he killed Kamsa after which he had become a normal mortal. But Daruka had never doubted his Lord's true eternal nature and power. And he was proved right.

The Sudarshana chakra flew from Krishna's Saranga Bow, flying over the side of the chariot and then sharply dipping down. From where he stood, even without looking down or following it with his gaze, Daruka could not but help see its passage within his field of vision.

'Turn the chariot so we can watch it work,' Krishna said.

Daruka complied, turning the celestial chariot sideways and descending smoothly by several yards to follow the chakra's progress.

Now he could see the chakra clearly.

Sudarshana flew down from Krishna's hand straight to the ground. It struck the ground directly in front of the charging forces of Jarasandha's army. It hit the ground with the impact of a meteor striking earth, ploughing up dirt in a spume that rose forty yards high. Daruka watched as

it raced along the ground, churning it up like the fastest plough ever created, running in a full circle. He had to use every ounce of his skill as a charioteer and his ingenuity to keep the sky chariot flying fast enough and at the right angle to keep the chakra in sight. Even so, there were moments when it vanished around a curve, his view blocked by the tops of trees. Still, he could see the plume of earth thrown up by its frenetic digging action. It was running in a full circle, digging up a track directly in front of the onrushing frontline of Magadha.

As Daruka watched, the spume of dirt flung up by the chakra's blindingly rapid passage finished falling back to ground. Even though he had witnessed it with his own eyes, it was hard to believe that a disk that small had accomplished such a great task in mere instants.

A yawning ditch some one score yards wide had appeared in the ground, directly before the charging Magadhan frontlines. It was hard to tell its exact depth from this height, but Daruka estimated that it was at least one score yards deep as well. The ditch appeared to run all the way around Mathura, forming a gigantic circle several hundred yojanas in circumference.

Of course, he thought, seeing the purpose of the ditch. It has to be broad enough to be impossible to leap across, even with a running horse. And deep enough that once someone falls in, they are unlikely to survive long.

In little more than a moment, the Sudarshana chakra completed a full circle and was back where it had started. He saw the golden disk emerged from the earth. Its perfect gleaming surface was unmarred by the dirt it had dug through.

Krishna used it to dig a defensive moat around the city. In less time than a man might dig a single shovel load of dirt from loose earth!

Its work done, the disk continued spinning in mid air as it rose toward the chariot, singing its strange sad song.

Krishna raised the forefinger of his right hand. The chakra slowed its spinning considerably and descended carefully until its central hole fitted onto its master's finger. It remained there, spinning. Krishna smiled at it.

‘You did well, Sudarshan. I am proud of you once again.’

The disk spun out a melodic question.

‘Yes, I know you can destroy the entire army on your own. But I do not wish you to do so. You have done the work for which you were summoned. Now, I wish you to return home. Thank you, my friend.’

With one final sad melodic rift, the chakra spun itself into invisibility.

Daruka looked at Krishna with awe. Krishna smiled back at him.

‘My Lord, you could have deployed the disk to destroy the entire Magadhan army, could you not?’

Krishna inclined his head.

‘Then why did you not do so?’

Krishna shrugged. ‘When teaching a wise man a lesson, one needs only a gesture. When teaching a fool, one needs words as well as gestures. But when teaching a dangerous and wise fool, one needs to use one’s hands to drive the point home.’

Daruka nodded slowly, trying to work his way through that cryptic response.

Krishna smiled at Daruka. ‘Remain here until I return. I shan’t be gone long.’

Daruka was about to reply when Krishna leaned on the side of the chariot’s well and leaped over the side.

3

BALARAMA charged at Jarasandha, swinging his mace. He was angry at the death of his charioteer and the death of his horses. He put that anger into the first swing of his mace.

Jarasandha laughed and dodged the swing.

Balarama swung again.

Jarasandha dodged him again.

Balarama swung again and again—each time Jarasandha dodged him deftly. Darting this way then that. Narrowly escaping the flight of the mace.

Balarama roared with frustration. ‘Stand still, Magadhan! I will smash your head to pulp.’

Jarasandha laughed. ‘Why don’t you try that on these fellows?’

And he gestured, summoning someone forward.

At once, a number of men surrounded Balarama and Jarasandha. Balarama hefted his mace and looked around.

They were all powerfully built men, many bigger and more muscled than Kamsa had been, or that giant with the Crooked Jaw named Mustika.

With one difference: They all carried maces.

Jarasandha chuckled. ‘I heard you have a penchant for bludgeons. Is it true that you used to carry a plough around when you were a boy?’

Balarama glowered at Jarasandha silently.

‘Well, it seems you’ve graduated from ploughs at last,’ the Magadhan said brightly. ‘Now it’s time to see if you’ve learned enough to go up against these fellows.’

The men began circling Balarama on all sides, each seeking an approach to charge at and attack him with his mace. Balarama swung around, turning constantly, watching each one. ‘Who are these fools?’ he asked as he kept them at bay. ‘More poor souls forced to drink your vile drugs to enhance their bodies artificially?’

Jarasandha smiled without taking offense. ‘That’s more than you can say for yourself. These men don’t actually need maces. Each of them can take an entire regiment on their own. But after watching the way you despatched Mustika and the other fighters on the akhada field, I thought they might need a little help against you this time. Hence the maces.’

Balarama continued to turn around. He was tiring of going in circles now and each time he turned, the men at his back seemed to be a step closer. At this rate, they would jump him from behind in another few moments. ‘Won’t make a difference, as you should know by now, Jarasandha. Maces or no maces, I’ll still make mincemeat out of your overmuscled goons.’

‘Ah,’ said Jarasandha, ‘such over-confidence in such a young boy. I think not. I agree you could take these men on with their maces anytime and win. But not when they attack you all at once.’

Balarama stopped turning and looked at Jarasandha.

Damn! He thought. That's a smart move!

Then the mace men rushed at him and he raised his own mace to defend himself.

4

BALARAMA swung his mace in a wide circle, turning nimbly on his heels, changing the angle of his arc with every turn to avoid being predictable. The whirling gold blur of the mace kept Jarasandha's fighters at bay but each time the mace swung past, they leaped in, seeking a way to get at him if only for a fraction of a second. And each time, he seemed to be straining harder, swinging harder, turning faster—working harder and harder to keep them at bay. It was only a matter of time before...

Thump.

The side of the mace struck one Magadhan fighter squarely on the chest. The fighter grunted and staggered drunkenly backward. The fighters behind him parted to let him stagger past, then closed the gap and moved in to fill his space. Balarama realized grimly that the man had deliberately stepped in front of the blow.

Thud.

Another fighter, this one struck on the side of shoulder, actually bending down to take the blow on the meaty part of his upper left side. A dangerous move: had Balarama raised the arc of the mace, the man might well have been struck on the side of the head. As it were, the Magadhan staggered sideways, lost his balance, and sprawled. Other fighters stepped over him, keeping the circle tight as ever.

Balarama continued swinging, his mind trying to anticipate their next move.

A third fighter offered himself for the mace, this time putting out his hands and taking the bulbous head of the weapon on his palms, with the

backs of his hands resting against his own abdomen.

Whoomph.

He doubled over and fell face-down on the ground. Balarama continued swinging, struggling to regain the momentum each time that he lost when the mace struck a fighter.

They're deliberately taking the blows. They're testing my strength and weapon as well as breaking the arc of my swing.

The only way to get within a swinging mace was to slip in under and strike fast and hard. Or to impede the swing, causing the mace-swinging to lose his momentum, and then, as he was regaining control of the heavy bludgeon, move in fast and hard from an angle and strike him.

Jarasandha's fighters had the advantage of numbers, far greater numbers than any mace swinger could take on at once. No matter how fast and how well Balarama swung, they would slip past his arc of defense. The three who had offered their bodies to the swinging weapon had not seemed to suffer last damage from the blows: for one thing, no blood had splattered when the mace head struck their bodies, nor had he heard bone cracking or felt flesh yielding. From the vibrations of impact that ran up the handle of the bludgeon, it had felt as if he were striking a heavy rug with a flimsy stick and trying to beat the dust out of it. He definitely hadn't beaten any dust out of those three bodies.

A fourth fighter stepped up to take a blow. This fellow actually stood there grinning as Balarama's mace found his abdomen. He bent over, grimacing, but didn't lose his grin. As he fell over, he clutched his belly but again, there was no blood or apparent injury.

Their bodies are hardened like lohitwood. It's like hitting an ironwood trunk three yards wide with a blunt axe.

This time, Balarama lost the angle of the arc and had to change his footwork quickly to keep from being carried out of his own private circle of defense. If he let that happen, he would stagger back into the enemy's grasp. And he doubted very much if they would simply catch him and pat him on the back.

The loss of balance actually helped him. The other fighters had probably intended to rush in while he was off balance. Due to his side-stepping one way, then leaping again to avoid falling against the enemy fighters, he didn't move quite as they had expected. One of them struck a double-handed blow through the exact space his head and neck had occupied only an instant earlier. Another effected a powerful side-kick that was aimed at the spot where he expected Balarama's knee to be located. A third struck with a pointed fist at the spot where his kidney ought to be, putting his bulging shoulder and back muscles into the vicious jab.

All three blows missed. Balarama was about a foot away from where they had expected him to be. But because they had struck at him they were moving fast at that instant. When heavy density fighters moved, they had to reduce their muscle density in the most mobile parts of their body in order to facilitate rapid movement. That was the only time when they were vulnerable, for those few heartbeats.

Balarama swung the mace upward, striking the first Magadhan in his left armpit, then brought the mace down like a pendulum to smash the hip of the second one and let it swing up diagonally to collide the head of the mace with the fist of the third fighter.

This time, he felt the satisfying impact of heavy metal striking and crushing living bone as the first fighter's shoulder, arm and rib cage cracked and splintered, the second fighter's hip buckled, and the third

fighter's fist vanished in a tomato-sized explosion of blood and bone shards.

Blood sprayed satisfying in the air, spattering him and the other fighters. All three Magadhans screamed and shrieked. And the impact on the other incoming fighters was greater psychologically than physically. Unaccustomed to being hurt in combat, drugged enough to take their own invulnerability for granted, none of these overgrown toddlers with bulging bodies had felt pain for a long time, some never at all. To not only experience blinding pain but to *feel* and *see* and *hear* their own limbs crushed, maimed, shattered so brutally shocked the sanity out of them. The three men flailed about like crazed drunkards, clutching their ruined organs and spurting limbs, colliding with their fellow fighters, knocking down several, screaming and shrieking and crying out for long-forgotten mothers, and generally ruining the carefully orchestrated closing circle that had been about to close in on Balarama only an instant earlier.

The circle broke. And Balarama made his move. The only move that he *could* make when surrounded by a chakravyuh of incoming enemies. He could neither go left nor right nor would breaking out of the circle serve any purpose since there appeared to be at least one or two hundred fighters surrounding him already with more joining in every minute. Therefore that left only two directions and one would involve lowering his guard and involve digging which wasn't practical when a split second and a wrong move could permit dozens of eager supermortal enemies to pounce on him.

He had only one way left to go and only this opportunity to go that way. So he did it.

He went *up*.

5

KRISHNA leaped over the side of the sky chariot. He was less than a hundred yards above ground. A mere hop. He landed on both feet, keeping his knees bent for balance. He touched down on the Mathura side of the ditch. The dust was still settling from the clouds of dirt flung up by the celestial disk but even through the billowing clouds, the Yadavas had no trouble distinguishing their own Lord. A great cheer went up at once and reverberated across the battlefield, all around Mathura. Krishna raised his hand in acknowledgement and grinned, then waved once.

The senapatis of Mathura came riding in haste to meet him. They dismounted and bowed deeply to him. ‘Lord Krishna, your feat with the chakra was beyond description. You have created the very moat we ought to have dug years earlier.’

‘And we would have, had the Usurper not been too vain to believe that anyone would ever dare to raid Mathura,’ said Pradhan Mantri Pralamba, dismounting from his chariot. He greeted Krishna with a bow of his head and a namaskaram. ‘But you have saved the day, my Lord. By your action, you prevented the enemy lines from breaking through.’

‘We would have held them back,’ said a young senapati, more confident than the rest. ‘We would have staved them off as long as was needed.’

‘But for how long?’ asked Krishna kindly. ‘A day? Two days? Ten? Jarasandha has a force of 23 akshohini. And he has an entire regiment of supermortals, each as powerful as the champions who fought alongside Kamsa. One of those brutes can wreak more havoc than a hundred elephants.’

The young senapati brandished a fist angrily at the cloud of dust obscuring the ditch that now separated the city from the invading forces. ‘Then we

would have fought them to the end. Till every last one of us had stained this field red with our blood.'

'And yielded Mathura to their grubby hands,' said an older general, one who had seen more decades—and more wars—than the younger man. 'What use would it be for us to be heroes if we could not even save our own people and city? Nay, Lord Krishna did the wise thing. By creating this rift through the use of his celestial weapon, he has saved us all. Now Jarasandha can no sooner invade Mathura than a gnat fly through a closed door.'

Krishna shook his head. 'I fear you are granting me too much credit. It is true I created this rift to stay the enemy's advance. But all I expected to accomplish by doing so was to delay that headlong advance. Not bar their way into Mathura completely. That task will still have to be done the hard way, by fighting them off.'

All the generals gaped at him. 'But that ditch is wider than any moat ever built around any Arya city,' said another general. 'Why, it looks as wide as one of the legendary moats around the great city of Ayodhya!'

'Wider,' said another man. 'I have seen the moats of Ayodhya. This rift is wider than all the moats of Ayodhya combined.'

'Regardless of its size,' Krishna said, 'and even if I were to make it bigger, it would still not prevent Jarasandha from invading Mathura.'

They looked at one another then at the moat, nonplussed. 'But how will he cross such a rift? At best he could bridge it in one or two places and have his infantry cross in twos and threes...'

'And if he does so, we shall happily pick them off in twos and threes as they come,' said another senapati enthusiastically. 'By Lord Vishnu's

grace, that enormous besieging force cannot possibly cross that divide all at once! For one thing, the elephants and chariots can never cross.'

'What they say is true, Lord Krishna,' Pralamba said thoughtfully. 'You have created a divide that is more effective than any fortification. I do not see how Jarasandha can possibly bring his forces across now.'

'And yet he will,' Krishna said grimly. 'Count on that. For I have the measure of the Emperor of Magadha. He has not come here to achieve an easy victory. He came to achieve a victory at all costs. Unlike you gentlemen who lead men who are of your own kith and kin and tribe and gotra, Jarasandha considers everyone in his army merely a soldier. Expendable lives to be used to serve his ends. And if that means sacrificing every last one's life to invade Mathura, he will sacrifice it.'

Krishna looked out across the yawning abyss that now separated them from the army only a hundred yards away. The dust cloud was still to settle completely, but even without being able to see anything on the far side, he knew that Jarasandha was still there as was his army. Just as he knew that Balarama was fighting fiercely and was heavily outnumbered at that very moment.

'But Lord Krishna,' said the older senapati, 'surely now we are in a better position to defend the city, thanks to your amazing feat?'

'I wish I could say we are, good senapati,' Krishna said. 'But I fear to celebrate prematurely. As I said at the outset, all I expected to achieve by doing this was delay their headlong advance and rob him of the instant victory he would surely have accomplished. For he meant to smash through our frontline and break into the city this very morning. By doing this, I have stolen his easy victory but it does not mean I have ensured our own. There is much hard work ahead. And a kshatriya's work is bloody. I fear our young senapati here may turn out to have said the wisest thing of us all after all. It may well be that we shall have to stain this field red with our blood to the last man before Mathura is finally saved.'

They were all silent, unable to think of anything to say in response to this extraordinary pronouncement. Even the young general who had spoken so confidently and brashly earlier now seemed subdued. After all, if even the mighty champion of Mathura saw such an outlook for this battle, then who was he to predict any other outcome?

Krishna smiled, his bright white teeth flashing in his dark face like the moon emerging from monsoon clouds. ‘But that is why I am here. And why Balarama is fighting his hardest at this very moment against immense odds. We will not let you expend your lives—not without laying down our own as well!’

Everyone brightened at once. The young senapati spoke up, ‘My Lord, that is all that I meant to say earlier. Not that we would fight and die, losing. But with you here to lead us, we would die happily, fighting to defend all that we hold dear.’

Krishna smiled. ‘And I shall do my best to see that you do not die, happily or not!’

All the senapatis nodded, pleased.

Krishna held up a hand. ‘Now, I cannot promise that we shall not suffer casualties for we shall. Against a force that size and with Jarasandha’s resources and powers, it is inevitable. So I will not make promises I cannot keep. For it is not within my abilities to protect each and every soldier on the field from harm today.’

‘Nor need you do so, Lord,’ said the eldest general. ‘We are kshatriyas. This is our dharma. Whosoever dies on this field today shall die a happy man and be remembered for generations to come. For he fights with Krishna and Balarama by his side!’

‘Aye,’ said the others vehemently. ‘We fight with Krishna!’

Even old Pralamba said with pride in his voice and a shine in his eyes, ‘It does not matter that Jarasandha has 23 akshohini or supermortal fighters or potions and powers to tip the odds unfairly in his favor. We have Krishna and Balarama on our side.’

‘Yes!’ cried the group of generals. ‘We fight with Krishna Balarama...to the death if need be.’ It was a pronouncement they had clearly rehearsed and said before for Krishna heard and saw the troops pick it up and repeat it all around the defensive circle. It echoed miles away.

‘WE FIGHT WITH KRISHNA BALARAMA...TO THE DEATH!’

Krishna put his hand to his eyes, wiping away two teardrops that glistened on his cheeks. ‘I am moved by your loyalty. We shall do everything in our power to live up to your faith and your love.’

He straightened his shoulders and smiled at them all. ‘Now, this is what I need you to do next to counter Jarasandha’s next move...’

Barely had he finished explaining when suddenly the roaring of the Magadhan army on the far side of the rift died down. Hearing the change in the enemy ranks, even the Mathurans quietened, listening and trying to make out what was happening. An eerie silence descended on the battlefield.

Krishna strode forward almost to the very edge of the rift. Freshly turned dirt crumbled away beneath his feet, tumbling far down into the abyss. The odor of earth was overwhelming, rich but not entirely unpleasant. The cloud of dust still hung over the ditch like a shroud, obscuring the vision of everybody else peering curiously across but Krishna’s senses could make out everything happening on the far side.

‘It begins,’ he said grimly.

6

BALARAMA leaped up into the air. A flurry of weapons swiped, sliced and slashed the air where he had been a moment ago. He flew up several dozen yards, leaving the flailing arms and oiled heads below and for an instant, he was afforded a wide view of the battlefield.

He saw the great ditch dug by Krishna's disk and the billowing cloud of dust thrown up by its creation and smiled. The city was safe for the moment now.

He watched as the onrushing hordes of Jarasandha's troops saw the abyss yawning before them and tried to slow their attack. It was difficult because while the frontlines could see the ditch, those behind could not. The wave of advancing troops slowed and attempted to halt completely, a difficult task when men and horses and elephants had been excited and whipped to a battle frenzy. Balarama saw many hundreds of soldiers, chariots, cavalry and elephants fall screaming and trumpeting into the ditch, and chaos breaking out in the front rows as those at the fore attempted to stop abruptly and those behind them pushed them forward and into the ditch.

As he reached the apogee of his leap, some hundred or more yards up in the air, he saw that the ditch ran all around the city, effectively halting the advance. Now his smile widened to a broad grin.

He fell back to earth with enthusiasm, opening his arms wide and holding his mace ready for action.

Jarasandha's fighters were staring up at him and roaring with frustration, gesturing to him to descend and face them like a man.

'You want me, you have me,' he said, chortling. 'But can you do me?'

He crashed into a group of fighters like a hound on a mouse, swinging his golden mace with all his might. He felt heads explode like melons and saw and heard shoulders and spines shatter like crystal. He touched ground and felt his feet sink a yard in with the weight and impact of his fall, then, before Bhoodevi could take hold of him with her invisible embrace, he had leaped up again.

This time he did not leap so high. He only went as high as he needed to. Just enough momentum to deliver the extra punch he required to break through their hardened bodies. His second descent was behind the first group of attackers, and in the midst of the rest who were not expecting him to land from above. He laid into them with the mace and this time they were the ones defending, too confident of their invulnerability to dodge his blows. That was exactly what he had counted on. The harder they made their bodies and more firmly they stood their ground, the easier it made his task. Perhaps easy was not the right word for it still took every ounce of his strength and each time he swung the heavy mace he heard himself issue an involuntary grunt as loud as an elephant's trumpet. But the equation of their resoluteness and his power, gained by using gravity to his advantage, worked brilliantly.

He smashed them into pieces like a man with a stick in a pottery store. Bodies crumpled and cracked on every side, blood and gristle went flying in every direction and shattered limbs flew recklessly. Each time, he did not wait for them to get his bearing but simply struck hard and leaped up again. Each time he landed in a new spot, using the cover of the billowing cloud of dirt from the ditch to conceal his ascent and descent. Each time he caught them by surprise, falling from nowhere with his deadly mace flailing the instant he landed.

He wreaked great damage. As the cloud of dust passed this way, fully throwing a shroud over Jarasandha's forces, Balarama found himself settling into a rhythm.

Leap, land, swing, smash.

Leap, land, swing, smash.

Leap, land, swing, smash.

He worked his way in one direction then the other as the dust cloud covered the battlefield like a fog, rendering it impossible to see farther than a few yards in any direction.

Like a wraith he descended each time, cutting down a half dozen of the powerful fighters, maiming some beyond repair, killing others on the spot, shocking all.

Ten, fifteen...one score times he rose and descended, delivering death with his bludgeon.

The golden mace was no longer golden.

It was coated in blood and gristle and flecks from five score bodies.

The part of the battlefield where he worked was strewn with broken bodies, each a screaming ruin with awful gaping wounds that had once been a man, a proud powerful fighter capable of slaughtering armies.

Balarama danced the dance of death.

Soon, there came a moment when he landed—and found nobody to receive his blows.

He leaped up again and landed several yards away—and once again found nothing but a half-broken man crawling and weeping piteously for mercy. Balarama gave him his mercy then leaped again.

Twice, thrice more he leaped and the third time he found a man with his back to him. He raised his mace as the man turned around. But the look of abject terror on the man's bloody face caused him to pause.

The man cried out in a foreign language. Balarama had no idea what he was saying but the intent became clear when the fighter dropped to his knees and clasped his meaty fists together in an universal gesture of surrender.

Balarama turned away in disgust and leaped again.

This time he landed farther away, far enough to be sure of what seemed evident.

His assumption was confirmed.

He had destroyed the entire regiment of fighters. Every last man was either maimed and broken or dead.

Almost as if in acknowledgement of his feat, a great cry rose from the Mathuran side of the ditch:

'WE FIGHT WITH KRISHNA BALARAMA...TO THE DEATH!'

He grinned at the approbation and hefted the mace, waving it even though he knew his fellow Yadavas probably could not see him or the weapon through this fog of dust.

He turned the mace, resting it on his shoulder as he surveyed the field, wondering whom he ought to take on next.

Just then, the field went silent. One moment, it was the usual chaotic shouting and screaming and whinnying and trumpeting. The next moment a pall of silence as dense as the cloud of dust fell over the world.

In the silence, he heard a familiar sound.

At once he knew what the Magadhans' next move was to be. And it sent a cold shiver through his body.

The sound was accompanied by a shouted order, echoed all around the circular frontline.

'LOOSE!'

‘LOOSE!’ cried Jarasandha, his voice amplified by asura maya and booming across the entire vast theatre of war. He grinned widely, reveling in a rare moment of expository exultation. He would show these young fools that even gods who walked the earth could not protect every mortal.

The reverberating command was echoed all along the yojanas-long frontline of the Magadhan forces. It rippled around the city of Mathura, circumscribing the great circle of the invading army’s siege line.

At the command, over two hundred and fifty thousand longbow archers loosed the first volley. The whickering of bow-strings resonated loudly enough in the smoke-fogged air that it sounded like the flight of a great flock of migrating birds taking wing. In a sense, it was a great flock taking wing: except that their migration was only across the great ditch—and into the Mathuran ranks.

The sound ululated in the still silent morning as every living being for yojanas around listened intently. For this was an age when war was an everyday matter and the sound of certain weapons could instill dread into the stoutest of hearts. This particular sound was familiar to every man, woman and child in Mathura City and the defending forces that surrounded the capital. This sound meant only one thing: Death was in the air.

In the smoky obscurity of the Mathuran ranks, every face turned up to the skies, keen ears attempting to follow the path of the volley. The arrowheads sang as they hurtled up into the air, seeking to fly high in order to breach the large ditch. The wooden shafts spun behind the metal tips, singing a harmony of their own.

In the frontline of the Mathuran army, Krishna was the only one who did not need to raise his head. Around him, every last one of the senapatis was looking skywards, tracing the path of the volley. Several gasped and some exclaimed as their faces turned to the apex and then their heads swiveled, looking back over their shoulders.

‘They shot too high!’ said the youngest senapati who had spoken up earlier. ‘They will miss our frontlines entirely.’

Krishna replied grimly, ‘They are not aiming for our frontlines.’

Across the Mathuran ranks, the realization rippled. Jarasandha’s forces were not firing at the Mathuran frontlines as expected.

‘They are probably afraid of shooting into the ditch,’ said one captain derisively. ‘They are shooting high to be safe.’

His second-in-command, an older man with more battle experience, frowned as he tilted his head, listening to the path of the volley. ‘Nay. Even so, they would not need to aim *that* high. They are going to miss our ranks entirely.’ Suddenly, his face went slack as realization struck him.

He looked at his captain. The man was younger and less experienced, but knowledgeable to understand the implication. ‘They are not aiming at us at all!’ he cried, turning around in alarm. ‘They are—’

‘—aiming at the city,’ said Ugrasena, rising to his feet in horror. ‘The craven!’

Vasudeva’s face drained of blood. He stood with Ugrasena, staring at the terror approaching from the skies. The dust raised by the digging of the

ditch had risen to a hundred and fifty yards over the city, encircling it on all sides and forming a smoky shroud.

Now, penetrating through that shroud and rending it to shreds, came a horrifying threat. Two hundred and fifty thousand metal-tipped deadly longbow missiles, fired so high up into the air that each was now descending from a height of more than three hundred yards.

At a length of one yard each and a deadweight of some 100 grams, they would each fall from such a height with a force of several kiloes. That would be the equivalent of a spear flung from a score yards away with all the force a very strong man could muster. Force enough to punch through inch-thick armor—if the arrowhead did not shatter first. And when it came to flesh, blood and bone...sufficient to drill through any of them as easily as a hot needle through warm butter.

‘Dear Lord Vishnu preserve us,’ Vasudeva said, tears springing to his eyes.

Across the courtyard, the prayer was repeated in varying forms.

Across the city, a million faces turned skywards to view the oncoming destruction.

From loosing to landing, the flight of the first volley lasted barely fifteen seconds. It was an interminably long time as the first realization turned almost instantly into horrified shock.

And then the volley came to ground.

A hail of death fell upon Mathura.

Arrows punched through people's necks, chests, backs, faces, heads... through children, old and young, male and female alike...through houses, walls, roofs, carts, windows, wagons...into livestock, sheep, cows, calves...

The hail of death lasted barely a few seconds. Yet it seemed forever.

Thousands were struck in that first volley alone. For it took everyone by surprise: Ugrasena and Vasudeva, their senapatis, their advisors...even Krishna and Balarama.

Of all the possibly ploys, tactics and stratagem they might have expected Jarasandha to deploy, this was not one.

Nobody had ever dreamed of Jarasandha ordering an attack upon Mathura itself, on the citizenry. It defied all the laws of warfare and honorable combat. So long as the defending army remained on the field, it was the enemy's right to attack them and assault them in a wide variety of ways. But not to simply bypass the army and attack the citizens themselves. It was not acceptable or conceivable in that day and age.

Yet Jarasandha had done it.

And because it was so unexpected, because there were only seconds from the time everyone realized the true destination of those arrows and their coming to ground, there was nothing to be done to save the victims.

The first volley fell like a hail of dissolution upon Mathura. Killing children, infants, women, men and animals indiscriminately. Entire families fell, riddled with arrows, spouting blood, gasping for breath around bloody mouthfuls of air. Old men who had survived a dozen wars and the reign of Kamsa and had only recently celebrated living over a hundred years died with arrows through their throats and eyes and ears. Young women, unwed and uncourted as yet, died. Mothers and aunts.

Fathers and uncles. Children and pets. Cows and calves. Dogs died yelping piteously, pinned to the dirt by yard-long arrows. Stray cats and even birds pecking at crumbs died. Uksan drawing carts were brought to their knees, hearts drilled with arrows.

Hundreds fell, never to rise again. Thousands more were wounded or maimed for life.

The royal pavilion was covered with a thick overhang. While it could not prevent arrows from passing through entirely, it deflected them. Old King Ugrasena was struck by one arrow in the forearm, punching through the bone of his hand and passing through it. Another three or four nicked or slashed or passed entirely through his flesh without harm to his vital organs. Vasudeva was miraculously spared as was Devaki who happened to be indoors at that precise moment, seeing to the preparation of the day's repast.

The screams of the dying ended mercifully quickly for the wounds were grievous and the shock of being struck just as damaging as the missiles themselves. But the cries and wails of the bereft and the wounded and maimed rose like a lamentation to a lost god.

8

KRISHNA could scarcely believe what he saw and heard. Using the power of his divinity, he sent his vision scouring Mathura, as if he himself were flying across the city and seeing and hearing everything taking place everywhere at once.

In moments, Mathura had been transformed into a battlefield, one where an army lay defeated and helpless, capable only of being hurt and killed, incapable of defending itself or fighting back. The sight of thousands dead, dying, maimed and wounded wrenched his heart.

In the royal pavilion, Vasudeva and Ugrasena sprang to action at once. ‘TAKE COVER!’ they roared. At once, their aides passed on the message. All those who knew what would follow took action as well.

Across the city, every Yadava who could stand and speak was doing the same. ‘TAKE COVER!’ people shouted to loved ones, to friends, or to strangers alike.

‘TAKE COVER!’ the words were repeated and echoed across Mathura.

Even the soldiers in the Mathuran ranks standing outside the city, were staring back at their home, stupefied. Their lips moved as well, warning their loved ones and families and friends and neighbors and fellow citizens: ‘Take cover, for God’s sake take cover.’

At once Mathura responded.

The Yadavas had not expected such a move. But once made, they would not simply stand by and be massacred either. They were a resilient enough people to react and do what was needed to survive.

Those fortunate enough to have survived the volley unharmed helped those who were wounded. Dragging people under roofs, into houses, behind overturned uks carts, beneath bridges and overhangs. Taking shelter behind any structure that seemed sturdy enough to resist a volley of arrows.

The wounded who had no help crawled to shelter as fast as they were able, helping each other when possible.

Across the city, mingling with the moans and cries of the wounded and dying came the shouts of those who knew the danger of remaining as they were.

‘Take cover.’ And they cajoled and ordered and requested their comrades to do so, even as they crawled and hopped and rolled to take shelter themselves.

Sadly, many of them chose badly, not realizing the capacity of these arrows and the height from which they fell. Not many Mathurans had experience with longbow arrows. Those who did were soldiers and all the soldiers were on the field. These were civilians and citizens and all they knew was the arrows came from the sky and the best way to protect oneself from them was to take shelter. Under what, it did not matter. Many picked up straw baskets or bales and crouched beneath or behind them. Others climbed into the backs carts, not realizing they had cloth covers. Others huddled in houses without being aware of windows and gaps in the roof and walls, for not all Mathuran houses were stone-solid or closed on all sides—indeed, being a herding nation, many lived in open proximity with their cows and calves.

And many did not even have time to take shelter at all. Many were too badly wounded to simply get up and run. They were still struggling to regain their feet, or unable to pull or crawl to safety. Some were pinned down by the deadly missiles, impaled by arrows that had passed through

bone and flesh with several inches of the arrowhead imbedded in the ground, or in wood, or between paving stones on the street. They could barely stay conscious let alone move.

The second volley followed almost immediately after the first and its effects were just as devastating. Those who remained exposed were subjected to a shower of impalements, a punishment so dire and agonizing that even the mythic tortures of the deepest levels of hell might seem mild in comparison. The long heavy missiles, falling from great heights, backed by considerable drawing power and accumulated momentum, punched through living bodies mercilessly, reducing people to tortured masses of raw flesh.

Many were betrayed by their choice of shelter. Arrows punched through bales and into bodies, through cloth overhangs, through open windows, through cracks in door joints, through gaps in brick walls, through wooden makeshift roofs. In some places, a cluster of arrows fell with sufficient combined weight and force to break through brick roofs or shatter adobe tiling, and in at least one instance, a clump of some several hundred arrows broke an entire small dwelling apart, reducing it to rubble.

The third volley was in the air even before the second volley fell.

Jarasandha's archers had the rhythm now. And they loosed volley after volley after volley...

Death rained down on Mathura that day. And even the most fervent prayers went unanswered...or so it seemed for the duration of the first terrible volleys of the Magadhan archers. For under such punishment, even a few minutes was like a lifetime in hell.

9

KRISHNA had spent his childhood years impatiently waiting for the time when he would go to Mathura and fulfill his destiny. Each time he heard of a new atrocity perpetrated by his uncle Kamsa, he would be filled with impotent sadness. Even though he was god incarnate he was still subject to the limitations of mortal growth and development. He knew that the time when he was to kill Kamsa was pre-ordained. Yet there were moments he chafed with impatience and longed for that time to come sooner.

More than once he thought of simply going to Mathura and confronting his nemesis. Yet each time he stopped himself by remembering that there was a plan and it must be followed. The consequences for failing to do so could be disastrous. If he faced Kamsa too soon and failed, however unlikely that might seem, that would mean an end to this incarnation.

Even if he did not care about death, the demise of Krishna Vasudeva would mean that Kamsa and his cohorts would continue their rampage of brutality unchecked. It could take generations for him to take another rebirth. Eons of planning and careful calibration had gone into selecting this particular age, this specific time and place, this special incarnation. He could not endanger all humanity because he was impatient. No matter how great a hero, he could not possibly save *everyone* nor end *all* evil. It was a simple fact of reality.

Yet he could not accept that. Having been born in Nanda and Yashoda's house, he came to understand and love these odd frail creatures named mortals very quickly. And once the emotional bond was formed, he could not accept the death or pain of anyone he loved or cared about without doing something to prevent it. So he had risked his own life more than once to ensure that not one life was taken or one person harmed while he was in Gokul and later in Vrindavan. He knew that it meant that he himself had to forego many pleasures and joys of mortal life that he could have

otherwise enjoyed to the hilt. But he accepted that loss. If he could save or protect even one life it was worth giving up all happiness in this incarnation. And so he had fought asura after asura and protected those he loved from each new threat, never relenting in his watchful attention.

And finally the day had come when he was old enough to go to Mathura. He had stood on that field and faced Kamsa at last. And he had known he was ready, more than ready in fact. The actual encounter had seemed almost simply in contrast to all that waiting. He had even found himself wondering why he had not come sooner, ended this long earlier. But he knew that it was necessary to wait this long, to be this certain, to be better prepared than was necessary. For in war and combat one is either over-prepared or not well enough prepared. There is no perfect balance. How can there be when one desires an outcome of win or lose? The whole point of combat was to destroy balance, to ensure one's own survival and one's enemy's destruction. And that meant waiting until one was completely certain and ready to claim victory. And so he had slain the Childslayer and claimed his destiny. And had believed that the worst was over, that the purpose of this incarnation was fulfilled and that now he could perhaps find more purpose and meaning to life. He had saved not only the Vrishni but all Yadavas and in a larger sense, all mortalkind.

But today had been a shock to his system. Today he had discovered that it was not over. It had not ended with Kamsa's death. His destiny had not been fulfilled when the prophecy was realized. It had only begun then.

For so many years, he had worked so hard to ensure that not a single life was taken or endangered. And he had succeeded.

And today, he had watched horrified as thousands of lives were ended. Thousands of innocents were slain. Thousands maimed and wounded and disabled for life.

And he had been able to do nothing to prevent it or save them.

It was unbearable. It was the most pain he had ever felt. For as Himself incarnate, he possessed infinite empathy, the capacity to open his heart and experience what others were experiencing. He felt their agony. Their pain. Their suffering. Their shock at being invaded and assaulted thus in their own homes, within their own city, now of all times, when they had thought the worst was over, the Childslayer was slain, the reign of terror ended and a new era of peace begun.

When they had believed they were protected by the true Lord of Mathura, king of mortals in all but title.

Krishna.

And yet, he had failed them.

Each arrow that pierced a body or limb pierced his own.

He felt the anguish of every man, woman, child, animal and bird. He even felt the pain of a snake impaled by an arrow and a ladybug crushed to death by an arrowhead.

He felt everything.

But above all, he felt the sense of disbelief that this could happen while Krishna watched over them.

For even though he had slipped the mask of maya over their senses, preventing the people of Mathura from seeing his true divinity openly, yet the awareness of his true nature lingered, like a faint fragrance of flowers long after the blossoms had faded and been removed from a chamber. Like the memory of a dream of a divine encounter. Like a longing for darshan with an unattainable deity.

And at some level, the people of Mathura felt...protected. It did not even matter by whom or why, the point was that they did feel protected. They were as sure of it as they were sure of night following day and day following night again.

And that surety had been betrayed.

Krishna had betrayed them, betrayed their faith.

And he could not bear to let that happen.

10

JARASANDHA laughed. Rarely did the Emperor of the Magadhan Empire permit himself to display such effusive emotion on a battlefield. The over-wrought melodramatic pageantry of most monarchs did not appeal to him. He understood that such displays served to boost morale and inspire awe but he had never felt the need for them. His entire approach was dependent on under-estimation. The enemy always under-estimated his abilities and resources and he always used that to his advantage. The rare times when an enemy king or army actually respected him enough to engage his attack skillfully, he simply exceeded even their wildest expectations, resorting to shock tactics or horrific displays of power that they could never possibly match.

He had known from the outset that Mathura would be unique as an enemy. He had been proven right. The divine powers of the Slayer and his bhraatr had turned his first strategy to disaster. While Balarama demolished his entire regiment of empowered fighters, Krishna's celestial weapon had dug a ditch that not not be breached by any siege force. The frustration of seeing his entire force of supermortal champions destroyed in a short time by a single enemy as well as the thwarting of his brilliantly conceived and executed circular advance upon the city had driven Jarasandha to a cold silent rage. He had even lost his appetite for the battlefield savories he enjoyed so much while watching his forces in action.

But he had come prepared for such resistance. After all, he was no Kamsa! He did not under-estimate his enemy. He had known that Krishna-Balarama's first objective would be to keep his forces from invading the city. He had not known exactly how they would accomplish this but he had come prepared for several eventualities. One was the possibility that they would somehow bar him entry into Mathura completely. And they had done just that.

So he had instantly put his counter-strategy into play. One out of ten of his infantry forces was assigned to a longbow garrison. With 109,350 foot-soldiers in each of the 23 akshohini he had on the field today, that meant 251,505 longbow archers. This did not include the shortbow archers in his cavalry or the shortbow archers on chariots and elephants. These were specially selected and trained longbow archers, each armed with yard-long metal-tipped arrows of willow woodstock and longbows crafted by the finest makers in the Arya nations.

Due to the great distance across which they were loosing, neither his archers nor Jarasandha himself could see the results of their volleys.

They did not need to.

The cries and screams from the city filled the air for miles around, leaving no doubt about the efficacy of the assault. Besides, now that the dust cloud was clearing, he could see the most recent volley falling well within city limits. He did not need to actually view the damage firsthand to know how bad it was. Like all Arya nations, the Yadavas were accustomed to the rules of combat. No invading force attacked the citizenry when its army was still on the field. It was just not done.

Except by Jarasandha.

Echoing the lamentations from the city were the cries of anguish and rage from the Mathuran forces as well. The soldiers of Mathura watched helplessly as volley after volley flew overhead and fell into their homes. They could only guess at the damage and loss being caused by such lethal assaults. The pain they felt was unbearable. Every last soldier raised his weapon and roared with rage at the Magadhan forces, eager to join swords and unleash vengeance for such a brutal betrayal of kshatriya dharma.

‘Cowards! Craven! Fight us if you dare!’ cried the Mathuran army across the ditch. ‘Fight us, you demons!’

And that was when Jarasandha laughed. He threw back his head and roared with laughter. For the very strategy that kept him from taking his forces into Mathura also frustrated the Mathuran army itself! Krishna had drawn a ditch preventing him from engaging with the Yadava forces—and the Yadava forces from engaging with his!

The Mathuran army could shout and rant all it wanted: they could no sooner touch Jarasandha's army than Jarasandha could send elephants leaping across the ditch.

So he laughed and laughed to his heart's content. As the volleys of deadly longbow arrows continued unabated. Slew after slew of lethal missiles winging their way skywards and falling into the proud capital of the Yadava nations. Wreaking untold destruction and loss to life and property.

It was almost as good as actually invading Mathura!

In a sense, it *was* an invasion of Mathura. For the arrows went where even men could not seek out and take lives with deliciously random abandonment.

Jarasandha laughed and relished the moment.

Ah, mortals could be such fun to kill!

11

BALARAMA did not roar with rage as his fellow Yadavas were doing. Normally, he would have been roaring the loudest, raging the most. Just as he was fair-skinned to Krishna's dark-skin, so also he was loud to Krishna's soft, a dhol-drum to Krishna's flute, counterpoint to his point. But this dastardly act of Jarasandha had infuriated him beyond the point of tolerance. This called for more than a mere showing of emotion. This called for retaliation. Not just wrathful retaliation as every Mathuran soldier on the field was crying out for but cold-blooded vengeance. What Jarasandha had done was a breach of kshatriya dharma and the Arya code of ethics. He had broken the primary rule of war: fight only with one's equal. To rain down volleys of longbow missiles on an unarmed civilian populace was not an act of war; it was an act of murder. By doing so, Jarasandha had declared himself a criminal of war.

He had removed any need for Balarama and Krishna to abide by the normal rules of war.

Until now, Balarama was bound by dharma to fight only those opposing him on the field of battle—such as the supermortal champions who had been sent to attack him—or his equal and opposite number amongst the enemy. This rule meant that foot-soldiers could attack only foot-soldiers, cavalry only engage with cavalry, elephants with elephants, chariots against chariots, and so on. Naturally, one could not be held accountable for incidental deaths or injuries caused in the chaos of battle but nobody, general or foot-soldier alike, could knowingly breach this law. It was the cornerstone of pitched battle among the Arya nations.

Until now, Jarasandha had abided by it in all his previous conflicts—or at least, he had done so to the best of Balarama's knowledge.

But now, he had openly defied kshatriya dharma and Arya law.

He had attacked an unarmed populace, bypassing the enemy force entirely.

That was not merely a violation of the law and dharma, it was heinous, dastardly behavior.

It was a crime against humanity and civilization itself.

It was an act so immoral, it deprived the criminal of all rights and privileges deserving of a fellow Arya, or even of a mleccha, as the barbarian races of the west were called. To the best of Balarama's knowledge even the white-skinned mleccha invaders with their jaundice-color hair and discolored eyes did not resort to such tactics. They understood the ethics of battle and the importance of mutual respect among warring forces.

What Jarasandha had done today was unforgivable.

And by doing it, he had given Balarama free rein to do as he pleased.

Now, nobody could cry foul or blame Balarama for anything he did to Jarasandha's forces.

Nobody could point a finger and tell him he went too far.

Jarasandha had just signed his own death warrant and that of his entire army.

And Balarama intended to execute that warrant.

BHAI, he cried out mentally as he picked up his celestial mace, swinging it over his shoulder to warm his tired muscles. **YOU DARE NOT STOP ME NOW. I WILL NOT STAND BY AND LET MATHURA BE RAVAGED THUS.**

The response came almost instantly, in a mental voice that was as cold and deadly as his own: **STOP YOU? I WILL NOT STOP YOU, BHRAATR. I WILL JOIN YOU. COME, LET US SHOW JARASANDHA THE PRICE FOR TAKING INNOCENT YADAVA LIVES.**

Balarama grinned, pleased at his brother's answer.

He swung his mace one last time and sprinted forward, into battle.

12

JARASANDHA rejoiced as volley after volley rose up into the air, falling toward Mathura city. The screams and cries of the civilians struck by the deadly rain was music to his ears. He stored the sounds in his memory to play back in his mind's ear at leisure and savor. He was a connoisseur of pain and often enjoyed having prisoners tortured as he dallied during his leisure times. The sounds enhanced his pleasure in almost every pastime from eating to consorting. But the sound of Mathuran women and children dying in agony was the sweetest raga of them all. ‘

Again!’ he cried to the senapati of his archers. ‘Again! Again!’

He would make them continue thus until their store of longbow arrows was depleted. That could take hours since each archer was equipped with ten score arrows and the elephants in each akshohini carried replenishments as well. By the time he was done with Mathura, the brothers would be begging him to let them surrender.

The cloud of dust raised by the digging of the ditch had finally begun to settle. The upper part of the cloud had dissipated, blown away by the wind. Now, as he glanced up at the latest volley, he saw the central mass of the dust cloud billowing outwards, boiling and seething like smoke.

He was still laughing when the dust cloud parted to reveal two golden chariots, gleaming and flashing as they caught the sunlight. The chariots flew out of the heart of the dust cloud and the cloud itself dissipated around them, vaporized in moments, melting away into obscurity to reveal a clear cloudless day. Against this starkly brilliant blue sky the two celestial chariots shot upwards. Each contained a single rider, one as dark as a crow's feather, the other as fair as milk.

Jarasandha chuckled. So. The shattered chariot had somehow restored itself. Well, after all, it was a celestial vehicle. And the brothers had decided to rejoin the fray. Good. He could do with some sport.

As he watched, the two chariots reached a height of less than one hundred yards, then halted, hovering in the air. He grinned. *Fools! Youthful inexperienced fools.* No doubt they had paused to take stock of the enemy forces and arrangements, not realizing that by staying in one place they had made perfect targets of themselves.

‘Archers,’ he cried. ‘Aim at new target. Chariots in the sky!’

The sound of his voice was carried to the far side of the great siege circle. At once, every single longbow turned and directed its aim at the two golden chariots.

‘But my lord Jarasandha,’ said the senapati in charge of the longbow garrison. ‘Some arrows may fall back upon our own forces.’

The senapati who spoke was mounted on a horse some ten yards away from Jarasandha’s chariot.

Jarasandha’s tongue shot out like a frog’s across this distance, like an arrow shot from a bow. At the very last instant, it split at the tip, each of the two points forking out a few inches apart. They pierced the eyes of the senapati, turning both his visual organs to pulpy ooze. Jarasandha retracted his tongue, licking the residue as the body of his slain general tumbled off the horse.

‘If I wanted suggestions, I would have asked for them,’ Jarasandha said.

There were no further suggestions. The archers had all taken aim and the points of their arrows were following the sky chariots which remained

stationary in the sky as if stranded.

‘Loose!’ he cried.

The volley shot skywards, streaking up in a converging pattern.

Two hundred and fifty thousand longbow arrows, all moving in concert. For a moment, they clouded the sky and shadowed the sun itself.

Jarasandha watched them rise, converge, and meet in a blur at the place where the two golden chariots hung suspended. The majority of them would find their mark.

He chortled. This was great sport indeed!

The chariots vanished from the sky.

One moment they were there high above the battlefield, the next instant, they had disappeared.

They winked back into existence at a point a hundred yards north of their original position.

Jarasandha blinked.

The storm of arrows reached the spot where the chariots had been and clattered uselessly against one another.

Then the entire volley began to fall earthwards.

Jarasandha lost his smile. The young fools had not been as foolish as he had thought. They had deliberately drawn his fire skywards, fully intending to dodge the arrows and let them fall back to ground—amongst Jarasandha's own forces.

'So that's your game, is it?' he muttered.

'Shields,' he cried.

At once, his army raised their shields, the foot-soldiers their painted wooden boards, the cavalry and chariots their metal-plated shields.

Jarasandha's entourage was staring skywards, fascinated by the unusual sight of their own army's arrows about to fall back upon their own heads. None of them had ever witnessed such a sight before. Distracted, they had forgotten that their Emperor would require his own shield. Their bald pates gleamed in the sunlight as they gazed upwards.

'To me, you fools,' Jarasandha said, then cracked his tongue like a lash around the necks of his personal aides, leaving red welts and oozing blood. The Mohinis sprang to life, racing to cover their Emperor with the great shield painted with his insignia. It required 18 muscular Hijras to raise it above his head. They were barely in time.

Jarasandha heard the hail of arrows clatter and thud around him, several hundred striking his great shield and imbedding themselves deep in its metal-wrapped body. Despite its prodigious thickness and double-metal-covering, some arrowheads still punched through. He flinched as one slipped through and nicked his collarbone, scraping it and drawing a thread of blood. He gritted his teeth.

Across the battlefield, several thousand men, horses and elephants cried out and screamed as their own army's arrows struck their bodies. Arrows punched through armor and shields and even through elephant hides to

maim and kill recklessly. Thousands fell, bodies turned to porcupine coats where the arrows had fallen in clusters.

Jarasandha pushed aside the great shield and peered up at the sky.

The chariots were descending to ground. Not just descending. They were racing earthwards like vehicles in a race to the death.

He opened his mouth to issue orders then found himself unable to think of any order to issue.

Seconds later, the chariots struck ground like juggernauts ploughing into the earth.

13

The golden chariots struck ground with an impact that was felt all across the theatre of war. Plunging down from the sky in arrow-straight trajectories, they tilted upwards at the last instant to land upright, ploughing through the ground. The force with which they plowed was sufficient to dislodge a meter-deep layer of topsoil and cause the this dislodged dirt to spew sideways and upwards in two great spumes that showered Jarasandha's forces on either side. The unfortunate archers into whose ranks the chariots touched ground and plowed their way through were thrown along with the spumes of dirt, some chopped to body parts and shreds, other whole and screaming. Ten thousand archers died in that first impact itself, thousands more as the chariots plowed a deep and wide furrow, reaping a bountiful and bloody harvest of human lives. Their fellow archers lowered their bows, staring in horror as the dirt thrown up by the ploughing chariots pattered down around them. It did not take a strategic genius to see that the goal of the chariots was to eliminate the ring of archers shooting inwards at the city.

‘ARCHERS, HOLD!’ bellowed Jarasandha, the order amplified through the open mouths of his generals, lieutenants and captains around the battlefield, a supernatural device he employed when he needed an order to be relayed simultaneously across large distances and great numbers of men. The order emerged in his voice even though it issued from the throats of a thousand different officers.

The line of archers, about to break and run for cover to save their own lives, held—shakily at first as the nerve of a few thousand broke and they had to be ordered shot down by their fellow archers—with a sword to their throats to ensure compliance. Once these bodies fell sprawling with arrows in their backs, the rest understood that their choice was to die trying to desert Jarasandha, or to attempt to fight the Slayer of Kamsa and his bhraatr. They decided that the latter gave them a fighting chance at least and held their places, keeping their arrows notched. But their eyes flicked

to the spumes of dirt flung up by the passage of the celestial chariots, and the reflection of that scene on their wide-open eyes testified to their growing terror. As archers they were accustomed to doing battle from behind a longbow, firing at targets hundreds of yards away. They had no stomach to fight at close quarters—and in any case, how were they to fight such an attack?

But their leader had realized this at once and taken charge. Jarasandha was no frightened longbow archer. The Emperor of Magadha had not become who he was in a day's easy fighting. He had faced all manner of enemy and survived a hundred impossible situations. He was not easily cowed.

'DEFENSIVE MANEUVERS,' bellowed Jarasandha's voice through a thousand different throats. And like a flock of migrating birds following their leader, the archers turned their arrows to point sideways, at the two golden chariots ploughing their way around the circle of invaders.

From Jarasandha's position, the chariots could be seen barreling through the ranks of archers with the speed of an eight-horse team racing for its life. Spumes of dirt and bodies flew to either side, like the wake of water thrown by a chariot racing through a shallow stream. When the chariot struck bodies, the spume turned deep red, as if the stream were filled with crimson water. The debris of blood, bone and flesh rained down across the rest of Jarasandha's army, driving the elephants and horses into a frenzy, shocking even the most hardened of his veterans. They were prodigious fighters one and all, but they had grown accustomed to winning, to their master's supernatural abilities and arcane knowledge of potions and alchemy tipping the balance in their favor. They were used to being the side that watched and cheered lustily as *their* champions plowed through enemy ranks, reaping bloody whirlwinds of slaughter. It was unnerving to see that same level of power turned against them now.

Yet their lines held and they stood their ground, watching with grim fascination as the two chariots reaped their scarlet harvest. The golden chariots were washed red with the blood and offal of fifty thousand archers

already and yet their momentum seemed only to increase. Their movement through the ranks of bowmen produced a peculiar organic sound. Fond of food and all the processes that its preparation involved, Jarasandha recognized it as the sound of a hand-wound churner grinding meat into mince. The smell that rose into the air matched the sound. His forked tongue flickered between his lips, hissing as he watched with cold anger. He was not defeated yet but he could not help marveling at the sheer power on display.

Then the chariots increased their pace, and whole bodies began to fly to either side and up into the air, flung by the impact of the grinding chariot wheels and undercarriage. It was fortunate that these celestial vaahans were not drawn by horses for no breed of equine could possibly have survived such an advance. Jarasandha saw half-severed bodies fly hither and tither, and the torso of a Bowman, his severed longbow still clutched in one whole hand, came flying through the air to crash into two of his personal Mohini guard, killing them on impact. The air was filled with flying debris and he snarled as he ordered the hijras to shield him again. Then he changed his mind and waved them away. It had occurred to him that the sight of him shielding himself and simply watching would not be good for the morale of his men. He was Jarasandha, Emperor of Magadha, king of the known world. He could not simply cower beneath a shield held by Hijras. He had to *do* something. He had to stop the Yadavas brothers before they wiped out his entire archery brigade.

Balarama grinned with wolfish joy as his chariot slaughtered the archers who had been raining death upon his fellow Yadavas in Mathura. The celestial vaahan threw up a protective shield that was not visible to the naked eye, guarding its occupants from any debris or weapons. He had not used it earlier because it would have been less than honorable to have used celestial protection when fighting an enemy. He used it now only to keep himself from being constantly barraged by the offal of the slaughtered archers and only after he sensed Krishna using it first. Krishna used it to

protect his sarathi Daruka. While they could endure the barrage of offal and body parts and other debris, the charioteer was mortal.

At first, Balarama relished the satisfaction of destroying the archers that had caused so much suffering and death in Mathura only moments earlier, but as their chariots worked their way steadily in an arc around the circular ranks of the invading force, Balarama itched to do battle with his own hands. He heard the taunts and cries of outrage from the other enemy forces as they decried the slaughter of the archers, demanding the opportunity to fight by more direct means. He sent a message to his brother through their inaudible means of communication.

Bhraatr, let me dismount and fight the enemy hand to hand. It does not seem honorable to continue this way for so long. We are more than capable of battling our foe face to face.

You speak truly, Balarama bhaiya, I shall grant my sarathi power to control the chariot and we shall both dismount and fight the enemy at closer quarters.

Balarama sent Krishna a mental emoticon that expressed his pleasure at Krishna's response: :-)

Daruka was pleased when Krishna offered him the reins that controlled the chariot. He had appreciated Krishna's need to master the celestial vehicle himself during the last maneuver but was pleased to be entrusted to do his

job independently. “Here, good sarathi,” Krishna said, “I am giving you control of not only this vehicle but my brother Balarama’s vehicle as well. Can you manage both chariots at once?”

Daruka sent his mind outwards, feeling for the other chariot’s controls. The celestial vehicle responded at once, turning ever so slightly at his command, changing its course by a fraction of a degree. He brought it back on track. “I can, my lord. You need have no doubts on my account.”

Krishna smiled. “I have no doubts at all, good Daruka. Only great expectations.”

“I shall endeavor to fulfill them and create newer greater expectations, great one.”

“I shall see you soon. When you have finished destroying the ranks of the archers, you may retreat with both chariots up into the sky to watch the rest of the battle from a safer vantage. It may get too hoary here on earth to risk being on ground level.”

“As you command, sire,” Daruka replied.

Krishna turned away and leaped from the chariot. Even though the vehicle was moving at blurring speed, Krishna seemed to leap away from it as easily as a man stepping off a stationary carriage. Then the flurry of debris and dirt churned up by the chariot’s passage obscured him and Daruka had to concentrate all his energies on keeping both vehicles on track. He kept them moving steadily around the vast moat dug up by Krishna, destroying the last ranks of longbow archers that threatened Mathura.

14

The brothers landed within yards of each other, twin puffs of dust raised by the impact of their landing. It so chanced that they landed near the elephant brigade of an akshohini. Over twenty one thousand elephants were assembled in this brigade alone, each armored and clad in the dark foreboding colors of Magadha, their mahouts seated aboard and armed with shortbows and light throwing spears. Their captain had tracked the approach of the enemy and reacted the instant both brothers touched ground.

“Hathi-fauj!” he cried, his command instantly echoed by his lieutenants across the line. That command alone drove icicles into the hearts of the enemies of Magadha for to face a charge by an akshohini’s contingent of battle elephants was a formidable thing. Twenty one thousand eight hundred and seventy armored battle-trained elephants made an army unto themselves—even Jarasandha’s own champions with their potion-hardened bodies had faced enemy elephant brigades and had their work cut out for them. The sheer onslaught and driving force of those many ton-heavy bodies rolling in seemingly endless waves made an elephant akshohini no less daunting than battling the ocean itself—or the wind, or the rain. One could fight as fiercely and bravely and for as long as one could stand without achieving victory.

Jarasandha’s army had 23 akshohini, each with its elephant brigade. With 21,870 elephants in each, that totaled five lakh three thousand and ten elephants. With their armor, mahouts and weapons, that added up to over a million tons of killing force.

When the captain of that first elephant brigade shouted “Hathi-fauj,” he was sounding the death knell for most enemy armies. Even rapacious Jarasandha rarely sent in his elephant brigades—they caused too much wanton damage and friendly casualties and were often impossible to control and curb. On occasion, when he needed to show strength or ‘use

the hammer' as he called it, stamping out an entire city or punishing a populace for resisting his siege for too long or too bravely, a single elephant brigade was more than sufficient to do the task with formidable results. As the captain of the first brigade called his "Elephant army" to order, the other elephant brigades were alerted and stood by as was their duty but none expected to see combat. Most smiled on hearing those fateful words. "Hathi-fauj" was the most dreaded cry in Arya battles. Even Jarasandha's brigade of champions, while devastating and seemingly indestructible, could not rival the terrifying visual spectacle posed by tens of thousands of armored elephants trumpeting and stamping their feet, frothing as they champed their lipless mouths and stared with wild rolling eyes.

"Charge!" roared the captain of the first akshohini. The sound of a conch shell being blown by his aide sounded across the battlefield, alerting the mahouts atop the elephants. And with a rumbling and thumping that caused the ground beneath their feet to shake, the twenty one thousand eight hundred and seventy elephants trumpeted one last time, lowered their heads and began lumbering towards the two solitary men standing a mere two score yards away. They had been inflamed and excited by the scent of blood and adrenalin for the past hours and were eager for action, for Jarasandha had his mahouts feed their beasts choice treats after a battle, and even their normal feed only after a rigorous bout of training. The pachyderms knew that the more fiercely they fought and stamped and gored, the better they would be fed. The males who caused the highest death counts would be permitted the privilege of mounting as well as other perks of victory. And those who remained stubborn, sat down on the battlefield (even if wounded) or otherwise failed to discharge their duties would not be fed or watered or cared for at all. They knew these things and knew that their comfort and survival depended on their performance in battle and hence they looked forth to proving themselves.

They began slowly as always but within a few yards they picked up speed —goaded by wickedly hooked prod rods and barb-tipped lashes—and were thundering with lowered heads, sharpened tusks held at an angle of attack. Even their minuscule brains and tiny eyes could not help but feel

astonishment and pity for the two mortals who stood before them. Was this their only opposition? Was it a jest or a game? Surely this could not be the extent of their enemy's resources? Why, this was work for a single baby bull, not even an adult male, leave alone a whole battle-herd! This was almost beneath their dignity, contemptuous.

Yet it was not their place to question or pause once the order and physical motivation to charge had been given. All they knew now was they had to destroy those standing before them by any means possible and their task would be done.

From across the breach, the generals of Mathura watched in stupefaction as the first akshohini's elephant brigade bore down on the brothers Balarama and Krishna. Word rippled back through the Yadava lines that the Slayer of Kamsa and his bhraatr had re-entered the fray. Mathura and its army waited with bated breath to know the outcome. Even those wounded or who had lost loved ones or friends in the hail of arrows paused in their misery to send up a prayer for their savior, the Deliverer. The necessity of the game of gods might have clouded their awareness of Krishna's full divinity yet no power in existence could entirely fog the mind of a true devotee of the Lord's greatness. In times of distress, people were wont to attribute godlike qualities even to mortal men—champion fighters, warriors, generals and kings. Krishna and Balarama were of a status elevated beyond all those things. To everyone who knew them and loved them, they were no less than devas. They did not need a certification of proof to sanctify their belief.

But they did need a miracle, to save Mathura.

And they prayed for it now as the elephants collided with their Deliverer.

BHRAATR!

Balarama's mental cry to Krishna was one of distress. Anyone else capable of hearing it might have assumed—wrongly—that the caller was distressed by the overwhelming odds. Even an army would be daunted by the sight of over twenty one thousand battle elephants charging straight at them. These were just two fifteen year old boys! But it was not out of fear or concern for his own survival that Balarama called out in those brief moments before the elephants reached them. Even though it lasted but a few moments their mental conversation flashed between them with the speed of thought.

These gajas are innocent in this conflict. It would not be right to kill them.

My heart bleeds for them too, bhraatr. But we must fulfill our dharma. They serve our enemy therefore they must be killed.

They are not all mastikas. Most are otherwise quite sensible hastin. They are driven mad by ill treatment, abuse and vicious training. There are hastiki among them. And zarama too.

Mad or sane. Battle-crazed or mature adults. Male or female. Grown ups or children. The answer is the same: they serve our enemy and so must be destroyed.

Is that our credo now? Either ‘with us or against us’? I thought that was the way of asuras. That dharma elevates us from that narrow attitude.

Dharma demands fulfillment, not hesitation. There is no room for doubt here. Either we kill or are killed. And if we die, with us dies all hope for Mathura. Do you think Jarasandha or his forces will pause like we have to debate matters of motivation, or distinguish between male and female Yadavas, or spare children?

Balarama hung his head. No.

Then do what you must. Destroy the enemy.

Balarama nodded and raised his mace again but as he did so, his fair handsome face was contorted by an expression of pain. It shall be as you say, bhraatr. But I do not like it. Not one bit.

That is good, bhai. For a warrior kills not for pleasure or personal satisfaction but only because he must. It is the only way any living creature can be permitted to lawfully inflict violence upon other living beings: because it is critical and vital to survival. No lesser reason will suffice. Anything else would be murder.

I understand. But I am not so sure this is not murder too.

Then they were out of time. Even though this entire exchange had flashed between them in the space of a fraction of a moment, that fraction had in fact passed. The elephants were upon them.

“Lord Vishnu in Vaikunta!” said the youngest senapati, staring incredulously across the breach. The sight was an incredible one. Every Mathuran soldier and officer was staring across the gulf at the sight of an entire brigade of elephants bearing down upon and then overrunning two young men. “Surely they cannot fight *that*?”

Nobody answered his rhetorical question. They were too engrossed in staring at the incredible panorama. They sent up prayers to Vishnu too, but in their hearts and minds, and with the fervent wish that the impossible should happen, that the two champions of Ayodhya should somehow, by any means, resist and survive this juggernaut of an onslaught.

Their prayers were about to be answered.

Viewed from across the breach, the collision of the elephant brigade with the brothers was akin to a tsunami striking two bamboo sticks. So insignificant did the two tiny human figures appear when seen from more than a hundred yards away, so puny and helpless. In contrast, the lumbering brigade of hastipaka appeared relentless, unstoppable. The unstoppable tsunami collided with the insignificant figures and enveloped them in a rolling cloud of dust that momentarily obscured the view of the watching Mathuran lines.

The frontline of gaja rolled over the spot where the brothers stood like a white-water rapid thundering downriver. Jarasandha was a shrewd enough tactician to know how to adapt to changes in the theatre of war. He had already demonstrated that by utilizing his longbow archers to attack the city when his frontal advance was prevented by the creation of the ditch. Now, he showed his astuteness by ensuring that his subordinate officers guided the elephant charge at an angle designed to lead them away from the same ditch. The incident with the chariots and the archers had proven that the brothers were as likely to use wily tactics as frontal assaults and he had no intention of sending an entire akshohini's worth of battle elephants plunging to certain death if Balarama and Krishna sidestepped or leaped away at the last moment.

But they did not sidestep. Or leap away. Or avoid the onslaught of gaja in any way.

Instead, they stood their ground.

Balarama struck the lead elephant, a giant bull with a broken left tusk, a blow so resounding, the elephant's head and trunk were crushed inwards,

smashed to bloody pulp. The bull crashed to the ground head-first as elephants always fell, the impact of its fall lost in the deafening reverberation of the brigade behind it. The bull leader had been only a few yards ahead of the rest but the instant it died the knowledge flashed across the length and breadth of the brigade. Elephants lowed and trumpeted their distress and anger at the killing of their leader. He was a middle-aged yet still robust bull, a descendent of the great Airavata himself, dreaded Hathi-Yodha who had served the late Kamsa so horrifically for so long. He had been a gift to Jarasandha from his late son-in-law and had himself been used to breed an entire line of Hathi-Yodha. The ease with which he was killed shocked his bloodline, several dozen of whom were present in that same brigade. They trumpeted their desire for the blood of the two-legged mortal who had slain their great sire.

Balarama followed the first blow with another leaping swing. Jumping in mid air, he spun around, his celestial mace gleaming and throwing off golden shards of reflection even through the dust raised by the charge of the hastipaka brigade. It glanced off the skull of another bull then struck the shoulder of a third bull, then, as the momentum of Balarama's flying leap swung him around in mid air like a top, he turned its angle slightly, to catch a great cow elephant a fatal blow just behind her ear, sending her careering sideways to smash against an entire score of other elephants, piling them head over heels. He touched foot on an elephant's back, felt the powerful body rippling as the beast raced headlong forward, then swung around again, spinning like a dancer in the most dazzling acrobatic performance ever displayed, smashing one, two, a dozen elephants in turn, each of those elephants flung sideways with ferocious force to smash against a half dozen or a dozen others, all squealing and trumpeting pitiful objections as their bodies were cracked and broken by the sheer force of the impact.

Two score elephants died under the force of Balarama's second swing of his mace. Subsequently, due to the oncoming charging brigade being so closely packed together, a hundred or more were fatally wounded, killed on impact or wounded beyond battle capability by each of his blows. At times when his celestial mace struck an unfortunate—or a fortunate,

depending on your point of view—gaja with full force, the beast itself exploded like a shattered plate of crockery, shards of bones flying in every direction to pierce and wound and kill dozens around it. Elephants went tumbling over the backs of the charging line of other elephants, squealing as they struck and rebounded off their fellows. Other elephants were struck hard enough that they drove their tusks into the flanks and sides and bellies of their fellow elephants, before crashing into dirt themselves.

Balarama's dance of death was visible across most of the theatre of war. Even Jarasandha, now seated on a high platform raised by his Hijra fauj within moments from pre-cut lengths of wood, watched with growing rage as the fair brother of Krishna spun in mid air, leaping over the charging brigade, smashing and killing with impossible efficacy. Never before had he or any other soldier present on that field that day ever witnessed any man kill elephants in this fashion. As a master of the art of war, even through his rage, Jarasandha could not help but marvel at the sheer artistry with which Balarama danced and spun and struck his blows at precisely the spots where they would cause most damage. He did not merely use brute force as most mace fighters did—he targeted each blow, its trajectory, its force, its angle of contact, to not only cause harm to the elephant it actually struck, but to do so in a manner which turned that victim into a weapon. With over twenty one thousand elephant charging directly at them, it was not enough for Balarama to merely defend and survive: he had to cause enough damage to hurt the enemy severely. He was doing just that.

But it was nothing compared to how Krishna fought.

16

DARUKA had completed his given task, ridding the field of all longbow archers and was taking the chariots up again when the elephant brigade collided with his master and his brother. Now, he watched from above in amazement as Balarama danced his impossible dance of death, striking down elephants like an elephant itself might strike down standing weeds. From his vantage point several hundred yards above ground the city of Mathura was a tiny island surrounded by its army then the great empty ditch, and beyond the ditch was the ocean of Jarasandha's vast army. Millions upon millions of cavalry, foot-soldiers, chariot and elephants extended for yojanas in every direction, covering the earth like nothing less than a great sea of violence waiting to be unleashed. In comparison with this great force, what were two men—young boys at that, merely fifteen years of age apiece?

And yet, each time Balarama leaped and spun in the air, leaping from elephant to elephant as he wreaked destruction, dozens of elephants died. As for their mahouts, they died with such ease and frequency that it was startling to view on such a scale. Daruka felt relieved at such moments that he was a charioteer and not a mahout, though of course he had no doubt that mahouts probably felt the same way when watching chariots smash against each other or flung topsy turvy when they hit obstacles or broke a wheel when racing at full speed in battle.

The chariot which Daruka stood in, Krishna's own chariot, had come equipped with a host of celestial weapons. Among them was the bow Saranga which Krishna had already used once to unleash the Sudarshan weapon. There was also a conch shell which was presumably to be used to announce the start and end of battle each day and numerous other weapons, some of which even Daruka, familiar though he was to the devices of combat, could not identify.

Now, as he held the horseless chariot and its partner chariot just behind it at a steady hovering height above the battlefield, he saw the weapons disappear from the well of the chariot. They glittered and shone with blinding brightness, then vanished—and reappeared below on the ground, in Krishna's hands. Even through the dust and chaos of the elephant charge, the weapons were unmistakable, their celestial glamor visible like miniature suns.

Daruka exclaimed and peered down. The charging brigade of elephants had overwhelmed the brothers, engulfing them in a river of grey-black hastipaka rippling along. The flanks of the frontlines of the charge had bypassed the brothers, overshot them by a hundred yards or so before their mahouts could turn them around and coax them back into the fray. This meant that the river was turning into a swirling whirlpool of elephants with the two brothers at the epicenter. Balarama was leaping and dancing and spinning so rapidly, he was never in one spot for long. Krishna on the other hand, was still standing where he had been before the elephants charged. How was he still able to withstand such an onslaught? Why had he not yet been crushed to fluid pulp?

The answer lay in what Daruka now saw, visible clearly from his unique vantage point.

Krishna had transformed into his true form.

At a glance, it might seem that only the young dark-skinned foster son of Yashoda and Nanda stood there, aged fifteen and ripe in his youth and mischievous beauty.

But to Daruka's devoted gaze, the being that stood on that field was no mere boy.

He was the four-armed supreme One himself. Black as a monsoon cloud. Clad in yellow silk anga-vastra and dhoti. Eyes as pink as lotus petals.

Lips as red as roses. Four arms longer than any mortal's could be. Throat as intricately formed and detailed as a conch shell with its overlapping layers. His torso and abdomen gleaming with layers of taut muscles, offset by wide hips and strong loins over powerful thighs and trunk-like legs. His limbs were adorned with precious bracelets and earrings, necklaces, sacred thread and belt, topped off by a crown on his scalp. On his chest was the sacred Kaustabha tuft within which was embedded the Kaustabha jewel, surrounded by a garland of wild forest flowers.

This was the Krishna that Akrura had seen in the river Yamuna when taking the brothers to Mathura.

It was visible only to those fortunate ones who believed implicitly in the divinity of the lord's amsa and knew the true nature of the son of Vasudeva and Devaki and his purpose here on earth in this lifetime.

Daruka knew this and recognized how blessed he was to be given view of such a sight. He bowed and clasped his hands together to show devotion to his lord then watched as Krishna unleashed the power of his divine self.

Magnificent as Balarama's fighting was, and terrible as his toll of death mounted up steadily, it was nothing compared to what Krishna was about to bring down on Jarasandha's army.

Using all four hands, the Lord of Vaikunta released four separate weapons at once:

The Saranga bow occupied only one hand because the bow was capable of launching missiles without needing to be pulled. The missile it launched was a thing that could hardly be called an arrow for it more closely resembled a wave of fire.

The chakra named Sudarshana spun off the finger of another hand, racing to do its given task.

A conch shell sat in a third hand, held to Krishna's blood-red lips as he prepared to blow it.

A lotus flower was in the fourth hand and at a flick of his finger, it too went flying through the air into the dust of the elephant charge.

Then Krishna blew his conch.

Despite what Daruka had assumed, it was not simply for announcing the start and end of battle. The conch also served another more sinister purpose.

Jarasandha watched in disbelief as Krishna blew his conch. From his raised platform, some ten yards high, he could not see as well as Daruka could see from the chariot hovering above, but he still had a view of Krishna amid the raging river of elephants. Balarama continued to dance and spin and smash his mace with devastating efficiency, killing hundreds of elephants and breaking the back of the attack. But Krishna had only stood still for the first several moments of the charge, apparently doing nothing and Jarasandha knew that he could not simply remain standing thus for long. The question was, how did Krishna intend to fight—he needed to see and know that in order to launch his counter-attack. He had any number of options available: over five million in fact. But he could not simply throw his armies at the enemy without knowing their capability and strategy.

Now, his question was answered.

The figure of Krishna appeared to blur in Jarasandha's view. He squinted and rubbed his eyes and tilted his head this way and that, trying to see more clearly. At first he assumed it was the dust raised by the charging elephants but even when the dust cleared in brief moments, he could still not view Krishna himself clearly. Only a moment earlier he had been able to make out that handsome dark face, creased in what appeared to be a dark scowl. Jarasandha had smiled to see that scowl for it meant that Krishna was either concerned or angry; either was to be desired in an enemy. It was only when an enemy displayed utter calm that he had reason to be worried.

The blur that was Krishna appeared to be doing something. He appeared to be moving both arms—except that he seemed to have four arms, not two. Jarasandha scowled and cursed, wishing he could see better. Then he saw the gleam of polished metal and was alert again. Krishna was about to unleash some manner of weapon. He frowned when he caught the glint of

gold off the weapons in the enemy's hands. That could only mean gold or brass. Neither were fit materials to be used in the making of weaponry; they were much too soft. Why would Krishna bother with such devices? Unless they were show-piece weapons as some kings used, merely to play the part of waging war while their soldiers did the actual fighting. Arrows that could barely pierce a breast-bone or cut flesh, javelins that were so light they bounced off a man's skull like a reed stick.

Surely Krishna could not be using such items?

Then again, perhaps Jarasandha had over-estimated him after all. Maybe Krishna was a better lover and fighter, as the rumors went. And Balarama was the real fighter. Maybe his energies were spent and all he intended to do now was put up a show for the watching Mathuran army to boost their morale.

If that was the case, then he would die on this field today.

Jarasandha grinned and was about to issue an order to his aides when suddenly everything changed.

Across the field, he saw the gleam of gold flash across the brigade of charging elephants. Krishna had unleashed his weapons, showpieces or not.

And then the weapons struck. And Jarasandha stopped grinning.

They were not showpieces.

They were dev-astras.

The missile shaped like a wave of fire sprang from the bow Saranga at supersonic speed. So tremendous was the sound of its passing over the heads of the assembled ranks of Jarasandha's soldiers that it was akin to a physical blow. The boom produced by its passing deafened many at once, their eardrums buffeted beyond endurance by the sonic implosion. They toppled off their horses and elephants and chariots, many falling to the ground, clapping their hands to their bleeding ears. The missile itself struck the twelfth akshohini of the army of Magadha, impacting with the force of a wave but unlike a wave, it did not simply batter and splash. It disintegrated flesh and bone and blood to gritty remains. So intense was the heat it produced—for it was the heat of tapas itself—that it incinerated living bodies, armor and apparel to crumbling ash on contact. The lives of lakhs of soldiers, horses and elephants were extinguished instantly. Mere skeletons were left behind, surrounded by a swirling typhoon of fire and ash.

The Sudarshana chakra flew in another direction, traveling across the breach and over Mathura city. The citizens stared up as the disk, brighter than the sun at noonday, flashed overhead, spinning at unimaginable speed. It swooped down with terrifying speed, attacking the Magadhan forces on the far side of the city. It struck with devastating impact, like a blade on a grinding wheel pressed to a slab of meat. Bodies were cleaved so cleanly in half, not one drop of blood spilled from the chopped halves to the ground; the two halves simply collapsed in a dead heap. Like the first devastra, Sudarshana too did not distinguish between man and beast, or between flesh and armor, steel and bone. It flashed across the battlefield like a smooth flat rock tossed sideways over a placid lake, severing tens of thousands of lives in a single passing.

The third weapon was the lotus flower. What harm could a mere lotus flower do? Yet this was no ordinary lotus flower. It was the very lotus held by Vishnu himself, plucked by his lady Sri's own hands from the oceanic pool in which Anantha lay coiled eternally. Over millennia Anantha's venom had infused the lotus in that pond with such a high level of toxicity, the mere fragrance could kill any living creature. Because Vishnu like all devas was not affected by mortally threatening poisons or weapons, he

could inhale its sweet fragrance with impunity. Indeed, only he or devas like himself could even scent its fragrance. But to the soldiers of the Magadhan army and the beasts that bore them and fought for them, the fragrance was as toxic as the most concentrated venom ever drawn. The lotus flower passed across a section of the great army, spreading its fragrance across the assembled lines. And as it passed by, tens of thousands dropped like flies whose wings had burned off.

The fourth and final weapon was the conch shell. Ordinarily it did serve the purpose of alerting the assembled armies on the battlefield that the day's warring had commenced—or ended. But when blown by its master in a certain way, it could produce a very different sound and result. Krishna blew into the conch shell in that certain way now, as the first three weapons spread their waves of devastation across the field. The sound produced by his blowing was nothing like the loud resonating trumpeting that it usually made.

This was a subsonic scream so low-pitched, it vibrated at the same frequency as the molecules in the body of a living being...and then stopped. When it stopped, which was when Krishna stopped blowing it, of course, all those molecules simply stopped as well. He blew it outwards, aiming the sound in the opposite direction to the breach and Mathura city on his right hand, to ensure that no friendly soldiers or citizens could come to harm.

The effect was even more devastating than the slaughter of the first three astras. The cessation of the conch shell sound stopped the hearts, brains, blood flow and every cell in every living body. The result was that the bodies at whom it was directed, regardless of their clothes, armor or other accessories, crumpled inwards like thin wooden boards. Bone structures, flesh, organs...everything was pushed inwards upon itself, forced into destruction by the cessation of the natural motion of their molecules. The tissue itself collapsed

When each weapon had completed its task in one cardinal direction, it returned instantly to its owner. Even as he blew the conch shell with one hand, the weapons had already returned to the other three hands of Vishnu.

And when all four had completed their tasks, he deployed them again. And again. And again.

“MAGADHAN!”

Balarama roared as he gave chase to Jarasandha's chariot and entourage. With the silent equivalent of a whistle, Balarama summoned his chariot back to ground, taking control of it again from Krishna's sarathi Daruka who continued driving Krishna's own chariot. Balarama leaped aboard his vehicle as it landed, mentally urging it forward the instant he was in the well of the chariot. It leaped forward, racing across the battlefield.

The field in question was a scene of carnage and slaughter. The mighty army of Magadha lay in ruins, not merely decimated or cut down, but totally eliminated. It had taken but a few deployments of Krishna's four weapons and the wielding of Balarama's mace, and all 23 akshohini were turned to corpses. The countryside surrounding Mathura was littered for yojanas in every direction with their remains.

Rivers were clogged with the severed corpses of elephants, horses, and men. Valleys filled with them. Bodies hung in trees, suspended in grotesque paroxysms. Streams of blood collected in pools and puddles, and in some places, trickled downhill sluggishly before coagulating and congealing. A few terror-struck faces and snouts were pointed away from Mathura: these were the ones who had seen the devastation wrought by Krishna's dev-astras and had turned to flee the battle. Balarama had leaped with huge bounds, covering entire miles in single leaps, and clubbed them down. Each and every Magadhan bearing arms that day had been eliminated. Only the supply train of women, children, cooks and artisans that followed any army on a campaign remained alive—and they had been stationed many yojanas from Mathura in any case. They were ignored as they posed no harm to Mathura. They were all slaves taken from the various territories that Jarasandha had conquered, held as ransom to ensure that their husbands fought as soldiers in his army and did not desert.

In the end, the only warriors left standing were Jarasandha and the last remnants of his Mohini Fauj. Seeing the utter devastation wrought by Krishna and Balarama he had descended quickly from his raised viewing platform, boarded his chariot and started to flee the battlefield. Now, he was a mile or so and gaining speed. And Balarama was giving chase.

Even the fastest horses in the world were no match for the celestial chariot. Balarama's vaahan swooped low over Jarasandha's contingent, startling his horses into bucking and drawing the nervous shrieks of the Hijras. The horse team, already confused and maddened by the sight and scent of so much death and struggling to avoid the many obstacles posed by carcasses and torn remnants of armor and weaponry, caught its feet on something and tumbled. The chariot rose bodily in the air and broke free of the reins and horses. As the horses themselves tumbled, breaking legs and screaming pitifully, the chariot somersaulted and struck the ground, bouncing once, then again, before coming to a halt in upright position once more, a shattered wreck with a shaken yet largely unharmed Jarasandha huddled in the well.

Balarama landed his chariot beside the wreck of Jarasandha's chariot, leaping to ground while his vehicle was still several yards in the air. The Mohini Fauj, reduced by now to barely a hundred of the Emperor's immediate bodyguards, rushed forward with pitiful gallantry. Balarama raised his mace and swung it in a great swinging arc, letting his body swirl with the force of the blow, like a man about to release an iron ball held by a long chain. Instead of releasing the mace, he continued to swing around, reaping Hijras like cornstalks. In moments, the entire Mohini Guard lay dead on the grassy knoll. He took another moment to smash the shrieking horses out of their misery, then he strode over to the well of the shattered chariot with Magadhan markings.

Jarasandha crouched in the well of the broken chariot, staring numbly into the distance. He did not even look up as Balarama approached.

Balarama reached forward and grasped Jarasandha by the back of his neck, the way a lion seizes another lion. He lifted him up easily, despite the difference in their age and sizes. Jarasandha hung absurdly from Balarama's grasp, like some pitiful puppy helpless and unable to fight back.

"Magadhan," Sankarshan said softly. "Where did you think you would run to? Even if it was the ends of the earth, we would find you. Don't you understand that by now?"

A faint disturbance in the air was the only indication of the arrival of the second celestial chariot. It descended smoothly and silently on the knoll beside Balarama's own chariot. Krishna descended, tucking away his weapons. As he stepped towards Jarasandha, the Magadhan had a brief glimpse of the being he truly was...then in place of that being, he saw the boy Krishna with two slender arms and a normal human body, approaching him with a grim look on his youthful face.

"Shall I kill him here, bhraatr, or shall we do it before the people of Mathura?"

Krishna replied. "We shall not kill him at all."

Balarama's head jerked. "What?"

"Release him."

Balarama stared at his brother then turned back to Jarasandha, dangling from Balarama's left hand. The Magadhan was tall enough that his knees dragged limply on the grass but he made no move to try to break free of Balarama's grasp. "We cannot release him. We must kill him. We have the right under kshatriya dharma."

“Kshatriya dharma forbids an honorable warrior from killing a helpless one.”

Balarama frowned. “He is not helpless. He is an asura in mortal guise. He is capable of fighting both of us at once and giving us a little trouble before we despatch him. I would call that a worthy adversary, not a helpless one. The rules of war fully justify us killing him when we get the chance, right? Well, this is our chance.”

“No, bhaiya, we shall release him. Let him go.”

Balarama still remained adamant. “Do you know what he meant to do? He brought an army of 23 akshohini to destroy Mathura and wipe out the Yadava race from the world. Never before has he invaded any nation with such a huge force. His intention here was not to conquer or merely subjugate, it was to eliminate. To wipe us out of existence.”

“And instead, we wiped his army of 23 akshohini out of existence.” Krishna’s voice was calm. “They pose no further threat to us or any other nation of the world.”

“Even so, he is still alive!” Balarama said. “And he remains the greatest threat Mathura has ever faced.”

“That is why he must remain alive,” Krishna said.

“That makes no sense, bhraatr. If he stays alive he could well raise another army. And return to try to do again what he tried today. Don’t be fooled by the way he looks now,” Balarama shook the Magadhan viciously, making Jarasandha’s limp body flipflop absurdly. “He is in shock, terrified beyond words of us now, but in time he will regain his hatred and lust for vengeance and raise a new army to invade us.”

“Who will follow him into battle?” Krishna asked. “His entire power and domination was due to his great army and superior fighting power. Now he has nothing. By leaving him alive, he remains humiliated, a perpetual reminder to our enemies of the might and power of the Yadava nation. Wherever he goes, whatever he does—or tries to do, people will laugh at him openly or snigger behind his back and remind each other that we cared so little about him that we let him live after wiping out his army. No soldier will respect him anymore. Even his slaves will feel superior to him.”

Balarama stared at Krishna for a moment. He absorbed the implications of his brother’s words. Then slowly, he turned and looked at Jarasandha. The Magadhan’s eyes were closed but there was dampness around the dark thickly lashed eyes. He was crying.

Balarama opened his fist. Jarasandha dropped to the grassy knoll like a sack of vegetables and lay sprawled there on his face. Balarama wiped his hand on his anga-vastra, even though the anga-vastra was more bloodied and filthy with offal than the hand that had clutched Jarasandha. “You are right, bhraatr,” he said. “After such a defeat, to be allowed to live is a far greater loss than to be killed. He will never survive such a humiliation.” He chuckled. “Besides, his enemies will now be baying for blood, eager to take revenge on him for all the abuse he has meted out over the years. They will fall on him like crocodiles on a wounded buffalo.”

Balarama kicked Jarasandha on the softest part of his rear side. “Get up! Rise, Magadhan and leave this kingdom. Never show your face anywhere near Mathura or to any Yadava for as long as you remain alive. On pain of death. Come on! Get going!”

He had to kick the fallen Emperor a few more times before the broken wreck that was now Jarasandha finally managed to get to its feet and stumble away. He shambled over the land strewn with the remnants of his once-great army and it was difficult to believe that this broken being that

stumbled into the horizon had until this morning been the most feared conqueror in the known world.

KAAND 3

1

MATHURA roared and cheered as the brothers Krishna and Balarama re-entered the city. It was a homecoming no less adulatory than their first entrance into the city. Then, the excitement had stemmed from the people's eagerness and relief at finally seeing their Deliverer after 23 long years of waiting and suffering. Now, their exhilaration came from knowing that their long-awaited Deliverer was truly capable of living upto his name. Not only was he the Slayer of Kamsa that the prophecy had foretold, he was the Savior of the Yadava nations. Word of the extraordinary feats that had been displayed by both Krishna and Balarama had spread to each and everyone in the city and hundreds of thousands of faces gazed in reverential awe at the two young men. Even gods incarnate could not have expected to see more devotion in the faces of their worshippers.

The symphony of music that rose from the city must surely have reached swargaloka itself. Conches blew constantly, drums, dhol-drums, veenas, flutes, mridangas and numerous other instruments sounded from all across the city. So divine was the ecstasy of Mathura's musicians that a multitude of instruments and voices and singing schools blended together to produce a perfect harmony. For when hearts and voices and instruments collectively express love, joy and devotion, that itself is true harmony, far greater than a mere matching of notes and tones and pitches.

Happy as Mathura had been on the day that they had been rid of Kamsa and his cruel tyranny, that day's celebration was matched by this one. The thoroughfares had been washed and swept clean by the people themselves, taking pride in the cleanliness of their avenues. They had painted banners with their own hands and raised them. Brahmins learned in the vedas recited the sacred texts aloud across the city, their rhythmic chanting filling the air with an auspicious ambiance. Upon entering the city, both brothers had had their feet washed, bodies anointed with yoghurt, necks garlanded, and all the way they were showered with handfuls of unhusked grain and fresh shoots by the women of Mathura.

It was Balarama who noticed his brother's eyes reflecting an emotion that contrasted with his omni-present smile as he waved to the crowds from the celestial chariots on which they rode side by side. Nobody else would have even noticed that faint shade of gloom that passed across Krishna's face like a cloud passing across the sun. But Balarama could read Krishna's innermost thoughts and feelings and he knew something was amiss.

"Are you thinking of her?" he asked.

Krishna glanced sideways at his brother in the adjoining chariot while continuing to wave and smile at the crowds. For once there was no trace of irony or commentary in Balarama's tone when he referred to the girl who had been the source of so much good-natured jesting all through their childhood. Balarama waved and smiled as well, concealing his brotherly sympathy better than Krishna concealed his lapses of emotion. Then again, it was not Balarama who was in love with Radha.

"Is it so obvious?" Krishna said.

"It is to me," Balarama replied. "Although I doubt even good Daruka would have any notion." He indicated the charioteer with a jerk of his broad chin. "Speaking of which, that was a rare find. His performance under the pressure of battle was admirable."

Krishna glanced at his sarathi. Daruka was standing ramrod straight at the fore of the chariot's well, holding the reins of the horses in a light yet perfectly controlled grip, using tongue-clicks and subtle nudges and yanks to guide them through the winding avenues and streets. Unlike most ostentatious city-states like Ayodhya or Gandahar which had enjoyed decades of peace and prosperity and used them to fund ambitious municipal and civic projects, Mathura was a city that had just managed to survive Kamsa's reign through sheer human fortitude. Krishna's heart broke when he passed entire sections that were little more than slums, the

people of those neighborhoods reduced to near-poverty through Kamsa's cruel initiatives. Rebuilding was his first priority, he reminded himself. You have no time to think of yourself and your venal needs. You are here for another purpose. Never forget that.

"Sometimes," Krishna said, "people come to us at certain times and play a certain role, like actors in a play, before retiring out of view. Sometimes, we go to others and play our roles and then come away once our part is done."

Balarama shook his head. "I have no idea what that means. Or what in Naraka and Patala it has to do with your charioteer being good at his job!"

Krishna smiled. "I meant only that someday I hope to be as good a charioteer to someone else as Daruka was to me today."

Balarama looked at him, both eyebrows raised. "Now that is totally without sense. Why in seven heavens should you become someone else's charioteer? Really, bhraatr, you will say anything just to change the topic, won't you?"

Krishna laughed. "I wasn't changing the topic."

Balarama waggled his eyebrows. "So you admit you were thinking of her?"

"I was."

"And wishing she were here to see your triumph."

"Not to see the triumph. I was wishing she were here to share this moment with me, to join in the satisfaction and joy I feel at this time."

Balarama kept one eyebrow cocked and dropped the other. “And to help you celebrate through the night...?” He reached over and clapped a hand on Krishna’s shoulder, chortling, the celestial chariots almost touching. “No, don’t answer that. I was jesting, bhraatr.” The celestial chariot made a sound of protest and lurched away from its sibling to a safer distance. His face turned serious. “I’ll admit I miss them too. Nanda-Maharaja, Yashoda-Maa, Rohini-Maa...all of them. I miss Gokul-dham.”

“I miss Vrindavan-nagri,” Krishna said wistfully, as he continued to wave and flash sincere but intermittent smiles at the cheering crowds on either side as the chariots made their way uphill to the royal enclave. “I miss it all. I wish we never had to leave.”

“But we did. And here we are now.”

“Yes,” Krishna said, looking up at the looming facade of Mathura’s castle and palace complex. “And this is home now for us. Forever. We just destroyed an army to protect it.”

Balarama nodded soberly, his heavy head dipping. “Including countless innocent animals that were enslaved and forced to serve our enemies.”

Krishna patted his large shoulder now, as they approached the gates of the palace and the cheering of the crowds fell back below and behind them. “But serve our enemies they did. Do not forget that. It was impossible to kill the Magadhan forces without killing their horses and elephants and camels and dogs as well. We did what we had to do in the service of dharma.”

Balarama nodded sadly. “There are times when dharma is harder to serve.”

“It is always hard to serve, bhraatr. That is why it is dharma.”

The celestial chariots glided through the open gates and into the palace enclave. They were home.

2

After the champions had been welcomed warmly home by their parents, grandfather and the ministers of the court, a closed session was held to discuss the aftermath of the battle.

The aged prime minister spoke first: “The spoils of war are rich. The weapons and armor recovered from the fallen are themselves enough to equip and arm our forces for a war campaign. Most weapons were never even deployed in the conflict. And there were many treasures as well. All the champions wore their precious ornaments to battle. There is a kingdom’s ransom in wealth being collected from the battlefield as we speak—nay, an *empire’s* ransom!” Pralamba shook his head in wonderment. “How the mighty fell today. Never before in all my years have I witnessed such a turning of the plough such that he who came to reap was himself harvested and sown!”

Everyone acknowledged and shared in Pralamba’s wonderment and delight.

“Grandfather,” Krishna said respectfully, “may I speak?”

Ugrasena’s lined face cracked in a wide smile. “Grandson, you may speak when you wish. You do not need permission. This is your kingdom to command and you know it is so.”

Krishna bowed his head in acknowledgement of his grandfather’s generosity. “I propose that the spoils of war be distributed amongst the poorest people of the state. Under Kamsa’s regime, the rich and venal were encouraged to grow richer through exploitation of the poor and helpless, while those who possessed no capital or possessions were deprived of even the opportunity to acquire any. A small minority possesses the majority of wealth. This is neither just nor lawful. I propose therefore that the riches

garnered today from the battlefield be distributed amongst the impoverished and the poor, regardless of varna, caste or social standing.”

Everyone looked at each other, thinking through the implications of this suggestion. “My son,” Vasudeva said slowly, “you realize that even the contract for garnering the spoils of war is given to the vaisya community, who are among the richest now thanks to Kamsa’s abuse of the brahmins and other castes? They will not be happy if we do such a thing...and yet,” Vasudeva went on, smiling, “I agree completely with my son, it is time the assets of the nation were shared by all. Any nation in which some profit while others starve is a nation of adharma. I second Krishna’s motion.”

“And I accept it in totality. It shall be exactly as Krishna wishes,” Ugrasena said in his cracked but decisive tone. “Pralamba, see to it.”

Pralamba’s brow was furrowed. “That will mean that the very sudras who are combing the battlefield and collecting the ornaments and armor in uks carts will receive the same items? Their vaisya masters will not be pleased!”

“We are not here to please those who are already content,” Krishna said. “We are here to help those who need our help.” His tone softened. “If we can do so without causing discomfort to those already content, where is the harm? The vaisya have grown rich under Kamsa’s ill-balanced regime, they do not want for anything. The sudra have been abused and misused since the passing of the age of Sudas and the Trtsu. It is about time they received some reward for their millennia of service.”

“I think what good Pralamba means, my son,” Devaki said, “is that once we enrich the sudras, they will no longer wish to serve the vaisya. That will make it impossible for the vaisya to continue earning. Their entire livelihood depends on using the labor of the lower castes and in their shrewd trading.”

Krishna cocked his head. “So you mean that the vaisya basically earn from the sweat and toil of other poorer beings? What is shrewd about such trade? It is exploitation, plain and simple. They might as well enslave them and force them to serve their purposes.”

“Like chained animals, or beasts of burden,” Balarama said, drinking fruit nectar thirstily. He put down the goblet and wiped his mouth. “Income earned by the labor of others should belong equally to those who toil. Unless it is shared equally, it is exploitation and nothing less than slavery.”

Pralamba stared at both brothers. “Do you mean to say we should repossess the wealth of those who have profited by employing others? In that case, we would have to give away our own wealth as well. For the royal household survives on the labor and taxes of the nation.”

Krishna nodded. “And that is why the royal household does what it must to protect the nation in times of need, as it has done today. No, I believe we earn the right to rule through the franchise of the people and their desire to have us govern. But you are right, good Prime Minister. We have no justification for taking away a portion of their wealth when we already earn through taxation and lagaans. Give away the royal portion of the spoils as well to the poor and needy.”

Pralamba sat back. Even Ugrasena and Padmavati were speechless. Vasudeva was the only one who smiled and exchanged a knowing look with his wife Devaki. She smiled a beatific smile such as only a mother could smile at her son’s exploits.

“Bravo, son,” Vasudeva said. “You have done in one day what no other king of Mathura has ever been able to do until now.” He turned suddenly to Ugrasena. “I mean no offense to you, my old friend.”

“Nonsense,” Ugrasena said, leaning forward. His eyes were wet with moisture. “When one speaks the truth there is no need to apologize for its

veracity. You spoke truly. No king of Mathura has been so selfless in all our history, and I include myself in that long list. Krishna, you have proven today that you are not merely a great warrior on the battlefield, you are a true king of Mathura as well. A king who upholds dharma and serves the people justly.”

“I am no king, grandfather,” Krishna said with surprising shyness, “I merely have the best interests of the people at heart.”

Ugrasena chuckled, and then had to struggle not to let the chuckle turn into a coughing fit. “That itself makes you unique among kings! Pralamba, it shall be exactly as Krishna says. See to it.”

Pralamba rose to his feet in dismay. “My liege, the king’s portion of the spoils is what we use to pay our army! Who will fight for us tomorrow if we give away all their reward to the poor and needy? Never mind the vaisya merchants, even the kshatriya will rise up in protest if we give away their just share.”

Padmavati gave her husband a sip of water to ease his throat then said quietly, “The king has considered all these factors. He believes, as do I, that the army will understand and respect Krishna’s wishes in this matter. After all, Krishna did the work of the entire army! Not one soldier needed to raise a sword or spear all day in battle. The entire battle and victory were all Krishna’s doing. Therefore it is Krishna who deserves the army’s share of the spoils as well as the royal share. And if he chooses to give it away to such a good cause, nobody will object.”

Pralamba considered this for a moment, then sat down slowly, his face looking less troubled. “What you say is true, my queen. Indeed...you are right! This may actually win Krishna more admirers than before.”

“Now that,” Balarama said, raising one eyebrow, “is impossible. There is nobody left who does not admire Krishna as much as humanly possible

already!"

3

Jarasanhda grimaced as he saw the bannermen standing outside his tent, their krta-dhvaja proclaiming the sigils of the individual kings they represented. All his hand-picked proteges and allies were represented, he noted. Of course, he had summoned them himself for the usual victory feast following the battle. He sensed the curious glances and odd looks from the bannermen as well as the skeletal retinue he had left behind at the camp, mostly older men or young boys and women whose main tasks were housekeeping and cooking. He tried to count the banners but lost count after ten or twelve. In any case, they were all here. They would be, for it was not everyday that one got to gloat over the failure of one's mentor, especially when that mentor had ridden them so hard over the years, berating them for every tiny error of judgement or ill fortune. All men cheer when you win a war. The same men cheer even louder when you lose.

There were no serving girls waiting to wash his feet or garland him with his favorite fragrant blossoms. No Hijras waiting to unbuckle his armor or take his weapons for polishing and cleaning. He pushed aside the flap of the tent and entered into a room full of chattering kings. The chatter ceased the minute he entered and two dozen heads turned to stare at him with intense interest, even glee. He noted that Akriti was there, and Kirata, Pundra, Arista, Paundraka, Bhishmaka, Purujit, Dvivida, Dhenuka, Kesi, Putana, Karusha, Meghavahana, Bhama, Vanga, Karava, Dantavakara, Bhagadatta, and Purujit...they were all here, except for those who had fallen over the years, either lost to various battles or ailments—or, in the cases of a few, to the Slayer. For they were all asura in human guise, as was he. The last asuras left upon the mortal realm.

“I trust you have been well taken care of?” he asked laconically, unbuckling his own armor. He tossed pieces randomly across the tent, not caring where they fell or what they knocked over. His serving girls and boys seemed curiously absent—then again, perhaps not so curious. After

all, they had all been slaves, and how was he expected to command and control slaves without an army—or even a personal bodyguard, for that matter? He supposed they had all departed for greener pastures the instant news reached of his defeat. Well, they were more honest than this bunch of back-stabbers. What did they expect of him now, this lot? To grovel and beg? He would not give them the pleasure.

“We did not come here to feast, Jara,” said Putana, who shared a name but nothing else with the venom-breasted Maatr he had despatched to aid Kamsa in that first attempt to assassinate the Deliverer. “We know that you suffered grievous defeat on the field of Mathura today.”

Jarasandha tossed a breastplate in the general direction of a porcelain vase he had raided a kingdom and slaughtered an entire dynasty to acquire. It had seemed so desirable at the time. Now, it shattered to shards and was nothing more than mud reshaped and glazed. “And corpses always bring vultures. Did you come to ask for spoils? You already know I have none to offer.”

The others looked at each other. Several shook their heads in commiseration. That look—of sympathy rather than gloating—angered Jarasandha more than mere arrogance would have. He tossed a metal-spike-encased glove at a carving that dated back to the age before the Vedas were composed, to the time of Vaivasvata Manu and perhaps even beyond. It fell but surprisingly did not break. He tossed the second glove after it and was pleased to see a chip fly from its center, ruining the hand-painted icon that adorned that section.

“We are not here to gloat, Jara,” said another voice. It was either Kirta or Dantavakara, he didn’t care to turn his head to see whom. “We know that Mathura did not fall therefore there are no spoils to share. We expect nothing from you.”

Another voice added hastily, “Nor are we offering you anything.”

This last part was added just in time because Jarasandha had been about to turn around and unleash his tongue—in both senses of the phrase—on them for daring to pity him. He frowned as he removed his boots and sat holding one boot in his hand. “I would accept nothing, of course. I do not need your charity.”

“Nor would we give it,” said another voice firmly. It was Paundraka. “We have too much respect for you to offer you aid or commiseration, Jara.”

He frowned, dropping the boot and pulling off the other one. “Then why are you here?”

“To tell you that you lost this battle because of your karma.”

He stood up holding the second boot. “What?”

They exchanged hesitant glances. Another voice said this time, “It was your karma that led to your defeat. You have fought too long and won too many battles already. It was only a matter of time before your past deeds caught up with you. Over so many lifetimes in so many ages you have waged war and inflicted violence upon so many innocents, it was only a question of where and when you would eventually suffer defeat. Today was that day and Mathura was the place where your karma caught up with you.”

Jarasandha looked at their sombre faces. “You are all serious? You really believe this nonsense?”

Kesi nodded. “Accept it, old friend. You had a good run. Now your time is past. Go back to Magadha, live out the rest of your life in self-contemplation. You are the son of Brihadratha, you will not have any difficulty living in comfort the rest of your days.”

Jarasandha grinned. “And I should forget about the empire I built over the past two decades? Forget how I gave each and every one of you more territory to rule over than you would have acquired on your own in ten lifetimes apiece? Forget all the wealth and power and control I worked for all these years? Just because of one battle lost?”

Someone clicked his tongue. It was Purujit. “It was no mere defeat, Jara. Your entire army was wiped out. Every last fighting man. Even the animals were not spared!”

“You have no weapons, no animals, no men...nothing.”

“Not even your dignity. By letting you leave the battlefield alive, Krishna took even that away from you. No kshatriya will respect and follow you ever again.”

“Your time is over. Retire.”

“Retire.”

“Return to Magadha.”

“Live out the last of your days in your home.”

“Forget about empires and ruling the world.”

Jarasandha laughed. The sound was shocking in the confines of the quiet tent. It shut them all up more effectively than any protests of arguments or rants of rage.

4

Jarasandha did not laugh out loud in typically villainous fashion. He was not Kamsa. Even in this moment of utter desolation, he still retained his famous dignity and gentlemanly composure. He merely chuckled. Yet so unexpected was that action that it filled the quiet tent, silencing every last one of the kings present. He threw the second boot on the ground and grinned up at them.

“You fools. You simple-brained dolts. You idiots without a grain of sense in all your collective skulls.”

They looked at him. Some looked shocked. Others, resigned and accustomed to Jarasandha’s arrogance. Most seemed mildly curious in the manner of men who were viewing a person on the verge of a complete breakdown, prepared for any form of behavior or outburst.

Jarasandha shook his head. “You still do not understand, do you? How could you? That’s why you’re merely kings and I am emperor. Emperor of Magadha, lord of the known world. Never forget that.”

They tried to be gentle. “Jara, you achieved more than any ruler in the history of the world. Why, if there were lands and territories worth claiming beyond the Kush ranges you would surely have conquered them as well. You were master of the civilized world. Nobody disputes that. But no ruler can reign forever. That is a fact of life. Your reign is ended. Live out your days peaceably. None of us will ever make a move against you.”

“Of course you won’t,” Jara said. “A toothless predator is to be pitied, not killed. That is how you can feel magnanimous and show the world what loyal friends and allies you were to the end!”

They did not respond to that allegation, not even to dispute or deny it. The implication was obvious: they did not dispute it at all.

“But you are all wrong in your assumption. My time isn’t over. It has only just reached its apogee. I am at the peak of my achievement. I am close to being God Incarnate upon the mortal realm. Soon, nobody will stand in my way. I will rule forever. Eternally.”

They exchanged uneasy glances now. This was the talk of a madman, not a king on the eve of a bitter defeat. Perhaps Jarasandha had gone completely over the edge, losing all touch with reality.

He grinned at their expressions. “Of course you don’t know what I’m talking about. How could you? You’re merely pawns in the great game of which I am master and commander. You are only permitted to know what you need to know. Nothing more or less. Therefore all you see is Jarasandha, Emperor of Magadha, defeated yet spared by Krishna-Balarama, his vast armies reduced to corpse-flesh, food for vultures and crows and maggots. You see only the apparent reality of the day, not the greater picture that transcends it.”

They shook their heads sadly. “Nothing transcends death, Jara. Your armies are dead on that field. You can never raise a force that great even in a hundred years. Nobody will ever follow you into battle again. Your very survival is an affront to kshatriya dharma.”

Jarasandha chuckled. “That is where you are wrong. There is a force that transcends death. You all know of it. Can any one of you name it?”

They looked at each other now, their eyes speaking the message they did not wish to speak aloud. *He’s lost it, he’s gone insane, he’s talking utter dribble.*

“Time, you fools. Kaal! The only force in the universe that is greater than death itself. Kaal controls the Wheel of Creation, the Becoming and Unbecoming. The cycle of birth and death, rebirth and moksha... everything turns according to the Wheel of Time. Turn back the Wheel and you defeat Death itself. Don’t you see? That’s all it takes!”

They began to shuffle towards the exit, making noises of commiseration, pretending to have business elsewhere.

“Go then,” he said disdainfully. “Leave me. I will remember that you did not even have the gumption to stay and hear me out afterwards. I will remember it when I return.”

“Return from where?” one asked curiously as he was about to leave.
“From Magadha?”

Jarasandha laughed. “No, you fool. Haven’t you heard anything I said? When I return from Mathura, as lord of the Yadava nation, bearing the spoils of war.”

This made the last of the kings even more eager to leave. Jarasandha chuckled as he watched them sidle out, avoiding meeting his eyes as they bade him goodbye, most of them assuming it would be the last they ever saw of him.

In another moment, the tent was empty except for Jarasandha himself. He sat for a while as the shadows grew longer and dusk fell. The battle had ended in mid-afternoon. Less than a day to wipe out 23 akshohini. Those Yadava brothers were quite impressive, he had to admit. He replayed the day’s events in his mind several times, going over tactics and strategy, remembering their counter-moves, the celestial chariots, the weapons they deployed, their unique skills and powers. Was that all they were capable of? No, there would be more. Perhaps even infinite ways to destroy his

forces. What did it matter? In the end, Mathura would be his, that was all that counted.

Finally, as the crickets began to crick noisily around the tent, he rose and prepared the potion he would require for the task at hand. It had to be mixed in a precise balance to ensure the perfect result. He sipped it delicately, feeling the exotic flavor on his twin palettes. Few people knew that he possessed two palettes, one above the other, lending him the ability to distinguish between a far wider variety of tastes than any mortal being. This particular potion tasted quite palatable, so to speak. If it wasn't so specific in its effect, he might have enjoyed quaffing it on a regular basis. But of course, that would not be possible. It could only be consumed to serve a single purpose.

He waited for the potion to take effect. It was hours past nightfall when the effect finally took over. He sensed a blurring of the tent around him, the broken artifacts and treasures, the silk cushions and drapes...and he smelled a peculiar odor, like nothing he could identify...as the air before him shimmered and warped and distorted like a reflection viewed in a warped sheet of polished metal...

And then with a quickening of his pulse and a sudden falling sensation, the Vortal opened below him, in the ground, like a doorway sunk in the carpeting of the tent. Garish red light streamed upwards from the opening, swirling and twisting like smoke.

He stepped to the edge and looked down...then dropped down into the abyss.

5

RADHA was the first to see him arrive in Vraj. She was sitting disconsolate upon the fork of a tree, singing rasa songs in a sad tone that altered the very meaning and intent of the lyrics.

When spring comes and blossoms bloom

You arrive and color me alive

Breathless wind sighing in the grove

Singing songs of hope and love

Why bring me fruits I cannot taste?

She sat this way and sang her heart out every day and had done so since returning from Mathura. She had known when she left the city that Krishna would have great demands and responsibilities clamoring for his attention. She gathered all news of him from every possible source as diligently as an orchard-picker picking the last ripe fruit before the monsoons began.

She had heard of his going to Guru Sandipan for instruction in the sacred texts and she had heard of his amazing graduation from the guru's kul in a mere matter of weeks rather than years. She had heard of his displays of erudition and wisdom in decisions of state, especially during the difficult time of consolidation and rebuilding after the prolonged damage of Kamsa's long and brutal regime. She had heard of his training of the army of Mathura and demonstrations of skill and mastery. And she had heard, of course, of the way all the ladies of the court—mothers as well as daughters—preened and primped for his viewing pleasure, every eligible (and several ineligible ones) desperately hoping to attract his fancy and snare the choicest husband in the nation, perhaps in the whole wide world.

It was only the events of the past day or two that eluded her for no visitor had come through from the direction of the city. There had been that yogi passing through last afternoon, but he had only been absorbed in his pilgrimage and had not even entered Mathura or crossed the Yamuna. Although he had hinted at the scent of some violence in the air he had nothing more substantial to justify that odd suspicion. It only made her worry. Was Mathura in trouble—again? Or was it another attack on Krishna? Either option was cause for anxiety. For she understood that Krishna's loyalties had expanded to include the entire Yadava nation now, not just the Vrishni, and since the seat of the nation was Mathura, his first responsibility was to protect the city-state. And if an asura arose who was even as powerful as Kaliya, who was to say what might transpire?

She had abandoned her work completely. She no longer even made a pretense of going to the fields or doing her chores. Even her father, overburdened dear man that he was, seemed to understand. "We must give her time," he said. "We all feel the loss of Govinda so deeply, as his childhood friend it must be painful to her. Our Radha has always been the sensitive one." He explained this patiently to her mother who was less understanding less patient and Radha was grateful to him for it. But she would have done as she pleased in any case.

She could not work and continue as before without her Gopala. Even the sight and sound of the rest of her people going about their daily chores as if nothing had changed sickened her. Did they not miss their Kanha? He who was also Damodara, and around whose udara Yashoda had once tied a dara to prevent him from running away to do mischief? He who was also Giridhari for lifting the entire hill to protect them? He who was Madhava himself, bringer of spring. Shyamsundara, the beautiful dark one. Ghanshyam, he with the complexion of a monsoon cloud. Kaladeva, her black deity. Janardana to the Vrishni, for all they possessed was at his behest.

Even Nanda and Yashoda did their chores, seeming only slightly muted and less vociferous but otherwise normal: did they not miss their Yashoda Nandan? She knew the cows and calves missed him deeply. The mother

cows had not given milk for two days after returning from Mathura and she knew that it was only the survival of their calves that prompted them to start yielding again on the third day. And his friends and accomplices in mischief, how could they go about their lives as before without their Van Ke Vihari—or Baake Bihari as some corrupted the term—He Who Loved To Sport in the Forest.

For that matter, how did the forest itself continue sprouting new shoots and growing new leaves and roots and flowers and trees without their favorite friend? How did the birds and insects and animals live their lives so nonchalantly with Vrajesh, Lord of Vraj, absent? At least the other gopis moped for him but not the way she did: they went about their tasks as before, they even flirted and romanced the gopas as before. The only difference was that they took less care with their appearance now, as if only Krishna deserved to see them look their best. They no longer dressed their tresses as carefully or enticingly as before: none of the girls oiled her hair or put fresh blossoms in it each day as they had done when Keshava was here, he who himself sported such long lustrous tresses.

The impoverished and outcastes missed them. At least they took the name of their lord often in her presence, calling him Dinanath and Dinabandhu and other such titles, friend and refuge of the destitute and afflicted. But then they went about begging and scrounged for scraps as before! How could they? She could barely put food in her mouth or keep nourishment in her belly without him present. The brahmins named him Patitapavana, purifier of the fallen, which was their way of saying they missed him, she supposed, though it was too remote to satisfy her. Some, like Gargamuni, spoke of him reverentially as Parambrahman but that was even more remote and elevated. Sometimes, respecting someone that greatly only removed the person from your emotions; to her, Krishna was close enough to touch, to hold, to smell, to kiss...Not a supreme brahmin but *her* Madhava.

When she looked at her reflection in still waters, she thought of her Achala, the still one. When she looked at a clear sky she thought of her Avyukta, crystal clear of mind and thought. When she dropped something

—as she did quite often these days—around the house, she thought of her Achyuta, the infallible. Everything reminded her of him. Even her own face reminded her of him, for what was Radha without Krishna? There was only one name she could not call him yet but longed to. The last name left. The only one she desired.

Radha Vallabh.

Lover of Radha.

When would he live up to that name?

That was what she longed to know.

She was sitting and musing thus as she did each day when she saw the chariot approaching. She always sat facing in this direction for that was the way to Mathura. Most visitors or traders came the other way, from Vraj itself. If someone was coming from the Mathura direction that could only mean he was a pardesi, a foreigner. And if he came by chariot he had to be a royal or on royal business. And there was only one reason a royal chariot would visit remote Gokul-dham: to bring home her most prodigal son.

She watched with bated breath and unblinking eyes as the chariot drew close enough for her to spy the occupant. There was a charioteer, she saw, and behind him a man in rich attire. That meant someone important. Her heart leaped as she recognized the familiar yellow anga-vastra that her beloved favored. It was his favorite color. And the dhoti? Yes! It had to be. It must be. Therefore it was...

“KRISHNA!” she cried and leaped from the tree, racing to meet the approaching chariot.

6

“KRISHNA!”

The young gopi ran in front of the chariot, crossing the path of the horse team with breathtaking abandon. The sarathi had seen her coming but had not slowed the pace as Gokuldham was still a few miles ahead. Luckily, the horses were well-trained and caring of human life, and the charioteer doubly so. He was able to rein them in and bring them to a halt without running over the careless girl.

Uddhava was about to berate the gopi for her reckless behavior when she came running up to the well of the chariot, beaming a smile so radiant he had not the heart to dispel it. She turned the beauty of that smile up to him and he felt his heart melt at once. Then she saw his face and blinked. She blinked again, reacting. And clasped her hand to her heart. And the smile faded to reveal a still-beautiful face grown thin from moping and waiting.

“You are not my Hari!” she said, as if addressing a deviant. “Why do you dress in his clothes? And ride his chariot? Who are you, imposter!”

Uddhava chuckled. “I am his friend and emissary. These are indeed his clothes and his chariot, given to me by Krishna himself, our lord of Mathura. And you must be Radha.”

She backed away, startled. “How do you know my name?”

He joined his palms together in respectful greeting. “I know everything about you. He has told me all.”

Her hand moved to her mouth, covering a gasp. “Everything?”

He chuckled again. “Please do not fret. He has sent me to ask after you and bring you news of himself. I am not Krishna in person. But I am the next best thing. He has authorized me to speak on his behalf in every respect.”

A guarded look came into her eyes. “Why? Is he not returning to Vraj again?”

Uddhava sighed. “The most difficult question of all. I had hoped to rest and repair myself after the long journey before answering so many questions. Perhaps if you would care to board my chariot, we could ride the rest of the way to Gokuldham swiftly? My sarathi tells me it is not far.”

She shook her head slowly. “Not far.” She looked pale, as if she had experienced a great shock. He realized that she must not be eating much or taking care of her health, for the little exertion and excitement had already weakened her visibly.

“Please,” he said, “climb aboard the chariot. You may sit in the well. I do it too, on long journeys. It is not very comfortable if the road is bumpy, but it takes the weight off one’s feet.”

She sat in the well. And Uddhava indicated to his sarathi that they could proceed. As the chariot trundled off at a more genial pace, he smiled invitingly at Radha. After a moment, she seemed to recover considerably. He revised his first impression: she was not weak or wan, it was only the shock of the huge disappointment of expecting Krishna and finding him instead that had turned her color white.

“You were expecting him,” he said at last, speaking a little louder to be heard over the sound of the chariot wheels.

She did not answer but looked down bashfully. He smiled again to himself. Mathuran girls would not have looked down, they would have stared back, boldly defiant.

“I am sorry he could not come.”

“Why?” she asked, with more vigor than he had expected. “Is he off fighting a war?”

He winced. It was one of the questions he had hoped not to be asked, but having been asked he could hardly lie. “Actually, he is. The very day after I departed for Vrajbhoomi, Mathura was besieged by the armies of Magadha.”

She sat bolt upright. “Magadha? That means Jarasandha! He is the biggest demon in the mortal world! He commands armies the size of all creation! How will Krishna fight him?”

Uddhava was taken aback by her energy and anxiety. “He can and he will. In fact, he has already fought him.”

“And? Go on, tell me!” She was crouching on her knees now, as if about to pounce on him to get every last scrap of information.

“And I am pleased to say that he won the battle. I received word from a rider who caught up with me only this morning as I was on this last leg of the journey. It seems Krishna and Balarama successfully repulsed the invaders and defeated Jarasandha.”

She laughed and leaped up, clapping her hands with such manic glee, Uddhava thought she would fall off the chariot. Reaching out to brace her hand, the chariot hit a bump just then and it was *he* who almost fell off. Luckily for him, she reached out and caught his arm tightly. He was

surprised by the strength of her grip. Clearly he had misjudged her condition. Then it came to him: Her strength comes from Krishna. As he grows in strength and achievement, so does she share in his victory.

He was profoundly moved. It was one thing to know that the gopis of Vraj doted on his Lord. But to see that devotion embodied in such a literal display was touching beyond words. Radha had transformed from the wan pallid figure running recklessly in front of his chariot into a vibrant beautiful robust cow-girl of the kind he had seen so often across the Yadava nations. The kind of woman who suited his lord Janardhan perfectly. *Except for the fact that she is a cowherd.*

Then again, he reminded himself, *So is our Lord!*

But it was easy to forget Krishna's origins. Already, he was not just Lord of Mathura but Deliverer of the Yadava people and savior of the human race itself!

Whereas this lovely creature will always remain just a cowgirl. No matter how much she dotes on our lord.

His heart went out to her at that moment. And he fell a little in love with Radha himself. Or perhaps it was a lot. But he could not show his love. For he was here as Krishna's ambassador.

"Tell me everything," she said, seating herself cross-legged in the well of the chariot as if she sat in royal chariots and gossiped every day of the week. "How did he do it? What powers did he use? He must have been magnificent to behold. Oh, how I wish I could have seen him on the battlefield. How I wish I could have fought beside him, shoulder to shoulder!"

And a pretty shoulder it is at that, he thought. Then he laughed aloud, shaking his head at the folly of his own emotions. *You simpleton, you,*

Uddhava. To fall in love with the one girl whom you can never possess nor even approach. For his own loyalty to Krishna would never permit him to ever express even a suggestion of impropriety to Radha. He respected and loved his lord too greatly to ever permit such a thing. Therefore, in the same moment that he had fallen for Radha, he had also sealed his own fate. *Fool, perfect fool.* He continued laughing to cover his inner thoughts.

She frowned, her pretty forehead wrinkling. “What? What did I say?”

He shook his head. “Nothing, Radhey. I was just thinking that Krishna described you perfectly. I did not believe him then and thought he must be exaggerating. But having met you, I see he did not exaggerate at all!”

She colored slightly and glanced down. “You called me *Radhey*. Only he calls me that.”

Uddhava smiled. “He asked me to call you by that name. To remind you of him.”

Now it was her turn to laugh. “As if I need reminding! Everything reminds me of Krishna.” She waved dismissively. “But enough bantering. Tell me about him. Tell me everything. Leave nothing out, Uddhava, or I swear by my father’s herds, I’ll set all the bulls in Vraj after you!”

He laughed at the though of him racing away across open fields with a horde of mad bulls chasing him with lowered horns and steaming nostrils. “I shall tell you all I know. That will have to do.”

He kept his word.

Bana rose that morning with a smile on his face. The weeks since his retirement had been the best of his life. With Krishna's permission he had retired from the Imperial Army and hung up his sword for good. He had seen far too much bloodshed and carnage under Kamsa to enjoy being a kshatriya anymore. Even if he considered it his dharma to remain a warrior and sought no enjoyment in the performance of his duties, he still could not dissolve the bitter aftertaste in his mouth. The taste had risen unbidden the moment the celebrations began in Mathura.

No sooner had the dhol-drums begun pounding their merry rhythm across the city and the air filled with cheers and shouts of joy and whoops of relief, he began to remember his wife and children. The long trial had ended at last but the judgement was of no value to him personally. He might as well have still been incarcerated in the horror of Kamsa's reign for all the good it did him to be free. True, he took great pride and pleasure in the minor role he had played in aiding the transition. But it was small reparation for all the terrible things he had done. Not just to strangers or to the people at large, or even to the soldiers under his command, but to his own loved ones.

Krishna had personally and publicly issued a pardon for Bana and all those who had been forced to perform acts of cruelty and war crimes under Kamsa's regime, and at his urging the surviving relatives of those who had suffered had publicly forgiven Bana and the others. But how does a man forgive himself? What ceremony absolves a human mind of its own burden of guilt? No amount of soma could drown that sorrow. He had killed his own beloved Chamundi and put a sword through the frail little bodies of his own beloved...he could not even say his children's names now. The very thought of it made him sick to the core.

He had spent days and nights following the reinstatement of Ugrasena in agony, wracked by constant pain that could not be relieved even by

chewing the appropriate leaves or consuming the tar extract the vaid had recommended for the pain. ‘Old war injuries,’ was the cause he had named and they were indeed war injuries. But injuries done by himself to himself. For no violence is as terrible as the violence we do to our loved ones—and to ourselves. That is the worst crime of all.

It had taken a great resolve and Krishna’s encouragement—he had actually visited Bana in his meagre quarters in the poorer section of the city, for when he had surrendered his commission he had given up his quarters and all the ill-gotten wealth he had accumulated while in Kamsa’s service. He lived now in a tiny shack, a hovel really, and earned a living carting hay and fodder to Mathura from outlying villages and back. It was a pittance of a living but he wanted the hardship and honest labor. It was the only way he could live at all. Kshatriya dharma was too deeply ingrained in his being for him to take his own life—and indeed, as Krishna himself had advised so wisely, why end a life when it could still serve a purpose? “It does not matter if your life seems useless to you,” Krishna had said in that fateful conversation that night after Bana had sobbed his heart out and confessed every last sin. “Because it can still be of use to others. Live for them if not for yourself. Live for the use that your body can be put to in the service of others. What cannot be undone can sometimes be repaired. Work and service are the best reparation.”

And he was right. From the very first day, Bana had felt a hand upon his shoulder, guiding him gently but firmly. It was as if the more he worked, the better he felt. He was a long, long way from completely forgiving himself. That might take years or might never happen. But already he had begun feeling pride in the little ways in which he helped people. For one thing, he did not charge for his services. He ate where he could, whatever he could get, owned nothing, desired nothing. He lived only to work and to serve. And it felt wonderful.

Today, he was in his cart as usual—a cart gifted to him by Krishna himself, along with two robust uksan who ate far more than he did but deserved every bale. He was on the road going north out of Mathura and on his way to a village some two yojanas away. The city was barely a few miles

behind him. He had crossed the great new breach by using one of the new bridges built literally overnight by Krishna's architect Tvasta. He had no idea how such magnificent bridges could have been built in a single night. Indeed, the rest of the city was probably still sleeping off the previous night's celebrations. The jubilation over the defeat of Jarasandha's armies had rivalled even the celebration on the night of Kamsa's demise.

Bana suspected that he might even be the only one out on this road at this early hour, literally the crack of dawn. But then, he had more to make up for and less to celebrate. And besides, he had given up consuming any form of intoxicant as well as the eating of flesh as part of his process of reparation. One could hardly atone for past violence by continuing to slaughter and eat living things just as one could not expect to become a better man if one drowned oneself in drink each night.

He marveled at how swiftly the battlefield had been cleared too. He suspected that Krishna's miraculous hand had played a major part in that as well. He had seen the aftermath of war often enough to be sickeningly familiar with its most intimate details. For weeks after a battle, the carrion birds and rodents feasted and lived in vast numbers on the field, to the point where it was actually dangerous to approach a corpse. If the vultures didn't attack you, the land predators certainly would. And if you waited till both had left the rotting remains alone at last, the rodents were as lethal in their own diseased way. He had seen battlefields left with corpses rotting because there were not enough able-bodied and willing men to pile them and light pyres.

But this land looked as if a battle had never taken place. The trees, the bushes, the shrubbery, even the flower fields looked much the same as they had the day before. There were no carrion birds circling in the sky, no long-jawed shapes slinking around in packs, no stench of mortal decay... why, even the ground seemed unmarked. Only the ditch remained, and the new bridges of course. Had they not been there, Bana might have doubted his own wits. Yet their presence and the memories of the battle he had watched the previous day, the way he had helped pull the wounded to safety when the arrows fell into the city, the hours he had spent nursing the

hurt and caring for them, fetching water and provisions and vaids...yes, of course there had been a battle here only yesterday. Yet somehow Krishna had repaired the land overnight. How?

Bana shrugged. If he could understand how, he would be Krishna, not Bana. He still had a day's work ahead and wagonload of manure to deliver. He clicked his tongue, urging the still-sleepy uksan to go a little faster. Sometimes, they dozed while walking which made them difficult to control. He was reaching the top of a rise and had no desire to go down that steep slope with two addle-headed uksan—

He reached the top and exclaimed.

He stood up in the cart.

He stared.

The uksan began trundling over the top.

Bana stopped them with a jerk to the ropes and began clicking his tongue, urging them to turn around. It took several moments for they were already accustomed to this route and could not understand why the foolish human wanted to go the wrong way all of a sudden. But he persisted and managed to get them to turn at last.

All through, he could not take his eyes off the sight that lay beyond the rise. The incredible, unbelievable sight that dominated the view for yojanas in every direction, all the way to the horizon as far as the eye could see.

It was an army. The greatest army he had ever seen. And it was coming towards Mathura.

8

KRISHNA and Balarama awoke to the sound of trumpets sounding the alarm. They came out of their respective bed chambers clad in only their dhotis, wrapping anga vastras hurriedly around their naked torsos and saw Pradhan Mantri Pralamba approaching them at a rapider pace than was usual for the aging prime minister.

“My princes,” he said breathlessly. “At the cusp of the new era, we are faced by a crisis beyond belief. Jarasandha has brought an army to invade Mathura. It is already within sight of the city and will be here within the hour.” He caught his breath before continuing. “Our forces have been called to muster already and your father and grandfather and the rest of the Ministers Sabha have already assembled in the Sabha Hall. They await you. Come,” he said, turning to lead them up the corridor. “Let us speak as we walk.”

Krishna and Balarama exchanged a glance as they followed the prime minister. “Jarasandha invades us *again?*” Krishna asked, genuinely shocked. ‘I don’t understand it. He was completely *destroyed* after the battle yesterday! He did not even have the nerve to crow or abuse us and make his usual threats.’

Balarama shook his head, his left hand entangled in the length of fabric. “And which king would lend him an army to fight us again after yesterday’s battle?”

“None,” Krishna said. “And even if they did, how could they arrive so swiftly? There must be some mistake.”

Pralamba was looking to one and then the other with an expression of great puzzlement on his aging face. He slowed, bringing them to a halt as well. “What is this you speak of, young princes? What battle was there

yesterday? I was not aware of any such battle. Did you meet with Jarasandha privately perhaps?”

Krishna and Balarama exchanged a glance then looked at Pralamba. “Surely you recall the siege of Mathura and the great assault by Jarasandha?” Krishna asked. “It ended in our victory at day’s close but it was the greatest assault on Mathura’s sovereignty ever attempted in Yadava history!”

Pralamba’s face retained its puzzled expression. “Are you speaking of yesterday? Yesterday was the most peaceful day we experienced in years. We met in Council and discussed issues of re-allotment of the properties and lands that the erstwhile King Kamsa had arbitrarily given to whomever he pleased over the years, including many Magadhan envoys installed as satraps in various of our provinces. It was a relatively quiet uneventful day.”

Balarama kept struggling with his anga-vastra which had somehow got tangled behind his back. His powerful muscles made it difficult for him to turn or maneuver enough to get the errant end loose. Krishna slipped it over his shoulder and offered it to him—he nodded gratefully even as he said to Pralamba, “But surely you can’t have forgotten the invasion? The battle? The rain of arrows? Thousands were injured in Mathura City. And then our decimation of Jarasandha’s forces. And after that, we met in Council and decided to allot the spoils to the Sudras at Krishna’s request. How could you not recall all that?”

Pralamba frowned, thinking, “I have no recollection of any of these events you speak of. The only event of any import I recall is the arrival of that charioteer, and Krishna appointing him as his own sarathi.”

“Daruka,” Krishna said eagerly. “Then you do recall that when he arrived the day before , he brought us word of the army approaching Mathura, within just a few yojanas march? It was he who forewarned us a night

before the invasion! If not for him we would have been caught completely unawares.”

Pralamba looked at Krishna with some alarm. “Forgive me for questioning your word, my Lord, but the charioteer arrived *yesterday*, not the day before! We had no forewarning. If Bana had not seen the armies only a few miles outside of the city, we would not have even this hour’s notice.” He shook his head, bewildered. “I do not understand what you are saying. All I know is that we received word only moments ago that Jarasandha is approaching Mathura with a great invading force. Nothing less than 20 akshohini, perhaps as many as 22 or 23, based on the number of banners that former Senapati Bana counted himself.”

Krishna and Balarama looked at each other. Balarama stopped struggling with his anga-vastra’s errant end. “23 akshohini,” Krishna said, stunned. “Are you thinking what I am thinking, bhai?”

“Yes, bhraatr,” Balarama replied, looking equally harried. “He has not merely rallied a few new forces and returned, he has returned with the same great force.”

“Pray, let us continue to the sabha hall,” Pralamba said as his aides came rushing up to urge them to hurry. “We can continue this discussion in chambers.”

The palace was a beehive of activity, soldiers and courtiers rushing to and fro, which was unusual for this hour as well as for this time of peace. The three of them continued walking hurriedly and Krishna noted at least two palace sentries that he clearly recalled as having been killed the day before in the hail of arrows. He remembered them because he had seen their bodies lying outside the palace along with the rest of the palace casualties when they had returned yesterday evening. They appeared to be very much alive and well today as they rushed past on some urgent errand or other and he could not help but follow them with his gaze as they went by.

His gaze met Balarama's and he saw his brother had seen something or someone that was also out of place in similar fashion.

"Something is not right, bhai," Balarama said quietly to him as they approached the main convocation area of the palace. Courtiers were waiting in clusters and groups, muttering nervously. They all looked up and reacted with excitement as they saw Krishna and Balarama approach. Several started forward but were stalled when Pralamba raised his hand, informing them that the princes were on their way to War Council and could not stay to talk, however briefly. "It is as if yesterday were repeating itself all over again."

"Except that things are not occurring exactly the same way," Krishna said, frowning. "Something is amiss, that is for sure. We must find out what, and quickly."

They entered the Sabha Hall.

9

UGRASENA looked wan and haggard. Yet the old king sat on the throne in an attitude that inspired pride, if not confidence. Pride in the spirit and resilience of the Yadava people, even in the face of such a crisis.

“Good princes, we are pleased you could join us,” he said shakily. Then coughed briefly. Beside him, his wan but still relatively less haggard wife Padmavati offered him a sip of water before speaking on his behalf. “We were only awaiting your arrival, Princes Krishna and Balarama. Dear Vasudeva, pray continue.”

“I thank thee, Rani Maatr Padmavati,” Vasudeva said. Krishna’s father and mother both looked wan and troubled, as did every other member of the Council assembled there that day. Krishna sought out Akrura and Uday then remembered that he himself had despatched them both on urgent errands—Akrura to Hastinapura to enquire after his sister Pritha’s well-being and Uday to carry news of him to the denizens of Gokuldham, his erstwhile adoptive home. He missed them sorely but their absence reassured him somewhat, making him think that perhaps old Pralamba’s memory was the only thing aiss here today.

“It is a grave crisis that looms before us,” Vasudeva continued. His next words dashed Krishna’s hopes to pieces. “The Magadhan juggernaut is at our threshold, seeking to enslave Mathura and add the Yadava nations to his long butcher’s list of conquests. The craven attacks without warning or any gesture of conciliation, in complete violation of dharma. Not one word of forewarning or emissary to discuss terms of peace beforehand. This attack comes as a complete surprise.”

So then it was as Pralamba had said—nobody appeared to have any recollection of the previous day’s events. Balarama shot Krishna a dark

glance. Krishna pursed his lips.

“If it is in violation of dharma, then surely we can refute his advances on that basis alone?” suggested one minister known for his considerable wealth gained from trading rather than his war skills.

“What dharma does a Magadhan know?” asked an aging general, also the War Minister. “He knows only barbarism and butchery.”

“Besides, the point is moot, King Vasudeva,” said another Minister, head of an ancient Yadava house. “You cannot argue points of law or dharma with an army at your doorstep.”

A chorus of murmurs endorsed to this statement. The mood in the sabha hall was nervous rather than angry, Krishna noted. A bad sign. Not only was Mathura not expecting war so quickly after the passing of the old regime, it was not prepared for one.

“Nevertheless,” Vasudeva continued. “I have sent a rider to the Magadhan lines to enquire about their demands and to convey this same point.”

Someone groaned. “He will not return. You will only see his severed head on a lance at the frontlines next.”

“Talking peace with Magadha is like discussing dharma with a tiger in the jungle when it pounces on you,” said another cynical voice.

The argument continued for another moment.

Balarama leaned into Krishna. “Bhai, what are we to do? Should we not inform them that something unusual is going on?”

“There would be no point,” Krishna said. “Nobody but we seem to be aware that this has happened before. It would only confuse them and cause further delay. Jarasandha will not wait until we explain matters. The fact that his army is at the gates is still a fact. We have to deal with that first.”

Balarama nodded slowly. “I agree.”

Vasudeva looked to Krishna and Balarama. “What say you, princes of Mathura? It was you who freed us from the shackles of the Tyrant Usurper. Your voices are respected here above all others. What do you say to this new threat that confronts us now?”

Krishna stepped forward, glancing around at the strained faces of older men and women. He saw that what Vasudeva said was perfectly true: every single person in that sabha hall, regardless of their politics, wealth, social stature, varna or other allegiance, looked to Balarama and he for the last word and final decision. Whatever he said, they would do, no matter what the consequences. He could lead every last man, woman and child in the city out to fight Jarasandha’s forces right now, and they would follow him gladly, singing until the moment their lives ended on the battlefield.

Which was why he knew what he must *not* do next.

“I say assemble the forces of Mathura outside the city in a circular formation, ringing the city completely. Bar all gates and entry points. Call a curfew and ask the populace to take shelter within their domiciles. Let no man, woman, child or animal be out of doors until the curfew is lifted on my orders.”

It was his own birth-mother Devaki who leaned forward inquisitively. “Why do you call a curfew, Krishna? If the city is sealed and ringed by our armies, surely the people should be safe to move about freely within our walls? Why restrict them inside doors?”

“And why the animals too?” asked the wealthiest herder in all Mathura, with curiosity matching that of Devaki.

Krishna nodded, acknowledging the logic of their queries. “When Jarasandha sees his forces thwarted from entering the city by any means, he will resort to his longbow archers. They can inflict great damage and levy a high toll even from afar. Within doors, our people will be protected from the hailstorm of arrows.”

A murmur of excitement rose, people turning to one another to marvel at Krishna’s foresight and wisdom.

“Magnificently intuited,” old King Ugrasena said. “My grandson is right: Magadha is renowned for its longbow archers and for attacking even civilian populations without compunction.”

“Then we shall levy a curfew as Krishna advises,” Vasudeva said somberly. “Nay, we shall request it of the people and ask them to willingly cooperate. Pralamba, see to it at once.”

Pralamba nodded brusquely and issued orders to one of his aides who rushed out to convey the first orders to the waiting dhoots outside the hall. They would then courier the instructions to the army officers who would pass it on to the eventual recipients.

“What else, Krishna?” asked a younger general. “What are your instructions to our armies for the impending battle? How shall we defend ourselves? What stratagem or tactics do you advise us to use?”

Krishna looked around the room. Everyone watched him with intent expressions, looking for his leadership to carry them through this crisis. It reminded him of the day he had walked into Mathura with Balarama for the wrestling tournament. Nothing had really changed since that day in this one respect: They still looked to him to save them.

And save them he must.

“Just that the army should hold its position in the ring formation around the city walls as I described,” he said. “Nothing else.”

“Nothing?” asked Vasudeva incredulously. “Surely you must have some plan to deal with the invasion? Whatever you wish, we shall carry out your instructions to the letter, my son.”

Krishna nodded to his father with a gesture of respect. “I appreciate the support, Pitr,” he said. “But that is the only instruction. Leave the rest to Balarama and me.”

10

A strong wind was blowing, causing dust swirls to rise in waves across the distance, disturbing the horses and making the krta-dhvaja crack like whips. The dawn light blossomed in the eastern horizon but was dimmed by a cloudbank, lending the entire battlefield a dull lustrous light. It grayed the endless lines of Magadhan infantry, horse, chariot and elephant regiments that seemed to circle around the city as relentlessly as the horizon itself.

“It is the same army,” Balarama said grimly atop his horse. The wind whipped his words from his lips and his tone seemed to rise and fall in Krishna’s hearing even though he was only a yard from Krishna himself. “23 akshohini, the same exact lines and arrangement, down to the last man, horse and elephant.”

“Yes,” Krishna said. He had ascertained that for himself as well, using his preternatural consciousness to reach out and probe the enemy lines. It was indeed the exact same army as yesterday, arranged in exactly the same formation. It was as if the dead had come to life and resumed their positions in some grotesque parody of life.

Except that this was no parody. This was all too real. The army before them was real, the weapons were real, the threat as real as yesterday. The screams of anguish and shock of the Mathurans felled by arrows still echoed in Krishna’s ears. Just as the squeals of agony of the elephants and horses slaughtered by Balarama and he at the end of the battle still haunted Balarama.

But the ditch was gone. So was the river of blood that had spilled upon this plain. The offal and bones and flesh and severed limbs...the detritus of yesterday’s battle...all gone. Vanished. As if it had never happened.

In the past half hour that it had taken Balarama and himself to ride here to the frontlines, they had ascertained beyond doubt that not a single soul in Mathura was aware that today was being repeated. It was not merely a repetition of events, they now knew, it was literally the same day, begun anew. Mangalam, the second day of the lunar week. It was as if yesterday's Mangalam had been erased from existence, from memory, from time itself.

"How is it possible?" Balarama asked with more than a trace of anger.
"How?"

"The question is not how, bhraatr," Krishna replied, "It is who."

Balarama stared at him, puzzled.

"The *how* could be accomplished in only one way," Krishna explained, "through the intervention of Lord Kala himself."

Balarama raised an eyebrow. "The Lord of Time?"

"And Space. Kala-Bhairava Himself. Only he has the power to accomplish such a feat, turn back time so that the same day repeats itself."

"But why?" Balarama asked. "Why would he do such a thing? All Devas must know that Jarasandha is an asura in mortal form, come upon the mortal realm to try to continue the reign of evil that Ravana and Mahishasura and other great asuras of yore once perpetrated. Why would the great Kala himself side with Jarasandha?"

"Perhaps he does not side with him," Krishna said, gesturing ahead with a jerk of his chin, "not in the sense of joining forces beside him in the field of battle or provided military support. Perhaps Jarasandha had secured a

boon at sometime which he now used to secure Kala's aid. In any case, it does not matter.”

“But of course it does,” Balarama said, his horse snorting and shaking her head to keep the dust out of her nostrils. The wind was rising. “He may as well be joining forces on the field. Look at that! 23 akshohini worth of fighting power!”

“We defeated them yesterday, we can do so again.”

“That’s the point, Krishna,” Balarama said fiercely. “We defeated them already. Destroyed them! We should not have to do it again. It is unnatural.”

“It is survival. They are there and they mean to invade and raze Mathura to the ground. It is our dharma to ensure they do not.” He attempted a lighter tone. “At least today we know how to dispense with them quickly, without going through the motions as we did yesterday.”

Balarama turned his head and looked at the field speculatively. He was silent so long even Krishna grew curious.

“What is it, Balarama? What do you see?”

Balarama turned his head. He was grinning. “I just realized that you are right, bhraatr. What am I complaining about? We defeated them yesterday. We can do it again easily today. And to boot, I now have the opportunity to demolish 23 akshohini of the best warriors in the world. Now that is a fight worth fighting!”

Krishna smiled as his brother’s sudden burst of enthusiasm. “You always complained that I fought all the asuras and you never got to fight anyone important...”

“Except the Donkey Asura,” Balarama muttered, glaring.

Krishna stifled a laugh. “Well, here’s your chance. Today’s your day to make up for all that lost time and opportunity. The field is all yours, bhai.”

Balarama looked at Krishna. “What...? You mean?” He pointed at the Magadhan army then at himself. “All that...for me? By myself?”

Krishna shrugged. “Why not? You can handle them, can’t you?”

Balarama straightened his shoulders and stared ahead, taking the full measure of the enemy now for the first time, gauging and evaluating seriously. “Of course!” he scoffed.

“Of course. With one hand tied behind my back and while drinking a gourd of Rohini-Maa’s lassi!”

Krishna did laugh now, at the image of Balarama fighting the Magadhan army with a hand tied behind his back and a gourd of lassi in his other hand, splashing and slurping buttermilk all over himself. “Which hand will you use to fight then?”

Balarama grinned at him. “Good point. Well, maybe I’ll keep the lassi-drinking for afterward.” He urged his horse forward into a canter. The wind whipped at his hair and the horse’s mane.

“And use both hands,” Krishna cautioned. “And your celestial mace and chariot! And call if you need me at anytime.”

“I’ll call you when I need my lassi, bhraatr,” Balarama shouted above the wind, breaking into a full gallop now. He summoned his celestial chariot

as he picked up speed and it appeared beside him. He leaped from the back of his horse to the chariot without missing a step. The mare neighed in protest, disappointed at being left out of the fight.

“Go back to Krishna, my lovely,” Balarama called to her. “We’ll fight asuras together another day.”

Then he spurred the chariot into a high vertical climb and prepared to launch himself at the enemy.

11

JARASANDHA laughed as Balarama's celestial chariot plowed through his front lines, demolishing them and ravaging entire regiments on contact. The plume of dirt and bodies and gore that rose to either side of the golden chariot was like the wake of water threshed by a snake boat rowed by a hundred Malayali warriors racing on Pongal festival day. He continued laughing as his Mohini Fauj lieutenants and the 23 senapatis of his akshohini turned to glance at each other.

Jarasandha's laughter wafted across the field even as the stench and bloodspray from Balarama's epic plowing suffused the air. Never before had any man present there ever witnessed the self-declared God Emperor of the Magadhan Empire release his laughter with such abandon. The sound itself was peculiar and made many who heard it feel uneasy, like the sound of a tiger crying or an eagle barking. It was unusual and against nature. Jarasandha did not laugh. He only killed and conquered, nothing more. Oh, and at times, he ate. Although the eating usually followed the killing and conquering, and mostly involved choice selections from the bodies of his conquered enemies.

The sound of his laughter was too much to bear and many shuddered in horror at Jarasandha's laughter, more unnerved by that sound than by the sight and sound and smell of Balarama's great slaughter.

Finally, unable to restrain himself any longer, one of his most trusted aides bent his head respectfully and asked, "God Emperor, may we humble mortals enquire what amuses thee so greatly? On the field of battle, the Yadava named Balarama is destroying our armies, yet you neither give orders to attack or defend but merely express your amusement."

Jarasandha's full-blown laughter tapered off by degrees to a chuckle. His tongue lashed out to a full five yards length, its twin forked tips whipping

up the nostrils of the aide who had dared to question his behavior and penetrating his brain, killing the man instantly. Even as the man fell from his horse, dead on the spot, Jarasandha retracted his tongue, lips smacking as he tasted the dead aide's grey matter.

He grimaced, finding it wanting. "Bland. Too much talking always spoils the flavor of a good brain," he said. "But to answer his question, I am laughing because this is one battle where we do not need to lift a finger in order to win."

His generals and other aides exchanged glances surreptitiously, none daring to speak aloud after beholding the fate of the fallen aide. Nobody wanted to feel Jarasandha's forked tongue stabbing his brain that morning. Or any one of the numerous other exotic methods Jarasandha had for killing people who offended him, however momentarily.

The only sound heard in the lines of command of the Magadhan force were the distant sounds of their warriors and their elephants and horses screaming with anguish as they were mercilessly slaughtered.

Jarasandha chuckled.

"I see that nobody else wishes to ask the obvious. In which case, I shall ask it myself. Why," he raised a finger as if asking permission to ask the question of himself, "My God Emperor, why do we not need to lift a finger to win this battle?"

He chuckled in response to his own query, altering his expression as if to answer his interrogator—who was of course himself. "Excellent question, God Emperor. The answer is not quite as obvious or simple enough to explain for these dunderheads that surround me. Suffice it to say that the purpose of this battle is not to fight the Yadavas, merely to demonstrate a point to the Brothers."

Again, he turned his head at a different angle, mimicking the questioning pose he had adopted for the earlier question, even vamping it up a little by adding some effeminate flourishes: “How fascinating, God Emperor. My, but your brilliance is beyond estimation. Pray, tell, do you mean the Brothers Krishna and Balarama?”

He turned back into his usual surly self for the answer: “Of course I mean Krishna-Balarma, you son of a half-breed mule!”

Again, the effeminate vampish questioner: “Oh, my, God Emperor, I am foolish, am I not? Of course you meant them. But pray tell, why do you not wish to fight them?”

“Because I cannot defeat them in battle,” replied the surly Jarasandha.

“My, my, God Emperor, what a big brain you have! But if you cannot defeat them in battle, why have you brought your armies to their doorstep?” asked the effeminate Questioner.

“Because I wish to show them that I possess the means to destroy their precious Mathura city and all the Yadava nations, to grind them into the earth from whence they once rose. To destroy them as a race entirely. The army is here to attack the people, not the Brothers Krishna-Balarama.”

“Forgive my stupidity, God Emperor,” cried the vampish Interrogator, “I have no brains to speak of. If the army is here to attack the people, why do we not attack? Why do we simply stand by and let the Brothers demolish our forces thusly?”

Jarasandha rolled his eyes impatiently before responding: “Because I already know the outcome of this and every possible battle on this ground. No matter what stratagem I adopt, the Brothers will destroy my army and, if pressed too hard, slay me as well. I cannot win this war merely through use of brute force or military acumen.”

“Then pray tell, God Emperor my beautiful one, how will you win it?”

Jarasandha smiled a sneering malevolent smile. “By proving to them that they cannot win it either.”

“But that would result in a...”

“A stand-off, yes,” Jarasandha said, flicking his hand to dismiss the imaginary Interrogator and continuing the rest of the ‘discussion’ himself. “That is exactly what I seek, to repeat this battle over and over again until the day comes when the Brothers realize for themselves that I can continue doing this forever and they can destroy my armies innumerable times, and yet I can come back the very next day with the exact same force and yet they can never defeat me in battle. For how can you defeat an enemy that returns to do battle the next day, and the next and the next...unto infinity.”

He chuckled and raised a finger, questioning himself now. The generals exchanged a troubled glance. Bad enough that the enemy was demolishing their armies single-handedly, but now their leader had apparently lost his mind as well. Still, they had no choice but to listen patiently. They each knew the fate that would befall them if they dared to interrupt or question Jarasandha themselves. And so they listened, only comprehending half of what he said.

“No matter how many times they wipe out my forces,” Jarasandha went on, “I shall be back the next morning, with the exact same army, ready to threaten Mathura with annihilation once more.”

He chuckled to himself. “Of course, I won’t actually be coming back to the same Mathura, not precisely, nor will the army be exactly the same, not precisely, no. But it will take them some days to figure that out as well. And even then, there is nothing they can do really. In the end, I will triumph...by doing nothing!”

He looked around at his silent audience, then smiled impishly.
“Sometimes, we also serve who only stand and wait.”

12

DARUKA was waiting outside Krishna's bed chamber when he emerged. The sound of trumpets announcing a war alert rang through the city. Courtiers and palace staff were rushing to and fro on various errands. There was a sense of chaos and near-panic in the royal complex. Krishna looked at Daruka's grim face and frowned as he adjusted his anga-vastra.

"My Lord," Daruka said, bowing. "I apologize for starting your day with such bad news, especially as I have been in your employ only since yesterday and have yet to prove my mettle."

Balarama came out of his bed chamber, struggling with an anga-vastra. His fair handsome face was twisted in a scowl. He looked around, saw the chaos, then caught sight of Krishna and Daruka and came over. "What the devil—" he began.

Krishna held up a hand to cut him off. "Speak, Daruka. Give us your news."

Daruka turned to greet and acknowledge Balarama as well who grunted in response, still struggling with the knotted anga-vastra. "My Lords, Princes of Mathura, there is an army at the gates. Jarasandha of Magadha has invaded our lands with an army of some 22 or more akshohini."

Krishna and Balarama exchanged a wordless glance.

"How do you know there are 22 akshohini?" Balarama asked, "Did you see them yourself?"

"Indeed, sire, I did," said the charioteer. "I was driving Lord Krishna's chariot on the raj-marg in order to familiarize the horses with my driving

style and scent when I perceived the great host amassed on the horizon. Their generals were at the fore, as is usual before an assault, and it was not difficult to count their krta-dhvaja and know the sum of their forces. There were 22 akshohini or..." he hesitated, "It might perhaps have been 23. You see, there was one banner that was either tangled or unfurled and I could possibly have missed it in my count. I would have recounted but felt it was more imperative to ride back to inform you."

"You said the host were amassed the horizon?" Krishna asked. "Then they are some distance from Mathura yet?"

Daruka shook his head regretfully. "Nay, my lord. By the term 'on the horizon' I meant the extent of their forces. They extend as far as the eye can see. The front lines were within striking distance of Mathura City. They are as good as at the gates."

Krishna and Balarama exchanged another glance. Balarama grew disgusted with his knotted anga vastra and tore it off his body, intending to throw it aside.

"Permit me, sire," Daruka offered, holding out his hand. Balarama dropped the knotted bundle in his hand and Daruka patiently began sorting out the knots.

"And you informed the rest of the palace as well, I see," Krishna said, still trying to work out what was happening.

"Nay, sire," Daruka replied as he worked at the knots. "That was another witness who also happened to be on the road at the time. An uks cart carrier who was on his way outwards." Daruka glanced up at Krishna briefly. "I am told he is a former general who served under the Usurper."

"Bana," Krishna said.

Balarama swore softly. “I don’t understand it. I destroyed every last one of Jarasandha’s forces yesterday. It is impossible that he could have raised a fresh army of the exact same size again today. Overnight!”

Krishna shook his head. “Not a fresh army, the same army.”

Balarama stared at him. “The same?”

Krishna looked at Daruka. “Good sarathi, what day is it today?”

Daruka asked without question or hesitation. “Mangalam, my lord.”

Krishna looked at Balarama who blinked rapidly, understanding. “It is Tuesday. Again.”

“For the third time in a row,” Krishna added. “And on each previous Tuesday, we woke and found Jarasandha at the gates of Mathura with an invasion force of 23 akshohini.”

“And twice on those Tuesdays, we destroyed that entire force! Wiped them out to the last man, sparing only Jarasandha himself since, as you said, he was ultimately related to the Yadavas through his daughters’ marriage to our late uncle Kamsa and therefore it was against dharma to kill him unless he attacked us himself.”

Krishna nodded. “Which he did not. He only sent his armies to threaten Mathura.”

“And we wiped out that army. Twice already!” Balarama said.

“And yet it is back again. And if we do not defend Mathura, I have no doubt it will invade and destroy the city and massacre all the people,

enslaving the survivors and enlisting them the Magadhan ranks. Therefore we have no choice but to destroy it again or risk endangering all our people and cities.”

Balarama stared at him. “And then what? We wake up again tomorrow and...again, it will be Tuesday? Again, Jarasandha will be at the gates with 23 akshohini? Again, this whole farce repeats itself all over once more?”

Krishna nodded. “Except it is not a farce. It is deadly real. This is no game to the rest of our people. If we do nothing, Jarasandha will invade, destroy, rape, ravage, slaughter, enslave.”

Balarama swore again. “Then we will fight him again. Destroy his forces again.”

Krishna nodded. “We must. But then what?”

“Let him come back as many times as he wishes. We will fight again and again.”

“How many times, Balarama?” Krishna asked. Pradhan Mantri Pralamba had approached while they were speaking and was waiting to address them. “Pradhan Mantri, we have the news. Kindly inform the Council we shall be with them momentarily.”

Pralamba looked anxious but turned and returned the way he had come.

Krishna put his arm on his brother’s shoulder.

“How many times, Balarama?” he asked. “What if Jarasandha repeats this a thousand times? Each day we wake up, it is still the same Tuesday, the enemy is at the gates, we fight, we destroy them, we go to bed, and next morning it repeats all over again, with a few minor changes in detail. One

time Bana brings word, the next time Daruka, the third time both of them see the approaching invasion force... But the main details are the same. 23 akshohini. Too great an army to ignore or for Mathura to defend itself against. Too great a threat for us to walk away from." He paused, then went on, "And after doing it a thousand times, then what? We will wear ourselves down without accomplishing anything!" Krishna shook his head. "No, bhai, there is more to this than merely going out and slaughtering armies. We have to figure out Jarasandha's larger game-plan. He must have a greater strategy in mind. We have to find out what that is and defeat him at his own game."

Balarama's shoulders slumped. "I don't understand it. For one thing, if it's the same day repeating, why are there differences at all? Why Bana one day, Daruka the next...shouldn't everything be exactly the same?"

Krishna stared at him, his dark black eyes glittering with intelligence and wit. "That's it, Balarama! You have something there. The difference in detail. That means it's not the same day repeating, they're different days..." He looked down at himself, "They must be."

Balarama frowned. "I still don't follow. What does that mean, exactly?"

Krishna looked down pensively. "I'm not entirely certain but we need to go through a few more Tuesdays and observe differences in detail closely. I think that may be the key to understanding what's behind this."

Balarama thought for a moment then grinned. "Well, looking on the bright side, at least I get to do a whole lot of fighting again...and again...and again."

Krishna smiled at his brother's enthusiasm. "Fight to your hearts' content."

Daruka stood up, handing Balarama the unravelled anga-vastra. “Your garment, Prince Balarama.”

Balarama took it, smiling. “You untied the knots! That’s a miracle!” He wore the anga-vastra with a flourish.

Krishna shook his head, slapping his brother’s back. “If only all knots were as easily unravelled.”

13

BALARAMA watched as Krishna stood upon the battlefield, surrounded by an ocean of enemies. Lances, javelins, spears, arrows, axes, and weapons of all kinds were being flung at him. Elephant regiments attacked in full charges. Cavalry thundered at him. Entire rivers of chariots rode towards him. Great masses of infantry swept across him. And yet, each time, he stood his ground, armed with only the weapon named Sudarshana. The celestial disc whirled and gleamed as it flew through the air at blinding speeds, seemingly everywhere at once. It slashed through regiments of elephants, akshohini of chariots, armies of infantry, hordes of cavalry...nothing could withstand its deadly spinning blade. It cut Jarasandha's armies to pieces in moments, leaving Krishna like a bright and lustrous emerald island upon a crimson sea of the dead.

It was many Tuesdays since the first Tuesday. Eventually, even Balarama had tired of fighting. It had taken the slaying of several scores of akshohini, literally tens of millions of enemies, before he realized that the more one killed the less it mattered. Like any action repeated often, it became rote after a point. A day had come when he found himself slaughtering elephants and horses without compunction. That was the day he told Krishna that the next time, he would prefer it if Krishna did the slaughtering. Krishna had done so without comment or query.

He watched now as Krishna finished the day's work, leaving the battlefield strewn with over 5 million corpses. That evening when they returned to Mathura, Balarama said mildly, "It isn't really killing, because they will all be back again tomorrow, right, bhraatr?"

Krishna looked at him somberly and shook his head. "Nay, bhai. Tomorrow they may be back. But today it is killing. Nothing reduces its importance or reality today."

Balarama thought about that for a moment, then quaffed the rest of his goblet of soma. He had taken to drinking a great deal of soma since the beginning of the Tuesday War as they had taken to calling it. “Even so,” he said, “The end justifies the means. We have no choice but to kill them. Otherwise they will kill our people. We know that already. Therefore it is our dharma to kill them before they attack Mathura.”

He knew this was right. He felt it was right. Yet, he still glanced at Krishna for confirmation.

Krishna sighed. “I can no longer say what is what, bhai. Right or wrong, justified or not. Dharma or adharma, they have all become meaningless in this endless repetition.” He started to bunch his fists then sighed and released his anger. “Perhaps that is what Jarasandha truly desires: to strip us of dharma itself by forcing us to spend our lives in this mindless slaughter until we lose all perspective, all hold upon sanity, until we lose our humanity itself.”

Balarama shrugged. “Would that be such a terrible thing? We are not entirely human, after all. We know this to be true even if we cannot go about freely as gods on earth.”

“Yes, it would, Balarama,” Krishna said. “Because although we are divine amsas, we are still in mortal forms and subject to certain mortal laws of nature. Besides, I do not speak of literally not being mortal anymore, I mean that we would lose sight of what it means to be mortal. No human being can continue killing in this way without losing the sense of what is right and wrong, and that, my brother, is the basis of human behavior.”

“Right and wrong?” Balarama asked, sitting up. “But that differs based on your point of view. In the view of the Magadhangs, it is right to kill Mathurans because they impede the growth of the Magadhan empire! Whereas for innocent Mathurans living their lives in their own city, minding their own business, it is clearly the Magadhan invaders who are in the wrong.”

“Yes, exactly,” Krishna said, standing and walking about his bed chamber where they had come to talk and eat after the day’s battle. “And that dichotomy or plurality is the essence of humanness. You say White, I say Black.”

Balarama smiled wryly at his brother’s witticism: Krishna was as black-skinned as Balarama was fair. The legend went that Vishnu plucked two hairs at random from his head: one happened to be a white hair and the other a black one. They provided the genetic material for the amsas that were reborn as Balarama and Krishna.

“So the essence of humanness is contradiction and controversy?”

“No, bhai,” Krishna countered. “It is struggle. The two opposing points of view represent humanity’s constant struggle for betterment, change, self-improvement, growth, development, whatever term you wish to use. Change, always change. That is what marks humanity apart from all other species. There are creatures upon earth that have not changed for arbo years. While human beings often develop alterations in the social structure, thinking, lifestyle, body shapes, garbs, and other things within the same lifetime. It is extraordinary, this constant drive to change. It keeps the race robust and virile.”

Balarama shrugged. “So what? What does that have to do with our Tuesday War?”

“Jarasandha seeks to strip us of our desire for change by forcing us to live the same day over and over again, fight the same battle each day. Eventually, if we continue down this path, there is only result possible.”

“Boredom?” Balarama suggested.

“Worse. Cynicism. All societies that stop changing, stop growing. They stagnate. And stagnation is decline, decay, destruction. That which is not growing is dying.”

“That which does not kill us makes us stranger,” Balarama quipped, refilling his goblet with soma. “I see what you mean, bhraatr. So Jarasandha intends for us to burn out by reliving this same battle, day after day. But then what?”

“Then one day, when we are least expecting it, he will introduce a new element. Change. Radical, unexpected change. And because we have fallen into the trap of becoming cynical, of assuming we know what happens next, that we know *everything*...because we have relived this day’s events so often before, we will not be prepared. And that is when he will strike. And destroy us.”

Balarama stopped pouring and looked up. “And when you say ‘destroy’...”

Krishna shrugged and spread his hands. “I do not know what form that may take. Even my divine sight cannot penetrate the veil of Kala. That which has not yet happened can only be known in time.”

“Yet here we are speculating on it,” Balarama said. “While we could simply be asking the one person who already knows the answers to all these questions. Why don’t we do that, Krishna? Why don’t we just go and ask him the answers instead of sitting around and frying our brains by trying to figure out what his real plan is here?”

Krishna looked at Balarama. “Very good, bhai. Let’s do it tomorrow itself. After the battle.”

Balarama grinned mischievously, “You mean today, don’t you, bhraatr?”

He winked and raised the goblet to drink.

14

JARASANDHA watched with sardonic glee as the Brothers approached on their golden chariots. The ruins of his proud army lay scattered across the field of battle for miles in every direction, a vast wasteland of carnage and destruction. Smoke from fired chariots and flame arrows rose in drifts. Great numbers of carrion birds flew through the rising spirals of smoke, beaks bent earthwards, seeking fresh meat. There's was a cornucopia of delights, a smorgasbord of delectables that would last them for weeks—or until the meat grew too rank to consume. They had no way of knowing that by tomorrow these carrion corpses would have magically vanished from this field, leaving no trace of their ever having been here. Then again, in their places would be fresh, living bodies, awaiting their time of death. In a way, that was even more enticing—instead of yesterday's rotting corpses, they would have fresh corpses again tomorrow—and the day after, and so on in an unending succession of Tuesdays, until...until when.

Except that would not be the case. Yes, this same army would rise from the dead again tomorrow and the day after and for so long as it took for Jarasandha to assert his supremacy. But the carrion bird would be different each day. As would the bodies waiting to be turned into corpses. As would the city of Mathura itself and all its denizens. As would every blade of grass, tree, leaf, insect, stone, drop of dew...Everything would be almost exactly the same yet subtly different each day. Only he would be the same—and so would the Brothers.

Fitting therefore that they should come to him each evening after triumphantly cleansing the battlefield of his forces and still be too stubborn to broach the real subject of the day. The question of how he could be appeased. Thus far at least, they had not broached the subject and he did not expect them to do so today. Well, perhaps today. Or tomorrow. Sooner or later they must broach the topic. Or continue thus forever. He hoped it would not be too long; this endless standing about on battlefields

and watching his armies get slaughtered was growing tedious. As was the show of groveling and being humbled he had to put on each evening after the day's battle.

"Jarasandha," Balarama said as the chariots touched ground. Jarasandha marveled at the celestial vehicles. They would be of great use to his purposes, especially since as he knew, they could be used to travel freely between the Three Lokas—Swarga, Prithvi and Naraka. Imagine how convenient it would be to fly from Heaven to Earth to Hell and back again whenever he pleased. He mused on the possibility of asking for the chariots outright, then dismissed the idea with reluctance. There were far larger stakes involved here. Celestial chariots would be nothing compared to what he would have access to once he succeeded in playing his role in this great game.

"We know you are somehow repeating this day over and over again, causing events to reset themselves each morning." Balarama jumped down from the chariot, his heavy feet sinking into the soft loamy soil. He strode towards Jarasandha, his mace in his hands, thumping the bulb into his own palm to produce an ominous smacking sound. "We will not tolerate it any longer. You will make it stop and stop right now!"

Jarasandha smiled. "That is impossible. What you suggest, it cannot be done!"

Balarama turned to Krishna, who was approaching with greater care, adjusting his anga-vastra delicately. "You see, bhraatr? I told you he would not admit it readily. Let me smack him about a few times and we will have his confession."

Krishna raised his hand. Balarama subsided, muttering something under his breath, but moving aside and lowering the mace. Krishna strode forward.

“Jara,” he said. “I address you now not as an enemy but as a fellow Sura. After all, ultimately, we are of the same race, are we not?”

Jarasandha tensed at Krishna’s words. He felt every fiber of his being scream in protest and anguish. “A fellow Sura? Is that what you consider me?” He wanted to roar with fury, to leap at Krishna and pound his head to bloody pulp. But he settled for a piercing glare. “You can take your Sura race and go back to Swarga, Deva. I am an Asura and proud to be one.”

Krishna smiled sadly. “I know things have not been peaceable between our kinds for a very long time.”

Jarasandha snorted. “Since before time itself began, in the present way of reckoning. Our enmity is as old as the Universe itself, since the dawn of the first Day of Brahma.”

He was referring to the endless cycle of Creation and UnCreation, marked by Days of Brahma, each lasting Four Ages, each Age lasting for many millennia.

“This is true,” Krishna admitted. “Ever since the Lords of Creation existed, we have been in conflict. Yet today you play here with forces that endanger us all. That threaten the very fabric of existence. You are playing with Time and Space, Jarasandha. By going back in Time and causing this day to somehow repeat itself over and over, you might cause an imbalance in the scales of brahman itself. That would be perilous for all races, all kinds of beings!”

Jarasandha chuckled very softly, mildly. Almost politely. “I have already told your brother...” he corrected himself, using the proper Sanskrit pronunciation, “...your bhraatr...that what he and now you suggest I am doing is impossible. Nobody can do it. The Lord of Time and Space, Kala-Bhairav, would not permit such flagrant violation of the laws of existence. It would violate the law of Causality itself. And without Causality, there

can be no birth and life and death, no growth, no destruction, no Beginning and End, only chaos and nothingness eternally. As there once was..." he reminded Krishna, scratching his own cheek with one sharp taloned fingernail.

"And will be again," Krishna admitted. "For Creation itself is but a breath-space between death and Re-Death. But we cannot deny what is already occurring. I do not claim to understand how you are doing it or why Lord Kala permits it, but the fact remains that this is Tuesday yet again, one in a succession of Tuesdays on which the same events repeat themselves again and again, without ending. And I know that you must be causing this to occur. So do not deny it."

Jarasandha smiled. "Why should I deny it? I am causing it. But what I am causing is not what you believe I am causing."

15

“I have no objection to admitting to what I actually do or have done,” Jarasandha said proudly. “I simply do not wish to be accused of things for which I am not responsible.”

Balarama stepped forward, unable to contain himself any longer, and pointed the mace at Jarasandha. “So then you deny causing Tuesday to repeat itself, you liar?”

Krishna started to raise his hand to restrain Balarama but Jarasandha answered anyway.

“Yes, Bhraatr Balarama, I deny it because that is not what is happening here at all. This is not the same Tuesday repeating itself as you believe. It is a succession of different Tuesdays occurring at the same time, in different variations of Prithvi-loka.”

Krishna and Balarama was silent. Balarama lowered his mace, then shut his mouth.

Jarasandha smiled. The light of the setting sun was soft upon his perfectly balanced features. So exactly proportionate were both sides of his face and body that you could count the hairs on his lashes on one eye and they would correspond precisely to the number of hairs on the other eye. If one lash fell from this eye, one would fall from the other—or, if it pleased him, the fallen lash would grow back in order to maintain the Balance. Immaculate matching, at all times, in every single respect.

“I see I have your attention now.” He gestured at the battlefield. “You have been through this battle so many days already. Surely each day you noticed some subtle differences? Perhaps not so subtle at times? Mayhap a person

who said something different, or acted differently, or a different person did what another had done the day before? Surely each day was not exactly the same?"

Krishna and Balarama exchanged a glance.

"You need not answer," Jarasandha went on. "I know it to be so. I have noted it myself, even though my exposure is much more limited than your's, yet there are any number of tiny details that differ." He gestured at his own face and body. "As you may be aware, the idea of matching proportions is one that appeals greatly to me because of what I am. The fact is that no two Tuesdays we have experienced have been exactly the same."

Krishna nodded, then said calmly, "Assume it to be so. What then does it mean? What is it you have done here?"

Jarasandha chuckled. "Done? No, my dear flute-player. *Doing!* I am doing it even now as we speak. I am preventing you from continuing with your real work upon this mortal realm, by delaying you in this endless game of repetition."

Krishna's face clouded over, a trace of deep anger manifesting itself. "I did suspect that this was a diversion, not the real assault."

Jarasandha wagged a finger. "Your suspicion was right."

Krishna looked around, thinking. "And this is not the same day repeating. It is a succession of different Tuesdays played out on different worlds, each only slightly differing from the one before it, a series of infinite Prithvi-lokas, mortal realms, all marginally different from each other?"

Jarasandha nodded. "We are not traveling back in time each morning, as you assumed. That would be impossible. You should know that by now,

bhraatr Balarama,” he called out with an exaggerated raising of his tone, “time travel cannot be done, by anyone. For each time we attempt to travel back to a certain moment in time, we alter that timeline irreparably, thereby splitting it off into a different future. By going back in time, I would only repeat the same day over and over again, each time leading to different outcomes.”

“Isn’t that what you just said you were doing, you stupid asura?” Balarama sputtered.

“No, bhraatr Balarama,” Jarasandha went on. “I am forcing the three of us to travel through the Vortal to alternate versions of our world, to relive a succession of Tuesdays in each alternate world, going through similar but not exactly the same events each time, while in our actual world—the original world in which we were waging war against one another...”

“...time marches on, continuing in our absence,” Krishna said, “It is as if we disappeared from that world, traveling to other alternate worlds, while that world moved forward in time.”

Balarama shook his head. “But if these are only alternate worlds,” he gestured around them, “then why is it always Tuesday each time we awaken?”

Jarasandha looked at Krishna, smiling.

Krishna answered: “Because that is how he has set up the Vortals. He has set them to trip at a precise moment in time, taking us back to the morning of the same Tuesday in each new alternate world.”

Balarama scratched his back with the mace. “So then we *are* traveling in time?”

“Not really. Traveling in time would imply that we were going back and forth on the same timeline, like moving to and fro on the exact same road. This is slipping between worlds at different times. So yes, it is like time-traveling but each time we do so, we change the world simply by the act of coming *into* that world, and thereby change its future, splitting it away from the original world, our world.”

Balarama looked at his mace as if he wished he were wielding it now instead of standing around discussing such things. “I shall take your word for it, bhraatr. So this is not our world at all? And these are not really Jarasandha’s armies we destroyed today? Again,” he added emphatically.

“Yes,” Krishna replied. “We are fighting and destroying alternate versions of his armies in each alternate world, protecting alternate Mathuras each time. While our own Mathura in our own world remains unattended, undefended...but against *what*? If this is the distraction then there must be a real menace threatening our people. What is that?”

Jarasandha chuckled. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Krishna grasped hold of Jarasandha unexpectedly. He held the asura lord by his throat, lifting him a yard above ground. Slight and slender though he seemed, Krishna’s strength was superhuman. Perhaps because of that, he rarely used his strength, unlike Balarama who was happy to demonstrate it at every opportunity.

“Answer me,” Krishna said. “What is your ultimate goal in playing out this elaborate charade? By causing us to slip through these Vortals each day, forcing us to fight the same battle over and over, what is it you seek to ensure? Speak!”

Jarasandha’s eyes glazed over momentarily as Krishna’s fist choked him but he made no attempt to respond.

“Answer me, Jarasandha!”

Jarasandha’s tongue flickered out, its twin tips diverging to either side of his mouth, licking at the corners. “Kill me and you will never know.”

Krishna held him up for another moment, his eyes dark. Balarama saw thunderclouds amass within Krishna’s eyes, lightning flicker in his pupils, and swallowed. Even he was a little afraid of his brother’s fury.

But Krishna’s anger subsided, brought under control once more. For his superhuman strength was balanced by his superhuman self-control. That was why he was a master of dharma. Krishna let Jarasandha drop to the ground. The Magadhan clutched his throat and rubbed it a few times but was otherwise unharmed. He grinned at Krishna as he turned and started to walk away.

“Govinda,” Jarasandha said.

Krishna stopped, his back to Jarasandha, his face still tight with suppressed fury.

“You wish to know my ultimate goal? It’s quite simple. To slaughter all the people under your protection...merely *because* they are under *your* protection! For no other reason than that. I do not seek to harm you directly—although if that occurs, I would not mind it. I seek to harm those you protect. For that would be the greatest triumph. To destroy your flock while the cowherd watches helplessly.”

Balarama hefted his mace but a look from Krishna made him lower it again. He settled for a glare at Jarasandha. The brothers began walking to their chariots.

Jarasandha called out one last challenge as they boarded the celestial vehicles and they began to rise.

“And in the end, I shall achieve my goal,” Jarasandha said. “Do you hear me? I shall win in the end, Krishna! Nothing you do shall prevent that from coming to pass!”

The chariots sped away, leaving him laughing to himself in the light of the setting sun.

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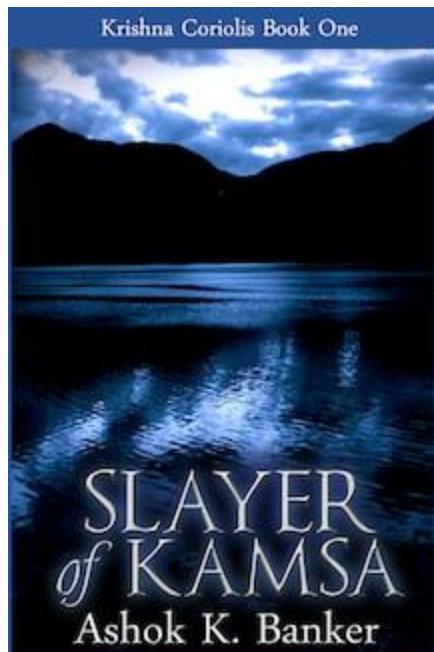
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Violating the peace accord sealed by his father, King Ugrasena's renegade son Prince Kamsa embarks on a rampage of destruction...until he meets his nemesis King Vasudeva who is supernaturally immune to any attack from Kamsa! So Kamsa allies with the evil Jarasandha, emperor of Magadha, to awaken his own demoniac powers. Returning to Mathura as a rakshasa in human form, Kamsa wrests control by force, imprisoning his new brother-in-law Vasudeva and wife because of the prophecy that foretells that their Eighth Child will be his destruction. But even in the womb, the unborn Krishna uses powerful magic to cast a spell across the entire kingdom on the night of his own birth! Now, the stage is set for the epic clash

*of the child-god and the terrible forces of evil with the
birth of Krishna...Slayer of Kamsa!*

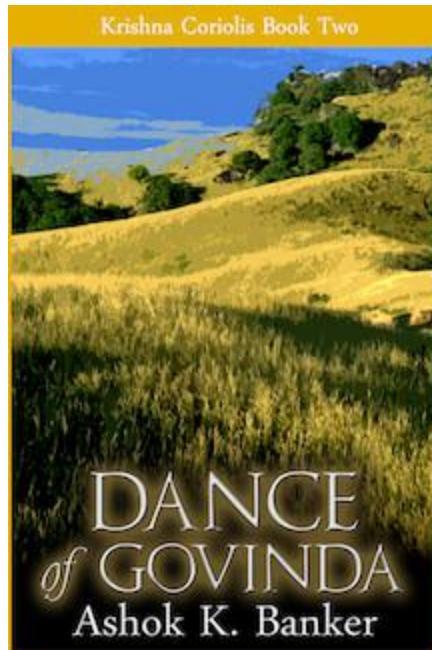
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The prophesied Slayer of Kamsa has been born and smuggled out of Mathura in the dead of night. Kamsa finds that his nephew has escaped and flies into a demoniac rage. Meanwhile, Jarasandha of Magadha arrives in Mathura with his coterie of powerful supporters to ensure that Kamsa stays loyal to him.

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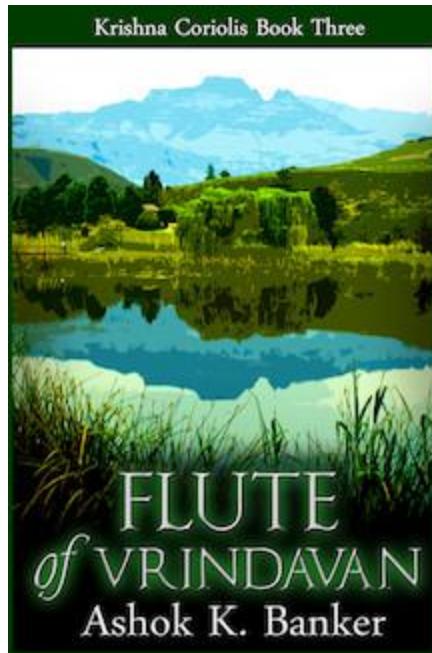
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Infant Krishna and his half-brother Balarama are the most mischievous children in all of Gokuldham, getting up to all sorts of pranks, raiding neighbours' dahi handis and letting the calves run free. But disciplining God Incarnate is no easy task. It slowly dawns on Mother Yashoda that the babe she is trying to protect is in fact the protector of the entire world!

As Krishna survives one horrific asura attack after the other, she comes to terms with the true identity of her adopted son. Meanwhile, Kamsa despatches a team of otherworldly assassins to slay his nemesis. Harried by Kamsa's forces, Krishna's adoptive father, the peace-loving Nanda Maharaja, is forced to lead his people into exile. They find safe haven in idyllic

*Vrindavan. But even in this paradise, deadly demons
lurk...*

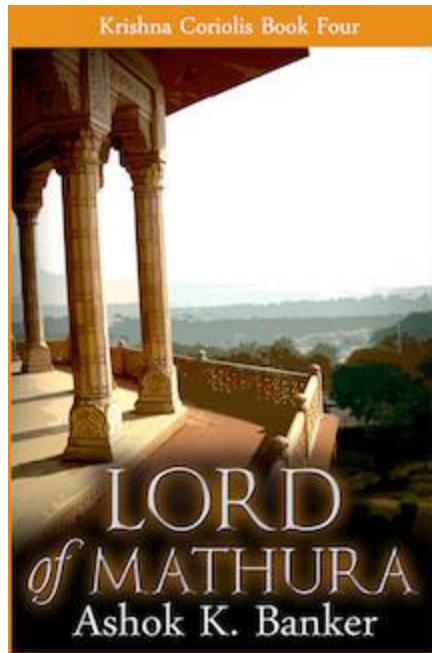
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As Krishna grows into youthful manhood, Kamsa grows ever more desperate to kill his nemesis. With Jarasandha's aid, the rakshasa-king launches a relentless campaign of demonic assault against Krishna—and his fellow Vrishnis. Young gopi Radha learns to her sadness that Krishna cannot return her love when he has the fate of all humankind in his hands. Finally the day of the prophecy arrives and the stage is set for the final showdown between Krishna the boy-god and Kamsa, lord of Mathura.

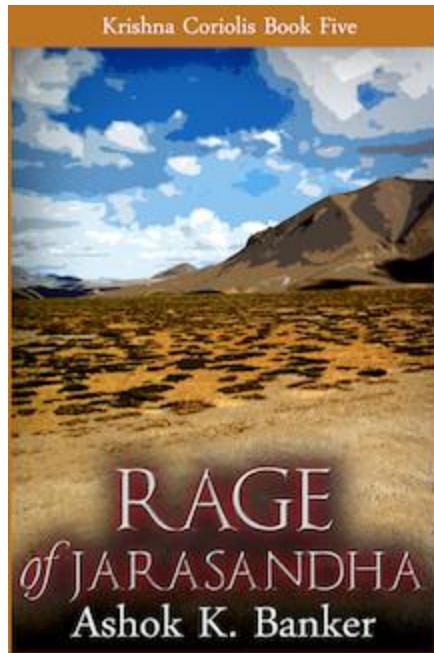
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Kamsa the Usurper has been slain. Krishna has fulfilled the prophecy. But barely has he restored old King Ugrasena to the throne of Mathura when a new threat rears its head. Jarasandha of Magadha encircles Mathura with a great army. Even if Krishna and Balarama fight like superheroes, they cannot possibly save the citizens of Mathura. Or can they? The Krishna Coriolis series ramps up to an epic new level of thrills and excitement in this 5th and most exciting installment of the bestselling series.

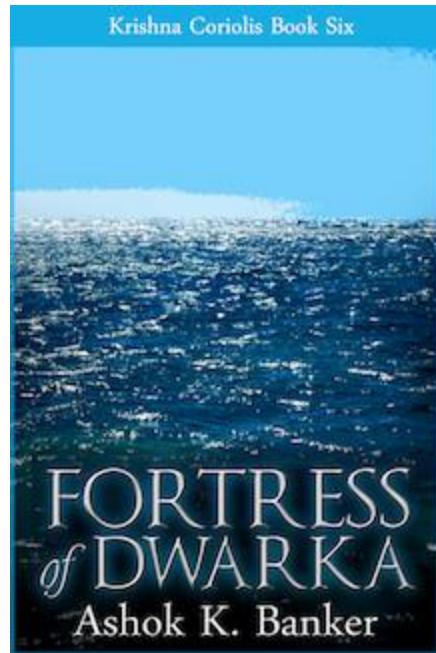
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Jarasandha's relentless attacks threaten Mathura's very existence. With the aid of a talented young architect Krishna builds a great fortress-city in the middle of the ocean and transports the entire population of Mathura in the blink of an eye. Finally, the Yadavas enjoy an era of peace. But a new challenge beckons: Krishna's eternal soul-mate has taken birth on the mortal plane to be with him. No sooner has Krishna found her than he finds that she is being used as bait in a deadly trap.

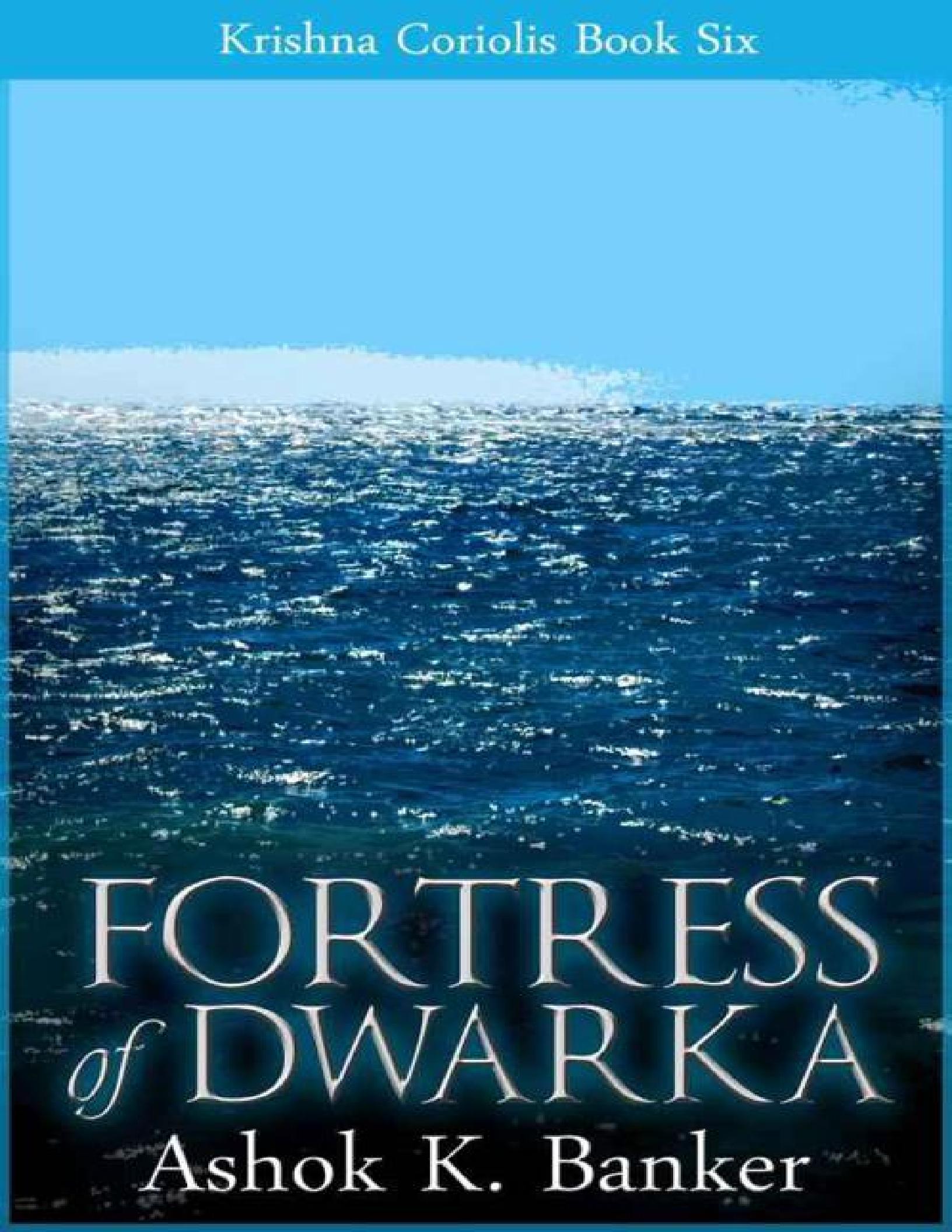
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Krishna Coriolis Book Six

The background of the book cover features a wide expanse of dark blue ocean with white-capped waves, stretching towards a bright, featureless horizon under a clear, pale sky.

FORTRESS *of* DWARKA

Ashok K. Bunker

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FORTRESS OF DWARKA

Ashok K. Banker

KRISHNA CORIOLIS
Book 6



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Dedication

*For Biki and Bithika:
My Radha and my Rukmini.*

*For Yashka and Ayush Yoda:
My Yashoda.*

*All you faithful readers
who understand
that these tales
are not about being Hindu
or even about being Indian.
They're simply about being.*

*In that spirit,
I dedicate this *gita-govinda*
to the krishnachild in all of us.
For, under these countless
separate skins, there beats
a single eternal heart.*

Epigraph

	yadrcchaya copapannah	
	svarga-dvaram apavrtam	
	sukhinah ksatriya partha	
	labhante yuddham idrsam	

*Blessed are the warriors
Who are chosen to fight justly;
For the doors to heaven
Shall be opened unto them.*

KAAND 1

1

From his high elevated seat, Jarasandha watched with arched eyebrows as Balarama wreaked havoc in the Magadhan ranks. The island that was Mathura city was surrounded by an ocean of Magadhan cavalry, foot-soldiers, chariots and elephants—arrayed for yojanas in every direction, covering the earth like nothing less than a great sea of violence waiting to be unleashed. In comparison with this great force, what were two men—young boys at that, merely fifteen years of age apiece? And yet, those two striplings were causing epic destruction to his forces.

The brother of Krishna struck down elephants like an elephant itself might strike down standing weeds. Each time Balarama leaped and spun in the air, leaping from elephant to elephant as he wreaked destruction, dozens of elephants died. As for their mahouts, they died with such ease and frequency that it was startling to view on such a scale. Jarasandha watched with reluctant admiration.

From his vantage point, it appeared as if the charging brigade of elephants had overwhelmed the brothers, engulfing them in a river of grey-black hastipaka rippling along. The flanks of the frontlines of the charge had bypassed the brothers, overshot them by a hundred yards or so before their mahouts could turn them around and coax them back into the fray. This meant that the river was turning into a swirling whirlpool of elephants with the two brothers at the epicenter. Balarama was leaping and dancing and spinning so rapidly, he was never in one spot for long. Krishna on the other hand, was still standing where he had been before the elephants charged. How was he still able to withstand such an onslaught? Why had he not yet been crushed to fluid pulp?

Then the ranks parted and the dust clouds cleared for a brief moment, and Jarasandha started at what he saw.

Krishna had transformed into his true form.

The being that stood on that battlefield was no longer merely the young dark-skinned foster son of Yashoda and Nanda, aged fifteen and ripe in his youth and mischievous beauty.

He was the four-armed supreme One himself. Black as a monsoon cloud. Clad in yellow silk anga-vastra and dhoti. Eyes as pink as lotus petals. Lips as red as roses. Four arms longer than any mortal's could be. Throat as intricately formed and detailed as a conch shell with its overlapping layers. His torso and abdomen gleaming with layers of taut muscles, offset by wide hips and strong loins over powerful thighs and trunk-like legs. His limbs were adorned with precious bracelets and earrings, necklaces, sacred thread and belt, topped off by a crown on his scalp. On his chest was the sacred Kaustabha tuft within which was embedded the Kaustabha jewel, surrounded by a garland of wild forest flowers.

Jarasandha glimpsed this for only an instant and then his vision turned dark and forbidding. That beautiful vision of Krishna turned into a great and powerful force of nature, raging and roiling like a thunderstorm at sea. He saw lightning flash within those great pink eyes, and as the delicate lips parted, they revealed a world of pain and terror that awaited Jarasandha and his asura allies. It was a mind-numbing sight.

Then the vision was obscured by a dust cloud and the pressing ranks of the Magadhan forces as they continued to harry the brothers. Jarasandha fell back in his elevated seat, suddenly perspiring and breathless as if he had fought a battle himself.

Magnificent as Balarama's fighting was, and terrible as his toll of death mounted up steadily, it was nothing compared to what Krishna was about to bring down on Jarasandha's army.

Using all four hands, the Lord of Vaikunta released four separate weapons at once:

The Saranga bow occupied only one hand because the bow was capable of launching missiles without needing to be pulled. The missile it launched was a thing that could hardly be called an arrow for it more closely resembled a wave of fire.

The chakra named Sudarshana spun off the finger of another hand, racing to do its given task.

A conch shell sat in a third hand, held to Krishna's blood-red lips as he prepared to blow it.

A lotus flower was in the fourth hand and at a flick of his finger, it too went flying through the air into the dust of the elephant charge.

Then Krishna blew his conch.

Jarasandha watched in disbelief as Krishna blew his conch. From his raised platform, some ten yards high, he could not see as well as Daruka could see from the chariot hovering above, but he still had a view of Krishna amid the raging river of elephants. Balarama continued to dance and spin and smash his mace with devastating efficiency, killing hundreds of elephants and breaking the back of the attack. But Krishna had only stood still for the first several moments of the charge, apparently doing nothing and Jarasandha knew that he could not simply remain standing thus for long. The question was, how did Krishna intend to fight—he needed to see and know that in order to launch his counter-attack. He had any number of options available: over five million in fact. But he could not simply throw his armies at the enemy without knowing their capability and strategy.

Now, his question was answered.

The figure of Krishna appeared to blur in Jarasandha's view. He squinted and rubbed his eyes and tilted his head this way and that, trying to see more clearly. At first he assumed it was the dust raised by the charging elephants but even when the dust cleared in brief moments, he could still not view Krishna himself clearly. Only a moment earlier he had been able to make out that handsome dark face, creased in what appeared to be a dark scowl. Jarasandha had smiled to see that scowl for it meant that Krishna was either concerned or angry; either was to be desired in an enemy. It was only when an enemy displayed utter calm that he had reason to be worried.

The blur that was Krishna appeared to be doing something. He appeared to be moving both arms—except that he seemed to have four arms, not two. Jarasandha scowled and cursed, wishing he could see better. Then he saw the gleam of polished metal and was alert again. Krishna was about to unleash some manner of weapon. He frowned when he caught the glint of gold off the weapons in the enemy's hands. That could only mean gold or

brass. Neither were fit materials to be used in the making of weaponry; they were much too soft. Why would Krishna bother with such devices? Unless they were show-piece weapons as some kings used, merely to play the part of waging war while their soldiers did the actual fighting. Arrows that could barely pierce a breast-bone or cut flesh, javelins that were so light they bounced off a man's skull like a reed stick.

Surely Krishna could not be using such items?

Then again, perhaps Jarasandha had over-estimated him after all. Maybe Krishna was a better lover and fighter, as the rumors went. And Balarama was the real fighter. Maybe his energies were spent and all he intended to do now was put up a show for the watching Mathuran army to boost their morale.

If that was the case, then he would die on this field today.

Jarasandha grinned and was about to issue an order to his aides when suddenly everything changed.

Across the field, he saw the gleam of gold flash across the brigade of charging elephants. Krishna had unleashed his weapons, showpieces or not.

And then the weapons struck. And Jarasandha stopped grinning.

They were not showpieces.

They were dev-astras.

2

The missile shaped like a wave of fire sprang from the bow Saranga at supersonic speed. So tremendous was the sound of its passing over the heads of the assembled ranks of Jarasandha's soldiers that it was akin to a physical blow. The boom produced by its passing deafened many at once, their eardrums buffeted beyond endurance by the sonic implosion. They toppled off their horses and elephants and chariots, many falling to the ground, clapping their hands to their bleeding ears. The missile itself struck the twelfth akshohini of the army of Magadha, impacting with the force of a wave but unlike a wave, it did not simply batter and splash. It disintegrated flesh and bone and blood to gritty remains. So intense was the heat it produced—for it was the heat of tapas itself—that it incinerated living bodies, armor and apparel to crumbling ash on contact. The lives of lakhs of soldiers, horses and elephants were extinguished instantly. Mere skeletons were left behind, surrounded by a swirling typhoon of fire and ash.

The Sudarshana chakra flew in another direction, traveling across the breach and over Mathura city. The citizens stared up as the disk, brighter than the sun at noonday, flashed overhead, spinning at unimaginable speed. It swooped down with terrifying speed, attacking the Magadhan forces on the far side of the city. It struck with devastating impact, like a blade on a grinding wheel pressed to a slab of meat. Bodies were cleaved so cleanly in half, not one drop of blood spilled from the chopped halves to the ground; the two halves simply collapsed in a dead heap. Like the first devastra, Sudarshana too did not distinguish between man and beast, or between flesh and armor, steel and bone. It flashed across the battlefield like a smooth flat rock tossed sideways over a placid lake, severing tens of thousands of lives in a single passing.

The third weapon was the lotus flower. What harm could a mere lotus flower do? Yet this was no ordinary lotus flower. It was the very lotus held by Vishnu himself, plucked by his lady Sri's own hands from the oceanic pool in which Anantha lay coiled eternally. Over millennia Anantha's venom had infused the lotus in that pond with such a high level of toxicity, the mere fragrance could kill any living creature. Because Vishnu like all devas was not affected by mortally threatening poisons or weapons, he could inhale its sweet fragrance with impunity. Indeed, only he or devas like himself could even scent its fragrance. But to the soldiers of the Magadhan army and the beasts that bore them and fought for them, the fragrance was as toxic as the most concentrated venom ever drawn. The lotus flower passed across a section of the great army, spreading its fragrance across the assembled lines. And as it passed by, tens of thousands dropped like flies whose wings had burned off.

The fourth and final weapon was the conch shell. Ordinarily it did serve the purpose of alerting the assembled armies on the battlefield that the day's warring had commenced—or ended. But when blown by its master in a certain way, it could produce a very different sound and result. Krishna blew into the conch shell in that certain way now, as the first three weapons spread their waves of devastation across the field. The sound produced by his blowing was nothing like the loud resonating trumpeting that it usually made.

This was a subsonic scream so low-pitched, it vibrated at the same frequency as the molecules in the body of a living being...and then stopped. When it stopped, which was when Krishna stopped blowing it, of course, all those molecules simply stopped as well. He blew it outwards, aiming the sound in the opposite direction to the breach and Mathura city on his right hand, to ensure that no friendly soldiers or citizens could come to harm.

The effect was even more devastating than the slaughter of the first three astras. The cessation of the conch shell sound stopped the hearts, brains, blood flow and every cell in every living body. The result was that the bodies at whom it was directed, regardless of their clothes, armor or other accessories, crumpled inwards like thin wooden boards. Bone structures, flesh, organs...everything was pushed inwards upon itself, forced into destruction by the cessation of the natural motion of their molecules. The tissue itself collapsed

When each weapon had completed its task in one cardinal direction, it returned instantly to its owner. Even as he blew the conch shell with one hand, the weapons had already returned to the other three hands of Vishnu.

And when all four had completed their tasks, he deployed them again. And again. And again.

3

In the end, the only warriors left standing were Jarasandha and the last remnants of his Mohini Fauj. Seeing the utter devastation wrought by Krishna and Balarama he had descended quickly from his raised viewing platform, boarded his chariot and started to flee the battlefield. Now, he was a mile or so and gaining speed. And Balarama was giving chase.

Even the fastest horses in the world were no match for the celestial chariot. Balarama's vaahan swooped low over Jarasandha's contingent, startling his horses into bucking and drawing the nervous shrieks of the Hijras. The horse team, already confused and maddened by the sight and scent of so much death and struggling to avoid the many obstacles posed by carcasses and torn remnants of armor and weaponry, caught its feet on something and tumbled. The chariot rose bodily in the air and broke free of the reins and horses. As the horses themselves tumbled, breaking legs and screaming pitifully, the chariot somersaulted and struck the ground, bouncing once, then again, before coming to a halt in upright position once more, a shattered wreck with a shaken yet largely unharmed Jarasandha huddled in the well.

Balarama landed his chariot beside the wreck of Jarasandha's chariot, leaping to ground while his vehicle was still several yards in the air. The Mohini Fauj, reduced by now to barely a hundred of the Emperor's immediate bodyguards, rushed forward with pitiful gallantry. Balarama raised his mace and swung it in a great swinging arc, letting his body swirl with the force of the blow, like a man about to release an iron ball held by a long chain. Instead of releasing the mace, he continued to swing around, reaping Hijras like cornstalks. In moments, the entire Mohini Guard lay dead on the grassy knoll. He took another moment to smash the shrieking horses out of their misery, then he strode over to the well of the shattered chariot with Magadhan markings.

Jarasandha crouched in the well of the broken chariot, staring numbly into the distance. He did not even look up as Balarama approached.

Balarama reached forward and grasped Jarasandha by the back of his neck, the way a lion seizes another lion. He lifted him up easily, despite the difference in their age and sizes. Jarasandha hung absurdly from Balarama's grasp, like some pitiful puppy helpless and unable to fight back.

"Magadhan," Sankarshan said softly. "Where did you think you would run to? Even if it was the ends of the earth, we would find you. Don't you understand that by now?"

A faint disturbance in the air was the only indication of the arrival of the second celestial chariot. It descended smoothly and silently on the knoll beside Balarama's own chariot. Krishna descended, tucking away his weapons. As he stepped towards Jarasandha, the Magadhan had a brief glimpse of the being he truly was...then in place of that being, he saw the boy Krishna with two slender arms and a normal human body, approaching him with a grim look on his youthful face.

"Shall I kill him here, bhraatr, or shall we do it before the people of Mathura?"

Krishna replied. "We shall not kill him at all."

Balarama's head jerked. "What?"

“Release him.”

Balarama stared at his brother then turned back to Jarasandha, dangling from Balarama’s left hand. The Magadhan was tall enough that his knees dragged limply on the grass but he made no move to try to break free of Balarama’s grasp. “We cannot release him. We must kill him. We have the right under kshatriya dharma.”

“Kshatriya dharma forbids an honorable warrior from killing a helpless one.”

Balarama frowned. “He is not helpless. He is an asura in mortal guise. He is capable of fighting both of us at once and giving us a little trouble before we despatch him. I would call that a worthy adversary, not a helpless one. The rules of war fully justify us killing him when we get the chance, right? Well, this is our chance.”

“No, bhaiya, we shall release him. Let him go.”

Balarama still remained adamant. “Do you know what he meant to do? He brought an army of 23 akshohini to destroy Mathura and wipe out the Yadava race from the world. Never before has he invaded any nation with such a huge force. His intention here was not to conquer or merely subjugate, it was to eliminate. To wipe us out of existence.”

“And instead, we wiped his army of 23 akshohini out of existence.” Krishna’s voice was calm. “They pose no further threat to us or any other nation of the world.”

“Even so, he is still alive!” Balarama said. “And he remains the greatest threat Mathura has ever faced.”

“That is why he must remain alive,” Krishna said.

“That makes no sense, bhraatr. If he stays alive he could well raise another army. And return to try to do again what he tried today. Don’t be fooled by the way he looks now,” Balarama shook the Magadhan viciously, making Jarasandha’s limp body flipflop absurdly. “He is in shock, terrified beyond words of us now, but in time he will regain his hatred and lust for vengeance and raise a new army to invade us.”

“Who will follow him into battle?” Krishna asked. “His entire power and domination was due to his great army and superior fighting power. Now he has nothing. By leaving him alive, he remains humiliated, a perpetual reminder to our enemies of the might and power of the Yadava nation. Wherever he goes, whatever he does—or tries to do, people will laugh at him openly or snigger behind his back and remind each other that we cared so little about him that we let him live after wiping out his army. No soldier will respect him anymore. Even his slaves will feel superior to him.”

Balarama stared at Krishna for a moment. He absorbed the implications of his brother’s words. Then slowly, he turned and looked at Jarasandha. The Magadhan’s eyes were closed but there was dampness around the dark thickly lashed eyes. He was crying.

Balarama opened his fist. Jarasandha dropped to the grassy knoll like a sack of vegetables and lay sprawled there on his face. Balarama wiped his

hand on his anga-vastra, even though the anga-vastra was more bloodied and filthy with offal than the hand that had clutched Jarasandha. “You are right, bhraatr,” he said. “After such a defeat, to be allowed to live is a far greater loss than to be killed. He will never survive such a humiliation.” He chuckled. “Besides, his enemies will now be baying for blood, eager to take revenge on him for all the abuse he has meted out over the years. They will fall on him like crocodiles on a wounded buffalo.”

Balarama kicked Jarasandha on the softest part of his rear side. “Get up! Rise, Magadhan and leave this kingdom. Never show your face anywhere near Mathura or to any Yadava for as long as you remain alive. On pain of death. Come on! Get going!”

He had to kick the fallen Emperor a few more times before the broken wreck that was now Jarasandha finally managed to get to its feet and stumble away. He shambled over the land strewn with the remnants of his once-great army and it was difficult to believe that this broken being that stumbled into the horizon had until this morning been the most feared conqueror in the known world.

4

Jarasandha did not laugh out loud in typically villainous fashion. He was not Kamsa. Even in this moment of utter desolation, he still retained his famous dignity and gentlemanly composure. He merely chuckled. Yet so unexpected was that action that it filled the quiet tent, silencing every last one of the kings present. He threw the second boot on the ground and grinned up at them.

“You fools. You simple-brained dolts. You idiots without a grain of sense in all your collective skulls.”

They looked at him. Some looked shocked. Others, resigned and accustomed to Jarasandha’s arrogance. Most seemed mildly curious in the manner of men who were viewing a person on the verge of a complete breakdown, prepared for any form of behavior or outburst.

Jarasandha shook his head. “You still do not understand, do you? How could you? That’s why you’re merely kings and I am emperor. Emperor of Magadha, lord of the known world. Never forget that.”

They tried to be gentle. “Jara, you achieved more than any ruler in the history of the world. Why, if there were lands and territories worth claiming beyond the Kush ranges you would surely have conquered them as well. You were master of the civilized world. Nobody disputes that. But no ruler can reign forever. That is a fact of life. Your reign is ended. Live out your days peaceably. None of us will ever make a move against you.”

“Of course you won’t,” Jara said. “A toothless predator is to be pitied, not killed. That is how you can feel magnanimous and show the world what loyal friends and allies you were to the end!”

They did not respond to that allegation, not even to dispute or deny it. The implication was obvious: they did not dispute it at all.

“But you are all wrong in your assumption. My time isn’t over. It has only just reached its apogee. I am at the peak of my achievement. I am close to being God Incarnate upon the mortal realm. Soon, nobody will stand in my way. I will rule forever. Eternally.”

They exchanged uneasy glances now. This was the talk of a madman, not a king on the eve of a bitter defeat. Perhaps Jarasandha had gone completely over the edge, losing all touch with reality.

He grinned at their expressions. “Of course you don’t know what I’m talking about. How could you? You’re merely pawns in the great game of which I am master and commander. You are only permitted to know what you need to know. Nothing more or less. Therefore all you see is Jarasandha, Emperor of Magadha, defeated yet spared by Krishna-Balarama, his vast armies reduced to corpse-flesh, food for vultures and crows and maggots. You see only the apparent reality of the day, not the greater picture that transcends it.”

They shook their heads sadly. “Nothing transcends death, Jara. Your armies are dead on that field. You can never raise a force that great even in a hundred years. Nobody will ever follow you into battle again. Your very survival is an affront to kshatriya dharma.”

Jarasandha chuckled. “That is where you are wrong. There is a force that transcends death. You all know of it. Can any one of you name it?”

They looked at each other now, their eyes speaking the message they did not wish to speak aloud. *He's lost it, he's gone insane, he's talking utter dribble.*

“Time, you fools. Kaal! The only force in the universe that is greater than death itself. Kaal controls the Wheel of Creation, the Becoming and Unbecoming. The cycle of birth and death, rebirth and moksha... everything turns according to the Wheel of Time. Turn back the Wheel and you defeat Death itself. Don't you see? That's all it takes!”

They began to shuffle towards the exit, making noises of commiseration, pretending to have business elsewhere.

“Go then,” he said disdainfully. “Leave me. I will remember that you did not even have the gumption to stay and hear me out afterwards. I will remember it when I return.”

“Return from where?” one asked curiously as he was about to leave.
“From Magadha?”

Jarasandha laughed. “No, you fool. Haven't you heard anything I said? When I return from Mathura, as lord of the Yadava nation, bearing the spoils of war.”

This made the last of the kings even more eager to leave. Jarasandha chuckled as he watched them sidle out, avoiding meeting his eyes as they bade him goodbye, most of them assuming it would be the last they ever saw of him.

In another moment, the tent was empty except for Jarasandha himself. He sat for a while as the shadows grew longer and dusk fell. The battle had ended in mid-afternoon. Less than a day to wipe out 23 akshohini. Those Yadava brothers were quite impressive, he had to admit. He replayed the day's events in his mind several times, going over tactics and strategy, remembering their counter-moves, the celestial chariots, the weapons they deployed, their unique skills and powers. Was that all they were capable of? No, there would be more. Perhaps even infinite ways to destroy his forces. What did it matter? In the end, Mathura would be his, that was all that counted.

Finally, as the crickets began to chirp noisily around the tent, he rose and prepared the potion he would require for the task at hand. It had to be mixed in a precise balance to ensure the perfect result. He sipped it delicately, feeling the exotic flavor on his twin palettes. Few people knew that he possessed two palettes, one above the other, lending him the ability to distinguish between a far wider variety of tastes than any mortal being. This particular potion tasted quite palatable, so to speak. If it wasn't so specific in its effect, he might have enjoyed quaffing it on a regular basis. But of course, that would not be possible. It could only be consumed to serve a single purpose.

He waited for the potion to take effect. It was hours past nightfall when the effect finally took over. He sensed a blurring of the tent around him, the broken artifacts and treasures, the silk cushions and drapes...and he smelled a peculiar odor, like nothing he could identify...as the air before him shimmered and warped and distorted like a reflection viewed in a warped sheet of polished metal...

And then with a quickening of his pulse and a sudden falling sensation, the Vortal opened below him, in the ground, like a doorway sunk in the carpeting of the tent. Garish red light streamed upwards from the opening, swirling and twisting like smoke.

He stepped to the edge and looked down...then dropped down into the abyss.

5

“My Lord,” Daruka said as they sped away from Jarasandha. “You seem troubled. Is there anything I can do to alleviate your anxiety?”

Krishna blinked, looking at the city looming ahead. “Yes. Take me upwards. Directly upwards.” He pointed at the sky.

Daruka obeyed. The celestial chariot swung upwards at a ninety degree angle, flying straight up to the sky above. Yet Krishna and Daruka remained standing as they were, unaffected by the vertical trajectory.

Balarama slowed his own chariot and sent a mental query to Krishna: **Bhraatr, where are you going?**

Krishna replied: **Go home to Mathura. Go through the motions of victory as usual. I shall return shortly. I need some time to think by myself.**

He added more genially: **Flute time.**

Balarama sent back the mental equivalent of a smile: :-). His chariot continued towards the city, the cheers and sounds of dhol-drums and celebrations exploding even before his vehicle began to descend.

Krishna's chariot continued upwards to a height greater than Daruka had ever seen before. When the earth was far beneath them and its details were too minute for even the sarathi's keen sight to discern, he asked his master hesitantly, "Higher, my Lord?"

Krishna smiled. "Yes, Daruka. Do not worry. We shall be able to breathe as on earth. The pushpaka will care for us. I need to get away from worldly matters for a while and recall the universe as I once knew it."

Daruka nodded, spurring the chariot on faster, their speed now so great that the very stars seemed to blur past. "I understand, Great One. If we stand too close to a tree trunk, all we see is the knot on the trunk. Sometimes one needs to see the whole forest."

Krishna smiled again. "Or the sum total of every forest that was ever created."

Daruka was silent for a while after that, trying to comprehend the concept of being able to view every forest ever created. It was too much for even his agile mind and eventually he gave up and simply admired the sight of stars blurring past, turning into streaks of light.

That is the point, good sarathi. To contemplate something so vast, one cannot understand it, merely accept its existence. Like viewing a star. Or a galaxy. Or all Creation.

Daruka marveled at his Lord's wisdom. **I understand now, my Lord.**

He breathed in deeply, wondering at the miracle of being able to breathe air in this vast emptiness. He knew there was no air beyond the reach of Mother Prithvi's grasp because air itself was created by Mother Prithvi. The silence was deafening, the epic vastness overwhelming, yet he found a strange sense of calm descending upon them as they flew on farther and farther, until, glancing back over his shoulder, he could no longer even make out the green-and-blue orb that was his home.

After the bloody and brutal battle that had raged all day, he understood why Krishna would find such a voyage soothing. He had barely been able to comprehend the scale of slaughter visited by Krishna and Balarama upon the armies of Jarasandha but the violence had been all too real and palpable. He had even found his heart crying for the unfortunate beasts—the elephants and horses—that were compelled by their human masters to participate in that orgy of violence.

As a charioteer, Daruka respected animals greatly, particularly the children of the Ashwins, the great Sky Twins from whom all horsekind were descended. They were magnificent, loyal and enduring beasts. It was a sheer tragedy to see them slaughtered in a conflict that did not directly concern them. It had made him ponder on the very nature of enslavement: for what else was the use of horses and elephants, uksan and cows, if not slavery in a sense?

At least with cows and sheep, if one was as loving as the govindas of Gokuldham, then one could claim that the animals were as well tended as the humans they served. But horses, elephants and uksan were nothing more than slaves forced to carry the burden of their human masters, or the

loads they made them carry or drag, and more often than not, those masters were nothing like the gentle govindas of Gokul. And when it came to participation in war or conflict, then their use was worse than slavery. They were merely fodder for the cruel reaping of warlords. If not inhuman, it was certainly inhumane.

And yet, if man did to man all that he did, then what were poor beautiful dumb animals? With what tongue could they protest?

In a way, Daruka was grateful that he drove a chariot without horses for Krishna. Even though, if he had been given charge of actual horses, he would have cared for them as if they were his own children. Yet this was better by far. A chariot that needed no brute force to pull it, no fear of the animals tiring or weakening, or falling ill, or breaking a leg, or being wounded in battle...Much more humane, if not more human.

He realized that the emptiness of space had achieved a certain purpose for him as well. He might never have thought such a thing through upon earth, busy with his daily routine and work. Least of all during the trauma of battle. Yet here it seemed so clear, so obvious. Perhaps that was the problem. Humans on earth, busy with their daily lives, forced to live minute by minute, day by day, struggling constantly, could hardly afford the luxury of thinking of the needs and welfare of animals! They had their own needs and welfare to think of first and by the time they were done seeing to their own needs, the day was done and it was time to lay their heads down for some much-needed rest. Perhaps someday hence, when the human race had progressed beyond needing to tend to its needs on a daily or immediate basis, there would an opportunity to realize such insights. To free animals from slavery. To learn to fend for themselves, either by using machines such as Pushpak, or more mundane equivalents. He prayed for such a day.

“We may return now, sarathi,” Krishna said from behind him. His voice sound calmer, more at ease.

“At once, sire,” Daruka said, willing the chariot to turn around. He then willed it to find its way back to earth on its own, for he could not tell which of the countless gleaming orbs in the endless night sky was Mother Earth, certainly not at this blinding speed.

“Did this respite help cool your thoughts?” Krishna’s voice asked him.

Daruka smiled. “Indeed, my Lord. It did.”

He felt Krishna smile at him. “It helped me as well. It always does. Although, this was the first time I have brought a mortal along.”

Daruka bowed his head without turning back, for a sarathi’s dharma required him never to leave his post or let his attention stray, horses or no horses. “I thank thee for the privilege, Great One.”

Krishna’s laughter rang in his mind. “It is I who should thank *thee*, good sarathi. You see, all I did was listen to you thinking. And it helped me resolve my own problem!”

And he continued laughing. Daruka joined in as well, although he did not entirely understand what Krishna meant. Then again, even if others may doubt or wonder, he knew beyond doubt that Krishna was God Incarnate. And God was entitled to His Mysterious Ways. Or, as those who loved and believed in Krishna termed it, His Lila.

6

DAWN was still some hours distant when Krishna strode through the corridors of the Palace. The palace complex was deserted except for the usual sentries. The day's victory had been celebrated by the populace until the wee hours and the feasting and dancing and celebrating had wound down only a short while earlier. He had returned with Daruka only moments ago, and had told the charioteer to go freshen up and consume some nourishment before they left again.

Daruka had been surprised by the hour. He had assumed they had been traveling for only a short while and could not understand how so many hours had passed so quickly. Krishna did not have the time to explain to him that time itself passed more quickly away from Mother Prithvi's realm, and that the speed of their passage had affected the passing of time as well. Daruka accepted the anomaly as he would learn to accept so much else concerning his Lord. It was one of the reasons Krishna had chosen him on sight without trial or test: a man who excelled at his profession and could accept the impossible without being shocked or impaired was very rare.

Now, he nodded in passing at the sentries posted at the entrance to his and Balarama's chambers and entered his brother's bedplace. Balarama lay sprawled on his large and luxuriant bed. From the remains of the feast on the table nearby, Krishna deduced that his brother had indulged his legendary appetite with great gusto and was now sleeping off the day's work. What amused him was the sight of the little wooden plow that lay on the silken cushion beside Balarama's head. Balarama still clung to that old childhood relic, battered and worn though it was after all these years. He clung to it now in sleep like a child to his favorite comforter.

Krishna bent over his brother's prone form.

"Rise and shine, bhraatr," Krishna said in his brother's ear.

Balarama did not so much as stir.

It took several more urgings, each rising steadily in volume and intensity, coupled with some firm shaking before Balarama was finally roused from his deep slumber.

"Are you sure you weren't Karna of the Kumbhas in your last life?" Krishna asked finally, as Balarama sat up, looking around with one warily open eye, rubbing the other one as he stretched out his kinks.

"Who?" Balarama asked sleepily.

"Never mind," Krishna said, throwing off the covers so Balarama could get out of bed. "Come on. I think I've understood what Jarasandha's game is and if I'm right we need to get a move on before daybreak."

Balarama muttered sleepily as he re-tied his dhoti. "So what did you find out?"

"I'm not sure yet, that's why I want to go see for myself. Come on."

Balarama struggled with his dhoti but managed to get it around himself somehow. He was still surly from being woken up early. “Why didn’t you just go and see for yourself and then come and wake me?”

Krishna looked at him balefully. “For the same reason that we were both placed upon this earth during the same lifetime, instead of just me coming down alone.”

Balarama frowned, trying to work out the mental equation while trying to knot the dhoti. “Because you can’t do anything without me?”

Krishna made a sound of amusement. “Because sometimes two can do what one cannot. Come on now.”

Balarama picked up his anga-vastra and stared at it doubtfully. It was terribly tangled up.

“Leave it,” Krishna said wearily.

Balarama tilted his head, looking at one knot on the anga-vastra as if he might have figured out how to unravel it.

“Leave it,” Krishna said firmly.

Balarama sighed and tossed the anga-vastra aside, stepping into his slippers. “It’s warm weather anyhow. Don’t really need an anga-vastra.”

He added after a moment. “I could have untied that knot in a second, but it’s so much nicer being bare-chested.”

“Keep telling yourself that, bhraatr,” Krishna said, “Someday you might start to believe it.”

Balarama punched his brother in the back. Krishna barely missed a step. Balarama shook his fist, wincing.

It was still quiet when they emerged from the palace. Daruka had kept both their chariots ready. Krishna gestured by nodding his head and Balarama got onto his own chariot, while Krishna climbed aboard his chariot. Both chariots took off, the sentries on duty and a few early risers—or late sleepers—tilting their heads to gaze skywards as the gleaming golden celestial chariots flashed away like flaring diamonds against the deep blue velvet sky.

They hovered several hundred yards above ground, about a yojana from Mathura. Up here they had a panoramic view of the flat lands around the city for several dozen yojanas. The familiar lines of Jarasandha’s armies marched on endlessly, seemingly to the horizon. They were still at rest, biding their time until dawn’s arrival and the lawful start of battle under the prevailing rules of war.

Balarama grunted. He was standing in his chariot, only a yard from Krishna’s chariot. Daruka was managing both vehicles at once and doing an excellent job of it.

“Same old same old,” Balarama said. “So is this what you wanted to show me, bhraatr? This is just business as usual.”

“No,” Krishna said. “What I wish to show you requires going through Vortals.”

Balarama raised an eyebrow. “Vortals? Plural? Isn’t it treacherous enough going through *a* Vortal, let alone more than one?”

“That it is, but it’s the only way we can find out what Jarasandha’s real game is, without living through as many Tuesdays as it might take until the event itself is sprung upon us unexpectedly.”

Balarama looked at him with one raised eyebrow and one half-closed eye. “You do know that it’s very early, I haven’t had my full quota of sleep and I can get a little cranky until I’ve eaten my first meal of the day, don’t you?”

“You’re cranky when you go an hour without eating a full meal,” Krishna said. “Do you need me to break that down into parts and explain it?”

Balarama groaned and rubbed his face. “Just the brief explanation, please. No need to make it a full lecture.”

“Jarasandha has some power over Lord Kala, most likely through a boon granted in eons past. As a result, he is able to travel through a Vortal each

day precisely at dawn, and take us also through the same Vortal at the same instant.”

Balarama’s other eyebrow rose up this time. “I thought Vortals had to be physically stepped through at the same time? Like going through a doorway. Hence the word Vortal, similar to Portal.”

Krishna nodded. “Usually, yes. But asura maya can alter those qualities. Vortals can be opened and closed, entered and exited through other means as well, if one knows how to manipulate them. And Jarasandha being a powerful asura sorcerer, has mastered the art of manipulating Vortals.”

Balarama shrugged again. “So somehow he’s able to push us through the same Vortal he goes through each night, thereby transferring us into an alternate Earth, with an alternate Mathura, and hey presto, in this alternate reality, his army is still intact, it’s still Tuesday and we have to fight the same battle all over again.”

“Exactly,” Krishna said. “And the reason he’s doing this is to conceal the real plan he has devised to destroy us.”

“Can he do that?” Balarama asked. “Destroy us, I mean?” He gestured at the 23 akshohini arrayed below them. “All that couldn’t do it. Since he hasn’t dared to fight us yet, presumably he can’t do it either. All those asura assassin and his son-in-law Kamsa, enhanced with potions or whatnot, couldn’t do it either. So what other move could he possibly have left to deploy in this game of chaukat?”

Krishna pursed his lips and looked out at the horizon. “The reason he doesn’t engage us himself, I suspect, is because we would then be entitled to kill him, as it would constitute a fair champion’s duel in battle. By avoiding confronting or challenging us personally, he makes it impossible for us to kill him by the rules of kshatriya dharma.” He turned and looked at Balarama. “What I’m saying is, I think he’s saving his own skills and strengths for a future time, holding them in abeyance in case even this plan fails for whatever reason. Like Kamsa, he knows that using himself as a weapon is the last challenge he can issue: once he throws himself at us, there’s no turning back.”

“It’s either win or lose, kill or be killed,” Balarama said, nodding thoughtfully. “I see that. Besides, if he wants this other plan to work, he needs to stay alive long enough to keep us moving through this endless succession of Vortals to relive Tuesday over and over again on alternate Earths, fighting the same battle over and over again.”

“And that’s why we need to cut his plan short. Hence the early rising, before we are switched through the Vortal yet again. So we can steal a glimpse of his real plan.”

Balarama nodded. “I see it now. All right. Let’s do it then. I’m tired of reliving the same damn day as it is. Anything will be a welcome change.”

Krishna reached out and touched Daruka’s shoulder. “Daruka, brace yourself.”

Then he gestured, voicing mantras too quietly to be heard by even the charioteer, and with a blinding flash, they were transported.

THERE was only a flash of light and Balarama felt a slight disorientation. He also smelled an odd odor, something he could not immediately place, and then he realized that they were still in the exact same spot, standing in their respective celestial chariots, hovering some seven hundred yards above ground, Daruka at the helm of Krishna's vehicle, looking out at Jarasandha's army. He glanced around.

"Everything looks just the same, bhraatr," he said. He couldn't see a single detail that differed. He glanced down at himself—his anga-vastra was still missing. Apparently, once again the knots had beaten him. Two Tuesdays to the knots, then.

Krishna was looking about too. "That it does. Daruka, take us around in a large circle. Around the flanks of the Magadhan force."

Daruka did as his master bid. The night wind was cool to begin with, but at the speed that the celestial vehicles flew, it became bracing. Due to the size of the Magadhan army, the circle they circumscribed was a very large one, covering several hundred yojanas of actual travel distance. The vaahans covered the distance in moments, which turned the bracing night wind into a chilling one.

Balarama was relieved when they drew to a halt again on Krishna's orders, stopping at a different location than the one before. He gritted his teeth to keep them from chattering and flexed his muscles to try to warm himself up.

Krishna was looking out at the distance. “I see nothing amiss. Do you, bhai?”

Balarama’s teeth almost clattered as he opened his mouth to reply. “N... no, bhraatr.”

Krishna nodded and uttered the mantras of transport again. Once again, the flash of blinding light, the brief moment of disorientation and that same strange odor, pungent and oddly familiar.

Balarama shook his head to clear it, then realized that yet again, he didn’t have his anga-vastra on. Damnation.

“All looks the same again,” Krishna said. “What say, bhai?”

“True, bhraatr,” Balarama said, almost losing his control on the second word. “Do you think we need to do another flyabout?”

“Another, bhai?” Krishna raised his eyebrow. “We haven’t done so yet. Not in *this* world, not on *this* particular Tuesday. Remember?”

“Ah,” Balarama said. “Right.”

By the time they had finished circumscribing the extent of Jarasandha’s forces this time, his teeth were chattering and there was nothing he could

do to stop them. He hugged his bare chest, unable to control himself. It didn't help much.

Krishna seemed not to notice Balarama's discomfort. And Balarama would be damned if he would admit his weakness to his younger brother.

"Nothing apparent here again," Krishna said, then shrugged. He uttered the mantras again. Again, the flash. Disorientation. Odor.

"Daruka," Krishna said again.

This time, when they finished flying around the Magadhan armies, Balarama was almost in tears. His teeth were chattering, his lips felt frozen to each other and he could barely breathe or speak.

"Should...have...brought...damn...anga-vastra," he managed to say aloud.

"Did you say anga-vastra, bhai?" Krishna asked from his chariot.

To Balarama's surprise, Krishna tossed him his anga-vastra, duly unknotted and perfectly usable. Balarama's frozen arms flailed at it and for a moment he was afraid the night wind would whip it away. But he managed to snag it with a finger and somehow wrapped it around his bare torso. He felt immediately better although it was just a long strip of linen. Somehow, it was the psychological protection more than the physical comfort, he realized.

“I forgot to mention on the previous jump,” Krishna said casually, “I found your anga-vastra in my chariot. Probably I brought it along on that particular Tuesday and unknotted it for you. In any case, you have it now. Were you feeling somewhat chilly?”

“Chilly?” Balarama thundered. “I was damn near freezing to death. What are you smiling at?”

He stopped short. Even Daruka was grinning.

Balarama put his hand on the side of the chariot well. “Don’t make me jump over there, bhraatr. What’s the joke?”

Krishna grinned at him. “The celestial chariots respond to our thoughts. You could have warmed your chariot anytime you wished, using its power to keep you from feeling the cold. You didn’t need that anga-vastra at all!”

Balarama gaped. Krishna was right of course. “But what about Daruka?” Balarama said indignantly. “He was the one driving both chariots. Why did he keep mine warm?”

Daruka bowed his head respectfully to his master’s brother. “Lord Krishna bade me not to, sire. Forgive me. He said it was because you preferred to adjust yours to suit your own needs.”

Balarama glared at Krishna who was waggling his eyebrows provocatively.

Balarama shook a fist at his brother. “Someday, I’ll prove that I’m smarter than you.”

Krishna burst out laughing.

Balarama shook his fist again, threateningly.

Krishna stifled his laughter.

“Come on, now,” Balarama said sulkily, gripping the side of the chariot well and looking down. “This is serious business. No time to be fooling around.”

Krishna’s laughter ebbed. Daruka shook his head one last time as well.

Krishna took them through the Vortal once more. And again. And again.

“How many times is it by now?” Balarama asked. “I’m getting hungry,” he added, then thought of something, “It’s been days since I last ate!”

Krishna chuckled at the time-travel joke. “Indeed it has. We lived through 6 Tuesdays in real-time. And we’ve now flashed forward through the

Vortal 5 more times. That's 11 times in all.”

“So how many more times do we intend to do this? It could be hundreds of times, thousands even, before we finally find out what Jarasandha’s game is. Maybe even then, we won’t know for sure.”

Krishna shook his head. “No, I don’t think even Jarasandha has the patience to relive the same day’s events indefinitely. There’s a limit to how many times you can watch your forces being defeated in battle over and over again. But yes, it could be a few dozen or even a hundred or more times.”

Balarama groaned and rubbed his belly. “I don’t think I can take a hundred times more. As it is, these trips are fragmenting my brain.”

“That’s all right, bhai,” Krishna said calmly, “there’s not much there to fragment.”

Balarama glared at him. “Okay, then let’s keep going and get it over with.”

They went through again. And again. And again.

On the eighteenth try, they finally found what they were seeking.

8

“I don’t see anything, bhai,” Balarama said. “It all looks the same to me.” He gestured. Jarasandha’s armies lay arrayed before them as on the previous 17 times, looking much the same.

Krishna sighed. His brother was a wonderful person but he could try Krishna’s patience at times. “Not here. I meant before we arrived here. As we were passing through the Vortal.”

Balarama frowned. “As we were passing through...? You mean during the moment when the blinding light flashes and that strange smell hits us?”

Krishna nodded patiently. “Yes.”

Balarama grinned endearingly. “I close my eyes at that moment. The flashing light started to give me a headache, and the smell...” he made a face, wrinkling his nose and twisting his mouth. “Ugh!”

Krishna sighed. “Keep them open this time.”

He uttered a mantra, reversing their passage. Again, they flashed through the Vortal, but this time headed backwards. There was no literal forward or backward movement, but the air around them changed as they ‘went through’ the Vortal. “There. Do you see it now?”

Balarama blinked. “I kept my eyes open, wide. But nothing really. Just the usual flash and stench. What is that stench anyway?”

Krishna repeated the process, going forward now, this time slowing the passage through the Vortal until they were flashing forward in increments of barely a tiny fraction of a second each. Daruka, being mortal, was affected by it, and his movements were reduced to tiny increments—at this rate, it would take him hours to move his hand or bat an eye lash. But Krishna and Balarama, being amsas, were unaffected.

“There!” Krishna said, forced to point this time. “Do you see it now?”

Balarama turned and stared. His neck stiffened. “Yes. I see it.”

In a tiny fraction of a millisecond, between the 17th Tuesday and the 18th Tuesday, there was an anomaly. To Krishna it had been evident the first time he glimpsed it. Now, with time all but slowed to a crawl, even Balarama could not miss it.

Even so, Balarama had to ask: “What is it, bhraatr?”

“It’s another Vortal,” Krishna said.

And that was what it was. A tiny flash of light, like part of a doorway about to open or close, and a section of a man’s face visible in that partly open doorway. Krishna guessed that the being in question was moving at a speed so great, he was hopping through Vortals in milliseconds, literally speeding through the moments between moments. Which begged the

question Why? Why would anyone move that quickly? The answer was obvious. To avoid being detected. And since almost no mortals in the present age possessed the ability to view Vortals at all, let alone manipulate them, that meant the being was seeking to avoid devas and asuras. Which included themselves, Krishna and Balarama. In fact, it was obviously just the two of them the being meant to avoid. Because the being was clearly serving Jarasandha's purpose by doing what he was doing.

"Who is that passing through?" Balarama asked. "And what is he doing?"

"It's Narada-muni," Krishna replied grimly. "And he's using another Vortal to create a further ripple of alternation."

Balarama turned and looked at him searchingly. "You do know that I haven't the foggiest idea what that means."

Krishna tried to explain without derailing the thought process already blazing through his mind: "It just means he's using a Vortal on a higher level to control events not only in our simple time but also to control Jarasandha's control of the Vortal."

Balarama continued staring at Krishna. "Thanks. I thought it was just a serving girl fetching me wine. Now I feel much better because I understand life, the universe and the mysteries of romance perfectly. Thank you for enlightening me so succinctly."

Krishna sighed. "Imagine a man using a secret passage to sneak around his enemies. Jarasandha is that man, we are the enemies. Jarasandha is using a

Vortal to force us into reliving the same day, fight the same battle, until we become so inured to the repetition that we fail to see what he is really planning.”

Balarama nodded. “That much I already got. But now you’re saying... what? That Narada-muni is using a secret passage, a Vortal, to manipulate Jarasandha while *Jarasandha* is manipulating *us*? ”

Krishna nodded slowly. “Very good. Exactly.”

Balarama spread his hands, his anga-vastra flapping in the night wind. “Why? Isn’t Narada-muni supposed to help us? As one of the saptarishis, the original Seven Brahmarishis created at the beginning of time, isn’t he expected to be loyal to Devas and against the Asuras?”

Krishna shook his head. “Not necessarily. You’re forgetting the fact that at the beginning of time, the Devas and Asuras were one large tribe, the Suras. We later split and were divided over various issues. Technically speaking, the Saptarishis serve us all and can do as they please, aiding whomever they wish.”

“Yes,” Balarama said, “But aren’t we the good people and the Asuras the bad ones?”

Krishna smiled sadly. “I wish it were that simple, bhai, but you know very well that there are no good or bad people, only good or bad deeds. We devas have done some terrible things as well. And the asuras have done their share of good.”

“Yes, but I mean overall,” Balarama said. “Overall, we’re on the side of good, aren’t we? If you total up good deeds, we have the winning score, don’t we?”

Krishna shrugged. “Probably, but that’s not the point here. The point is that Narada may not be acting against us. He may simply not be at liberty to explain his actions to us. Therefore he could be doing this secretly simply because it’s not necessary for us to know everything.”

Balarama opened his mouth to say something then shook his head and closed his mouth. “Suppose I agree that you’re right. Then what?”

Krishna pointed with his chin. “The question is what exactly is Narada doing? That’s what we have to find out. The answer lies here, in this brief flash of time between the 17th and 18th Tuesdays.”

Balarama looked around. “What happens here and now?”

Krishna nodded slowly, “That’s what we’re about to find out.”

He uttered the mantras and took them through to the 18th Tuesday again.

“It *still* looks the same to me,” Balarama grumbled.

“Daruka, go farther out,” Krishna said. “Take us some yojanas southward.”

Daruka did as Krishna instructed. The trip took barely a few seconds. They examined the land south of Mathura without finding anything.

They tried East next. Same result.

Then North. Ditto.

Finally, they tried West.

And found what they were looking for.

“Krishna,” Balarama said at last, when he had recovered from the first shock. “This is impossible.”

9

If Jarasandha's army of 23 akshohini had seemed like an ocean surrounding Mathura, then the army they were staring down at was the equivalent of all the oceans of the world, encircling the entire Prithvi. Of course, its limits did not extend around the whole of Prithvi but at the moment, it seemed almost possible.

The rows upon rows of weapons, armor and polished leather glinting in the faint night light continued not only to the horizon, but far beyond.

"How far does it extend, Krishna?" Balarama heard himself ask aloud. "It goes on westward for as far as I can tell."

"Take us westward," Krishna instructed Daruka. The charioteer obeyed, looking pale in the wan light. The celestial chariot leaped forward several yojanas, slowing to a halt.

Still, the lines of soldiers continued to the horizon.

Glancing back, Balarama could no longer see Mathura, but he could see the river of enemies that flowed towards his city. It was as relentless and overwhelming as the Yamuna in spate, Mathura a tiny morsel in contrast.

"Farther westward, Daruka," Krishna said again, sharply this time.

Daruka obeyed. Again they leaped forward yojanas at a time.

“Farther,” Krishna said, his voice and jaw tight now.

Again, still the same unrelenting river of death flowing to their homeland.

“Farther. Scores of yojanas this time,” Krishna said.

Daruka did as his master bade.

Finally, when it seemed they were past the limits of even the Ganga’s origin, they finally found the flanks of the invading force. A great caravan of cooks, servants, and other supporting staff brought up the rear.

Balarama tried to make an estimate and found himself feeling sick to the stomach. “Their support is itself the size of Jarasandha’s army.”

Krishna uttered a mantra that created a series of burning golden Sanskrit numerals to appear in mid air. “Back towards Mathura, Daruka,” he said. As Daruka flew them back homewards, the numerals remained suspended in mid air before and above both chariots, each Sanskrit numeral the size of a man’s head, the total count increasing steadily as they flew over the endless lines upon lines of marching enemy invaders.

When they slowed to a halt at their original position, in sight of Mathura as well as Jarasandha’s army, the count of Sanskrit numerals written on the air was well in excess of 3 crores.

“Thirty million?” Balarama said incredulously. “Six times the size of Jarasandha’s force?” He shook his head, feeling the world sway around him. “That would take more than a day’s killing to deal with, even with both of us working together, what say, bhraatr?” He tried to say it flippantly but it came out sounding scared.

“It’s not killing them that worries me,” Krishna said. “You and I could fight forever and destroy ten crore enemies. Or a hundred crore. Or arbo crore. That’s not the point at all, and Jarasandha knows it.”

Balarama understood without needing Krishna to explain further. Krishna’s eyes were looking towards Mathura. “It’s Mathura,” Balarama said. “The people. With such vast numbers threatening us, even if you and I both fight as fiercely as possible, some of the enemy are bound to break into the city, and cause havoc.”

“Havoc is putting it mildly. They would wipe out the Yadava race,” Krishna said. “Every enemy and even some allies would descend within a day, eager to destroy our powerful nations and share a portion of the spoils. It would be like the Battle of Dasarajna all over again.”

Balarama nodded. Guru Sanjeevani had taught them the tale of the Battle. It was narrated beautifully in the Seventh Parva of the great Rig Veda. “Except that instead of 60,000 against 3,000, we would be a million against 35 million or more.”

“Yes. And we don’t even know what skills or champions or powers this new enemy force possesses.”

Balarama glanced westward. It was difficult to believe that in that darkness lay the greatest army he had ever heard of before, let alone seen with his own eyes. “Speaking of them, who are they, Krishna? I did not recognize the sigils on their krta-dhvaja. Even their leather armor and horses look foreign.”

“They are yavana, my Lords,” Daruka said. He bowed to ask forgiveness for speaking out of turn. Krishna nodded to indicate that he could speak freely. “I have seen their like before. It is said they were once Arya like us, the chosen people, denizens of this great sub-continent. But after the great conflict of Dasarajna that you speak of, the Battle of Ten Kings, they were outcast. Their cities were destroyed by our kind and they were forced to ride the desolate plains endlessly, using the fierce wild horses they found roaming freely there. It is believed that someday they would return to seek vengeance for the wrong done to them by us.”

“Yavana,” Krishna said slowly, “You mean Sudra, don’t you?”

Daruka nodded. “Some say they are one and the same. Sudras are the descendants and people of Sudas who remained here in Arya lands and were relegated to the lowest varna of all, the most menial of castes, forced to perform the dirtiest tasks and prohibited from rising in varna. Those who refused to be subjugated to the humiliation of being treated in this fashion left the sub-continent led by Sudas’s sons and daughters, and became mleccha.”

“Barbarians,” Balarama said, “Like the hedonistic people who dwell in the western lands across the great oceans. The cruel ones with skin whiter than mine.”

“No, not like them,” Krishna said. “These are still Arya in all but name. Honorable, proud, noble people reduced to outlawry because of the foolish pride of Brahmarishi Vishwamitra and a few others. Had things gone differently, they might have been the most powerful nation in this sub-continent today. After all, it is thanks to their efforts that this land of Bharata was first settled and united, however tenuously, by a common culture and the Mother Language of Sanskrit.”

“And yet, things went against them, and so they roved abroad for centuries, changing their ways, their language, their customs, who knows what else?”

“And now they return seeking vengeance,” Krishna said, “spurred no doubt by the saptarishis themselves to serve some larger purpose.”

“What purpose?” Balarama asked. There was still much about this grand game of Vortals and repeating Tuesdays that he did not understand.

Krishna shrugged. “Right now, it does not matter,” Krishna said. “All that counts is that they are here and by being here, they serve Jarasandha’s purpose. For he doesn’t care if we are destroyed by his soldiers or yavanas. All that matters to him is that we lose, even if someone else wins.”

Balarama nodded, sobered by the recollection of that endless river of horse riders bearing arms. “We cannot win this war, that is certain. No matter what we do, Mathura will lose. The Yadava nations will suffer great, terrible losses. Yet what other choice do we have, Krishna? We will fight to the end, to the death!”

Krishna shook his head. “No, my brother. We shall not. We shall run and hide for now. And live to fight another day. It is the only way to protect our people and ensure their survival. This is not about you and I and our fighting ability, it is about protecting the people of Mathura. Let the city fall. We cannot save it now. But we will save the people themselves. Every single last one of them. That is our dharma.”

Balarama frowned. He could not fathom Krishna’s meaning. “But how? Where would we go? The yavana would only follow us. So would Jarasandha. We would only delay the inevitable. Is it not better to stay and fight now on familiar ground, *holy* ground?”

Krishna reached across the space between the chariots and placed a hand on Balarama’s shoulder. “The place we shall take our people will be familiar and holy too. It will be beyond the reach of the yavana and Jarasandha and any other enemy who threatens the Yadava nations.”

Balarama stared at his brother. He could see that Krishna already had a plan chalked out in his mind, down to the last detail. That was Krishna’s brilliance: to see the whole future mapped out perfectly in a flash of insight. He nodded. “May I ask the name of this fabulous place where you intend us to go? Is it someplace I know perhaps?” He was about to suggest Gokuldham and Vrindavan but knew that they were not the places Krishna had in mind. For one thing, they were hardly out of reach. Any army that could invade Mathura could invade even the innermost glens of Vrindavan easily. This wasn’t Kamsa’s so-called Empirical army any longer, it was a whole different enemy, far vaster in size and more powerful.

Krishna gazed out in a southwesterly direction. Balarama knew that the ocean lay that way. “It is a place that does not exist yet. A city fortress greater than any ever built before. It shall be impregnable from all sides, capable of withstanding any siege, surviving any calamity.”

Balarama raised both eyebrows. “Such a place does not exist because nobody has ever been able to build it yet. How long will it take to build?”

Krishna smiled at his brother. Balarama frowned back at him. He knew that smile well.

“It is not how long it will take you should be asking, brother, but how much time do we have.”

Balarama shrugged. “How much?”

Krishna held the same smile. “Between the 17th and 18th day? How much is that?”

Balarama felt his own jaw drop. “A single day? To build an entire city?”

Krishna clapped Balarama’s shoulder hard. “Not a city, bhai. A fortress. The Fortress of Dwarka.”

10

The Palace Complex was filled beyond capacity. People filled every hall, every public chamber, every corridor, even the stairways and terraces, sitting on ledges, windowsills, the rims of wells, atop granaries and storage sheds. The compound and passageways were crowded with people, the streets leading to and from the palace, the ramparts, the walls overlooking the city streets, and beyond, spilling into the streets. Yet every soul sat quietly, even the youngest making no fuss, babes in arms suckling quietly or staring wide-eyed and listening raptly. Krishna's voice was only heard directly by those within the main palace sabha hall, but his words were passed on from group to group, repeated swiftly and silently with precision, until every last individual knew what he said down to the last detail.

Not only all of Mathura, all the Yadava nations were listening as well, for the tribal chieftains of all the major tribes—or *kings* as they were now called in these modern times—had been summoned urgently, and they listened with bristling beards and grave mustaches for the present crisis concerned their future as well. The future of the entire Yadava race was at stake here. And all knew that only Krishna, Slayer of Kamsa, Lord of Dharma, Flute of Vrindavan, and Savior of Mathura could save them yet again. Word and description of the great Yavana force making its way steadily towards Mathura had reached everywhere.

At first, those hearing of the great incursion had assumed that such a huge invading army could only be coming to challenge one of three great forces: Magadha, Hastinapura or the South. Magadha of course meant the Empire of Magadha, helmed by Jarasandha and ruled with his hand-picked allies, together making up the most hated group in all Bharat-varsha. Hastinapura, or the Puru Dynasty, premier race of the Bharata Aryas and the only force in the sub-continent that even Magadha did not dare

confront; aggressive battle, the Purus did not attack their own allies or betray trusts and were known for their high regard for dharma. The third power was the alliance of Southern kingdoms known variously by the names of their individual tribes and which some believed were the original true Aryas, their crow-black skin, cultural richness and spiritual beauty marking them apart from some of their coarser northern brethren.

Yet it was now clear that the Yavana were coming to Mathura, the capital city and beating heart of the Yadava nations. Why? What was their enmity with Mathura? Nobody knew. And as Krishna pointed out, it did not matter at present. With a lesser foe at the gates, even one as powerful as Magadha, one could consider a parley, or offer a surrender under the rules of war and kshatriya dharma. But with regard to foreign races such as Yavanas, mlecchas, firangis, or the dreaded white-skinned barbarians of the frozen north, one could not even hope let alone depend on civility or civilized dialogue. The act of asking to speak could itself be construed as weakness and an invitation to slaughter. Besides, with such a great force threatening Mathura, what could the Yadavas offer? The Yavanas could roll over them in an hour, leaving nothing but dust and debris and broken bodies.

And there was the matter of Jarasandha's complicity in this invasion. Thirty million Yavana did not choose this particular time to invade without good reason. Krishna believed he knew that reason now: Jarasandha had provoked them, inciting them to invade and to time their incursion in such a way that Mathura would still be recovering from the battle with his forces the day before. Even if Mathura succeeded in repelling his forces successfully—thanks to Krishna and Balarama's abilities—it was quite impossible to defend the entire city and collective nations of their race against such a massive force. The Yavana were numerous enough to spread like wildfire across the country, to wipe out the Yadavas from the face of the earth if that was what they desired.

And the very fact that they had brought such a great force strongly suggested that it was precisely what they desired. To stamp out the Yadavas forever.

Which was why every man, woman and child now listened raptly to Krishna's every word, knowing that he was their only chance. Nobody else could save them.

"Exile," said Krishna, his young and handsome face seeming wan and old in the harsh top light of the sabha hall. So crowded was the hall that the mashaals on the walls had to be doused to avoid hot oil dripping onto heads and necks, leaving only the perpetually illuminated lamp above the throne dais to light the room. Long dark shadows fled in every direction, and Krishna stood beneath that molten light like a study in hope and despair. Hope for what he represented, despair for the certain end of the existing way of life. "Exile," he repeated, keeping his words slow and clear to give those passing them on sufficient time to convey his every nuance."

"It is the only way," he went on. "We must leave Mathura, abandon all our cities and towns and villages, and retreat to a new abode."

There were expressions of disbelief, shock, horror. But nobody argued or debated. They were already past all that: the heated dialogues had been played out earlier in the presence of the combined chiefs—*kings*, rather—and the court of Mathura. The conclusion had been unanimous: there were literally nothing they could do to avoid the certain annihilation that now awaited them.

Not even surrendering would help: the Yavanas were a riding culture. They had no fixed homestead or permanent houses. They took no slaves or

prisoners, barring a few choice women to be used as mates and child-bearers. They had no place to keep slaves or servants, no use for them. They were a proud independent people perpetually at war. To take a servant or a slave would be an insult to their own abilities. Nor did they spare their own. Once a Yavana grew too old or sick to ride, he or she was left on the vast rolling plains, horse-less, to fend for himself or herself as long as possible. There was no mercy to be had from such an enemy.

“But where will we go?” asked someone. It did not matter who spoke the words. They were on everyone’s lips, in their hearts and minds. Where would they go indeed? Many had fled their homeland during the worst years of Kamsa’s regime, seeking refuge in Bhoja and other friendly neighboring kingdoms. Krishna’s own aunt, Vasudeva’s sister Pritha, better known as Kunti, had not returned home to her parents’ house for over a decade for the same reason. But in the past weeks, most had drifted back, hailing the end of the tyranny and the dawn of a new era. To be told now that their very homeland was under threat and that they had no choice but to leave en masse was a great, terrible shock. Naturally the question everyone wished to ask was: “Where will we go?”

Krishna told them. In calm words he described briefly the new home of their entire race, the place where all the Yadava nations would reside together in harmony. His words were mesmerizing. Even as he spoke, they began to see it in their minds, a great shining city-state that accommodated all the diverse tribes and nations of the Yadava race where they lived in peace for generations to come. It was an ideal and an idyll. A dream. A paradise on earth. And yet, because Krishna promised it, they believed it was possible.

And their belief was all he needed to build it.

11

Tvasta looked uncertainly at the golden chariot. The young Shilpi had heard of the fabled celestial vehicles of Krishna and Balarama and had even glimpsed them from afar, flashing by like golden streaks of lightning. But this was the first time he had seen them from up close. They were beautiful. Their lines flowed in undulating waves like liquid rather than solid gold. The whorls and patterns inscribed on the sides of the well were intricate to the point where even his keen eyes could not quite discern the micro-patterns within those patterns, as if the designer had inscribed details so microscopic that no matter how keenly you examined them you would always continue to find more and more patterns within the patterns. He started as the pattern he was viewing rippled suddenly, like a person standing behind a waterfall might suddenly move, and began to undulate again, settling into new whorls and patterns.

“The designs change every now and then,” Daruka said, smiling reassuringly. “It is a marvel to watch. I feel privileged merely to serve our Lord aboard this miraculous vehicle.”

Tvasta nodded in greeting to the charioteer. They were still awaiting Krishna and Balarama who were within the palace. The courtyard was emptied of people now, the long talk over. People across Mathura were preparing themselves for departure. Tvasta knew that Krishna had given specific instructions not to pack anything as they were making a great journey and it would be impossible to carry any belongings with them, but he knew that his own wife was carefully binding a few of her most treasured possessions in an old garment, unable to part from them. He was quite certain that the rest of Mathura’s populace was doing the same. It was near impossible to leave one’s house, the domicile that had sheltered one’s family for generations, without taking some prized object along, if only for memory’s sake. He tried to put the sadness of the migration out of

his mind and focussed on the task at hand, using the chariot to occupy his thoughts.

“And you fly this horseless chariot?” Tvasta asked.

Daruka beamed proudly. The sarathi’s cheeks tended to bulge on either side, lending him a chubby appearance which was belied by his slender body. The only chubbiness on him was in those cheeks which only made them all the more endearing. “It is my pride and privilege,” he said. “Although I do not claim to understand it. And no matter how well I master its controls, I am no match for our Lord. He maneuvers it as if it were molded to his mind.”

“And indeed it was,” said Krishna coming down the steps of the palace, Balarama beside him. Both brothers looked weary, reminding Tvasta of the same look he had seen on countless warriors returning home after a long campaign. But the battle with Jarasandha or the Yavana army had not yet been fought—indeed, it was to avoid that battle that they were undertaking this migration. Yet Krishna and Balarama both seemed war-weary in aspect and movement. Tvasta shrugged it off mentally, no doubt he was misinterpreting their tiredness. They were probably burdened by responsibilities of state.

“The chariot was in fact molded to my brother’s and my own thought patterns,” Krishna said, “and bearing that in mind, your ability to control it is nothing short of godlike, Daruka. Do not underrate your own excellence.”

Daruka blushed and smiled, his chubby cheeks flowering with embarrassment. “My Lord, you shower me with flowers too sweet to smell.”

Balarama laughed. “That’s a nice way of saying that you just embarrassed him, Krishna!” Balarama clapped the charioteer on his back lightly, yet the clap was almost hard enough to send the poor fellow flying across the courtyard. Tvasta caught him in time, smiling at the famed strength of Krishna’s brother. “Krishna’s right, Daruka. You certainly fly the pushpakas better than I do!”

Krishna greeted Tvasta warmly. “Good shilpi, thank you for honoring us with your presence.”

Tvasta bowered low, joining his hands reverentially before Krishna. “My Lord, it is my honor to serve you in any way I can. Even to sweep the dust from your feet would give me great pride.”

Krishna smiled and raised Tvasta up by his shoulder. “It is not your skill as a sweeper I desire, good Tvasta. It is your skill as a master of the Shilpi texts that can serve all Mathura today.”

Tvasta bowed. “Whatever you say, my Lord. Although I do not understand how my humble knowledge of the arts of shaping forms could serve Mathura, I shall do whatever you command.”

Krishna smiled. “You shall do much more than that, good sculptor. You shall build us a city today.”

Tvasta stared at him in dumb shock. Balarama chuckled at his expression and patted him gently on his back, then climbed aboard his own chariot.

Krishna gestured to the other chariot where Daruka had already taken his place at the reins. “Come aboard now, good Tvasta. We have a great distance to cover and a great deal of work ahead to be done, and barely a day in which to do it.”

Tvasta clambered aboard the chariot, swallowing nervously. “I have never been upon such a craft before, sire.”

“Well,” Krishna said genially. “You have been aboard chariots before? It’s much the same thing.”

Tvasta was about to answer that he had not had much occasion to climb aboard chariots, being a sculptor and not a warrior-lord. But just then the celestial vehicle rose up suddenly into the air and he found the palace roof falling below them at a pace as rapid as a heavy rock sinking into clear water. He gripped the edges of the chariot wheel with white-knuckled intensity, holding on for dear life. A sensation of vertigo overwhelmed him. He shut his eyes until the sensation passed.

Krishna’s hand on his shoulder caused him to open his eyes again. He looked up into the smiling eyes of his lord. “Do not fear, my good man. No harm will come to you. Any sensation you experience is due to your own fear. The celestial vehicle causes no change to human beings, no matter how high it rises or how rapidly it flies. You have my assurance on that. Here, take my hand.” And he held out his hand.

Tvasta hesitated then took the proffered hand. He felt a sense of well-being pervade him at once, and all fear and anxiety melted away. Slowly, he rose to his feet, marveling at how wonderful he felt all of a sudden. He

looked out and saw that they were already racing away from Mathura City, several hundred yards above ground. Balarama's chariot raced alongside them, the only other thing in sight that was traveling at such great speed. He could not begin to estimate the velocity at which they were traveling but he knew that no bird that had ever lived could possibly fly at such a pace, nor could any arrow fly this fast.

Krishna released his hand but touched his shoulder gently. Tvasta nodded gratefully, standing without holding onto anything yet feeling perfectly secure and at ease, just as if he were standing on solid ground and looking at a perfectly ordinary scene. He stood that way and marveled at the landscape flashing past as they flew to their destination.

12

The flight was short despite the great distance covered. When their destination came into view, the sculptor released a sound of exclamation. Even Krishna's charioteer showed his excitement.

"Is that the ocean, Lord Krishna?" Tvasta asked humbly.

"Indeed it is, my good shilpi. Have you not seen it before?" Krishna said, standing beside the man at the railing of the chariot.

Tvasta shook his head. "I have hardly had occasion to leave Mathura, my Lord. My work keeps me busy night and day as you yourself might have seen."

The sculptor was responsible for most of the carvings and sculptures in and around the royal complex of Mathura. Those that he had not done himself, his students had executed. For even from a very young age, he had been masterful enough in the execution of his craft that every young man and woman with talent had sought him out and desired to become his pupil. He had rejected their subservience and instead made them his associates, and with their aid, under his able instruction, he had redesigned the palace complex from end to end and overseen its construction, and had done the same for most of the great houses in the city's richest quarters. Even at this youthful age, he was already a master architect whose knowledge of the Shilpi manuals was matched by none other in Mathura. Yet he preferred to refer to himself as simply Tvasta the sculptor.

“Tvasta,” Krishna had asked him when he had met him some months earlier and admired his work. “Why do you call yourself merely a sculptor? You have accomplished so much more than sculptures.”

Tvasta had rubbed his knotted hands and said simply, “My father and guru say that it is better to be a rock and let others call you a mountain than to call oneself a mountain while others say you are just a rock.” He smiled, his guileless face as smooth as a perfectly finished marble sculpture. “And sculpting always remains my first and last love.”

Krishna had admired the young boy’s humility inspite of his great achievements and fame and had promised him that someday he would engage his services in building a city. He reminded Tvasta of that promise now.

“Daruka, slow the chariot,” he said first. When the sarathi had done as he bid and Balarama had slowed his vehicle as well, Krishna turned to Tvasta.

“Tvasta,” he said, “you remember when I told you that someday you would build me a city? That day has come. It is today. This is the site of the city you shall build today.”

Tvasta looked at Krishna wonderingly then stared at the vista before them. “But, my lord, how can a city be built in a single day? And how can anything be built here? The land close to the ocean is always soft and often has secret channels of water underneath. Building large structures or fortifications could be dangerous. We might find basements and dungeons

and other underground passages inundated by the ocean during stormy seasons.”

They were hovering above the beachside of an unfamiliar coast, far from Mathura or the home of the Yadava nations. The beachfront was sandy with inlets and marshlands interwoven. The ocean that pounded these beaches was fierce and foaming with waves. Even Daruka who was not an architect frowned as he listened to Tvasta and looked down at the proposed site.

Krishna surprised them both by laughing. “I would not give you such a challenge, good Tvasta. For even the finest sculptor must have good stone to work with. This is not the proposed site of our city fortress.”

Krishna pointed ahead, gesturing to Daruka to start the chariot again. “The site is out there, in the ocean.”

Tvasta was dumb struck. He said nothing further for the next several moments. On Krishna’s instructions, Daruka flew the sky chariot a considerable distance out to sea. Tvasta began to hold the rim of the chariot’s well again, unnerved by the sight of so much water on all sides. Finally, when they had reached a point where there was nothing but ocean visible on the horizon in every direction, Krishna bade Daruka stop the chariot.

“Here,” he said to the wonderstruck sculptor. “This is where we shall build our city fortress.”

Tvasta looked down nervously from the chariot. He could see nothing but deep ocean. A strange oceanic beast leaped from the water, breaking free of its watery home, leaped in the air, and splashed back inside. He did not know how to react: was the beast threatening them or merely going about its own business. He saw others of similar shapes and appearance also leaping out of the water then diving back in sinuously. They appeared friendly and the manner in which they moved was very beautiful and graceful. He was mesmerized by the unusual sight.

Krishna's voice broke him out of his reverie. "Good shilpi, are you ready to begin work?"

Tvasta looked at Krishna in wonderment. "My Lord, I shall do anything to serve you. But how am I to build a city upon sheer water? This ocean seems without depth or bottom! And it is teeming with strange creatures. Surely no land being can survive here for even a moment. How can we build an entire city?"

Krishna chuckled. "My dear Tvasta, take my word for it, the denizens of the ocean are far gentler than us land beings. They do not go to war as we do, very few of them would ever seek to harm any of us, and those few that do, do so only in order to eat and survive. As for the depthless bottom you speak of, it is not depthless but it is indeed very deep, no doubt. That is why I have chosen this spot. No enemy can come from below, or from any direction without being seen well in advance. And once we finish building the city fortress, no enemy will be able to challenge it, even with the largest army in existence."

Tvasta shook his head in bewilderment. "All that is well and good, my Lord. But how are we to build on water? I cannot even stand there, let alone work! And to build a city such as you speak of, within a single day?

I do not doubt your ability to work miracles, Lord, I merely question what part can humble Tvasta play in such a grand scheme?”

Krishna nodded. “I shall show you. But in order to show you, I must take you with me down into the depths of the ocean.”

At once Tvasta’s eyes widened and his breathing slowed. “My Lord, I will surely die! I am not divine as you and Lord Balarama most certainly are, I cannot survive beneath this vast expanse of ocean!”

Krishna smiled. “Surely you know that I would not let any harm come to you, good Tvasta? And I would not ask this of you if there were another way to accomplish this task. But it is vital that you come with me for you are the expert in constructing cities, not I.”

Tvasta looked around. He saw Daruka looking at him. Daruka smiled and blinked his eyes reassuringly as if to say to Tvasta that Krishna spoke the truth. Tvasta turned back to Krishna. “Lord, you will keep me safe in those watery depths? I shall survive and return home safely to my wife and children and grandchildren?”

Krishna chuckled. “And their grandchildren as well! Have no fear, good shilpi. I give you my word.”

At that, Tvasta’s fear melted away and he straightened his back again. “Your word is God’s word, my Lord. If you say jump into the ocean, I shall do so gladly.”

Beside them, speaking from his own chariot, Balarama said, “Don’t jump though! You don’t know how to swim yet and we already have two perfectly serviceable vehicles to take us down.”

Tvasta looked around, frowning. Krishna tapped the chariot’s side, his rings knocking and echoing musically against the shaped gold-hued plates with a sound like no metal ever known could make. “Brother Balarama is right, we shall stay within these chariots and they shall keep us all safe and breathing air as normally even within the depths of the ocean. All you need to do is trust in me, Tvasta. Do you trust me?”

“I do, Lord,” Tvasta said without hesitation. “I trust you with my life.”

“Very well, then,” Krishna said. “Let us descend. Daruka, we must move slower beneath water as we must not disturb the beings of the ocean or cause harm to any one of them. Take it as slowly as necessary and use your judgement. Remember though that things beneath the ocean can often move as quickly as land beings when you least expect it.”

Daruka looked a little nervous but nodded gamely. “I shall do my best, my Lord. Pray, correct me if I make a single error.”

Krishna smiled. “Do not fret. I am with you to guide and show the way.”

13

The chariots plunged into the ocean together, their luster seeming to grow dazzling bright in the instant before they sank. Then they disappeared beneath the waves.

The dark-finned creatures that had been leaping and playing in the water dived beneath to see where the new visitors had gone. They saw the two chariots sinking rapidly downwards, and tried to follow, but after a few hundred yards they gave up the chase and returned to the surface. Unlike most of their fellows in this watery world, they required air to breathe and could only survive without it for a few minutes.

They chattered and squeaked excitedly about the astonishing new visitors and hoped they would see them again when they returned.

If they returned, their elders corrected. Land creatures who ventured so deep never returned. It was possible that these strangers were the exception, but that remained to be proven. Then they went about their watery play again.

Tvasta and Daruka both looked around with wonderment as the chariots travelled downwards at a sharp inclining angle.

They reached out and felt only air around them. Looking at Balarama's chariot beside their own, they saw that each chariot was encased in a large bubble of air, the bubble's shape warped and distorted by the force of their downward flight.

At one point, both bubbles touched and were joined together, sharing the same large store of air. They looked up and saw the distant surface of the ocean and the bright sky and sun beyond, barely visible already. They had already sunk several hundred yards deep and at the rate they were proceeding, there was a great distance yet to travel.

Krishna said, “Are you well, Tvasta?”

“Aye, my Lord,” said the young sculptor. “I feel as healthy as I did moments ago when we were hovering above the ocean.” He looked around, marveling. “It is a miracle how you accomplish these wonders.”

Krishna smiled indulgently. “This is nothing, Tvasta. In fact, the real miracle is the trust you place in me and the faith you have in my abilities. It is what makes it possible for Balarama and I to do whatever we do. Am I not right, bhai?”

“That you are, bhraatr,” Balarama called out, his voice somewhat muffled by the sound of the water buffeting the bubbles. “It is faith that enables you to lift mountains and plumb the depths of the ocean.”

Krishna smiled again at Tvasta. “You know, Tvasta, your faith in me reminds me of a tale of another faithful follower who also traveled to the same realm where we now descend.”

Tvasta looked curiously at his master. “Where is this realm we go to, my Lord? What is its name?”

“Samyamani is a realm like no other. There is nothing to compare it to. It is described in the tale I speak of, although you will perceive it with your own eyes.”

Tvasta joined his hands before Krishna. “My Lord, it would be my great fortune if you would recount this tale to me.”

Krishna raised an eyebrow. “You wish me to narrate the tale? Now?”

Tvasta indicated their descending chariots. “I see we have some distance yet to travel. It would help pass the time and take my mind off the fact that I am descending into the depths of a great watery world!”

Krishna chuckled. “Why not. It is a good tale and bears narrating. It is one that is known to the great Maharishi Krishna Dweipayana-Vyasa, it is he who has recorded it and perhaps someday he shall include it in his Fifth Veda.”

Daruka turned to look at Krishna. “A Fifth Veda, my Lord? I thought there were only four and the rest were vedangas.”

Krishna nodded. “I speak of the one that is not yet written but shall be written not long from now, a mere two generations hence. It is not strictly a Veda like the Rig, Yajur, Atharva and Samar, it is more a katha-vidya and as such it is unparalleled in the annals of human knowledge. Someday it will be known as the greatest story ever told. This is but a tiny morsel from that vast banquet of stories that remains to be told, and written. Listen now, to the tale of the Disciple And The Earrings.”

“His name was Uttanka,” Krishna went on, beginning his tale...

Uttanka was a novice to Guru Veda. One day, Guru Veda had to leave home to officiate at the ceremony for his patron. He left his shishya Uttanka in charge of the ashram and house with the instructions, “Do whatever needs to be done to take care of the household. Ensure that nothing is lacking.”

With these simple instructions, Veda left.

As it transpired, his journey took him to a faraway foreign nation and his absence from home was far longer than expected. Uttanka obeyed his guru’s request dutifully.

Some months later, the women of the household gathered together to speak to him. They told him that Rishi Veda and his wife had been desirous of having offspring for a long time. Now, the preceptor’s wife was in the ideal period for conception, based on her biological factors as well as the astrological signs and other omens. If this time passed, who knew when she might conceive again. As the man of the house, it fell to him to impregnate her and ensure that her period fertility did not go waste.

Uttanka was troubled by the request of the women. He said to them, ‘I hear your demand but it is not proper that I should do this on your word alone. I take my instructions only from my guru and he has not asked me to do any such thing.’

They urged him, saying that the preceptor had after all told him to do whatever needed to be done and to ensure that nothing was lacking, therefore he would only be performing his duty to the guru by filling his wife’s barren womb.

But Uttanka held firm and refused to do as they said.

In time, the guru returned home from his long journey. He heard all that had transpired in his absence, and was pleased with Uttanka's decision for he would not have approved of another man inseminating his wife.

He said to Uttanka, 'My son, you have fulfilled your dharma admirably while using your own judgement wisely. This is a great service you have done for me and I am deeply grateful to you. In return, name anything you desire and I shall do everything in my power to return the favour. Do you wish to leave my service and pursue your own fortune? If so, then I grant you leave to go and bless you with a certainty of success in any endeavour you choose.'

Uttanka considered his guru's words and replied, 'Gurudev, it is well known that when a shishya completes his education he must give his guru a dakshina, otherwise if one person asks for something without offering anything in return and the other person gives without rightfully receiving anything in exchange, there shall be enmity between those two, and one shall inevitably die. You have already granted me the greatest gift any guru can give his shishya: you have given me leave to go forth into the world, declaring my education complete. In exchange, I wish to give you your guru-dakshina as it is only fair that I repay you for your gift of learning to me.'

Rishi Veda was impressed by his pupil's answer and said, 'In that case, Uttanka, give me some time to consider what guru-dakshina to ask.' Uttanka was sanguine and continued to stay peacefully at his guru's ashram.

Some time later, Uttanka came before his preceptor and asked him once again, 'My guru, command me what guru-dakshina you desire that I may give it you.'

Rishi Veda said, 'Uttanka, my son. So many times have you asked me already what guru-dakshina I desire. I am still unable to think of anything. Yet you deserve an answer, therefore go to my wife and ask her if she desires anything. Give her whatever she demands and I shall consider it as my guru-dakshina.'

So Uttanka went to the guru's wife and joined his hands before her. 'Shrimati, my guru says I have completed my education and may go home. But I must give him guru-dakshina before I take my leave. He has sent me to you. Command me what you wish and I shall bring it to you as a guru-dakshina.'

The preceptor's wife thought briefly and replied: 'Go then to King Paushya, your guru's patron. His queen possesses a certain set of earrings that she wears. Ask him to give you those earrings and fetch them to me. In four days, there shall be an important ceremony and I wish to appear most radiant before the brahmins who will attend. Bring me the queen's earrings and you shall have the blessings of your guru as well as my own good wishes!'

Happy to finally have a task to perform, Uttanka set out at once for Raja Paushya's palace.

14

Krishna smiled and shook his head as if remembering. “Poor Uttanka had to suffer a number of mishaps and adventures but finally, after great effort, he procured the ornaments in question and was returning home to give them to his Guru’s wife when the earrings were stolen from him by Takshak, the king of Nagas. Uttanka immediately gave chase to Takshak and would surely have caught him. But then Takshak dropped out of sight, literally, for he had jumped into the earth to reach the same city where we are traveling now.”

“Samyamani,” said Tvasta with wide eyes. “Is it the city of Nagas?” He swallowed, visibly nervous as would be any man who was told he was entering the fabled kingdom of the Serpents.

Krishna shrugged. “The Nagas dwell there as do many other species. But the realm itself is governed by another master.” He gestured. “We shall speak of him another time.” He seemed distracted for a moment.

Tvasta gazed around as he waited for Krishna’s attention to return to him. He saw the ocean passing by outside the bubbles of air, vast and dark and forbidding. By now they were traveling at a great depth, so deep that sunlight did not penetrate and all was dark and mysterious. The bubbles captured light with them as well, and within their confines, it was as bright as the sunlight in the sky above—as if Krishna had captured entire snatches of air, complete with the sunlight passing through them and trapped them in the bubbles.

This light lit up the ocean passing by, and occasionally Tvasta caught glimpses of a few strange beings that moved ponderously through the depths. They were vast and dark in visage and size and inscrutable. He felt himself cringe at the thought of what might happen if one of those sea giants were to penetrate the bubbles or attempt to assault himself and his companions. Even though he knew Krishna and Balarama were capable of taking on any opponents, he still feared for himself. To distract himself, he turned to his Lord again.

“My Lord Krishna,” he said. “Tell me everything, in all its detail? I wish to hear the full extent of the tale?”

Krishna returned from his distant thoughts and looked at Tvasta again. “And so you shall, good Tvasta. For katha-vidya is the foundation of our cultural heritage. Even the great Vedas, the Books of Knowledge which contain the wealth of our collective wisdom from ages past, convey their greatest messages through the medium of katha. Story is the highest form of shared knowledge, the most exalted form of learning. No mere recitation of facts and numerals can equal the insights conveyed through a simple story effectively narrated. Listen now and I shall tell you the rest of Uttanka’s tale. For there is a message within it that concerns yourself.”

It was a long distance to the palace of Raja Paushya and while he was walking, Uttanka saw upon the road the largest bull he had ever seen in his life. Seated atop the bull was the largest man he had ever seen! Intrigued by this extraordinary sight, Uttanka slowed to stare at the enormous bull and the giant seated atop it.

As he was staring at them curiously, the man called out to him. ‘Uttanka!’

He was startled to hear his name shouted by a stranger. The man called out to him, ‘Uttanka, eat the dung of this bull!’ Uttanka recoiled in disgust at the very thought. Naturally he did not comply with the giant’s request. Once again the giant called out, ‘Uttanka, eat it without hesitation. Your guru himself has eaten in his time.’

Despite his disgust, Uttanka felt a powerful urge to do as the stranger said. Somehow, he overcame his repulsion and ate the bull’s fetid dung and even drank its urine.

Soon afterward, Uttanka reached the palace of Raja Paushya and went before the king. He introduced himself and announced, ‘Raje, I am the disciple of your guru Rishi Veda.’ King Paushya replied warmly, ‘Then you are as a god to me. Speak. What can I do for you?’

Uttanka told him about the earrings his queen possessed, which were desired by Rishi Veda’s wife, to wear for the ceremony before the brahmins. ‘I beg you to give me the earrings that I may present them to my guru’s wife as my guru-dakshina.’ Paushya answered without hesitation: ‘Of course. Go directly into the queen’s palace and ask for my wife. Tell her I sent you and you shall have what you desire.’

Pleased to hear this, Uttanka went into the inner apartments of the palace of the queen. He searched everywhere but could not find the queen.

Returning to the king, he said with some irritation: ‘Raje, you ought not to have lied to me. You said the queen was in her palace but I looked everywhere and could find no trace of her.’

Paushya was taken aback at first, then thought for a moment.

Finally he said, ‘There can be only one explanation. You must be somehow impure or polluted. Since she is a faithful wife to me, she cannot be seen by anyone who is not immaculately clean.

Somehow, you must have consumed leftover food or in some way rendered yourself unclean. Think and try to remember.’ Uttanka thought back and

realized the king spoke the truth. ‘Indeed, it is as you say. As I was in a hurry to come here and reach back to the guru’s house before the ceremony, I performed my ablutions on the road, while walking.’ Paushya nodded. ‘That would explain why you did not see the queen. Ablutions must always be performed while sitting, never while standing or walking.’

Uttanka saw the wisdom of the kshatriya’s words and performed his ablutions again. He sat facing the east, then first washed his hands, face and feet thoroughly and without making haste. Then, maintaining absolute silence, he sipped just enough clean water, ensuring it was completely free of scum or froth, in precisely the right amount that was required to reach his heart. Then he washed twice and cleansed his orifices with water.

Only when he had duly completed these ablutions to perfection did he rise once more and enter the queen’s inner apartments. At once, he saw the queen, seated where she had always been, now made visible to his senses.

At the sight of Uttanka, the queen rose and greeted him appropriately with respect befitting an acolyte of her husband’s guru. ‘Great one, command me. What can I do for you?’ Uttanka said to her gently, ‘Good queen, I ask that you give me the earrings that you are wearing. I wish to give them as guru-dakshina.’

Without hesitation, the queen removed her earrings and proffered them to him gladly. But as she gave them she cautioned him in a whisper: ‘Good man, know this. Takshak, Lord of Nagas, dearly desires these earrings. He would do anything to possess them. Carry them carefully.’

Uttanka thanked her for the earrings and for her warning and assured her, ‘Shrimati, do not fear. This is my guru-dakshina. Even Takshak, King of Snakes, cannot take them from me now!’

He bid the queen farewell and returned to Paushya. The king asked him if he was satisfied now and Uttanka replied, ‘Oh yes, raje, I am very pleased. I shall now take your leave.’

Pausha bade him wait, saying, ‘Great one, you are clearly a person of great learning and note. I have been waiting to perform an important shraddha. By your grace, we may now perform it before you leave.’

Uttanka was reluctant but felt obligated to the king for his gracious treatment and generous gift. ‘Very well, raje. I shall stay a short while. But I ask that rather than prepare special food which will take a great deal of time, let us consume whatever food is already prepared.’ The king agreed and sent for food for Uttanka at once.

When the food arrived and was served to Uttanka, he was upset to see that it was brought cold and there was a hair in the food. Angered by this extremely rude slight, he threatened Paushya: ‘You dare offer unclean and cold food to a guest? I shall curse you with blindness!’

Paushya reacted equally sharply: ‘In that case, since you wrongly accuse me and spoil food that was unspoiled, you shall lose the ability to have offspring!’ B

ut as the host, Paushya felt obliged to investigate his guest’s complaint. On examining the food closely, he found that it did indeed contain a hair and was quite cold; he enquired further and learned that this was because the food had been prepared by a woman who was careless and had not braided her hair.

Apologizing for this grave lapse in his hospitality, he joined his palms before Uttanka and said in a contrite tone: ‘Great one, the fault was entirely my own. You spoke truly. The food served to you was indeed cold and unclean. Please forgive me for this error. Please do not curse me with blindness.’

Uttanka sighed and shook his head regretfully: ‘What I pronounced shall surely come to pass. You will go blind but I shall counter the effect to ensure that you regain your eyesight soon. Now that you admit your fault, you must also take back your curse. Do not render me incapable of bearing offspring.’

Paushya rubbed his face in misery. ‘Great one, would that I could. But as you know, a brahmin’s heart is soft as ghee even though his words may be sharp as razors. A kshatriya is the opposite: our words may be soft as ghee but our hearts are sharp instruments. Even now, my anger has not been quelled completely. I cannot take back my curse. Please, just go.’

Uttanka rose and said, ‘I spoken the truth. The food was impure just as I said. Yet I allowed myself to be appeased by you. Earlier, you cursed me saying that I had wrongly accused you and spoiled food that was unspoiled. But my accusation *was* true and the food *was* spoiled, therefore your curse is ineffective. Let the matter end here.’

So saying, Uttanka left Raja Paushya’s palace, taking the earrings with him.

15

Uttanka was eager to return to his guru's house and complete his mission. He put aside all thoughts of the events preceding and pursuant to his procuring the earrings and kept his mind set on reaching home at the soonest.

But after walking a fair way, he saw a peculiar sight. There was a man on the road ahead who kept appearing and disappearing.

As Uttanka approached, he was able to make out that the man was a kshapanaka, a mendicant given to wandering naked and begging for alms. But there was something most peculiar about this mendicant. One moment, he could see the kshapanaka quite distinctly, standing on the road, the next moment, the kshapanaka was nowhere to be seen.

Uttanka was vexed by this sight, remembering the equally bizarre incident that had occurred when he was en route to Raja Paushya's palace. 'I shall ignore this phenomenon completely and concentrate only on reaching home quickly,' he told himself.

He continued walking. But instead of passing by the kshapanaka, somehow the man always stayed several yards ahead of him on the road, continuing to appear and disappear in random flashes.

Tense and disturbed by this vision, Uttanka found himself exceedingly thirsty. Due to the altercation with King Paushya, he had been unable eat or drink anything since leaving his guru's home days earlier and was desperately in need of refreshment.

Spying a pool just beside the road, he bent down to drink. As his simple garb contained no compartment, he was compelled to set the earrings down beside him for a moment while he cupped his hands to drink the water.

The instant he set them down, the kshapanaka appeared in a flash beside him, snatched up the earrings and disappeared.

Uttanka sprang up and chased after the kshapanaka. At first the mendicant continued his vanishing act, but as Uttanka gained on him and began to grasp hold of his limbs and struggle to get the earrings back, the being finally gave up his disguise and assumed his true form.

He showed himself to be Takshak, king of snakes, and in his true body, it was impossible for Uttanka to grasp hold of him. Uttanka struggled manfully with him for a while, but Takshak slithered out of Uttanka's grasp and slipped into a chasm in the ground that had miraculously appeared.

Uttanka understood at once that the queen's warning had come to pass. If he allowed Takshak to escape now, the lord of the Nagas would wriggle all the way home to the realm of snakes and Uttanka would never recover the earrings. His only chance was to plunge in after the Lord of snakes.

Determined to fulfill his obligation to his guru, he leaped into the chasm moments before it closed.

Uttanka tumbled through empty space for what felt like an endless period of time.

Finally, he found himself on solid ground with no recollection of having suffered any impact on landing. He was in a rock tunnel deep underground. Hearing a slithering sound from ahead, he moved in that direction and spied Takshak's tail sashaying from side to side as the Serpent Lord slipped away.

He followed the Naga for another endless period of time, through tunnel after tunnel, through bifurcations and intersections, through small narrow tunnels where he had to slide sideways to avoid striking his shoulders or elbow and through enormous vaulting tunnels where the ceiling was too high overhead for him to see and his footsteps echoed cavernously.

Through all this pursuit, he could barely see anything, the entire journey being in darkness. Only the sound of Takshak slithering ahead guided him. He was in perpetual fear of the Naga Lord slipping through a tunnel before he could follow, leaving him at a loss to know which way to go next.

By some instinct, he was able to avoid striking his limbs on the rocky outcroppings as he went, and to avoid the numerous pitfalls and yawning abysses that lay at every turn. After an unknown duration, he finally saw light up ahead and emerged to find himself in a wondrous place.

At first, he thought he had somehow emerged into the upper world again, and was standing on a vast plain beneath the open sky. By degrees, he realized that he was in fact farther underground than any mortal had been before. Many miles, certainly several yojanas beneath the surface of the earth.

The place he had emerged into was a vast underground cavern, so enormous that he could barely glimpse the roof of it, high, high above. The cavern's other dimensions were equally epic: from one side to the far end was a distance so great, he could not accurately judge how many yojanas it might cover.

There were entire townships nestled on the ground of the cavern, gleaming cities and individual nests where Nagas lived in uncountable profusion. Lakes, even oceans, mountains, valleys, hills and dales, it was a world unto itself, but all formed of the craggy black rock of the underworld, and lit by a luminescence alien to the illumination of daylight and sunlight. It was perpetual night here but without stars or moon or celestial orbs visible, only utter blackness beyond the phosphorescence of the inhabited regions.

He climbed down from the tunnel's entrance and walked to the nearest city of the Nagas. He began to see many of the denizens of the underworld, some in anthropomorphic form with only some vestige of their snakelike nature, others more serpent than human in appearance, and still others neither snake nor human but something else entirely.

There were as many varieties of Nagas as there were species of living creatures on the surface of the world. Uttanka marvelled at their profusion and variety and despite their fierce outlook, he found himself curiously without fear.

As he stopped in the center of the city, he felt certain shlokas form in his mind unbidden. Following his instinct, he recited these aloud:

|Beautiful sarpas, subjects of Airavata!
||You victors of wars, you wielders of lighting!||
|Handsome and many-shaped with chequered coils,
||Adorned with jewels of shining hues||
|You shine as the sun shines
||In the great cavern of the sky||
|Myriad are your pathways on the banks of the Ganga
||Who dares march against your assembled might?||
|I salute you who salute the great Takshak, Airavata of the Nagas
||I salute you Takshak son of Kadru and your son Ashvasena||
|By the banks of the river Ikshumati in Kurukshetra, you lived
||Alongwith your youngest brother Shrutasena||
|Who lived in Mahadyumna and coveted your throne
||May you march with 20,000 men at war and always find victory!||

After he finished chanting these shlokas in Sanskrit, Uttanka was able to pass unmolested through the land of the Nagas. But although none obstructed his way or threatened his well-being, he also did not find that which he sought, namely, the earrings he wished to carry back home to his guru's wife.

Continuing to search doggedly, he began going from chamber to chamber in the great city of the Nagas. He saw many wonderful sights. Among these, he saw two women weaving a length of fabric mounted upon a loom worked by hand. The fabric was formed of black and white threads. He also saw a great wheel being turned by six boys. And a man who was handsome beyond description.

Inspired yet again to poetic heights, Uttanka chanted the following shlokas:

|Three hundred and sixty spokes in this wheel,
||Moving in a cycle of twenty four divisions||
|Turned constantly by six young boys|
||Representing the hours of the day and the days of the year||
|Two young women who are the weavers of time|
||Weave black and white threads eternally||
|Representing the past and the present|
||Creating and destroying worlds endlessly.|
|O master of the vajra, protector of worlds!|
||Slayer of Vritra, destroyer of Namuchi!||
|The man in black who commands truth and untruth|
||He who once rode the great steed Ucchaihshrava||
|Avatar of Agni, as she emerged from the amrit-manthan|
||Lord of three worlds, great Purandara!|
|Before thee I bow eternally!|
||You are master of the universe||
|All fortresses fall before thee|
||Mighty Indra, accept my salutation!||

The man who was handsome beyond description turned his gaze upon Uttanka. It was as if the sun had emerged from a cloud-blackened sky to shine its light directly upon him. He felt the heat and radiance of that great being shine upon him and enlighten his soul.

'I am pleased by your praises,' said the man. 'Speak. Ask me for something you desire.'

Uttanka bowed to him and said meekly: 'Lord, let me have power over the Nagas.'

The man commanded, 'Blow into the anus of this horse.'

Uttanka did as he was told. At once, a great rush of flames and smoke billowed forth from the horse's orifices. As he watched with amazement, the smoke spread through the world of the Nagas like a living thing, scorching every creature, entering every crevice, burning every last living being and habitation.

Before his very eyes, the great wondrous world of the Nagas was turned into a place of ruin and ashes, awash in smoke and soot.

Faced with devastation, Takshak emerged out of his hiding place. Still carrying the earrings, he threw them back at Uttanka, eyes weeping copiously from the smoke and flames. 'Take back your earrings! I no longer want them!'

Uttanka took the earrings with great delight. But the instant he received them his thoughts turned back to his given mission. This was the fourth day since he had departed his guru's house. It was the very day the ceremony was to be performed for which the guru's wife had desired to wear the earrings to impress the attending brahmins. It was quite impossible for him to climb all the way up from the realm of the Nagas and reach his guru's home in time. And if he did not give them to her in time, all his effort would be in vain.

He only thought these things but the man knew his thoughts and spoke aloud again: 'Do not fret, Uttanka. Mount this horse. It will transport you

to your guru's house in an instant.'

16

“What happened next, my Lord?” Tvasta asked with shining eyes. Even Daruka was listening intently, Krishna noted, although the charioteer’s attention remained on the chariot’s fore, following every moment of their downward plunge with due diligence.

Krishna smiled. At least he had succeeded in keeping their minds off the terrors of the dark deep ocean that surrounded them. In a way, it was best that the ocean through which they plunged lay in pitch darkness. He could have as easily lit up the entire ocean with the shakti of brahman, instead of merely keeping the air in the bubbles lit.

He had done so deliberately. Had there been light enough to see the two mortals would have gone insane with terror. The tale of Uttanka too was intended to distract them as well as prepare them for the ordeal ahead. For while their mission in the underworld was a simple one requiring no feats of heroism, a journey to the afterlife was never to be taken lightly, particularly for mortals.

He continued the tale to its end, timing it to coincide with their own arrival at their destination.

Uttanka accepted the offer gratefully. Mounting the horse he turned its head and found the horse riding of its own accord. Its hooves clattered on the rocky floor of the underground cavern and as he looked back, he saw sparks shooting out each time it touched the stony ground.

The city of the Nagas fell far behind astonishingly quickly. The horse entered the tunnel through which he had come and thundered up at blurring speed. It was all Uttanka could do to hold on and keep his seat. In no time at all, he found himself on the surface once again, and back on the road home.

Shortly thereafter, he arrived at his guru's house and dismounted with relief. He saw the preceptor's wife had just bathed and was dressing her hair. Just as Uttanka entered, she was saying to her husband, 'Uttanka has not returned as promised. I must curse him.' Just then Uttanka bowed before her and presented her with the earrings.

She exclaimed and took the earrings, admiring them joyfully. 'Uttanka, you could not have come a moment too soon. In another instant, I would have cursed you! You have performed your duty admirably and given your guru-dakshina. May good fortune smile on you always!'

Uttanka's guru greeted his pupil warmly and asked him what had taken him so long. Uttanka narrated his experiences to his guru. In his excitement and his relief at having succeeded in his mission, the episodes of his travels tumbled forth out of order and he described things that had occurred last first and those that had occurred first last. But his guru sorted the incidents easily in his enlightened mind, stroking his beard as he contemplated. 'These events have a profound meaning,' he told Uttanka. 'You have already fathomed some of their significance, I shall explain the rest.'

The two women Uttanka saw weaving the loom, Rishi Veda told him, were named Dhata and Vidhata, the Giver and the Creator; one transposes and the other disposes. The black and white threads stood for night and day respectively. The wheel with twelve spokes is a solar year, the six boys turning it are the six seasons.

The handsome man is Parjanya, Lord Indra in his incarnation as god of rain. The horse was Agni, Lord of fire. The mammoth bull that Uttanka saw on the way to Raja Paushya's palace was Takshak, alias Airavata, king of snakes in yet another of his many disguises.

The giant who rode it was Indra, signifying his control over Takshak. The bull's dung which Uttanka ate at Indra's request was Amrit, the nectar of immortality. It was because he ate it that he was not killed in the kingdom of Nagas.

Rishi Veda smiled as he finished, saying, 'Indra is my friend and it is by his kind grace that you were able to return with the earrings. Now, my son Uttanka, you have achieved all you desired: you have given the guru-dakshina you promised. You have my leave to depart with good fortune.'

Touching his guru's feet to take his blessing, Uttanka left his preceptor's house for the last time.

Now he was truly free of brahmacharya-ashrama, the first major stage of his life. He had graduated to full adulthood and could go anywhere he pleased, pursue any occupation or vocation, marry and be a householder, it was entirely his choice. And he intended to do everything, live his life as fully as he could.

"It is a great tale, my Lord," Tvasta said. "I am privileged to hear it narrated by yourself."

Krishna smiled. 8 or 80, once a story took hold of a person, it made him a child! Aloud he said, "I hope that it will help prepare you for the descent we shall now make. Remember, like Uttanka, keep your mind focussed on your goal at all times, and you shall attain it. Everything else is not your concern and therefore not to be feared as well. As long as I am with you, no harm shall ever befall you."

Tvasta was still nervous but he had gained courage now from Krishna's kindness and the katha. The long tale had served its purpose: without being told so in as many words, the sculptor now knew that the place where they were going was none other than the realm of the underworld, the dreaded land of the dead itself, where all beings went after their biological bodies perished on the mortal plane. Without this long preamble, he might have gone insane at the very thought of such a descent, for he was a simple artisan unfamiliar with such matters. But with Krishna's aid, he had gained sufficient resolve to undergo this necessary journey.

“I am ready, my Lord Krishna,” he said now, steeling himself visibly. “Take me to the ends of the earth if you will, I shall not waver. Just give me a chisel and hammer and stone to cut and I shall build you the greatest city on earth!”

“That you shall, good Tvasta. That you shall,” Krishna said. Then he turned to Daruka and said quietly, “Slow our descent. We have arrived at our destination.”

16

MATHURA had assembled yet again. It was the hour before dawn and the city was unnaturally quiet and still—even though not a soul was asleep.

Krishna had given word that there was no need for anyone to assemble in public. They could all remain within their houses, carrying only the clothes upon their bodies, nothing more. He would take care of the rest. But the very idea of leaving home without leaving home was incomprehensible to most. As was the idea of departing on a long journey without carrying a single possession. So great crowds thronged the streets and byways, others stood on roofs and walls and other elevations, seeking for a sign.

Everyone understood that Krishna would work some miracle here but none knew how he would accomplish it. Everyone was curious to see how he could possibly arrange the migration of an entire populace within a day— bypassing not just one but two great enemy forces. Thirty five million in all! The Yavana army was within a few hours ride, the last courier had reported, while Jarasandha's army was stationed only a yojana from Ayodhya, and was preparing to break camp and march on the city within the hour.

How could so many civilians, women, children and olduns among them, as well as entire herds and flocks of livestock, travel westward to the site of the new city that Krishna said he had built for them, without being seen and attacked by the enemy? For that matter, how could so many travel so far in a single day? It was a question that troubled many, except those who

believed implicitly in Krishna's divinity and had complete faith that he would take care of them.

How could an entire city-state be built in a single day? That question was the other one that vexed people.

Krishna and Balarama had returned that night with the young sculptor named Tvasta. And his family had received a great shock. Tvasta was no longer young! The young man who had left only hours earlier with the Brothers had returned with his hair white as the marble he loved to cut, his face as lined as the statues he chiseled, and his entire aspect aged no less than three score years. He had been gone barely six hours, yet had aged sixty years in that short time. How had this happened?

They had asked Tvasta but he had smiled with a look of beatification they had never seen before and said simply, "Krishna, Hari Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hari Hari."

They had asked whether the city had been built. He had said it had.

They had asked how was it possible to build an entire city in a single day—less than a day, in fact—and he had answered again, "Krishna, Hari Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hari Hari."

There was no doubt that he had become a devotee of the Lord of Mathura!

They had asked him how he had aged sixty years in six hours and he had said, "That is how long it took to build the city."

They had looked at each other, perplexed, and then said, “But you have been gone only six hours.”

And he had replied: “In the city of Samyamani, Time is an absent master. Even Lord Kala has no dominion there, Krishna says. This is because it is a Lokaloka, a place which is not a place.”

They had no idea what this answer meant.

“And the city is built?” they asked again, unable to believe him.

He only smiled and said yet again: “Krishna, Hari Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hari Hari.”

“How is the city?” they asked, suspicious now, convinced that his brains were addled and his mind deluded.

“Beautiful,” he said simply. Then added: “You will see it for yourself shortly.”

Then he had laid down to rest awhile, saying, “Wake me when it is time to go.”

He turned his face towards the wall, bent over on the cot, almost hugging himself.

And had fallen asleep at once, as if he had not slept in sixty years.

They marveled at his hands, coarse and callused, his back bent and knobbly from bending over while sculpting. Yet he appeared healthy and in good shape, merely exhausted.

Like a sculptor who had been working for sixty years non-stop without a respite.

Of course that was impossible, they said, there must be some explanation for his apparent aging.

Those who believed in Krishna said nothing. They knew.

Now, his family awoke Tvasta. “Wake up, little brother, it is time to go,” said his elder sister, then felt foolish, for she was still young while he was older than their grand-father now in appearance and physique. Nobody knew how to adapt to this unusual phenomenon of a young man turning old.

But when Tvasta turned towards her, sat up and rose from the bed, stretching himself, she was shocked.

He was young, handsome, robust Tvasta once again.

“It is a great day,” he said, beaming and rubbing his palms together as he always did when he was happy or excited. “Today, you shall see my greatest sculpture yet.”

His family all stared in stupefaction as he went about, telling them all how proud they would be of his shilpi art today. How hard he had worked and how he had accomplished his best work under Krishna’s guidance and supervision. “And the other Lords, of course,” he added.

“Which other Lords?” they asked, curious, still recovering from the shock of his turning young again in his sleep. It was as if the sleep had refreshed and reinvigorated him again, and had they not seen him earlier, they would never have believed that he had in fact spent sixty years away, and not merely six hours.

“Oh, you know,” he said in his usual casual way. “Indra, Varuna, Kubera, Yama...”

They stared at one another, speechless at first.

“The Devas? Indra-dev, Varun-dev, Kuber-dev, Yam-dev?” they asked.

“Yes,” he said, “Who else? They contributed and helped a lot too. If not for their help, I would never have been able to finish on time.” He chuckled. “There was this one time, I was installing Sudharma—that’s the assembly hall—and Kubera was impatient to dump his eight treasures and leave at once, the self-important fellow that he is...”

His aunt, a devout believer, fainted dead away. Tvasta frowned and looked around. “What happened to maasi? Is she alright?” She was.

Then it was time to go. Someone called out from the rooftop that dawn was breaking and it was time.

The great migration of the Yadavas was about to begin...

18

“Mother!”

Devaki rose from her seat as Krishna came into her chambers. “Krishna, my son, I am here.” Near the place where she had been sitting was the effigy of Ganshyam that Krishna had once carved from her from a thundercloud. She still treasured it as dearly, anointing it daily. Even now, agar sticks placed before it gave off their familiar sweet scent.

“Mother, Maatr, life-giver,” Krishna said, touching her feet and kissing his fingertips reverentially. “You gave me the most precious gift of all, life itself.”

“I gave you a life of struggle and strife,” she said wanly. It was true. Not a day went by when she thought about it. “Ever since I brought you into this world, you have had nothing but responsibilities and burdens, violence and war. What a cruel mother I am, to have placed such a heavy load upon such young shoulders.”

He smiled and took her aside, bidding her sit. She sat beside him. He spoke gently. “You placed no load. You gave life to me and created these young shoulders, imbuing them with strength enough to carry a thousandfold load.”

To his surprise, she covered her face and began to sob. “How can you say that so blithely? I know what I have put you through? You were never permitted to enjoy your childhood and now you are spending every waking

minute of your life's best years in the service of the people. What life have I given you?"

"Maatr," he said affectionately, "who says I didn't enjoy my childhood? Ask any gopa or gopi Gokul-dham. Krishna's Lila is famous there! I was the terror of Vrindavan. Women would hide their dahi handis and butter pots to keep them safe from me. And every single gopi of Vraj believes she is married to me!"

Despite herself, Devaki laughed through her tears. "You are only saying that to make me feel better."

"Go see for yourself! Ask anyone!" He rose and put his fingers to his lips, mimicking the act of playing a flute. "I was known as the Flute of Vrindavan for very good reason. Everybody danced to my tune!"

He danced a ridiculous little dance, mimicking the ras-garba dance of his adoptive parents. Devaki laughed. "Stop that, you're just trying to cheer me up."

He stopped dancing and spread his hands. "That's what I do? I make people feel better. Is that so bad? Does that make me a bad person?"

She waved at him to stop that kind of talk. "Shubh-shubh! Say auspicious things."

"Maatr," he said, coming closer and kneeling before her. "I am telling you that I am happy, happier than any other son in the world today. Do you

know why?"

He waited for her to respond. She laughed at his patience and shook her head. "No, why?"

"Because," he said solemnly, "Not only do I have the most wonderful mother and father in the world, I have two of them! Can you believe it? Who has two of the most wonderful fathers and mothers in the whole world? I do. And that's what I came to tell you, Nanda-Maharaja and Yashoda-Devi are here!"

Devaki started. "Here? Where are they?"

"Outside your chambers, waiting to be called in."

Devaki's hand flew to her mouth, covering it in embarrassment. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

He shrugged. "You were busy crying and feeling sorry for me. Are you sorry for me now?"

She waved at him. "Silly boy, you should have told me right away. How can we keep them waiting outside. Send them in at once."

He turned to go.

“Wait,” she cried, “just a moment, at least let me arrange my face! What will they think if they see me crying like this?”

He grinned. “That you have the most miserable son in the world, burdened by the whole universe’s problems!”

She waved at him again. “You’re a rascal, Krishna!”

“But a lovable one. And I’m your little rascal, remember!” He grinned and left the chamber.

Devaki used the brief respite to fix her face and garments as best as possible. She still still adjusting herself when the sound of voices preceded Yashoda and Nanda’s entrance. Vasudeva accompanied them as well.

“My friends,” she said, embracing and greeting each of them in turn. “How wonderful to see you!”

Vasudeva explained. “They are here for the shift to the new city. Krishna said they could travel with us if we wished. I agreed at once.”

“And we are so glad you did,” Yashoda said warmly. “Since the day we left here, not a day has passed when we did not wish we were here again.”

Nanda smiled wanly. “I envy you, Devaki-devi. You have Krishna with you all day all the time. That is a great privilege.”

She smiled and joined her palms to him. “And you had him for 15 years, Nanda-Maharaj. At least grant me this time with him now.”

They all laughed. Krishna came forward and put his hands around both his mothers. “Yashoda-Maatr, tell me honestly and don’t you tell a white lie just for the sake of anyone’s feelings!”

Yashoda laughed. She had put on some weight since the time she had parted from Krishna and now she looked even more matronly than ever. “I shall try. What do you wish to know, son?”

“Devaki maatr here thinks that I am the most miserable, the most burdened, the most struggling son in all existence. Tell me, is it truly so?”

Yashoda laughed aloud. “Krishna? He is the happiest boy in all creation! I doubt that a happier child ever existed.” She looked at her adopted son and pinched his cheek. He made a face but did not pull away. “I too spent many sleepless nights thinking that it was such a burden for a small child such as he was back then to be fighting asuras and struggling on a daily basis merely to survive, as well as having to take responsibility for the welfare of so many others. But then I realized something, Devaki-devi. Do you know what I realized?”

Devaki shook her head, curious.

Yashoda went on. “I realized that Krishna was most in his element when he was doing his dharma. Whether that meant fighting, playing, making music or...” she wagged a finger admonishingly at Krishna, “breaking

gopi's hearts! He is a doer. A maryada purshottam. To be given a life-task and then to devote himself to fulfilling that task is what makes him Krishna."

Devaki nodded, but still looked a little uncertain. "Yes, but other boys seek success in their given profession. Or seek their fortune. Or merely live a good life as a grihasta, loving their wives and children. Others meditate and seek enlightenment. Krishna's life is entirely devoted to the service of humanity. And that entails constant struggle, strife, battles, fights, violence, war...He has no time to simply live." She looked at Krishna sadly. "Or love."

Yashoda nodded. "What you say is true, I cannot deny the truth. Yet think about it, Devaki-devi. Which life does not have struggle in it? A warrior fights too. Yet he mostly fights for his own survival, or at best for a cause or an employer. Krishna fights for the most honorable reason of all: to serve and protect others. What could be more satisfying? Violence is a terrible thing but he does not initiate it. He is the most peace-loving person on earth. Left to himself, he would only be troubling calves and playing his flute and chasing gopis all day long..."

"...And all night too," Balarama said from somewhere behind them, half-whispering mischievously.

"...Instead he chooses to serve the people, the world, and dharma constantly, tirelessly. This is an onerous task. But it is also a noble one. Who says that we cannot find pleasure in serving others? Who says that to undertake responsibilities is only a burden? Why should the service of humanity be a chore, a labor? It is driven by love and affection. Krishna does all this because he loves all humanity, every living creature on this earth. He is no different from a warrior going to war to protect his family, except that we are all Krishna's family. Every woman is his mother, sister

or cousin, every man his brother, father or uncle. He earns rich rewards for what he does. I saw that the first time he displayed his godlike powers. When the evil Putana tried to poison him with her own milk. He did not merely slay her, Devaki. He danced upon her body! Not to celebrate her death but to celebrate his own life. The arrival of a new era. And today, as he takes us to this new city for our safekeeping, he is dancing a new dance again. And it is our honor that we have the opportunity to dance with him!"

Devaki's eyes brimmed with tears that spilled and rolled down her cheeks. She embraced her sister-Yadava. "Sister Nanda, you have shown me how wrong I was. You are right. I was wrong to think that Krishna only does what he does out of responsibility or duty or a sense of dharma. He does it because..."

"...Because I love you," Krishna said, putting his arms out to include all in the room—"every last one of you. You are all Bhooodevi to me, Mother Earth. And to protect you and serve you is not my burden or responsibility. It is my joy and passion and pride."

He smiled and indicated the doorway. "And now, if you will permit me, it is time for me to serve my people once again. Come!"

19

Across Mathura, people experienced a strange transformation. It was similar to the way one felt while meditating deeply, that exalted state of consciousness between dreaming and awakening. Impatient children stopped fidgeting, grew still, and stared up in wonderment, old people suffering from ailments grew calm and serene, and even the animals stopped making sounds and yawned widely or stopped panting. Everyone looked around and saw the very air glowing, motes of dust floating in what appeared to be a magical light that suffused everything.

Some found they could see into other people's bodies and beyond them, some felt they could see all the way to distant worlds, viewing the terrain and life forms of those other planets as if they were merely next door, and a few, very few, felt they could glimpse great scenes of creation and destruction, the beginning and ends of worlds and time itself.

Then everything blurred. The world seemed to shake, rattle and roll like marbles in a tin can. A tremendous burring sound grew from nowhere, and the earth, furniture, buildings, ground, everything began vibrating with great intensity. The vibrating and burring sound and shaking and rattling and rolling increased until the intensity was too much to bear.

People closed their eyes, animals too, and only babes continued to gaze up in adoration and awe, some newborns gurgling and trying to point at specters only their innocent eyes could behold.

The phenomena continued unabated for what seemed like several minutes. Nobody knew what was happening or what the outcome would be but

everyone sensed that the best thing to do was to stay still and wait it out, like an earthquake. A few began to panic. Before they could do something rash, a voice spoke in all minds, human, animal, insect and bird alike, reassuring and authoritative:

Do not fear. no harm will come to you. This will pass. It is no more than the shakti of yoga building up sufficiently to transport us all. Never before in the history of life has the power of yoga been used to transport such a great multitude. Yet, have faith in me and all shall be well.

At the sound of Krishna's voice in their minds, everyone grew calm. They waited as the vibration and shaking continued to increase in intensity until it reached a level that felt as if every cell in their beings was being shaken, the very matter within that cell shaken, as if Krishna had grasped them all in a giant fist and was rattling them all like a handful of bone dice. Nobody could bear to look anymore, for the effect was too dizzying and every living creature shut his or her or its eyes and waited, praying silently.

And then, with a great sighing sound, everything faded away.

All was calm once more.

The ground was still, the sound of rattling furniture was gone, the burring sound ceased, the blurring of vision ended, the glowing air and motes of light gone.

And everyone opened their eyes and saw a miracle had come to pass.

Svayam Bhagawan was the term that best described Krishna, and by extension, his half-brother Balarama as well, for they were one and the same being, black and white aspects of the same cosmic essence. God Incarnate. Choosing to remain fettered by the limitations of the mortal form, nevertheless he was capable of extraordinary feats. He had already proven this through his survival at birth, the numerous encounters with asuras, his spectacular defeat of Kamsa on the wrestling field, and of course, his prowess in battle against the forces of Jarasandha. But when the denizens of Mathura opened their eyes that day, they saw the full extent of what Krishna's godliness could accomplish upon the mortal plane. A miracle it was, no other word could come close to describing it.

And its name was Dwarka.

A fortress-kingdom in the middle of the ocean. Seen from above, as by the wondering eyes of ocean birds who had never seen the likes of it before, it was an island miles in length and breadth. Circumvented on all sides by the greatest moat of all—the vast ocean herself—it was a perfect circle, great vaulting walls rising sheer against the buffeting tides. The walls descended far below, into the very depths of the ocean itself and below the floor of that great body of water, where its massive foundations rested upon a bedrock so dense and impenetrable that no foe possessed the power to attempt to invade it from below or without. The walls themselves were hundreds of feet high, high enough and strong enough to withstand the fiercest oceanic storms, quakes, tsunamis or tidal waves. Dozens of yards thick, they formed great ramparts upto which the Yadavas could ascend through stairwells and tunnels, then stand up and observe any oncoming vessels or invaders from a distance of tens of yojanas before they approached. No siege machine ever built could assault those great walls, nothing built by mortal hands could reach over those vaulting ramparts.

The very sight of those enormous defenses would strike despair into any insolent invader: even a vast armada could not stay at sea forever, and there were limits to how many men and animals could be brought within range successfully, let alone kept at sea long enough to attempt a siege, let alone succeed. All Jarasandha's elephants, camels, horses, chariots, and other animal-based forces would be futile here. His soldiers would sicken and waste away during a long siege, while the defenders within were self-sufficient and could survive forever without needing to leave the island fortress.

But most of all, so remote and distant from any land body was the island kingdom that nobody could possibly know where it lay, let alone find it even if they searched for decades. Krishna had deliberately chosen a location that lay out of the paths of all the tidal currents that wayfaring ships might use to travel on the high seas, that did not fall in the way of any wind currents or seasonal breezes. Whether driven by oars or sail, no ship could come to this precise location without defying the necessary rules of oceanic travel, by sailing at a near-impossible angle to the wind, or rowing *against* a powerful intercontinental tide that would even a thousand strong oarmen could not resist for more than a few hours. And all this was supposing they knew the exact location of the island, which was itself unlikely if not impossible. If this impossible feat of locating the island was accomplished, then the equally impossible task of bringing a force sizable enough to besiege the fortress also achieved, the besiegers would then be faced with the impenetrable defenses. And even if, by some miracle of their own, or through asura maya, they broke through— laughable even as a thought, but still conceivable—they would still have to contend with the might of the Yadava nation, forced to fight to the death to defend their homes and families, and most of all, the might of Krishna and Balarama unleashed.

Which fool exists that would even dare to conceive of such a siege?

As daunting an example of military genius as the island-fortress was on the outside, it was just as fabulous an example of city building within.

Tvasta's art involved studying the shilpa manuals which recorded all that was known about architecture, city-building, home-building, and allied knowledge since the beginning of the Yadava race, then to apply that vast knowledge base to the given task at hand. At the first sight of the island from Krishna's flying chariot, he had gasped, marveling at the audacity of even conceiving to build a city in this impossible location, unable to even comprehend the godlike power required to do such a thing. Then, the first rush of wonderment faded as his artistic mind instinctively began to visualize the city that could be built here. Visions of great avenues lined by enormous leafy trees, immaculate gardens quilted with flowers, houses, mansions, palaces...everything flooded his mind's eye like a memory of the future. In that instant, the entire plan of Dwarka formed in his consciousness, complete and perfect down to the last detail, as if his mind saw the city itself already built and flourishing upon that desolate rocky mass in the ocean.

And Krishna had placed a hand upon his shoulder and said warmly in his ear: "It is splendid. I approve the design. Now build it as you see it."

Tvasta had started, astonished that Krishna could read his mind, then awed that Krishna would approve of his fleeting vision, then dismayed at the thought of even attempting such a task. "How, my Lord? It is far beyond my meagre talents."

Krishna had smiled that famous mischievous smile, the impish one that made the women of Mathura sigh so deeply, his black eyes dancing with amusement. "Nothing is beyond the reach of talent. Build it. And the rest will be provided."

And now, here it was.

The people of Mathura opened their eyes and looked out upon their new home. Every face shone with wonder. Every pair of eyes reflected the gold and green and crimson colors of the great metropolis. Infants in arms swiveled their heads to gawk in big-eyed awe. Children stilled their incessant limbs and stared in reverential silence. Women with babes in arms or children at hand let their mouths fall open as their kohl-lined eyes gaze in wonderment on sights that they had never dreamed of before. The faces of Yadava men, hardened by war, work and hard living, lost their deep-set lines and craggy looks as they regressed to the softer unlined expressions of their boyhood. The very old grew agitated at heart as their eyes brimmed with tears, filled with gratitude for having lived long enough and survived so much in order to be able to see this day; they raised their lined faces and smiled as tears rolled from their rheumy eyes. Dogs, cats, livestock, cattle, all sniffled and crouched down or paused in their chewing and foraging to stare silently as animals stare at a strangely colored sky or harvest moon, sensing that something now existed that had never existed before, marveling at the industry of mortals and the shakti of gods. Newcomers to the swarga realms, the heavenly planes, did not gaze with such amazement. For this was the mortal realm, yet the sight they beheld was like nothing mortal eyes had ever beheld before.

Dwarka lay resplendent in the morning sunlight, a glittering cornucopia of architectural beauty. Lush groves where gentle breezes roamed, carrying the fruity odors of ripening fruits. Ripened tree fall lay scattered at random, the bright red and orange and prickly pelts contrasting with the deep green of the grass. Great parks with walkways, shaded benches, ponds and waterways, vaulting fountains and leaping squirrels. Massive gates of ornately filigreed gold wrought patterns. Towering watchtowers of crystal with golden spires that rose high enough to look out over the city entire as well as the over the great stone walls and bulwarks to observe the ocean beyond; elaborate platform moved by contraptions using weights

and pulleys served to raise and lower the watchtower guards and visitors in moments, eliminating hard climbing up the 1008 stone stairs. Gargantuan granaries that were artfully built so a simple panel could be opened and a lever pulled upon to release as much or as little grain as was required each day, each granary containing vast stores of grains capable of feeding the entire Yadava nation for years, if not decades. The great pots for daily dispensation before each granary, from which citizens could freely help themselves to as much as they needed for their household's nourishment, were made of solid gold; the granaries themselves were constructed of silver and brass. Everything was designed artistically to be functional as well as aesthetically pleasing.

The houses themselves were marvels of construction. It was impossible to even comprehend how their curved corners and jeweled domes could have been built, or indeed, how they remained standing so staunchly. Every house was made of solid gold, regardless of the occupant's earlier status. There would be no discrimination between classes or castes here in Krishna's city; he had made sure of that. The houses were all of gold, the domes bejeweled, the roofs set with emeralds the size of fruits. Every house had a terrace with a view of the ocean as well as the gardens and inner city. Somehow, by some miracle of architecture, no matter how near the ground a house might be when entered, once you ascended to your terrace by climbing a dozen steps or so, you found yourself looking down from a terrace that was many dozen yards higher. This meant that nobody could claim to look down on his neighbor, nor was anyone compelled to look up at her neighbor! Every house had a temple and when the family that chose that house entered within, they found their own chosen idols in the shape of their own deity of preference housed within. How could Krishna have known—or Tvasta? Neither needed to know. The houses themselves provided what their occupants desired.

Even though members of all four varnas came to Dwarka, they lived in complete equality now. Only the rulers and administrators whose houses needed to contain space for administrative staff and duties, or items that

had to be organized for distribution or redistribution were granted larger mansions and buildings suited to their official needs. This was no democracy, yet no democracy could claim to be this democratic in the history of humankind.

Magnificent was the city, rich were its treasures and pleasures.

Tvasta led his people on a walking tour, his words somehow conveyed through the intelligent acoustics of the city itself to every last person following. Krishna and Balarama exchanged smiles at the gazes of amazement that lit up the faces of the people as they looked upon one new wonder after another.

“This is Sudharma, the great hall of assembly,” announced Tvasta proudly, as two of the largest doors ever seen, each rising to the height of five elephants standing upon each other’s backs, opened of their own accord, swinging wide to permit the people to stream in. Even that huge population seemed dwarfed as they shuffled into the vast cavernous sabha hall that seemed to reach for yojanas in every direction. Like many houses and buildings within Dwarka, the sabha hall was far, far larger on the inside than it was on the outside. Also like the rest of the city, the sabha hall adjusted its size to accommodate the number and nature of those entering within. Right now, it had expanded to the size of a kingdom, the far walls and vaulting ceilings literally yojanas distant: only the enormous size of the great statuary and the carvings on the ceilings and portraits on the walls served to provide some scale against which to compare the size of the space.

“All that is spoken or decided within these walls will always be correct in dharma,” Tvasta said. “That is why it is known as Sudharma. This sabha hall was gifted by mighty Indra himself,” Tvasta said. “As part of his demonstration of friendship towards our Lord Krishna for the

inconvenience he caused him and the Vrishni during the years of exile.” He did not elaborate the story itself: all those who knew the story of Krishna knew every last detail already. “Other devas gave other treasures and gifts. Lord Kubera gave eight great treasures. Varuna, lord of wind, bestowed white and black horses as fast as the wind itself. The nine planets each gave precious gifts.”

The great procession passed through the hall and beyond, the great doors slowly swinging shut only after the last stragglers had exited, pausing briefly to let a yapping puppy bound after his young mistress. They continued their magical tour.

In the center of the city, everyone’s breath was stolen momentarily by the awe-inspiring sight of a tree greater than anything they had seen until now. The houses of gold, granaries of silver, roofs studded with diamonds, towers of crystal, all paled before the great, towering tree that rose from the heart of the island-kingdom, her roots spread out around her for miles in every direction like vast skirts, the trunk a thousand yards around, the towering branches fanning out to shade more than a third of the great city, the upper branches and trunk containing an entire zoology of beasts and birds and insects of all kinds. Silhouetted against the evening sun—for the tour had taken all day—the tree was magnificent beyond all description.

“This is Parijata,” said Tvasta reverentially, for a great artist respects that which human eye, mind and hand cannot match more than any man-made creation. “The celestial tree. Our Lord Krishna informs us that beneath its boughs, all natural laws are suspended.”

To demonstrate, he leaped upwards, stretching out his hands, and to everyone’s shock, flew up through the air, rising toward the lowest branches which were high above the ground. “Do as you will,” he cried out, turning as he rose up, his face flushed with excitement, “no harm will

ever come to any being in Parijata's shade. Neither death nor injury, age nor illness. Come dance upon the air if you wish!"

And with that, the tour ended and the celebrations began. One by one, led by the very young and most adventurous at first, followed by everyone else, the people of Mathura flew up into the air, dancing and cheering and laughing and clapping with joy and praise for their Lord Krishna and the great miracle he had wrought.

Vasudeva and Devaki rode in Krishna's celestial chariot along one of the many carriageways that crisscrossed Dwarka. Devaki gripped the side of the chariot, still unaccustomed to this miracle of flight. Vasudeva smiled at her reassuringly but she noticed that he kept his hand on the railing as well. Courageous as he was, horseless motion was not something he could fathom let alone accept unconditionally. The chariot flew smoothly, silently, as if seeking to disprove their anxiety and as it progressed, they grew more confident. They flashed through crossroads, somehow avoiding collisions with other horseless carriages similar in function though lacking its celestial resplendence. Immediately behind them came Balarama's celestial chariot carrying Nanda Maharaj and Yashoda Devi and their family. From the looks of Balarama's animated conversation and the awed expressions of the Gokulites, it was clear that they were finding the wonders of Dwarka a far cry from the rustic simplicity of Vrajbhoomi.

And there were wonders indeed to see. Even Vasudeva and Devaki caught their breath as the chariot ascended higher through successive carriageways and avenues that crisscrossed and intertwined in a bewildering pattern of movement that promised a collision at any moment yet appeared to be as well-orchestrated as a concatenation of tributaries melding into a delta. Somehow, the horseless chariots that were provided for public transport in Dwarka were capable of flying at astonishing speeds and zipping past each other at angles that would have disoriented any living being, without ever so much as brushing past each other. Now, as Krishna's chariot brought them up to the height of the watchtowers guarding the city's perimeter, they found themselves looking down at the length and breadth of the incredible metropolis. A glittering cornucopia of emerald rooftops, crystal domes, pearly mansions, silver facades, golden pillars, glittering walls, gleaming statuary, vaulting fountains, lush gardens

and walkways, all teeming and bustling within the bounding of the great stone walls.

And in the midst of it all, sprouting with luminescent virility, rose Parijata, towering above it all, a great and gracious grandmere, spreading her skirts to welcome her progeny. Beneath her shady boughs, even from this height, Devaki could glimpse the tiny figures of people flying and dancing, old as well as young, the former come to spend time in the healing shade of the divine tree which made all ailments and conditions disappear magically for the duration, the latter simply eager to frolic and play.

Devaki realized that they had stopped and that she had been gazing out at the wondrous sight for several moments. Beside her, Vasudeva was observing the city with moist incredulous eyes as well. Krishna's voice from behind them gently intruded upon their reverie.

"Does it please you, Pitr, Maatr?"

Devaki shook her head, eyes shining. "Nay."

Vasudeva turned to glance at her curiously.

"It entralls me," she said, throwing her head back and laughing, then catching herself and covering her mouth. "It is beyond belief, Krishna. How did you accomplish this, my son?"

He smiled. "I had some help. And time."

Vasudeva chuckled. “A night and less than a day!”

“So it seemed,” Krishna acknowledged. “But that was in the mortal realm. By working outside of human time, we were able to build the city at leisure, taking a great deal more time.” He paused then tilted his head, reconsidering. “Well, perhaps not at leisure. But it certainly took decades.”

Vasudeva and Devaki exchanged a glance as if to say, Can you believe such modesty? And shook their heads at the same time.

“But how will we sustain these...machines, this wealth, this luxury?” Vasudeva asked. “The Yadavas are not a rich people, certainly not after Kamsa’s reign and Jarasandha’s self-aggrandizement.”

Krishna smiled. “It does not take wealth to run this city, Pitr. It is run by the strength of dharma and the power of brahman. The people of Dwarka provide sufficient energy for all the devices of the city to run and replenish themselves, even repair themselves when required, for all eternity. The city is entirely self-sustaining. All that we could ever want will be provided for within these walls. Only the more traditional tasks such as farming, cooking, and their like need be done through labor. The city itself needs neither money, nor taxes, nor wealth to maintain itself.” He patted the gleaming gold railing of the chariot. “Like this pushpaka, everything here is powered by brahman shakti. And brahman shakti is everywhere, within us all, an unlimited infinite supply.”

Devaki shook her head, marveling. “You make it sound so simple. Yet how does one harness the force of brahman? How does one put the most

elemental energy in the universe to work in this manner? Krishna, you have wrought a miracle named Dwarka. This is the greatest city ever built in human knowledge. Nothing before it and nothing after it can ever hope to equal its magnificence.”

Vasudeva nodded gravely, his beard rippling in the gentle breeze. It carried with it the salty tang of the open sea, for it was a sea breeze blowing. In the distance, sunlight cast great gleaming nets upon the great expanse of perfect blue, and high clouds drifted lazily, as if slowing to look down and admire the beauty of Dwarka. “Your mother speaks truly. You have accomplished something beyond all imagining.”

Krishna inclined his head, smiling. “After so many years spent beneath the bloody boot of Kamsa’s oppression, the people deserved a season of rest. This is small compensation and reparation for all the atrocities and terrible, terrible horrors they experienced.”

“And we are safe now?” Devaki asked. “Jarasandha’s forces cannot threaten us here, surely?”

“No. Never,” Krishna said.

“Even if he dared to seek us out and eventually found us,” Vasudeva said, “he could not hope to mount an assault and maintain a siege capable of breaking the defenses of this island-fortress. Nay, mother of Krishna. I can say with full confidence that we are finally safe from all oppression and war. It is just as Krishna says: A season of rest. We can rebuild our battered hopes and dreams here in peace and leisure. The Yadava people will now flourish.”

Devaki shook her head, beaming happily. “At last, we are free. Oh, Krishna, my son, I am so happy today. And we are both so proud of you and your brother.”

Krishna nodded, smiling as he bowed to each of his parents in turn. “It is I who is fortunate to have been brought into this world to serve you, and all my people.”

23

Krishna and Balarama's sarathis landed their chariots on the rooftop of the palace. Every residence in Dwarka had a rooftop landing stage for the family's flying chariot. The palace, of course, had several dozen. Balarama grinned at Krishna as he stepped off his own chariot. The rest of the family moved towards the stairway to descend down to the main palace.

"Finally, bhraatr," Balarama said, "We can sleep peacefully, knowing that no threat looms over our people. The terrible Tuesdays have ended. Tomorrow when we awaken it will be Wednesday at last!"

Krishna smiled. "Yes, it will. But the threat is not ended. Merely distanced."

Balarama looked at him. "What do you mean? Are we not safe here? Beyond all threat of attack or siege or any other form of danger?"

Krishna nodded. "Yes, we are."

Balarama spread his hands questioningly. "Then what is the problem?"

Krishna shrugged. "The Yavana is still approaching Mathura and will reach it by nightfall."

Balarama frowned, putting his hands on his hips. “So? Let him. He will find no one there to fight or harm. Why should we care what he does?”

“If he does not find us there, he will pursue us here.”

“So? Let him. He doesn’t have a chance of finding us!”

“Yet he will try. And as long as he keeps trying, we will only be postponing the inevitable, not ending the threat.”

Balarama sighed. “So you wish to go to him and face him now?”

“I don’t wish to do anything. I would be content remaining here to the end of our days and enjoying a much-deserved respite from battles and slaying. But what choice do we have? It is the only way to rid ourselves of him and to live in peace.” Krishna paused as he looked out at the vast ocean. “Besides, we still have to deal with Jarasandha.”

“Jarasandha? But isn’t he the reason why we built Dwarka and moved our people here?”

“Yes, bhai. And now that they are safe, it is time we dealt with him.”

Balarama sighed, scratching his shoulder. “I don’t understand. Why can’t we just forget about him? We are safe here, beyond his reach.”

“Yes but so long as he believes we are alive, he will continue to hound us. The Magadhan will not rest until we are destroyed.”

Balarama shrugged. “So let him sack and destroy Mathura. There is nothing of value left there now.”

“Precisely. Which is why it will not satisfy him. Besides, don’t you think he would notice that the city is empty? He needs the satisfaction of a massacre and a sacking, both. That is his way. It’s why every kingdom fears enmity with the Magadhan empire. Once begun, it can only end with Jarasandha overrunning one’s homeland, taking what he pleases, and slaughtering as many as he desires. Nothing less will appease his rapacious lust.”

Balarama shook his head, looking out at the glorious view of the ocean. “Bhraatr, we can never stop fighting, can we? There is always something else to be done. One more chore. One more life to save. One more battle to fight. One last mile to climb...”

Krishna smiled. “That is the price for living a life according to dharma. Eternal struggle.”

Balarama sighed and shook his head, moving toward the chariots. “Dharma. Where have I heard that before? I feel like all my life I’ve heard you talking about dharma and had no choice but to do as you said... *according to dharma!*”

Krishna grinned. “Not in this life. That was a previous life, bhai. When you were Lakshman and I was Rama. Unlike Rama, I do not harp on

dharma all the time in this life. Only when you need reminding.”

Balarama grinned back. “Trust me. One thing I don’t ever need reminding about, is dharma. It’s second nature to me now.” He clapped his hands together. “All right, bhraatr, let us go finish this chore as well. For the sake of *dharma!*” He paused. “Just one thing though, how exactly are we going to give Jarasandha the satisfaction of sacking our kingdom and slaughtering our people?”

Krishna smiled his famous impish smile. “I have an idea.”

Balarama waggled his eyebrows. “You *always* have an idea!”

They climbed their chariots, and were aloft in moments.

KAAND 2

1

Jarasandha watched the column of dust as he sipped a refreshing drink. He was seated in the shade of his Imperial tent, fanned by slaves, served by slaves and guarded by hijra champions. The dust column rose a good six or seven hundred yards high and formed a waving wall that extended in a zigzag diagonal line all the way to the horizon. He had been watching it approach for the past several days and now it was within a few yojanas of his camp. He watched it with the same detached amusement with which he might watch a defeated enemy king being dismembered, his queens and children ‘tamed’, or two of his favorite champions dueling to the death. Most things in life were sport to Jarasandha, and things which were the direct result of his own actions or planning were pure entertainment.

As was the sight of the approaching dust cloud in the distance.

It was, of course, the dust raised by the feet and hooves of the Yavana’s army. The same Yavana to whom he had sent word through a succession of intermediaries that stretched all the way from Magadha across the several hundred disparate kingdoms that lay between Bharat-varsha and the distant land of the Yavana barbarians. To the Yanavas, and to most of the pale-skinned barbarians who resided in the lands farther north and west of the Yavana kingdoms, Bharat-varsha was a mythical land. A distant dream of elephants and jewels, golden streets and diamantine towers.

To the barbarians of those faraway uncivilized kingdoms, forever locked in interneceine wars and enmities, this land east of the Sindhu river was nothing less than a dream of heaven itself. “*Indus*,” they pronounced the

name of the river, and called the great sub-continent by the same word. Indians, they called the people who resided here, marveling at their spices, silks, ornaments, books of knowledge, ancient wisdom, healing arts, spiritual maturity...To them, this was the land at the edge of the world itself. Beyond this, they whispered, the world fell off steeply into a deep dark bottomless abyss.

Of the great lands and equally rich civilizations and cultures east of Bharat-varsha, they had no knowledge. The idea of anything existing beyond this point was inconceivable to their teachers and wise men. As far as they were concerned, this was high heaven and nothing more remained to be seen in the known world.

Stupid ignorant barbarians.

Enticing them to invade had been as easy as it was for a voluptuous woman teasing a celibate man by dancing on his lap.

It had taken several caravan loads of treasure, gifts and bribes for every king and his officials along the long winding trade route, and elaborate stories of the untold riches waiting to be had in the legendary mythic city of...Mathura. Yes, Mathura! Of all the ludicrous targets to aim their sights at, these Yavanas were coming to sack Mathura. Because that was the gruel he had fed them, wooden spoonful by spoonful. And they had lapped it up, believing his nonsensical stories about Mathura the great, the fabulous city of wealth and wonder, the seventh heaven, wonder of the known world. And it was this fabled city they had travelled all the way to raid now, raising a wall of dust high enough and dense enough to cause even migrating flocks to change their course as they flew south.

And now, they were here at last. Within striking distance of Mathura.

Jarasandha heard the sound of approaching carriage wheels and knew his allies were approaching. He didn't bother to rise nor to turn as the sound of boot heels approached.

"Emperor Jarasandha," said the familiar voices. "A great Yavana army approaches within sight of Mathura."

"Yes," he said casually, sipping his drink. "I have spasers too. They have kept me updated on the approach of the barbarian hordes."

They crowded around him, men grown fat with the wealth and spoils he had helped them win over the years, frowning and scowling down at him. He remained seated, unconcerned with decorum. The advantage of being an Emperor was that one never had to behave like one.

"Their target appears to be Mathura itself. We believe they mean to besiege the capital city and overrun the kingdom!"

Jarasandha shrugged. "It's a free world. They can do as they please."

Exclamations. "But their army is enormous. It is far greater than our forces combined!"

"And they are barbarians. Foreigners."

“So?” he asked.

“They will easily overrun Mathura. They will capture the Yadava kingdom, sack its wealth and treasures, and then will take the spoils back to their foreign lands.”

“Probably,” Jarasandha agreed.

“But then what of our own campaign? We have come to invade Mathura ourselves. Why should we let foreign barbarians steal away our intended target?”

Jarasandha shrugged. “Because they are stronger than us in numbers and forces? Because if we go against them, we will surely lose?”

There was a moment of silence after this pronouncement. The tone of their arguments changed somewhat, became more petulant.

“But how can we permit this to happen? It will cost us our greatest prize! You yourself have said so often. Mathura is Magadha’s greatest prize.”

“Besides,” added another whining voice, “it is the kingdom of your erstwhile son-in-law. The legacy of your future grand-children. How can you let it go without a fight?”

Jarasandha shook his head. “I have no intention of letting it go. The Yavanas will invade Mathura, take what they desire, then leave. After they

are gone, we will move in, take Mathura for ourselves, annex it to the Magadhan Empire and move on to the next target. They are merely doing our dirty work for us, saving us the time and effort and cost. For that, if they gain a few treasures, so be it. It is worth the price for us getting Mathura.”

They looked at him incredulously. “You mean, you have planned this all along? This is your doing? It was you who sent word to the barbarians and convinced them to invade?”

Jarasandha handed off the depleted drink to a slave and rose to his feet. The kings took a step back, giving him room. He smiled at them from one side of his face. “Let us just say that I grew tired of toying with the Yadavas and playing the game of the brothers Krishna and Balarama. It was time to move the campaign ahead by force.” He gestured at the distant wall of dust. “And so I played a new gambit.”

They frowned, not understanding. “But we have only just camped here. We have not yet attempted to besiege Mathura ourselves. What do you mean ‘tired of toying’? We have not even begun to fight!”

“Actually,” he corrected them, “we have fought. Fiercely and bravely. Some 17 times in all. And I for one am quite weary of a battle a day for 17 days.”

They looked at each other, wondering if Jarasandha had lost his senses.

He chuckled. “But you would not understand. Let us just say that I have foreseen the future, 17 possible futures to be exact. And this is the 18th

one. It was time for a new gambit. And this is it.”

He moved towards his tent. They started to follow but he paused at the entrance, turning to face them. “The Yavanas will destroy the body of the Yadava nation and leave. We will pick up the bloody corpse and chain it to our chariots. The spoils of war will be the kingdom itself and all it contains. All will work in our favor. I have foreseen it. Good day, gentlemen. I highly recommend the heartblood punch. It is most refreshing.”

And with that, he turned his back on them and went into his tent.

2

The Yavana was watching the city when his quarry emerged. A small-built man with hair the color of corn and eyes the color of lapis lazuli, he reacted with some surprise: in his case, this meant raising both eyebrows when his men began to call out. He was not given to large gestures or reactions. For a man to leave his homeland, gather an army made up of warring clans and barbaric tribes and march them halfway across the known world, he had to possess great fortitude.

The Yavana had been mildly pleased when his frontlines had crossed the fabled Indus river without falling off the edge of the world. He had been thrilled beyond words when they had begun witnessing the wonders of the mythic lands east of the great river. Giant beasts with ivory tusks, one-horned creatures with armored hides, long-jawed water predators with mouths full of razor teeth and powerful lizard tails...and cows, everywhere they went, countless kine, chewing, mooing, dawdling, milking, calving...cows everywhere.

More than once he had been tempted to divert from the path allotted to him, marked out by local guides provided by his allies who had enticed him into making this epic journey, tempted to simply rove this fabulous mythic land and see its other legendary wonders: cities paved with streets of gold, houses with roofs of precious stones, people as powerful as gods, great sages who could command the elements at will...all his life the Yavana had heard inspirational tales of the lands of the Indus and the great wonders here. Yet apart from the few exotic creatures, all he had seen until now were cows, cows and more cows.

It had been a relief to finally see the distant rooftops and boundary walls of the city his guides called Mathura. They had informed him that he was now at his destination and was to wait here and lay siege to the golden city. That was their term for it: Golden City. From where he stood, and now maintained camp, it did not seem either golden or great. It looked like any city he had besieged or invaded before. A motley collection of hovels and mansions contained within battered walls. Even the early morning sunlight did not catch any reflections or cast off any highlights: those were not roofs studded with diamonds nor domes of gold.

He had a growing suspicion that his hosts here, especially the mysterious benefactor who had engineered his campaign and enticed him into invading the mythic land of the Indus on the pretext of sacking its greatest and richest city had done so with ulterior motives. It was a shrewd plan: entice a foreign invader here to sack and destroy an enemy city, wait for the foreigners to depart as they surely would in time, and then take over control of the defeated kingdom for oneself.

Had the destination not been a city in the fabled land of the Indus, no foreigner would have been foolish enough to fall for that old ruse. But the land of the Indus was a mythic place unexplored by any Yavana king or chief. And the Yavana prince was seeking to make a name by going where no Yavana had gone before. And so he had bitten the bait. But now that he was here, he could see it clearly for what it was: a ruse. Nothing more or less. He would have words with the mysterious benefactor who had lured him here. And then he would have swords with him too. He had decided this, calmly, before his men had even begun setting up camp last evening. And had woken this morning with the full intention of seeking out that treacherous rogue and asking him a few pert questions at sword-point before dispatching him to the land of his Indic ancestors.

But this morning, before he could do much more than his ablutions, the gates of the city had opened. And now a man had sallied forth. The

excitement in the Yavana's camp was palpable. Even he could not help but feel intrigued. Whatever he might have expected, this was not it. He had expected the city to react aggressively to the sight of the great foreign invasion force: to send out heralds perhaps, to beg for mercy. To send arrow swarms. Champions. Hawks. Fabulous creatures on foot or by air or even beneath the earth. But not this. Not this at all.

He frowned, squinting as he peered from horseback at the distant speck moving away from the city gates, which were already closing behind him. So apparently the individual had been sent forth solo. That must mean he was a herald of some sort. Even a champion would bring at least a page or servant to carry his weapons. Well, it would be interesting to see what this Indic herald might have to say. The Yavana prepared to wait.

But as the moments passed and the figure travelled farther from the city gates, it became evident that this was no herald. The person who had left the city was not even coming towards the Yavana forces. He was heading in a different direction altogether.

His men realized it at the same time as he did: they turned to him as one and watched his reaction.

"It must be a courier," they said. "Despatched to some ally kingdom to ask for aid and reinforcements. What shall we do, Prince of India?"

The title had been conferred upon him before his departure. It had been his mother's idea. By naming him as the conqueror of the land he was setting forth to invade, she said, he would already be regarded as successful. Once a name caught on, the reality hardly mattered. He expected that he was now and would forever be, Prince of India. It was a name he could live with. After all, he was Prince of India now, was he not?

But who was this lone figure leaving the besieged city and where was he heading?

He mused on his course of action. Ordinarily, he would send out a few men to catch and kill the escapee, ensuring that if he was a courier, his message would not reach its intended ears, and thereby sending a message to the besieged that he was not to be trifled with. But he felt inclined to let the courier get away unharmed this once. After all, he had not come all the way from Grekos just to set up camp and put his feet up. If the courier fetched more Indians and that led to a stiffer resistance, so be it. The Prince of India wanted a fight: he had come halfway across the world looking for one.

He was about to give the order to let the man pass when something happened. The air before him rippled, as if in a heat wave, and a shimmering figure took shape in the haze.

3

“Lord of the Yavanas,” said the Indian sage.

His long white beard and red ochre robes were clearly visible, despite the insubstantial nature of his appearance. Yet he was only an apparition. The Prince of India could easily see his closest advisors and other men through the hazy form of the sage: they were waiting patiently for his response and command, accustomed to his long periods of introspection, respectful enough to wait as long as was needed. They had ridden and fought with him a dozen years or more and all trusted his judgement enough to know that even if he chose not to speak while the escapee got away, it was for good reason.

What they did not know, *could not* know, was that he was distracted by a ghostly apparition of an ancient Indian sage that had suddenly appeared in their midst; an apparition not visible to their eyes. How this was possible, the Yavana did not know or care. All he knew was that the sage was here again and that he was the same sage who had guided him on this long journey, assuring him that the trip would not be wasted or his efforts in vain. And he was more than pleased to see him, since he had a bone or two to pick with him

“Sage Narada,” replied the Prince of India, waving to his aides to leave him. They complied without question or curiosity, accustomed to his eccentricities and whims. Every ruler had his peculiarities. Some drank. Others used substances other than alcohol. Some had vices or appetites that could only be described as...excessive. The Yavana prince was relatively simple to understand: he craved only to conquer and expand his

empire. Since their reputation and career advancement was reliant upon his success in achieving his goals, they were happy to comply with his minor whims. If he chose to address invisible Indian sages from time to time and ask them for guidance or advice, so be it. They had all known lieges who had indulged in far, far less tolerable eccentricities. On the list of intolerable eccentricities of kings, talking to non-existent sages was probably ranked among the lowest. They retired to a distance sufficient that they could still observe and protect their lord, yet could not hear his words.

“Prince, I am pleased to welcome you to the land of power and plenty,” said the ancient sage, bowing gracefully with joined palms in the Indian manner. “We have a saying in our culture: Atithi Devo Bhavya. It means ‘A Guest Is As A God’.”

The Yavana smiled. There was a sword edge in that smile. “If that is so, then you treat your Gods most strangely.”

“My Lord,” the sage appeared puzzled. “Do I sense discontentment in your tone?”

“You do,” said the Prince of India. “Thus far, I have seen nothing resembling your much-promised land of gold and treasure.” He gestured to the city in the distance. “All I see are common structures and a land attractive in some ways yet no more plentiful or treasure-strewn than the Grekos islands. Indeed, I have seen more treasure and exotic sights in lands much farther east. The great city of Babylon and her neighboring kingdoms are far richer in sights and spoils.”

Narada inclined his head. “Do not be too hasty to judge my homeland, great prince. A wealthy man does not put his greatest treasures out on the

street for all to see. Some lock their wealth behind steel coffers. Others disguise it in mundane garb.” He gestured to the same city in the distance. “Besides, Mathura itself is only a stepping stone to the true wealth that awaits you.”

The Yavana drew his sword. The sound was keening and audible on the still morning air. Even his aides several dozen yards away heard the distinctive sound and caught the flash of early sunlight upon the tempered steel. They turned to glance curiously as their Prince pointed his weapon at a point in the air that might correspond to the height of a tall man’s throat —except that there was no man standing before their Prince. They quickly averted their eyes and pretended to be absorbed in some mundane conversation, not wishing to embarrass their lord by witnessing his self-delusion.

To the Yavana’s eyes, the point of his sword lay precisely at the bobbing bulge on the sage’s throat. The point touched the skin delicately enough to prick it without drawing blood. He did not know if the apparition could be harmed by Grekos steel but it was more the gesture and attitude he wished to present than any actual threat.

The sage’s face reflected his displeasure. “What means this insolence, Prince?”

“I am not sure if you are to be trusted, sage,” said the Yavana. “I did not conquer so many great nations and overthrow so many powerful kings without learning much about human nature and the myriad ways in which human beings manipulate one another to achieve their own ends.”

“I see,” replied the ghostly apparition, moving so that the sword point passed through his throat and emerged behind his spine without causing

any apparent harm to his person. “As you can see, your mortal weapons cannot harm me. I speak to you from another plane through the use of a Vortal. Even your formidable army will not avail you here.”

The Yavana kept the sword pointed a moment longer then lowered it reluctantly. “Perhaps. But why should I trust you any more? Why should I not turn my army around and march back home the way I came? Give me one good reason to stay?”

Narada paused, observing the Greek’s face and judging his emotion state. “Here is your reason,” he said shortly. Then he raised a massive wildwood staff in his hand and gestured.

The Yavana started. The air above and around him exploded. One moment he was standing on a rise overlooking a vast plain with only the dusty outline of Mathura city in the distance. The next moment, he was standing upon the rooftop of a great and wondrous palace, overlooking a city such as nothing he had ever beheld before even in his most fantastical dreams. He gasped and fell to his knees, overwhelmed.

Narada lowered his staff, smiling grimly down at the Yavana. “Now do you understand why you are here? That is what lies in store for you if you do as I say.”

“What place is that?” asked the Yavana, gulping in breath. “I saw...roofs of diamonds and emeralds! Paving stones of solid gold! Precious gems studded into walls, each the size of a fist! Flying chariots. Vast battlements. Surely it is a city of Gods?”

Narada shook his head. “A city built by Gods, yes. But occupied by mere mortals. It can be yours, alongwith all within its walls. You have only to do as I say.”

The Yavana’s aides were glancing again in his direction, exchanging words as they saw him on his knees. They began moving in his direction, concerned. He rose slowly to his feet, head still reeling from the vision he had been shown. “What is the name of the city, great sage? Tell me what I must do to possess its spoils! I will do anything you say!”

Narada raised his staff and gestured in the direction the Yavana had been gazing moments earlier. “A person is attempting to flee the city of Mathura. Follow that person and slay him. Once you do that, I will take you to the city.” He paused. “The city named Dwarka.”

And with that he vanished in a swirl of morning mist through which the Yavana’s aides walked unsuspectingly as they approached their lord and master with expressions of concern.

He shook off their queries. “Fetch my horse,” he said. “We shall ride after the courier.”

4

In the scented dimness of his imperial tent, Jarasandha descended into the Vortal. He wished to observe the Yavanas sacking Mathura, crushing the Yadava capital to dust and bone fragments, reaving and pillaging, wreaking their legendary havoc on the city and people that had eluded him for so long. No city, no kingdom, no power had ever resisted him successfully. Many had tried. Some had held out for a great length of time. But eventually, by one means or another, he had invaded. Intruded. Triumphed. Prevailed.

After witnessing Krishna's rout of his erstwhile son-in-law, he had believed it would take his own imperial army to bring the son of Vasudeva to his pretty knees. Yet after seventeen days of warfare--or rather, the same day repeated seventeen times--he had definitive evidence that mere mortal forces could not easily defeat the Slayer of Kamsa. It would take more, much more.

The Yavana had been his solution. Even Krishna could not resist the world's greatest army as well as protect his people at once. Either one would be crushed today. It hardly mattered which. To crush Krishna's people was to crush Krishna himself. Jarasandha would settle for seeing Krishna's spirit broken and to see him brought to his knees emotionally, if not physically. Today, he expected to witness that glorious sight, either in fact or in essence.

The miasma of the Vortal exuded a strange energy today. The initial odors one smelled while passing through the interdimensional passageway were

the same, but immediately after, on coming through, he sensed a significant change. Something was different. What?

He found his answer momentarily.

The passage opened like a ballooning tunnel suspended in mid air, some hundreds of yards above ground. The location was less than a kilometer from Mathura. A solitary figure was heading away from the city. Several dozen others were giving pursuit, some kilometers behind yet gaining fast.

The texture of the Vortal passageway was not unlike a billowing satin sheet, one thin and transparent enough that one felt as if a fingernail could tear a rent and rip it open, spilling Jarasandha down from this fatal height. Yet he knew this was not so: the Vortal was as solid as time itself; as relentless as the mind's energy. Just because it happened to be invisible and almost inexplicable, just like those other two concepts, did not make it insubstantial or unreal. Merely daunting.

He used his mind's energy to drive the Vortal forward, enabling him to continue observing the pursuit of the escapee from Mathura. Who was it? Why was a single person fleeing the city? And why was the Yavana prince and his army giving pursuit instead of doing what they had come all the way from the distant land to do: sack Mathura?

Something was amiss here and Jarasandha intended to find out what it was. He drove the Vortal downwards, like a snake undulating to wriggle lower to the earth, descending in curving steps until he was low enough and close enough to recognize individual figures and identifying characteristics, moving faster than a running man yet not quite as fast as a galloping horse.

There was something familiar about that solitary figure leading the chase. Clad from head to foot in yellow garments that shone and reflected the light of the rising sun, he moved with a familiar feminine grace. Jarasandha had watched that same grace on the battlefield too many times over the past seventeen days not to recognize it at once.

“Krishna!” he breathed, furious at once. That solitary figure running away from Mathura was Krishna. Which meant that some new game was afoot here. Quite literally, since Krishna was on foot. He punched the energy of the Vortal hard, tilting his head forward, eyes gleaming angrily as he drove the passageway forward, like a giant worm moving through the air, suspended by unseen forces.

The Yavana Prince was pursuing Krishna, accompanied by his aides and men at war. And in their wake came the rest of the army, lumbering prodigiously as befitted a behemoth of that gargantuan size. Seen from this vantage point, it was like watching a giant snake undulating in the early morning sunlight, snaking forward slowly, its cold blood warming and energizing it into sluggish movement.

Jarasandha punched the Vortal harder, driving it downwards and forward at a faster rate. His goal was the lone figure running with lithe, agile steps ahead of the galloping Yavana forces. Jarasandha raced to catch up with Krishna and to try to get low enough to see. Neither he nor his sorcerous passageway could be seen by anyone on the ground he knew, yet as he approached he slowed the progress of the Vortal worm...just in case. When he was low enough and close enough to see the racing figure clearly, he drew in breath sharply.

It was Krishna, no doubt about it.

Yet he had never seen Krishna like this before.

Dressed all in yellow silk which contrasted starkly with his jet-black skin. A curl of hair upon his bared chest. *Srivatsa*, it is called, *that lock of hair curled upon his chest*, Jarasandha thought then wondered at how he could know such a thing or how a lock of hair upon a man's chest could possibly have a name! Upon Krishna's neck was a glittering gem that caught every ray of light from the risen sun and refracted it across the landscape, fracturing the world into glassine fragments. *Kausubha*, the jewel at his throat is named.

Krishna's arms were longer than they had seemed before, during the seventeen days of battle. Long enough that they reached his knees. But that was impossible surely? Impossible or not, it was so. His cheeks glowed ruddily like the heart of a fresh lotus. The smile on his face was infectious, illuminating the world, glowing brighter than Surya himself. His face itself was a lotus resplendent. Dangling from his ears were enormous earrings shaped like...crocodiles? Yes.

Krishna turned to gaze up at Jarasandha.

A blade stabbed Jara's heart.

Krishna was looking directly back at him as he ran, over his shoulder. There was nothing else in that quadrant of his view: he would hardly be gazing back the open sky.

He grinned brightly at Jarasandha, then winked.

Jarasandha balked.

Manipulating the Vortal like the reins of a horse team, he yanked himself back, back, back, with such incredible force, the worming passageway of energy spun back over its own length, turned over and struck ground, burrowing deep within the earth, then tunneling back with incredible speed.

Mere moments later, he burst free from the Vortal, into the scented dimness of his own imperial tent. A pair of Mohinis on guard at the entrance of the tent reacted to the exhalation he gave out: panicked and hoarse. The Emperor of Magadha was not wont to issue hoarse panicked outbursts of that sort. Yet his subsequent words left no doubt it was he and they settled for glancing uneasily at one another but remained at their post. Ensuring their Lord's safety was important; interrupting his privacy at an unguarded moment could well cost them their own lives.

5

The chase was long and fierce. The Yavanas were on horseback and chariot and carriage--the frontriders at least, themselves a sizable army--and Krishna was just a man on foot with barely a few kilometers lead. Yet each time the Yavana Prince felt certain he would catch up with Krishna at any minute, Krishna eluded him again. It was impossible, he knew. One moment he would spy Krishna merely a few hundred yards ahead, walking at a brisk pace--not even running, mind you--and he would spur his own horse forward, closing the distance in moments. But somehow just as he came within shouting distance, close enough to fling a javelin or loose an arrow on the go, Krishna appeared to be the same distance ahead that he had been earlier. The Yavana would ride faster, enraged, and still Krishna would remain ahead. At times, Krishna would even glance back, his white teeth flashing in his dark face, grinning at his pursuers: this would cause the Prince to goad his horse and army even more. Yet it was to no avail. No matter how hard they rode or how fast they covered ground, Krishna always remained just out of reach, eluding them by a mere few hundred yards.

“This is Indian sorcery,” his aides told him as the morning wore on to noon and their horses began to tire, then grow dangerously exhausted. The army had traveled nonstop from their homelands, driven by the promise of Indian spoils. This new pursuit was ill-advised. And because the Prince was so certain he was on the right track, he had instructed the entire army to follow. Already, their forces were stretched out for many dozen yojanas behind them, extending not only to the city of Mathura but far beyond. Even though it might take them days before they fully left Mathura behind, the fact was they were leaving their destination without having achieved their purpose. It did not take a brilliant military mind to realize

that they were departing from all logic and common sense to pursue a phantom instead of a real goal.

“Even if we catch this Indian prince,” they said to one another, brows knit in concern, “what will we have achieved? He cannot even be worth a ransom or else he would not be traveling on foot, fleeing his own city unescorted? We have left the richest city in the Indus to pursue a ghost runner.”

And the term was apt for as the hours stretched into a day and the day turned into a second day, it became evident that their quarry was no ordinary man on foot. There was something at work here that was more than human. No mortal man could keep running for a full day and night without being caught by the fastest horses in Grekos. What was more: he was not even running! He was merely walking briskly, his skirts--they did not know that the Indian garment was called a dhoti--swirling as he went. Even more disconcerting was the manner in which he frequently turned and grinned at them, as if luring them on.

“And if this is Krishna, as your Lord says he is,” they murmured uneasily, “he is fabled to be a god among Indians. A great warrior and lover. This could all be part of a deception on his part. He could be leading us into a trap or an ambush.”

Yet the Prince’s supporters--for he had some--pointed out that action was better than inaction. That the so-called “richest city in the world” as it had been claimed to be, had turned out to be disappointing in the extreme. At least this way they might find their way to some more desirable prize. As for riding into a trap or ambush, what did the greatest army in the world have to fear? What ambush could waylay a force of their size? What trap could contain such a great juggernaut of war? Bring it on! They had come

here to fight and chasing was better than standing still and holding siege for long wearying months.

So they continued giving chase. And Krishna continued to elude them. Days passed. Then weeks. And soon they fell into a rhythm, driven by stubborn persistence. Now that they had followed him thus far, they may as well continue until he was caught. They were far, far from Mathura now anyway. There was little point in turning back and doing so would make them seem to be foolish now to their own men. Besides, as at the beginning, Krishna continued to seem just within reach, as if they would surely catch up with him within the hour, certainly within the day.

As the days went by this way, they knew that they were being deluded in some manner but could not tell how. Krishna continued on foot, they continued on horse back and chariot. They came close enough that they could see the individual teeth in his white smile each time he looked back enticingly, but somehow he always regained his lead and they found themselves racing merely to keep up.

Yet they could not stop. It was as if they were under a spell. “Sorcery,” muttered the detractors from time to time. But even their objections were desultory. They were frustrated beyond measure: they wanted to see this Indian prince-god caught now. They could not sleep or eat or resume their lives as before until they had him.

Finally, when it seemed that he would lead them on this way forever, Krishna slowed. It took them some time to realize that he was slowing because he was climbing. The landscape had changed from the vast flat plains and lush green valleys to a gradient. They were heading up into mountain territory. Soon, they saw great white-topped peaks ahead. Surely these were the fabled Himalayan mounts of which so many great tales

were told? Had they come all the way here? So far up North? Surely not! Yet it seemed they had.

Somehow, their pursuit of Krishna had led them up to the peaks of the world's highest mountain range.

Still, they chased him, more determined than ever to catch their quarry.

And still Krishna led them onwards and upwards, grinning and enticing them to follow.

6

Something very strange was going on. Jarasandha had followed the progress of the Yavana army in their pursuit of Krishna for weeks now. By this time, only the dust cloud from the tailenders of the Yavana army procession was visible from the vicinity of Mathura. The main body was far north, moving at the same breakneck speed it had been maintaining this past fortnight or two. The trail would have been laughably easy to follow anyway but the sheer number of fallen horses, wagon-uksan, even soldiers and support staff was prodigious. A novice to the art of war and large campaigns could be forgiven for assuming that a great battle had raged along that trail: thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, lay dead of exhaustion, dehydration, illness, or from the infighting that invariably broke out when a campaign turned sour.

This campaign had turned sour before it truly began: after the months spent traversing hostile alien lands to reach the fabled Indic continent, the harried army had been shocked by the realization that the mythic golden city was little more than a dusty collection of hovels and battered mansions. Before they could even recover from this shock they had been pressed into the pursuit of a lone enemy on foot. To what end? It was beyond madness.

Most of the Yavana army were mercenaries who had sold every possession and property, including their spouses and children in many cases, to raise the funds required to equip themselves for this ambitious campaign. They depended on the spoils they had been promised at the end of the road. To be fed only dust and broken illusions was unacceptable. It was treasonous treachery. And their anger, rage and frustration vented itself first on their colleagues, then on their commanding officers--usually men of lineage or

noble blood who could afford horses, chariots, tents and better weaponry-- and if the madness of this quest continued thus, it would eventually explode into full-blown rebellion.

An army--any army--is a monster weaned on blood and destruction. If you cannot press it into productive service and keep it occupied, it will gnaw its own feet out of frustration. When it tires of the taste of its own sour disappointment, it will turn on you, its owner, master, leader, general, king, whatever you choose to call yourself. And then it will run loose through the world, like havoc unleashed and unbounded. Then try to tame the wanton beast. Go ahead and try.

Jarasandha's spasas kept their distance, stomachs turned by the stench of rotting corpses and bitter disappointment that the Yavana army left in its wake like a decrepit tail. They reported back to him from time to time on its progress: the Yavanas had followed Krishna all the way to the Himalayan foothills. Now they were venturing up to the main Himalayan ranges, with winter fast approaching. Were they truly fools as all foreign whiteskins were rumored to be or merely bewitched by the Slayer? Most favored the latter rationale, especially since many of them were white-brown hybrids and their own lord Jara was the child of white western aliens. Yes, it must be brahmanic sorcery. Why else would a force of that size leave a prize like Mathura and go racing like madmen after a single man on foot? More importantly, why were they unable to catch that man on foot even after weeks of hard riding?

"He is leading them to their doom," they reported to their master. "Once they go into the Himavat ranges and winter falls upon them, they shall never return alive." Jarasandha snarled and dismissed them in disgust.

Then he strapped on his belt and armor and called for his chariot. Let the Yavanas go to their doom then. He had other business to attend to.

Soon afterwards, he entered the gates of the city that had once been Mathura.

Once been, because whatever this place had been before, it was no longer. The empty streets, deserted hallways, desolate houses, rooftops where birds nested freely, mansions where rats and other rodents were in full occupation, the entire city laying abandoned....this was only what Mathura had once been. There were no corpses, not a single body or sign of recent violence. Every living soul had left here weeks earlier, that was evident. But how? There had not been a single moment of a single day or night that Jarasandha's sharpest-eyed spasas had not been eyeballing this city and the entire surrounding countryside as carefully as vultures waiting for a dying tusker to fall.

Nobody had left through the gates, over the walls, through the wells, tunneled underground, or up into the air.

He could not even fathom when they had left!

Had it been after the Yavana arrived? Or before?

The Yavana had arrived on the 18th day of Jarasandha's campaign. For the preceding 17 days, Jarasandha had battled Krishna, Balarama and the Mathuran forces daily by using his shrewd ruse of shifting them through the Vortal so they were constantly defending, always fighting for survival.

The day before the Yavana arrived, the 17th of his Vortal campaign, they had all been here. He had no way of knowing for sure now but his instinct told him that on the 18th day itself they had gone. He had checked with his spasas and seen for himself as well: not a single bobbing head, or curious child or even a courier pigeon had been sighted in the city the day Krishna had emerged from the gates and started leading the Yavanas on their long merry quest. That was nigh impossible: surely someone or something would have been visible, if only a curious pair of eyes watching their Lord leave?

Or least Balarama, he thought now as he dismounted from his chariot before the palace of King Ugrasena. The vast battlements were eerily deserted, a sight that was causing his own men much discomfiture: he could hear the whispered talk of ghosts and invisible Mathurans watching. He even wondered if there could be any credence to such thoughts: could the Mathurans still be here? Somehow cloaked by an invisibility spell by Krishna? Was that why only Krishna had run out of the gates to draw the Yavanas away? Leaving Balarama behind to watch over and protect the people?

He walked the echoing hallways of the great palace where he had once held sway through his figurehead son-in-law "King" Kamsa. Ah, he had dreamed such dreams for this kingdom. Such plans he had once had. For his future grandsons and grand-daughters to rule and reign here.

Abandoned dreams now. Empty houses filled with stale ambitions.

"Where are they?" he asked aloud, his voice echoing off the high curved roof of the great sabha hall high above where only pigeons roosted now. The once-proud marbled floor was stained with bird guano, rodents

scurrying openly in the corners and through holes in walls. Everything remained as it had once been: the furnishings, paintings, walls, pillars, roofs, houses, mansions, palaces. Only the occupants of the city had vanished in the blink of an eye. Overnight. Instantly.

How? Where?

Those were the only two questions he had. Even the first was irrelevant except if it aided him in answering the second: Where? That was the crux. Where had the people of the city all gone?

He heard a commotion and turned to see his ally kings arriving, all looking around in frank amazement and venial covetous greed at the palatial surroundings.

“Sire, we have Mathura now,” said one of his aides happily. “It is our’s at last.”

Jarasandha was too preoccupied to backhand the man. He would kill him later for his stupidity, when the man was least expecting it, and when he would die without even knowing why. Idiot.

“No, we don’t,” he said softly, heard only by himself. “We only have the empty nest. The golden peacock has flown.”

The Yavana was exultant. The weeks of futile pursuit had depleted his army, sapped their morale and driven his resources to the limit. He had thought the Indian prince would never stop! Even when the man began climbing the craggy foothills, then ascended to the higher peaks, finally climbing a sloping mountainside that seemed to rise up beyond the clouds, he seemed unstoppable, proceeding at the same relentless pace. How could any man keep running and now climbing at such a pace?

The answer was: no man could. He was clearly the God-Child Krishna of whom so much had been narrated, much of it softly and in hushed tones of awe, to the Yavana as he had been nurtured and raised to ascend to his throne. It was common among his people of the Grekos islands to wrest power by force and from the time he had been able to walk and talk on his own, he had been prepared to overthrow the current king of his tribe and take his place.

It was likely that the king was his father--likely, but not certain, because only the woman who had partnered with the man and who had birthed him could know for certain, and often, due to internecine politics, she might not want to tell her own children the identity of their true father. But in any case, he had been raised to kill him and take his place and had done so, listening all the while to tales of a mythic Indian child-god who grew up battling demons, dallying with comely cowherders, and had killed his own maternal uncle in a wrestling bout.

The legendary Slayer of Kamsa, Flute of Vrindavan, Lord of Mathura, and many other titles by which he was renowned, was a highly regarded figure

among the Yavana peoples: both for his ferocity as a warrior and reputation as a lover but also for his inscrutability. To kill a man who might or might not be one's biological father in order to ascend to his throne was politics: to kill one's own uncle and then put *his* father on the throne was mystical! It was this kind of exotic behavior that intrigued the Yavanas and other western peoples. What sort of land was this Indus? What sort of people were these? What was this morality they called Dharma?

Krishna was clearly a god.

Even if the self-titled Prince of India had had any doubts before crossing the Indus River, he had none now. After weeks of riding on foaming horses and having steed after steed collapse and burst their hearts from exertion without being able to catch up with a man on foot--not even running, merely walking at a brisk pace--was beyond impossible. It was divine intervention.

Yes, Krishna was definitely a God. He was certain of that now. And despite what his aides and followers thought, it was neither madness nor sorcery that had brought him all the way here on this insane quest.

He desired to kill the God.

For once did this, he would surely be the Prince of India. Or even the King of India.

After he killed the greatest God in this god-full land, even the people of the Indus must bow down and acknowledge him in reverence.

That was why he had pursued Krishna so relentlessly. Bringing his great army in his wake, pushing them to the limits of endurance, suffering more casualties from exhaustion and exertion than he might have in an actual pitched battle or siege.

And now, as he climbed the mountainside, far ahead of even his fittest aides and champions, he knew he was close. Soon he would have Krishna cornered, in a place from which he could not elude capture. And then he would have his opportunity: to face and fight the God-child Himself. Swayam Bhagavan as he was reputed to be. God Incarnate.

His breath wafted out in visible white puffs now, and he could hear the gasping and rasping of his followers as they struggled to keep pace. But he had grown up among the mountain tribes of the north-eastern mountains of his island-kingdom and climbed as surely as a billy goat. He relished the physical exertion after months of sitting his ass on a horse's backside. He enjoyed the crisp bracing mountain air. The epic view of the great northern range. The sound of his own heart beating, the loudest audible evidence of life.

And the sound of his quarry only yards ahead and above.

Finally, the chase ended.

He came out onto a ledge large enough for a dozen men to stand or a chariot to be turned. Not that a chariot could be brought all the way up here. He glanced back down. From the antlike specks that his army had turned into far down below, he estimated that he was some ten thousand yards above ground. The mountainside was dotted with only a few

thousand of his men, those still able to climb after the long and brutally wearing chase and journey. The nearest ones were still a hundred yards below and struggling, their upturned white faces pinched and ruddy with effort.

He smiled and turned back to the ledge. A few steps, crunching underfoot because there was frost here at this height, and swirls of powdery snow in the chill winds that wafted, curling icy fingers down his neck and licking the warm fat sweat drops, and he found himself at the mouth of a cave.

It was pitch dark inside and curved. Once he went in, he would not return without having accomplished his purpose. Nor would the Indian prince-god. Only one of them would come out alive.

The Yavana believed it would be he.

He hefted his sword in a powerfully muscled hand and started walking. Yards inside, the cave swallowed him whole. Snow swirled on the ledge outside as the wind quickened. In moments, there was nothing to indicate any living being had ever been here or would be again.

The Yavana prince gave himself time to let his eyes adjust to the gloom inside the cave. Only when his eyes had fully adjusted to the darkness did he proceed deeper. The cave walls curved and turned inwards upon themselves and he might have knocked himself senseless or injured his limbs had he just gone on without caution. But as a mountain boy, he knew well enough not to rush in. He used his sword as a probing device, holding it out and turning it this way and that, using its tip to feel for the walls and roof of the cave.

Before long, he found the curved walls straightening and then all of a sudden found himself in a straight stretch. Although there was no light here, he found he could make out the outline of things dimly. He knew that there were lichen and mosses growing in deep caverns that exuded a kind of luminescence that might be used for light. Not enough to see by clearly but sufficient to make out one's surroundings. He guessed that some must grow here on these walls, kept warm by some inner current of moist air.

He could make out the curved upper portion of the cave, some yards above his own head. It opened wider and taller here, and he guessed that this was the largest part of the cave. He sensed rather than saw a dark background some ten yards further on and knew that it was the back wall of the cave. He did not know if there were tunnels or passageways leading further inside or doubling back. But from what he could see now, it appeared that this was the extent of the cave.

He moved slowly through the darkness, sword raised. Ready for anything. For he knew that the child-god who had slain his own uncle would not lure

him all the way here merely to converse. He did not expect words, only violence. It was the language he spoke most fluently.

His foot struck something.

Something soft and yielding yet firm enough that it remained unmoved.

He pushed at the object again with his foot, trying to feel it out.

His sword remained ready to strike.

The object remained still as a stone.

But it was no stone. He could feel it yield beneath his sandaled sole.

It was flesh or something akin to it.

It could not be an animal or he would surely have smelled it. He knew bears hibernated in these caves and although it seemed too soon for a bear to retreat, it was possible that it was merely sleeping. But no bear would fail to react to an intruder for so long, nor would it permit the intruder to kick it the way he was kicking it now.

It could not be a dead bear or any other dead animal because it would not only have smelled then, it would have stunk to high heaven within this

enclosed and almost airless space.

What was it then?

He kicked harder this time, feeling the satisfying softness of another part of the thing that lay there.

Then he used the tip of his sword to probe carefully. He expected at any moment to feel the violence of retaliation as the boy-God fought back viciously, suddenly, with the powerful sorcery he was reputed to deploy.

The Yavana was not afraid of sorcery. In his land, he was considered a god too. All kings were. For every extraordinary thing that men do not witness for themselves, they assumed to have some element of supernatural power. When it came to kings and priests, they assumed it even when it was witnessed with their own eyes. What else were gods, they felt, if not powerful men and women who lived above the reach of normal law and limitations?

The Yavana considered himself no less a God than this Krishna fellow.

If Krishna had his tales of derring-do, so did the Yavana. If Krishna could be known as a God, so could the Yavana.

Once he had slain the Slayer, the Yavana would proclaim himself God of India. So much better than mere Prince of India.

He raised his sword and pointed it directly at the person lying on the ground before him, for he was certain it was a person now. Nothing else felt that way when kicked. He had kicked enough prone men and women to know what it felt like and enough children too to know that this was not one.

“Rise and fight me, coward,” he said, his voice loud and echoing in the cavern. “I have come across the world to do battle with you, at least do me the courtesy of lifting your weapon and defending yourself!”

The person on the ground stirred. The Yavana’s heartbeat increased pace. He hefted his sword in a new posture.

“Who?” muttered a voice, speaking a language whose words were incomprehensible to the Yavana but whose meaning was crystal clear. “*Who?*”

“It is I!” the Yavana cried out. “Prince-God of the Yavanas. I have come to end your stay on this earth. Rise up and face me one final time. Let me kill you with dignity.”

Suddenly, light leaped into being in the darkness.

The Yavana leaped back, more startled by the light than he would have been by the flinging of a weapon or striking of a limb.

The light glowed within the eyes of a man, he saw. Deep blue iridescence, exuded from within the man’s being, released through his eyes. The light

had always been within the man's eyes. All the man had done was open his eyes to release it. It had been the faint effervescence from his closed eyes that had enabled the Yavana to see a little in this space, not some luminous lichen or glowing moss.

Now, as the man's eyes opened fully, the light that shone forth was formidable, terrible, blinding. As was the man's deafening cry of rage.

“*WHO?*” cried the man with a blasting tone that shook the very spine of the Yavana and echoed endlessly off the walls of the cave. Even the aides following up the mountainside, some about to reach the ledge of the cave, heard the voice and saw the blue glow burst from the open cave mouth. One of them exclaimed and released his hold on the cliff face to clutch at his ears, face contorting with pain as he was assaulted by the shrill sound of the single word.

The Yavana screamed, dropping his sword and reaching for his ears too. Blood spurted from both ears as his eardrums burst.

“**WHO?**” asked the man in the cave.

And this time the fire from his eyes blazed out in a great fireball of blue light, enveloping the Yavana and scorching him to a skeleton instantly. The skeleton was charred to fine ash which swirled and settled on the cave floor with a faint spattering sound. The Yavana was dead even before he knew what was killing him.

9

AS the Yavana perished in a burst of blue brahman shakti, the reverberations set off by the “**Who?**” of the One in the cave shuddered throughout the mountain, spreading like spider cracks across a glacier. Millions of tons of snow, ice and rock accumulated over centuries lay undisturbed in that Himalayan wilderness. So immense was the power of that voice, so deep its booming vibrations, that the very depths of the Himalayas shuddered.

As the motes of blue shakti evaporated at the cave entrance, leaving no trace of the perished Yavana except a few footprints in the powdery snow, the Yavana’s followers paused, sensing something amiss. They had heard the booming “**Who?**” and were climbing as quickly as they could to reach their master but now they hesitated, feeling the unease that comes before the crisis. Attached to the face of the mountain, they felt its being tremble in sympathy to the great cry of power.

Farther down, stretching across the mountainside, the valley below, and across the craggy slopes of the Himalayas for yojanas, the army of the Yavanas paused as well. Every soldier, cook and aide in that great force felt the deep reverberations within the mountain range’s belly. Everyone turned to glance at his fellow, feeling that something terrible was to follow.

In response, the snow began to crumble at the peaks of the mountains. It fell like powdery cotton, floating down to drift into the valley. In its wake came the mounds of packed snow from the past months of winterfall. This fell harder, in chunks and pieces. Then the harder snow, then the ice and

finally, the very rock itself began to yield and tumble. Even before the first flurries of dislodged snowflakes from the peaks could reach the ground, the avalanche was in full spate, a great army of nature roaring down from those tremendous heights. Like a hundred akshohini of elephants, riding the chariots of gravity, propelled by the horses of acceleration, bearing the spears and swords and maces of jagged edges, blade-sharp ice shards and bone-crushing boulders, the avalanche descended on the Yavana army.

First to die were the Yavana's followers, swatted off the mountainside like ants washed away by a waterfall. Their mangled bodies joined the onrush as, in moments, the great roaring wall of stone and ice and snow fell upon the main body of the army. Even the shrillest screams of brave men were drowned out completely beneath the gargantuan roaring of the avalanche.

No army's charge could have wreaked such destruction or demolished that great force as completely and swiftly.

In the moments that followed, the bestial fury of the avalanche wiped out the entire Yavana army, carrying a storm of bodies miles away to land in a distant valley where the tail end of the army was still arriving, fighting bitterly over their disappointment at not finding any spoils of war in this mythic land of the Indus.

A cascade of other avalanches followed. In an hour, the only trace left of the greatest army ever assembled were the occasional spear or wagon wheel or broken limb sticking out between fallen boulders and jagged shards of glacial ice. Great mountain crags watched and listened impassively, unmoved by the epic scale of human destruction wrought with such facile ease.

Still later, as the dust and snow began to settle, the great ancient mountain ranges returned to their eternal state of stillness, resuming their long cold sleep.

The Yavana invasion had ended. For all time afterward, the legend of the lost army would remain a mystery. Back home in the Grekos islands and mainland, other Yavanas would speculate and wonder at what might have happened. Eventually, the belief would settle, like the dust of the avalanche, upon the opinion that the Yavana conqueror had been too young, too brash, too bold. That he had ventured too far beyond the edge of the known world, into the fabled perils of the Land of the Indus. And as could only be expected, he had fallen off the edge of the world, alongwith his great force.

For a great age thereafter, no Yavana would dare venture in this direction, though many would dream of it, emboldened by the myth of their forebear who had “fallen off the edge of India”, as the story came to be told. And eventually, another equally young, brash, bold Yavana would arise and vow to follow in those very same steps, bringing another even greater force of his countrymen to attempt to conquer the wealth and mysteries of the Land of the Indus, seeking to be remembered as the conqueror of the known world.

But that is another story for another time.

10

“Who?” the voice had asked in the blackness of the mountain cave. The Yavana had been unable to answer. As a result, he and his great fighting force had been extinguished from the earth as easily as a cascade extinguishing a swarm of fireflies. As the last echoes of the final avalanche died away, the cave returned to its perennial silence. Silence so palpable that it rang in one’s ears as clearly as a bell, filling the void of eternity.

The One in the cave was appeased by the Yavana’s extinguishment. For hours after the last motes of the intruder’s body had evaporated into the icy air, he remained standing in the pitch blackness of the grotto, his preternatural senses probing outward. In his mind’s eye he was able to view the destruction of the great army more vividly than a man looking out from the peak of mighty Himavat might have envisaged. He saw every death, every last man fall, ever horse and mule broken, every last life extinguished. Fireflies. Cascade.

Slowly, by degrees, he returned to himself. His consciousness drew inwards until once more it was contained within the limits of his own flesh, blood and bone. The cage of his body re-established its temporal dominance over his brahmanic essence, restraining it. His breathing slowed to the hibernation pace that had enabled him to survive the long stay in the cave. His mind sensed no further threat, no other presence. He began to prepare himself to return to the long slumber from which the Yavana had so rudely awakened him. His basal metabolic rate reduced steadily, controlled through the yogic science of pranayam breathing, the blood slowed in his veins and arteries, the heart itself beat less frequently. In moments, he was ready to lapse back into the deep dreamless sleep that

had enveloped him earlier. He was still lying supine on the cave floor, his body still partially in hibernation, and now he allowed himself to drift back in unconsciousness.

But even as his eyelids began to droop and he started to fall into the well of sleep, something alerted his senses. Through his closed eyelids, he sensed illumination within the darkened cave. He reacted. Opening his eyes he looked out angrily, ready to blast any intruder into ash again. His lips parted to utter the same challenge he had issued earlier to the Yavana.

But before he could mouth the single word, he saw the being that stood before him.

This was no mere mortal, like the Yavana.

This was a being of superior ilk. Jet black as a monsoon stormcloud, with flashes of deep blue light within his body, under his skin. Clad in a garb of yellow silk that contrasted with his crow black complexion yet enhanced his beauty. His face benevolent and beatific, glowed with a deep blue luminescence that could not be matched by any source on earth. Earrings shaped like alligators glittered and dangled from his sensually shaped ears. The One in the Cave observed the earrings stirring and realized that they did not merely resembled alligators, they *were* alligators. Life-size and very much alive. He could not fathom how life-size alligators could be dangling from a man's ears until he realized that this was clearly no mortal man. Scale and relation had no meaning where this being was concerned.

His body was lithe, athletic, beautifully shaped, his chest broad and sloping, his neck adorned with a vajayanti garland. He took a step toward the One and his gait was slow yet powerful, like a predator in his element.

And he glowed with an effulgence that bathed the entire cavern in brilliant blue light. Not merely a light that exuded from his pores but an illumination that simple filled every particle of space around him, leaving no shadows or unilluminated crevices. It produced an ethereal unearthly effect.

The One knew at once that he was in the presence of a great superior being. Reawakened and invigorated by the appearance of this person of power, he rose to his knees and bowed deeply, joining his palms in respectful greeting.

“Namaskaram, great one,” he said. “Welcome to my grotto.”

In response, the being merely smiled back at him, a teasing enigmatic coyness on his effeminate lips. The One found it difficult to look at him directly, so blinding was his effulgence. He kept his eyes lowered as he continued to speak.

“What brings a great being such as thee to this remote cavern?” he asked humbly. “You are barefoot yet you have climbed this great height with no scarring to your feet, as if you walked on rose petals rather than the thorny crags of this great precipice. You are lightly clad yet seem to feel not the extreme cold of this high snow-bound peak. Surely you cannot be a mortal. You are most certainly a Deva descended to earth for some great purpose.”

The yellow-clad one smiled silently, listening without speaking yet.

The One continued his eulogy: “Are you perhaps Surya, the sun god, for you give off an effulgence no less potent than the sun itself? Or perhaps you are Soma, the god of the moons, because your divine illumination is blue and cooling rather than heated like the sunlight? Or perhaps you are Indra himself? Or some other deva or celestial body in human guise?”

When the dark-skinned one remained cryptically silent, the One continued: “In any case, there is no doubt that you are supreme even among the three gods of gods, highest in the trimurti of Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva, Creator, Preserver and Destroyer of Creation. I say this with full confidence for I have seen all three of the supreme godheads and I recognize your greatness by its effusion of brahmanic power.”

The being with alligators for earrings tilted his head slightly, as if acknowledging the One in the Cave’s eulogy. The One bowed his own head in thanks then waited for the Being to respond.

11

When the Being did not respond for another period of time, the One in the Cave felt compelled to speak again rather than remain silent. He had experience with devas before and knew that to them, a few hours or days of human life were no measure of time at all: an entire mortal lifetime was as a flicker of an eyelid to a deva. He could remain waiting here for millennia before his celestial visitor spoke. So he continued the one-sided conversation in an attempt to hasten a response.

“Permit me to introduce this humble self, sire,” he said. “I am Mucukunda, son of Yuvanasva of Mandhata, of the line of Ikshwaku. An eon ago, the asuras struck terror into the hearts of their immortal foes, the devas. The devas solicited aid from all kshatriyas. Ever mindful of my kshatriya dharma, I, among many others, willingly provided protection to the race of gods and fought fiercely on their behalf. The campaign raged for an untold time until even I lost all sense of age and date, place and presence. Finally, a day came when I saw that I was alone on the field of battle surrounded only by corpses and gore. Then the devas descended from the sky in flaming chariots and blessed me for my efforts on their behalf. They said they had obtained the One named Karttikeya, he of supreme prowess, and henceforth Karttikeya could continue the work that not only I, but a thousand thousand other kshatriyas like myself, had done for countless years.”

“‘You have served us with great honor and efficacy,’ the Devas said unto me,” Mukucunda continued, keeping his hands joined and his aspect demure as he addressed the Shining One. “‘You put aside all personal desires and responsibilities, renounced the world of mortals, abdicated your own kingdom which was rich and filled with pleasures. You have

given up everything a man could desire from a mortal existence in order to serve us. You have honored kshatriyas throughout time and have been true to your word. Ask any boon of us and it shall be your's.””

““Great ones,’ I said to the Devas. ‘As you so wisely stated, I already possess all that any mortal could desire: a rich and bountiful kingdom, a beautiful wife, fine daughters and sons, loving kinsfolk, wise ministers and advisers, loyal citizens...I ask only that I be permitted to return home to them to live out the rest of my days in peaceful occupation. That is boon enough for me. For a man who is content should know well enough not to desire anything further. Contentment is itself the greatest boon of all.””

“Thus saying, I bowed to the Devas reverentially and awaited their benevolence. But they appeared sad and forlorn, exchanging mournful glances amongst their number. Finally, they spoke again unto me, saying ‘Oh, beloved Mukucunda, in your contentment lies an age of wisdom. Would that we could grant you this request. Sadly, your service on our behalf has kept you away from mortal affairs for far longer than a mortal lifetime. Many generations have passed since you left your fine kingdom, beautiful queens and excellent kinsfolk. Not one of them remain alive today. Not only that, even your descendants have merged into other tribes and nations, and your lineage itself is lost in the annals of history. You have every right to return to your homeland, but know that if you do so, you will find nothing familiar. Language, dress, customs, practices, all have been altered immeasurably by the passage of time. The world you would return to would be a wholly different world from the one you left when you came to serve us.””

Mukucunda’s heart was struck a blow by this revelation. In all the centuries he had been waging war on behalf of the Devas, in all the battles and skirmishes and conflicts, he had sustained wounds and injuries, felt pain and anguish countless times. But no wound, no pain, no suffering of war could match the agony of knowing that the very life he loved had

vanished with time. A soldier sustains himself through the bitter winter of warfare on the heat of memories: take away his memories, you take away all hope, all reason for waging war itself. What would he be fighting for? What purpose remains in his life? Other lesser warriors might have raged and ranted, lost their heads and cursed the Devas for costing him his entire life. But Mukucunda son of Yuvanasva was a paragon of kshatriya dharma.

““So be it,”” he said, absorbing the shock of this revelation as a soldier on the field accepts an arrow and continues fighting regardless, ““Kshatriya dharma demands that the moment a warrior sets forth on a campaign, he consider his life already forfeit. The moment I took up my sword and bow to serve you, Lords, I had already surrendered my life. It matters not now if it is gone. This is what it means to be a warrior. I am kshatriya. I endure all.””

Mukucunda paused, gazing in awe at the great aspect of the Smiling Stranger in the cave, his luminescence illuminating every crack and crevice as if the very atoms of the rock themselves glowed in response to his brahman blaze. ““Then I asked the Devas to grant me the final boon any kshatriya can enjoy: release from mortality. But they declined, saying that only one amongst them possessed the power to grant that boon. His name was Bhagwan, the indestructible Vishnu, and he was not amongst them at that time but if someday, it was my good fortune, he would come before me and if I still desired, I could ask him my wish once again.””

“Then the Devas asked me to name any other boon. I said that I could not think of anything I desired anymore. All I wished for was to be able to rest peacefully in slumber for an age, or many ages, as the case might be. For I was exhausted from an eon of waging war and wreaking slaughter and further exhausted by the loss of everyone and everything I had once held dear. So I wanted nothing more than to sleep a great while, undisturbed, for a soldier’s sleep is as a dog’s sleep: the slightest unfamiliar sound or

disturbance rouses him to full action instantly. I desired the sleep of the just and the meek, the sleep of peace and infants. The slumber of eternity. If I could not sleep the Great Sleep, then at least I would sleep until my time was ordained and great Vishnu himself came to grant me my final boon of release.”

Mukucunda gestured around the cave. “And so I chose this cavern to isolate myself from all mortalkind, wanting nothing more to do with their lives and ways. The Devas promised that I would not be disturbed for so long as I slept for no mortal had any reason to come to these remote and inscrutable ranges and even if they did, surely no man could find this grotto among many millions of such caves in these mountains, nor would they have reason to search for it. But even if some accidentally ventured here, my store of tapas energy would be more than sufficient to blast him to ashes instantly. This is what happened to the fool who came here earlier, assaulting me in my divinely granted slumber. I have despatched him without care or thought to his purpose or identity. He does not concern me in the least because from the manner in which he assaulted me and from his bearing and weapons and garb he was clearly a mortal warrior of some kind. I know not his purpose in coming here and care not to know. But you, great one, who have arrived here and now reveal yourself in this resplendent manner, you are another level of being altogether. I know this beyond any doubt. Pray tell me, what manner of Deva are you? Surely you are a warrior of great prowess? I request you, tell me your deeds. Grant me the honor of knowing thy name. Do me the grace of sharing thy conquests and exploits with me, to please a humble warrior who once served your cause. It would bring me great pleasure to know these things.”

And Mukucunda bowed his head and waited for a response.

12

The Shining One spoke at last, yet his speech was not normal human speech, his message was conveyed through a pulsing of his blue aura, a reverberation that filled the senses and was translated by the mind into words effortlessly. For this was the speech of gods and the instant Mukucunda felt the pulsing of the brahman aura, his conviction that he was in the presence of the Supreme One was confirmed. He had lived and warred among the Devas long enough to know it was fact now: This could be no other but Vishnu Ananta in person.

“Dearest Mukucunda. You are beloved to the Devas for your sacrifice on their behalf. It is for the fruition of your wishes that I have come unto you. I am He whose births, deeds, titles and names cannot be enumerated by mortals, for their tally is infinite. One would sooner count all the particles of dust that have existed upon Prithvi-loka since the beginning of time than count my names, my deeds, my births and forms. Many great rishis and maharishis have attempted to count and list my exploits but even their epic efforts are thwarted because I exist not only in the present, but in the past and the future as well, simultaneously.”

Mukucunda’s eyes, so long closed in deep hibernation, were wide open and gazing with awe. The blue aura of his Lord’s glory reflected in his large eyes, the image of Krishna reflected in all its beauty within his steely grey pupils. He listened reverentially, knowing that this was a blessed moment in his existence and feeling his release was imminent.

“I too am a kshatriya in purpose and function. I am the protector of worlds, of all Creation. From time to time, I am requested by Brahma or

petitioned by the other Devas to descend to this earthly realm and serve mortalkind by destroying the asuras that have unlawfully brought their conflict with us Devas into this realm. In this lifetime, I am descended into the race of the Yadus, in the house of Anakadundubhi, the one they call Vasudeva. Therefore in this birth, I am named Vasudeva, son of Vasudeva. I was sent here to deal with a multitude of asuras plaguing mortalkind in this age. Kalanemi was the first and among the fiercest of my foes in this birth. I slew him in his form as Kamsa.”

Images flashed and danced within Mukucunda’s mind’s eye, yet it was as if he were *within* the images themselves, and the events taking place *around* him in all dimensions. It was a mesmerizing spectacle. Though a warrior himself, he was awe struck at the prowess of the Lord in this form as Krishna Vasudeva. Through the Lord’s own essence, he was able to relive the Slaying of Kamsa, Putana, Kaliya, and numerous other wondrous events in Krishna’s life to date. Tears sprang from his battle-weary eyes, spilling to the icy cave floor where they froze into jewels of ice. Yet he was filled with the fiery heat of tapas and also the energizing warmth of Vishnu’s great brahman effulgence. “Truly, I am blessed to be given your darshan, Lord. It is a lifetime dream fulfilled.” His mortal voice echoed and rang within the stone cavern, for he had no power to project his voice through motes of brahman energy.

“I know this well, Mukucunda,” said Krishna gently. “I am sustained by the love and devotion of bhaktas such as yourself. How could I not fulfill your life’s ambition to come before me? It is on account of your long and dutiful devotion to my name and image that I appear here before you today. This is that very day of which the Devas spoke when they released you from your service and sent you back to this mortal realm. This is the day when I come before you, faithful servant, and ask of you: Speak. Name your desire. You are still owed a boon as reward for your great sacrifice and service to the cause of Righteousness. You have but to name your desire and it shall be fulfilled.”

Mukucunda was filled with ecstatic joy. He was realizing the fulfillment of all those eons of war, pain, suffering, and loneliness. He paid due homage to Krishna, performing his ritual duty as a bhakta and taking his heart's fill of darshan of the Lord, for he knew that such a moment would never repeat again and he was blessed even among the blessed.

Finally, when he had completed his ritual obeisances and satisfied his spiritual urges, he said, "Oh Lord, the people of my realm are confused by your maya, this world of material pursuits that you created only as a temporary illusion befuddles them and they believe it is the only real world in existence. They seek petty happiness in their narrow domestic ruts but in fact, those daily disciplines are the very source of their unhappiness. The human body is made in your image, yet those who have earned the karmic right to be reborn as mortals fail to appreciate the value of their lives and merely eke out an existence driven by greed, worse than the animals who at least kill and eat to survive. The accumulation of wealth beyond one's needs, the indulgence of sensual pursuits to the point of self-effacing abandon, pride in treasures of metal and symbolic riches, the arrogance of patriarchy, the lust for more mates, these are all failures of the flesh, as limited in its confines as a pot of mud or a wall of stone. In my past life, before the Devas came to enlist me in their war, I too fell prey to these temptations. I too ignored the mind's lofty reaches to fall and grovel in greed and need, enslaved by the body's desires. I was a king and thought myself a god. I was drunk with vanity, intoxicated by power, addicted to luxury.

"Now, in this moment of supreme revelation, I realize my folly. Your radiance has erased the shadows that blinded my eyes. I am no longer deluded, nor do I hanker after sensory objects. I see now that the former Me, who thought himself a god, was merely a thing destined to become faeces, worms and ashes, clad in gold finery, riding in shielded chariots, jousting with elephants in rut. God among men, I thought myself, yet I was not even a king. Merely a slave. A slave to sexual pleasures. A slave to desire for rich food, fine clothing, glittering baubles, voluptuous

concubines. I was no more than a dog on a leash, led around the house by my desires to serve their fulfillment not my own.

“But now I have been given an opportunity of eons. The cobwebs of my mind have been brushed away. I see clearly now the purpose of my life. You have released me from the burden of flesh, the enslavement of desire, the addiction to power. You have freed me from the cycle of samskara itself. My wandering is ended. I am as fortunate as the most exalted Sadhus who spend a lifetime in the forest in solitude. I have been freed by Achyuta Himself! All mortals will envy me henceforth.”

Krishna smiled beatifully at Mukucunda, pleased at his words. “Speak, then, dearest Mukucunda. Speak your final wish and it will be granted.”

13

Mukucunda prostrated himself and said, “Thanks to your effulgence, I am washed clean of all desire, Lord. As the Gangotri produces crystal-clear water of the highest purity, I too have been distilled, my attachments leached out of me by the power of your presence. The gunas of sattva, tamas and rajas which had accumulated from my time on the mortal plane have been removed from me, for you are the primordial one, free of all gunas, without taint or duality, monastic in your knowledge, supreme in purity. I wish nothing more than to be free of earthly miseries. I touch now your lotus feet and beg for shelter, Lord. Hear my distress, hear my plea.”

And as Mukucunda touched Krishna’s feet, Krishna bent and blessed him, raising him up. “Mukucunda, once you were a king among men. Now you are an emperor of great souls. You have resisted all the temptations of the six senses, enemies of all fleshly beings, and through your bhakta have seen fit to ask for the perfect boon. I give you leave now to roam the earth freely. Go where you will, you will be unharmed and unsinged. No desire will trouble you, no peril befall you. Wander in the great forests and practice pranayama, or ascend the highest peaks and sit in profound meditation, as you wish. You go with my hand sheltering you always. Absolve yourself of the sin of the kshatriya: cleanse yourself of the crimes of slaughter and violence, of life-taking and butchery. And when your days are done of their natural course, you will ascend to Swargaloka as is ordained and in your next birth shall return not only as a man, as you deserve through your righteous karma, but as a brahmana in my service. Thus shall the cycle of devotion and fulfillment be ever perpetrated: as devotee becomes priest and bhakta spans lifetimes. Go now, Mukucunda, go in peace.”

And with those blessed words, Krishna anointed Mukucunda with his sacred touch and permitted the great warrior of the gods to leave the grotto that had been his home for countless years. Circumambulating Krishna, Mukucunda departed with joined palms and a glad heart.

Mukucunda emerged from the cave and proceeded down the mountainside. He observed as he went that plants, animals, trees, and all things upon earth had diminished in size and beauty. In contrast, he was as a giant among men. Walking through places where people dwelled, and stared at by them while also gazing curiously at the denizens he passed, he puzzled as to how this diminishment of stature had occurred. Finally, he realized that a greater length of time must have passed while he fought for the Devas and later lay within the cave. So great a length that entire eons had changed and it was now Kali-Yuga.

Accepting this reality, he proceeded in a northward direction. Other men might have wandered for awhile, taking in sights and sounds, relishing the return to civilization, drinking in human company as one drinks soma. But Mukucunda's heart and mind and soul were filled wholly with his Lord's divinity. He desired nothing more than to ascend directly to the next life. His steps were firm and assured, his pathway distinct.

In due course, he found himself ascending to Gandhamadana, that holy region. There, he proceeded directly to Badarikashram, where he settled, absorbing himself in the undertaking of bhor tapasya, grueling ascetic practices, worshipping Hari in the very homeland of Nara-Narayana itself. His future and further life was thus assured.

Krishna descended from the Himavat ranges and gazed out upon the remains of the Yavana army. While the enormous force of fighting troops was extinguished to all but the last handful of men, the great grama train had been spared. This great caravan of wagons followed in the Yavana army's wake, carrying the serving men and women, dancing girls and entertainers, cooks and weapon-repairers, carpenters and iron-workers that were all indispensable to keeping a traveling army requisitioned and provisioned at all times. Due to their heavy loads, they brought up the far rear, often arriving weeks after the frontlines made camp at a location. As a result, they were still many yojanas from the scene of their army's destruction and were in fact, not many miles from Mathura itself.

Krishna whistled and like an eagle falling from the sky, his golden pushpak fell to earth in a near-vertical drop. It plummeted then came to a halt with its sarathi, the good Daruka, as unshaken as if he had merely driven the celestial vehicle from around the nearest field, instead of falling miles from the sky. He greeted his Lord warmly as Krishna climbed aboard the vaahan.

"The Yavana army was crushed like ants beneath a boulder," he said. "I saw it all from above."

Krishna nodded and instructed him where to go. As they came within sight of Mathura's outlands, he told Daruka to slow the golden flying chariot, then indicated the sprinkling of wagons visible from here.

"The Yavana store train. All their wealth and booty collected on their journey from the Yavana islands, the treasures they wrestled from places on the way, the bounty, the prizes, the ransom, it is all in those wagons. We shall take it all home to Dwarka."

Daruka stared. “There must be thousands of wagons, many tens of thousands of tons of treasure!”

“Exactly,” Krishna said, “I will not leave it for Jarasandha to find and claim. He does not deserve the spoils of this army or any army. That is the only reason why I claim it. Otherwise, I would have not cared if it had been buried in the avalanche that destroyed the Yavana army.”

“But, sire,” Daruka asked, “how will we transport such a great store all the way to Dwarka?” He looked at the chariot. Its well was just large enough for two men to stretch out side by side comfortably, no more. “Surely not in this pushpak? It would take a vehicle ten thousand times this size!”

Krishna smiled his enigmatic smile. “Not a vehicle ten thousand times this size, Daruka. Ten thousand vehicles of exactly this size. For a chariot must be large enough for a charioteer to control, must it not?”

Krishna wrinkled his brow. “Behold.”

Daruka turned and looked back at the great plain where only moments earlier, there had been nothing but the tall grasses waving and the distant ant like forms of the Yavana supply train approaching at snail’s pace.

The landscape was filled from end to end with thousands of gleaming golden chariots, each the exact replica of the one he commandeered.

“My Lord,” he said, his hands trembling for the first time since he had joined Krishna’s service—for while a sarathi’s heart might quiver like gelatine, his hands could never tremble in battle—“You work miracles with a wrinkling of your brow! But how are we to drive these ten thousand celestial pushpaks?”

Krishna smiled and clapped a hand on Daruka’s shoulder. It looked like a lithe effeminate hand but it felt like a rod of solid iron. “You shall, Daruka. You shall drive them all at once, merely by willing it. That is why I have made them all the same size as this chariot. Command this one, and all of them shall follow. Now let us relieve the Yavana supply troops of their wearisome burden. They may put up a little resistance but we have dealt with harder challengers before our noonday meal. Come. The sooner we begin, the sooner we return home to Dwarka with our rich bounty.”

14

Jarasandha's rage was beyond control. It was rare for the God Emperor of Magadha to permit his emotions to go out of bounds but when such a rarity occurred, it was no less than a force of nature, a thing so terrible to behold that it drove fear into the hearts of his most hardened Mohini bodyguards. When Jarasandha raged, the earth itself trembled.

Today, he so enraged, even he trembled!

He felt his body shake with unresolved anger. He could easily have lashed out at the nearest Hijra warriors, his personal bodyguards, or anyone or anything else in sight, giving vent to some of this rage. But while on other occasions it would have instilled fear into the hearts of his followers, making each one determined never to give their master cause to find fault with their services, in the present case, it would invoke the opposite effect. Everyone knew that this was not an error on the part of Jarasandha's soldiers or generals or allies. It was Jarasandha's own doing. He had been duped by the Lord of Mathura, duped and deceived so cleverly and elegantly, that even he was now raging with fury. Nobody had ever seen Jarasandha so enraged and frustrated before, and many took secret pleasure in the sight, relishing the sight. For a tyrant is feared when he is powerful but mocked when he fails. They were mocking Jarasandha now, but were shrewd enough to do so silently within their hearts, for to show their ridicule for their master's failure outwardly would be to invite instant death.

So Jarasandha raged with nothing and nobody on whom to vent his fury. This was why he trembled with frustrated anger now.

Mathura had been abandoned. How, he did not know.

The populace had been moved, down to the last pup and lamb. Whence, he knew not.

The spoils of war had been denied him, leaving only empty homes and streets, already damaged and ruined through his own bitter siege and arrow storms. Where had all that treasure been taken, how had it been taken, he had no idea.

It was the lack of knowing that enraged him. And also the lack of fulfillment.

For decades, he had cultivated political methods and ruses to ensure that the rich capital of the Yadava nation would come into his possession whole. It was the reason why he had chosen to marry his daughters to Kamsa rather than simply invade, as he had done with other nations. The Yadavas were too proud to be enslaved: they would break and rebel before they followed him into slavery like other nations and tribes had till now. They were more valuable to him as allies in his campaign than as enemies.

But with Kamsa's unexpected death, that alliance had ended abruptly. With the survival and subsequent rise of the Slayer of Kamsa, his very campaign had been threatened. So he had brought the might of his fighting strength to Mathura, to crush their resistance and perhaps still demonstrate that the wisest course lay in joining him. It was why he had resorted to asura maya, using vortals to shift sideways through parallel worlds in order to destroy the will of Krishna and Balarama rather than simply wipe

out Mathura itself. Once he despatched those two brawling brothers, nobody could stand between him and his prize, he knew.

But now the prize itself had been taken from him. What good was an empty city and a deserted nation?

And from the word he had just received, the Yavana had been killed, and the great invading army destroyed. How, he could not fathom. Or rather, he could perceive the physical facts and know the how and where, but it still did not explain how he had been outwitted yet again. It did not absolve him of the humiliation of failure, again.

And now, he was watching as Krishna stole the treasure of the Yavana as well.

From his vantage point overlooking the great grassy plains that undulated in every direction, he could see the gleaming shapes of golden chariots rising and swooping away, carrying ton-loads of precious cargo. Hundreds of chariots, all flying of their own volition, all moving in precise formations, as if controlled by an invisible hive mind—or perhaps just the single mind of Krishna himself.

And as he watched, the last group of chariots, burdened with enormous loads of rich treasure, rose up into the air with more precise coordination than a flock of migrating birds, hovered briefly as they turned around to face north-west, then whooshed away with a speed that was at the very limits of human vision. Even if Krishna could produce a thousand flying chariots to carry away the Yavana's riches, how in the world had he found a thousand charioteers to fly them with such precision and ease? The last question flummoxed Jarasandha more than anything else: it was not knowing these little details that frustrated him most of all. He could deal

with the occasional failure but if he did not understand how he had been thwarted or outwitted, how could he possibly avoid a similar fate the next time?

He watched as the last of the chariots disappeared into the horizon, gone into oblivion. He clenched his fist, tightening his grip on the reins of his mount until the beast whinnied in pained protest. He was now at the limit of his self-control. If he did not kill a few hundred or eat someone soon, he felt he would explode.

“Sire,” said a voice. “Balarama has been spotted to the east of our forces.”

Jarasandha turned, frowning, and peered in the direction the man was pointing. East? Why east? The only thing that lay in that direction was... nothing really. Just wilderness beyond the fringes of the Yadava pastures. And a wild mountainous wasteland. Was that where Krishna and Balarama had taken the Yadavas? But the chariots had flown north-westwards. Then again, flying chariots could easily fly out of range then double back around to deceive. Whereas, if Balarama had arrived from the east, that seemed to indicate that he had been in the east. If nothing else, it was something to do—and someone to fight. Not just someone, a worthy opponent!

“Show me,” Jarasandha said, spurring his mount forward with vicious haste.

15

Balarama saw the dust cloud approaching and waggled his eyebrows. “Here they come, bhraatr,” he said.

He rolled his shoulders, cracked his neck and twisted his burly torso around from side to side, working out the kinks in his body. Beside him, Krishna remained lying prone on the grassy knoll, hands behind his head, gazing up at the sky and dreaming idly. Balarama chuckled at his brother’s nonchalance. Tell Krishna that the world’s cruellest tyrant was approaching with 23 akshohini of the fiercest army on earth and he continued staring up at cloud-animals and day-dreaming. That was Madhava, dancer of the Madhuvan gardens where the grapes responsible for the greatest soma in all creation grew freely.

Balarama had been lazing around most of the day until Krishna sent for him. Yawning as he emerged from his chamber into the balcony of his residence at Dwarka, he had frozen in mid-stretch as he saw the sky filled with hundreds of gleaming gold chariots, all carrying full loads.

When Daruka told him that the chariots all carried treasure, he had snapped wide awake. All the people had come out into the streets as the chariots landed, and chests were opened and the treasures exposed to the balmy sunshine. It was unbelievable, an empire’s ransom in precious stones, ornaments, clothing, and all manner of wonderful objects, many from distant foreign lands, all the spoils and taxes collected by the Yavana on his mighty campaign of conquest.

There was enough to make each citizen in Dwarka wealthy for a lifetime: Balarama came down to the courtyard in time to hear Krishna informing Vasudeva and Devaki that the treasure was to be divided among all, regardless of rank or class or caste. This time, even the nobility would hardly bother to protest for daily life in Dwarka was a treasure in itself. Even so, the sheer scale of Krishna's acquisition was numbing to contemplate. Balarama had shaken his head, marveling with everyone else as one new wondrous artifact after another was unwrapped and revealed.

Krishna had taken him aside and told him what they needed to do next. Balarama had shrugged and a chariot ride later, they were here. As Krishna had instructed, he had taken his chariot within sight of the Magadhan rear lines, making sure he was seen and that they reacted suitably, before returning to this knoll where Krishna had waited, lazing and dreaming. Now, he instructed the chariot to rise up and hover a full yojana above the earth's surface, awaiting his call. The pushpak swooshed upwards with the smoothness of wind, and was beyond the limits of mortal sight in a moment. Krishna had instructed him to send it away.

Balarama finished his stretching as the dust cloud approached within a mile's distance and resolved into battle formations. He paused and stared at it for a moment, shielding his eyes from the noonday sun with the flat of his hand. "They seem to be preparing to attack, bhraatr," he announced. "They're riding hell for leather."

Krishna replied lazily from the ground without budging an inch: "Let me know when they are a thousand yards away."

Balarama grinned. "So we fight? Good. I haven't fought in so long, my muscles are atrophying."

Krishna snorted from his supine position. “It’s been only a day since we last fought. You’re confused by all the travel through vortals and time-shifting.”

Balarama frowned, then cocked an eyebrow as he stroked his jaw, peering at the approaching dust cloud. He could see chariots now, and elephants. That looked promising. “That can’t be! It feels like ages.”

Krishna said laconically: “For you, a whole day and night without fighting is an age.”

Balarama shrugged. “So I like to fight. So?”

Krishna shrugged his shoulders. “So nothing. I’m just saying, it’s only been a day.”

Balarama slapped his beefy chest muscles, then his thighs, waking them up. “A thousand yards now, and closing fast.”

Krishna sighed lazily and rolled to his feet. He did it with one graceful movement, unlike Balarama who had to either throw himself to his feet in a kind of leaping action, or stagger up because of his build and weight. Balarama envied the ease with which Krishna did that. “Time to run.”

Balarama grinned. “Yes, nothing like a good fight to...” He trailed off, staring at Krishna suspiciously. “I thought you said ‘run’.”

Krishna winked at him. “I did.” He gestured with his chin in the eastward direction. “Come on.”

Balarama turned to watch Krishna start walking—away from the direction of the fast-approaching dust cloud, which wasn’t a dust cloud anymore but an army stampeding like the greatest herd of bull elephants ever to run across the face of the earth. “But that’s the wrong direction. Aren’t we supposed to run towards them if we mean to fight?”

Krishna glanced back over his shoulder, beckoning to Balarama. “Not today. Come on, bhai.”

Balarama glanced at the Magadhan army. It was perhaps four hundred yards or so away, and riding at a pace of perhaps half a yojana an hour, which was very fast for an army of that size. “But I don’t understand. I thought you called me here for help. Because you wanted to fight.”

Krishna came back and caught hold of Balarama’s shoulder, half-embracing his brother. “Let’s walk and talk, shall we? Come.”

He forced Balarama to walk along with him, moving at a brisk pace. “There’s no point fighting Jarasandha again. We’ve proved that we can fight and defeat him enough times already.”

“Yes, I know,” Balarama said. “Seventeen times, to be exact. I remember that. So I thought this was going to be the 18th and final time!”

“That would be boring and predictable,” Krishna said, increasing the pace so they were now jogging slowly. The grass shirred beneath their feet.

Balarama said, “I don’t mind! You be predictable. I’ll be boring! But let’s stay and fight, Krishna! Please.”

“It won’t serve any purpose, bhai,” Krishna said as they ran. We could fight him every day like this forever, and he would keep coming back. This whole plan is designed to get him off our backs for good. Can you run a little faster, please...*big brother!*”

Balarama didn’t mind being called *big*. As Rohini-maa had taught him when he was young and still chubby with baby fat, *big* was a compliment for a fighter. He ran, keeping pace with his more athletic brother, although the grass beneath his feet was pounded far more thoroughly than the grass over which Krishna ran. Looking back at their parallel trails, Balarama’s looked like one wheel of a wagon cart had passed over it.

“I understand now,” Balarama said slowly, running faster. “We moved the people to Dwarka whose whereabouts nobody knows now. We’ve destroyed the Yavana army and taken its spoils. Jarasandha would blame only you and I for these things, it’s we he wants now and he won’t cease searching until he finds us. So now we need to finish off Jarasandha once and for all, so he won’t bother to come after us or try to find us ever again. Right?” He looked at Krishna then shook his own head. “No, I take that back. Fighting him serves no purpose, like you said. He’ll just use some asura trick to make us keep fighting him forever or something. Right?”

Krishna grinned at him as he ran. Balarama was already sweating and heaving but Krishna looked like he was standing in one place and smiling. “Right. That’s why we’re running.”

Balarama nodded, grinning. “I get it now! I understand the plan. It’s brilliant.”

They ran for a while. The sounds of the army following them continued, neither growing louder nor softer as the Magadhan forces gave relentless pursuit.

After almost an hour, Balarama, now growing painfully out of breath and feeling his legs, frowned and glanced at Krishna who was still sprinting easily, as if he could run this way forever. “But what I don’t get is why are we running?”

Krishna laughed and clapped his brother on the shoulder. “Sometimes, it’s the only thing left to do.”

16

Jarasandha laughed as he saw the two figures running across the sea of grass, as the great plains of Mathura were often called. “Cowards! Running away because you know the futility of standing to fight!”

Around him, his generals and captains laughed as well, the rest of their forces taking up the merriment. Laughter rippled down the ranks of the moving akshohini, audible even above the rumbling thunder of the great army as it trampled the grass into chopped stalks and churned the earth until it resembled a great field ready for seeding. They were happy to see their god emperor laughing, something he rarely did. It was better, far better, than him venting his fury on them!

Besides, the sight of the two greatest champions of Mathura, including the Slayer himself, scurrying away like frightened rabbits, was quite astonishing. Unusual enough to provoke comment, surprise, even amusement.

Jarasandha laughed and continued roaring insults, enjoying the response from his soldiers. It helped keep them in good spirits after their realization that all the spoils of Mathura had been taken from them, robbing them of the customary prizes of battle that they were long accustomed to by now. The armies of Magadha always won eventually, and to the victors went the spoils. To have neither won nor lost, and to find that the enemy had not only fled the field but had taken all their treasure with them was an experience they were unaccustomed to and not a man among them could make sense of it. They had shared some of their god emperor's rage, feeling his frustration too.

Sighting Balarama and Krishna and chasing after them helped relieve some of that anger and frustration. The fact that the great duo, champions of their people, were fleeing instead of standing to fight, itself suggested that something had changed in the balance of power. Why else would Krishna and Balarama be running away if not out of fear? Perhaps their powers had been fleeting, illusory, mere conjuror's tricks? Perhaps they were nothing more than puppet champions, standing and posing and relying on hearsay and false reputations while the other champions did the real fighting?

After all, for this army of Magadha, the siege of Mathura had never taken place. They had never encircled the city and attacked it arrow storms. Nor had Krishna and Balarama ever ridden forth and engaged them in battle. To them, this was not the 18th day of battle but the 1st. They were fresh, untested and unchallenged as yet. And as such, they were spoiling for a fight. So all they knew of Krishna-Balarama were the stories they had heard. And stories could be made up or exaggerated or mere propaganda.

The reality was before their eyes: running away and showing their backs and bums like rabbits fleeing foxes.

So they laughed. And followed with great zest and eagerness, looking forward to the moment they caught up with the fabled Slayer and his brother and did unto them what they had come to do unto Mathura. If they could not do battle with Mathura's armies, they would settle for slaughtering her champions at least.

“Look!” cried a cavalry officer to his companions. “They slow now. They are tiring.”

“We will have them soon,” cried the mounted officer to his right. “They cannot outrun horse and elephant and chariot for long. These Yadavas are not known for their running.”

“Except they will be famous for it after today,” quipped a third officer.

They all laughed and spurred their mounts.

“Bhraatr,” Balarama gasped. “I cannot run anymore. We must stand and fight now.”

Krishna looked back at his brother. “We are almost there. Only a short distance further, to those large rocks. Do you see?”

Balarama nodded, his breath hitching as he struggled to keep pace with Krishna’s easy loping gait. “I see. But I cannot...run!”

Krishna smiled and winked. “Very well. We have come far enough to convince them of the illusion. Let’s shorten the distance left.”

Suddenly, Balarama found himself running between the giant boulders that had seemed at least half a mile away a moment ago. He ran around one of the boulders to find himself in a narrow cul de sac surrounded by closely

growing trees on every side. Krishna had stopped in the shade of a tree and was munching an apple as if he had been standing beneath the tree all afternoon.

Balarama gasped and bent over, resting his palms on his thighs. “This is a good place to make a stand.” He glanced around as he recovered. “But I like fighting out in the open. More place to move around—and move them around!”

Krishna shook his head. “We will not fight, bhai. We keep running. Remember? Fighting is what Jarasandha wants us to do.”

Balarama straightened up slowly, his breath slowing to a near-normal pace. A supermortal body of his bulk and muscle mass tired fast—but recovered faster. “Just a little skirmish? Just half a dozen akshohini? You can stay here if you don’t feel like it. I’ll take care of them myself.”

Krishna grinned and started through the thicket. “Keep moving. They will be here soon. I want them to see us on the mountain before they reach.”

Balarama followed sulkily, still absorbed with thoughts of a fighting opportunity missed. Suddenly, Krishna’s last words struck him and he blinked. “Mountain?”

“God Emperor Jarasandha,” said one of his aides. “They are climbing the mountain.”

Jarasandha raised his line of sight to watch the two figures climbing up the steep face of the mountain. He had already spotted them earlier but had continued to examine the surrounding terrain and pay heed to his scouts who had gone circling around to ensure that no ambush or trap lay in store for them here. “Yes, so they are.”

He watched the two figures climbing as he waited for confirmation from the scouts and outliers. They were climbing manfully up the mountain as if pursued by wild beasts. In a sense, they were. He knew that his army would tear them to shreds once they caught up. But if his instinct and military assessment was accurate there would be no need to catch up or tear them to shreds. For while he had been willing to follow them across open country, he had no desire to put his forces in a down-hill position, climbing up on foot while the Yadava brothers rained down boulders for days. It was a desperate but shrewd tactic. Climb to the highest ground and make a stand. Futile, yet shrewd. If nothing else, they could cost him a great deal of wasted time and troops.

The scouts and outliers returned shortly with the word that not a soul was to be sighted on the horizon for as far as could be seen. Apparently, the Yadava brothers were alone and for some reason feared to stand and fight back as they had before.

Jarasandha mulled his options. Sending soldiers up that mountain was pointless, because even ordinary mortal warriors could fend off an akshohini once they found a suitable position on the peak. From the looks of it, the mountain was so heavily wooded, there could be an entire army concealed there and he would not know it until it was too late.

No.

The Brothers had climbed that mountain for a reason, assuming Jarasandha would make his army follow them up as well.

Therefore that was exactly what he should not do.

He could climb the mountain himself and face them on his own. But once he did that, there would be no turning back. He would have to confront them on his own. And he knew better than to do that. Whatever the reason for this strange change of tactics on the part of the sons of Vasudeva, he was not foolish enough to disrespect their powers and strength. No, there was a simpler way to flush out prey that had climbed a tree—or a wooded mountain, as in this case.

“Fire,” he said. “Fetch me fire.”

Krishna and Balarama stood on the peak, watching as entire legions of Jarasandha's men rode about on horses, flinging blazing torches into the woods that ringed the bottom of the mountain. The rest of the army had encircled the mountain, watching the spectacle. The fire caught hold easily and spread quickly, lapping at the foot of the great rise in a short time, growing like a bonfire fed on dry twigs.

The smoke began to rise in a great thick mass overhead, like a brooding monsoon cloud. Ganshyam watched with a smile on his handsome face as the fire began to crackle and speak like a living thing.

Balarama swore and glanced down. "That blaze will run all the way up to us," he said. The entire mountainside is wooded and the trees and foliage are dry as cotton after the summer season, they're going up like tinder in a firestove."

"Yes," Krishna said. "It will be quite a fire."

Balarama glanced at him. "You knew this would happen? You meant to run and climb up here, leaving Jarasandha with only this option? You knew he wouldn't be foolish enough to try to come up himself after us, and he wouldn't waste his soldiers and time trying to get us down. Fire was the obvious tactic and he took it."

Krishna shrugged. “He took it. He didn’t have to but he did. It was his decision. Free will. Every mortal has it, remember?”

Balarama laughed. “Yes, of course, every mortal has free will—after you arrange events and things in a certain pattern! But Jarasandha is no mortal. You and I both know that.”

Krishna nodded. “And his death is not meant to be at our hands. You and I both know that as well.”

Balarama started to say something then stopped and nodded as well. “Yes. I do. So what happens now? We stay and inhale some smoke? If you had told me earlier, I would have brought something to roast! We could have had a nice picnic up here. We could even have invited your old gopi friend.” He winked at his brother.

Krishna smiled back good-naturedly. “My days of frolicking with gopis in Vrindavan are long gone, bhai.” He sighed and looked to the horizon wistfully. “Wonderful days they were. And wonderful gopis. But all good things must come to an end someday.”

Balarama stepped back from the edge of the mountain face as smoke began to drift up in great gouts. The heat of the fire was already reaching them and as the afternoon turned into evening and the sky grew darker, the blaze illuminated the land like a gigantic torch set in the middle of the great grassy plains. “Time to roast now, bhraatr. Do you mean to make us tidbits for Jarasandha to feast on tonight?”

Krishna slapped his brother's broad back. "Not a chance, bhai. I intend for us to spend the night back in our comfortable beds in Dwarka, sleeping the sleep of the just."

Balarama thought about that for a moment. "Oh well. If we won't be fighting today then I'll take sleep instead."

Jarasandha waited until the fire had consumed the entire mountain. His entire army was watching the spectacle, enjoying it. The Magadhan Imperial Army was weaned on blood and destruction. Usually, they burned cities—after sacking and ravaging them. Burning a mountain was a first, even for them. But it wasn't uninteresting in itself. For one thing, they got to watch enormous numbers of birds rising up and quitting their nests in great hordes, then flying round and round in circles screeching and calling in dismay as they found the land occupied for miles around by two-legged animals. The archers busied themselves by loosing arrows at the birds, dropping hundreds. The cookfires would be busy tonight with fowl.

Then came the animals. Such a densely wooded mountain had an entire eco-system of fauna. Large, small, medium, furry, clawed, predatory, prey...all manner of beasts dwelled there. And as the fire began, they panicked. The fire ringed the entire foot of the mountain, leaving them no choice but to climb the mountain itself to reach higher ground. They did so. Through the trees, they were visible as furry hides undulating as they climbed and struggled in common misery, lion and deer, bear and antelope climbing side by side. Many stumbled and fell to their death. Some froze in fear as the flames enveloped them and were charred to death.

But a great number managed to climb all the way to the peak. Jarasandha had eyes watching every inch of that mountain, but a great many were watching only the peak, keeping those two tiny figures atop that great rise firmly in their sights. However, the smoke from the fire soon obscured even the vision of the sharpest men, cloaking the mountain in an angavastra of living flame and rippling smoke. Soon, it was impossible to see anything except flame and fire. Even the animal sounds ended although the sweet aroma of roasting meat drifted down to the ever-hungry martial forces and stomach juices churned in anticipation of the evening meal. Like Balarama, if they could not fight, they would settle for food and drink. And after food and drink, then sleep. A soldier's only immediate desires.

Night fell and the fire blazed on. Jarasandha stood watch all night, not willing to take the slightest chance that the Brothers might escape. He could not believe they would simply remain up there and die in the fire. Yet how else could they possibly escape? If the pushpak came to receive them, it would be spotted. If they tried to jump out of sheer desperation, they would be seen. He had scouts riding at breakneck speed, carrying minute to minute updates from every one of the tens of thousands of pairs of eyes he had set to the task of watching. Whatever Krishna and Balarama did, it would be seen and reported.

Only when night had passed and daybreak came and the fire smoldered to a smoking cindery mess and there was no sign of any movement at the peak.

Finally, he began to allow himself to believe that somehow, just possibly, he had succeeded in slaying the Slayer. He could not understand how or why exactly but after all, even the greatest warriors must die someday and even gods can be slain by one means or another. From all appearances, Krishna and Balarama had perished in the fire. And sometimes, appearances were more important than facts. Jarasandha's army rose to

greet the next day with a wistful sigh at all the lost booty and the lack of a battle, but their wistfulness was leavened with the satisfaction of having slain the legendary Lord of Mathura and his brother.

“We burned them like corpses,” his men said to one another.

And even Jarasandha permitted himself a smile and nodded.

At least he had slain the Slayer.

But of course, he had not.

Krishna and Balarama waited until the smoke was dense enough to blot out all sight of the peak on which they stood. This meant standing and harboring a great number of panicked and stricken animals that had bravely climbed to the peak in a desperate bid to escape the fire. They herded the animals just like they were Nanda-Maharaja’s cows, keeping them safe from the fire and in the center of the peak where they were least visible from the ground. All around them, fire and smoke rose up in a great dense pillar, rising for hundreds of yards above the mountain itself.

Down into this pillar, his celestial chariot descended when summoned by Balarama. Dropping down as instantly as it had risen up, it seemed to miraculously appear on the peak, shielded by flames and smoke on all sides. Perhaps a sharp-eyed archer among Jarasandha’s scouts saw a glint

of reflection as the flames reflected off the golden chariot but it was no more than a mote of yellow light in a blazing mountain of yellow light.

Krishna used the Pushpak's ability to expand itself from within, while appearing to remain the same size from the outside. Balarama and he herded all the animals into the celestial vaahan, knowing that if they remained here, they would not survive. Even if the fire did not reach the bald top of the peak, the smoke would kill the creatures. And afterwards, when the fire was spent and they descended the mountain to the plains again in search of food and water, Jarasandha's armies would slaughter them just for the sport as they had slaughtered those birds from the sky.

So they took them aboard the pushpak and then they climbed aboard themselves. As the animals had been herded on board, Krishna and Balarama had rubbed soot onto the golden chariot's gleaming exterior, deliberately soiling it until it was as black as a charred ember. Then, under Balarama's instruction, it rose, drifting and floating just like a charred ember, rising and hovering and floating with the rising smoke and flames, higher and higher, until not one watcher from the ground far below could distinguish the chariot from an actual ember or ash. Once it was high enough, the chariot shot up at blinding speed, too quickly to be seen by the human eye, and then proceeded westwards. Home to Dwarka.

Yashoda and Devaki were both astonished when Krishna and Balarama stepped off the chariot on the roof of their residence. They had been waiting for their sons all day, just as Vasudeva and everyone else in Dwarka had been waiting too even while they went about their daily chores. As far as they were concerned, the brothers were equally the sons of Devaki as well as Yashoda. Their bond of shared Krishna-motherhood was already a strong one, strengthened further by their proximity in

Dwarka. Rohini came running up to join them, breathless from climbing the stairway to the terrace so fast; she had been spending the time with her sister-mothers as well, but had gone down to take care of the other household chores for a while.

All three mothers were taken aback when Krishna-Balarama stepped out looking like they had been cleaning fireplaces, sooty and grimy. But they were even more astonished when she saw what followed them from the chariot. Not having watched the boys grow, Devaki had nothing to compare the sight to but Yashoda had seen her two little rascals trundle home in worse wear more times than she could remember, usually with this same nonchalant attitude, that she immediately thought of them as being five years old once again—or 9 at most. And Rohini sighed and shook her head in exasperation as she recognized that particular sheepish expression on Balarama's face that told her he was about to confess to something truly outlandish.

Seeing their three mothers, the brothers immediately tried to look contrite and sociable. "Maatr," they both sang out together gruffly, bending to touch each mother's feet in turn and receive her blessings. "We brought home some friends to play!"

And then the "friends" began to emerge from the chariot, grunting and lowing and snarling, and Devaki, who was still the most impressionable of the three, fainted dead away.

18

Dwarka was at peace and so Krishna was at peace.

The people flourished.

They lived in the most beautiful city on earth, enjoying the perfect life, free of sickness, disease, war, crime, poverty, exploitation, abuse. Apart from the vagaries of wind and weather and the occasional sea storm that sent people indoors for the duration, there was nothing that could threaten them. The young respected the old because the old respected the young: brought up with love and respect, every child reciprocated the same to his elders. The high caste and low caste forgot their divisions and mingled freely, retaining their traditions only inasmuch as it related to their culture and work, not as superior or inferior levels. The prosperity of Dwarka and the stern governance of Krishna-Balarama ensured that even those with the slightest bias in their upbringing quickly learned to regard all living beings as brothers and sisters on earth.

Food was plentiful. Every family was rich enough to sustain them for several lifetimes. They worked because they enjoyed the occupation, not to earn a living. In a society of equals, there was no place for money men. Neither money lenders nor keepers could go about their dubious business: when every one of your neighbors has as much as you have, whom will you lend to and why should they borrow from you? Anyone in need could go to Krishna directly and he would always assist in whatever way was required. Because the sons of Yadu had been outcaste by their patriarch Yayati, Krishna emphasized to everyone the importance of equality. There

was no question of upper or lower caste or class when everyone pooled resources and shared the rewards equally.

No doors were locked in that great city. Yet every heart was open to entrants. With the lust for greed, profit and money mongering eliminated, love proliferated. Those who sought to resort to unfair practices to accumulate the wealth of others were sternly but gently reprimanded and corrected. No profiteering, hoarding or excessive accumulation of resources was permitted by law. None were permitted to exercise power over others. Even Krishna and Balarama, as well as their parents and the rest of the Council of Ministers moved freely among the people and were afforded no additional privileges: whatever adulation they received was earned, not mandatory.

A season of peace settled over the Yadava nation. After decades of strife and struggle, war and violence, the people were content merely to live and prosper, work and progress. With all the usual obstacles removed and all the necessary protections provided, mortals had no reason left to exploit or abuse one another and were content to live in harmony. This was the natural state of all beings: for nature's way is peace by default. Only those who are not strong enough to sustain themselves prey on others or seek the artificial advantages of competition. And in Krishna's age of Dwarka, there was no room for competition, nor any reason to pursue it.

In time, he came to be known by a new name, one that recognized his achievement not only in saving the people from the Slayer and the numerous threats that had plagued them over the decades but also in building this island utopia. Dwarkadish was the name. It meant simply First Citizen of Dwarka. But in Dwarka every citizen was as a lord so it could be interpreted to mean First Lord of Dwarka as well. After all, if there was a person deserving of the title in that sacred sanctuary, who else could it be but Krishna?

Dwarka flourished and so Dwarkadish was content.

For a while at least.

KAAND 3

1

Vidarbha. A nation neither great nor small. Neither rich nor poor. Neither famous nor infamous.

Its chief claim to fame was that it was the first kingdom one came across after crossing the vast Dandaka-van, the dreaded forest region that was the dark heart of the Arya sub-continent. Prone to droughts and famines, as well as periods of fecund fertility, it was a small yet proud kingdom that had force built strong alliances with other kingdoms of similar ilk. Just as large nations will acknowledge and ally with one another out of political expediency, so also kingdoms that are neither large nor small will link themselves with other similar nations.

The king of Vidarbha was named Bhishmaka and he was a robust and rowdy elder statesmen, given in his youth to much warring and raiding, his hide toughened by the frequent forays of the bands of bandits and outlaws who lived in exile or hiding within the confines of the Dandaka-van.

He had learned long ago that the only way to survive in the Vidarbha was to walk tall and roar louder. Just as even a lion will shy away from a monkey that screeches and throws itself about furiously, so also most attackers will back away from a foe who creates too loud a ruckus. Bhishmaka's bark was worse than his bite, and like most who grow accustomed to barking loudly, he often forgot that one had to bite occasionally, if only to remind one's enemies that one still had teeth.

But of late, Bhishmaka's days of barking as well as biting were in the past. Stricken by a condition that left half his body and face dysfunctional, he was literally half a man now. He spent his days wining and carousing and making threatening gestures that he could never hope to follow through on.

But if he could no longer bite, that did not mean he no longer had teeth.

Bhishmaka had five sons and a daughter in his house.

The five sons were each a young replica of their father, all given to loud and incessant barking as well as brawling. They roamed the Vidarbha like young lions, and none dared cross their path.

Rukmi was the eldest son and he was twice the man his father had ever been as a warrior as well as a reaver. He was not content with merely resisting the forays of the bands of outlaws that came out of the Dandakavan to sting and retreat hastily with whatever they could lift. He took fighting men *into* the dark and dreaded jungle, rooting out and harrying the outlaws in their own territory, so to speak.

The battles were bloody and brutal, for the outlaws had nothing to lose and the jungle was a grim and hostile place where few survived let alone thrived, and it could be argued that Rukmi paid a far more dear price in men's lives as his kingdom would have paid in lost booty to the outlaws, but his methods were successful. The forays ceased almost entirely. Even the outlaws had no desire to provoke all-out war. They withdrew and exerted their efforts elsewhere.

Rukmi's brothers were all bigger and stronger than he in body. Which was why, as eldest, he had to prove himself over and over again. This had made him stronger, faster, shrewder and a better fighter than all four of them. And as time went by and their father's capacity diminished further, they came to respect and accept his superiority. While not a just prince, he was smart enough to let them have their own share of the kingdom unofficially, so long as they left him alone to rule as the official heir-in-waiting. It was a better balance of power than most houses and the brothers soon settled into their own minor pockets of power, preferring to enjoy what they had than risk losing all to face Rukmi.

And they respected him even more when Rukmi found a powerful ally and friend in none other than Kamsa, son of Ugrasena, king of the Yadavas.

During his youth, Kamsa and his Marauders roved far and wide, building rough friendships with anyone and everyone whose purpose was even remotely beneficial to his own. This was before he met Jarasandha and much before the peace alliance that his father forged with Vasudeva of the Suras. Indeed, it was during the earlier bloodier era when Kamsa roved freely, wreaking havoc and sowing his wild oats where he pleased, that he met Rukmi and befriended him. They were less friends than drinking companions and fighting partners. Their entire alliance lasted barely a few months, less than a season, but the fighting was bitter and the odds vexing and they had bonded closely.

At one time, Kamsa had promised Rukmi his own sister Devaki in marriage. And Rukmi in turn had promised Kamsa his sister, Rukmini. Neither promise had been formalized or solemnized but it had formed part of the bond that linked the two men and neither forgot the promise.

Once Kamsa had taken up with Jarasandha, he had taken a different path, his life changing to follow a course unlike that he had envisaged for

himself. Rukmi, on the other hand, had continued in much the same way, living and brawling, fighting and drinking, and in time, as he continued to hear the infamous exploits of the legendary Usurper, he felt proud that he had once known Kamsa as a friend and fighting partner. It was one of the stories he told often to those he met, and it added to his fame in the remote Vidarbha region, making him somewhat famous as ‘the friend of Kamsa’.

As time passed, the very lack of contact with his former friend only seemed to strengthen the bond rather than weaken it. At some level, he probably knew that if he and Kamsa had continued to ride together, they would have fallen out sooner or later, perhaps even become bitter enemies themselves. But by preserving their former friendship in the statuary of past memory, it was solid and immutable: friends forever, in their minds.

Naturally, being a friend of Kamsa, it was only natural that he would regard Kamsa’s enemies as his own. And so he came to loathe the fabled Slayer and his legendary exploits. The bond between him and his former friend was almost renewed afresh when he received the formal invitation to attend the great celebration in Mathura. Ostensibly a wrestling tournament, Rukmi’s advisors informed him that it was in fact a show of strength by Kamsa son of Ugrasena, demonstrating how powerful he had become and how futile it would be for anyone to continue to oppose him.

Rukmi had been pleased by the invitation, far more pleased than he could display outwardly. He had insisted on his sister accompanying him, the memory of that earlier promise to his old friend still in his mind. And he had set forth for Mathura with an entourage designed to show his own kingdom and lineage in its best light. He was proud to be associated with the son-in-law of the legendary God Emperor of Magadha, Jarasandha himself and after all, Arya society allowed for a king to take as many wives as he desired. His first hope was to renew his old friendship and build an alliance that would profit Vidarbha and align it with the powerful military forces of the Yadavas, Magadha and their allies. His second,

secret wish was that Kamsa would find his sister Rukmini appealing and desire to have her as his wife.

But of course, that was the fateful tournament where Kamsa was slain on the wrestling field by Krishna. Even before Rukmi could meet with his old friend personally and shake his hand, the King of Mathura lay dead and broken in the dust of the akhaada field. When Jarasandha left in a huff, Rukmi and Kamsa's other allies and friends had no choice but to do the same.

When he returned home to Vidarbha with his entourage, he was infuriated, even swearing aloud that he would take every fighting man he could find and ride back to Mathura to avenge his dear friend by slaughtering that upstart cowherd. He had no intention of actually doing so of course, and everyone around him understood that. Merely saying so was sufficient in Vidarbha. As time passed, he adopted and wait and watch attitude and that still held true, particularly in light of the strange rumors filtering through from Mathura these days.

As fate would have it, Rukmi's path was indeed destined to cross that of his friend's Slayer. And it would not be on account of the dead Kamsa that Rukmi would face and fight Krishna.

It would be on account of Rukmi's sister.

Rukmini.

2

Balarama had searched everywhere for Krishna. He was nowhere to be seen in the city. Finally, puzzled and starting to get a little concerned, he located Daruka who told him that Krishna had taken his pushpak and gone somewhere.

“Without you?” Balarama asked.

“Yes, sire, I was aboard already when Dwarkadisha asked me to step off. He took off without saying anything further.”

Balarama looked around. It was early morning and a beautiful autumn day was breaking. The sea glittered with a million sparkles as the first rays of sunshine caught the waters east of the island city and many people were already out on their terraces and verandahs, women drying their hair, men perambulating in the parks, children playing with each other and grandparents. Accustomed to a hardy life, the people continued to work and play as vigorously as ever, determined to earn their place as citizens of this island paradise.

“Did he seem to be in a hurry?” Balarama asked. “Or troubled? Disturbed?”

“Lord Sankarshan,” Daruka said gently, using Balarama’s other name, “If our Lord is troubled, anxious or agitated, I have never seen it on his face

or in his behavior. He is always the same, always equitable. He seemed the same this morning as well, except..." The charioteer paused.

Balarama looked keenly at the sarathi's round, trustworthy face. "Yes? Go on."

Daruka frowned, thinking back. "There was something that made me feel he was...sad perhaps? Morose? Melancholy? It was not anything he said or did, but an air about him. Like the sound of a flute. So sweet, so beautiful, so haunting. But also—"

"But also so sad and lonely," Balarama finished. "Yes, I do know what you mean, Daruka. Thank you." He started to leave then turned back. "Oh, one more thing. Did you see which way the chariot flew?"

"To the east, I think, sire. But if you wish to follow him, it is a simple enough matter."

"How?" Balarama asked.

"Your sky chariot, my Lord. It will take you to its brother chariot in moments."

Balarama nodded. "I knew that. Of course I knew that."

He was in the chariot and off moments later.

Balarama's chariot took him in a wholly unexpected direction. He had thought it would carry him back towards Mathura perhaps, Gokuldham, or Vrindavan. But instead it flew to the east, angling to the north. The risen sun was in his eyes, blinding him and turning the world into a dazzling wall of gold but the pushpak dipped as it approached its destination within moments, and when he glanced back, he saw that Dwarka was long out of sight.

Shortly after, the chariot dropped to just above tree height, skimming the tops of endless rows of palmyra trees marking the coastline. It dipped sharply, wheeling about to the right, then landed on the banks of the confluence of the Gomati River and the sea. Balarama disembarked and looked up the length of the river, winding its way up between rows of palm trees and dense groves. He saw the sibling to his chariot, resting on the muddy bank just above the water line, and the tracks that led away into the palm forest.

He found Krishna standing in a clearing, surrounded by bars and pillars of sunlight streaming through dew-drenched palm fronds. The treetops were filled with squabbling parrots and myna and all manner of other birds, chattering and screeching to one another like a parliament of ministers. A brook gurgled past noisily, splashing sounds suggesting some manner of small animal sporting about out of sight.

His brother stood in the center of the clearing, drenched in sunlight, face raised to stare at nowhere in particular. He was as still as an ebony statue, face relaxed in the unguarded ease of deep contemplation and in that moment the older man he would someday be was visible. It was difficult to believe that he was still only a young man of barely sixteen years age but that was the fact. Balarama was barely seventeen. Yet he felt as if he

had lived far more than those many years and knew that if he felt that way, then Krishna had lived lifetimes in comparison.

The souls of men grow older than their faces. It was a thought that came to him unbidden. Yet it felt not like a quotation of someone else's words but a memory of something he had himself thought once, a long time ago. Yet how long ago could it have been if he was only seventeen years old?

He remained standing beside Krishna awhile, not wishing to disturb his brother's solitary contemplation. There was no crisis to deal with, no urgent decision to make, no message or summons to deliver. He would not even have come here had he known that all Krishna wanted was to stand alone in a riverside grove and think awhile. A man was entitled to his own time. It was only his concern that had brought him here to check on Govinda. Now that he had seen he was well and safe, he wanted to turn back and return to Dwarka at once. He regretted intruding upon this moment of idyllic privacy.

It was Krishna who spoke, acknowledging him without looking at him or addressing him directly. It was as if Krishna spoke to the forest itself, to the world at large, to all Creation. It was like the voice of the wind whispering through trees, the ocean singing in her bed of sand and shale.

“What do we come for?” said Krishna’s voice, to nobody and nothing in particular, yet therefore to everyone and all things at once. “What is it we seek here? What do we hope to accomplish? The cycle of life and birth will go on after we have come and gone, regardless of what we do. The world will turn and, turning, return again to where it once stood, then turn again. This is the song of eternity, we are merely instruments in the background, playing our part. We can neither change the song itself nor write its ending. All we do is play and then depart and another takes our

place. The song goes on with or without us, it neither belongs to us nor is changed by our playing.”

A small breeze sprang up, rustling dried leaves on the ground, churning them into a small spinning vortex. Krishna’s finger rose a few inches to point to the vortex, controlling it, raising it above the ground. The leaves and particles and debris churned in the air, spinning faster. “The earth has her movement. She spins one way and the force of her spinning causes the oceans and wind currents to spin another way. But there is also a force, another undefinable force, that spins water and wind on earth in one direction in half the world and the opposite direction in the other half of the world. Northern hemisphere, it causes tornadoes and whirlpools and storms and even dogs and cats to spin in one direction. Southern hemisphere, it spins them the opposite way. It is as if an invisible line were drawn around the waist of the world, and all things north of it turn one way, all things south of it turn the other way. This is the coriolis effect.”

And now Krishna raised his eyes to gaze at Balarama. And Balarama saw that the pupils of his brother’s eyes were planets in their circuits, spinning around suns, and that the entire universe was reflected within those eyes—contained within those eyes. And all that had ever existed and would ever again exist was inside those eyes.

“So this thing we do, this game we play, this life we live, what else is it but a coriolis? A turning this way then that way then the other way again. Like a dog spinning to catch its own tail but never succeeding. Like a tornado churning and bellowing yet accomplishing nothing. Like a whirlpool sucking down the ocean or a river to no end at all. We have power and it is formidable, unimaginable power. The power to make and end. The power to create and destroy and everything between. Yet after all is said and done, the collective sum of all our deeds is nothing more than a coriolis effect. Turning and endless churning that accomplishes nothing. Not even

Amrit Manthan but mere Manthan, and more Manthan. An aimless wandering across the map of time that marks the boundaries of our existence. A journey to nowhere. And I, even Krishna, even Swayam Bhagwan, can accomplish only a Krishna Coriolis. Epic sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Krishna lowered his finger. The small vortex subsided. Silence lay over the clearing like a dense canopy. The chatter and shrieking of the parrots had ceased. The gurgling of the brook continued but no small creatures splashed about in its waters. The distant stirring of the ocean was a dreamlike rhythm. Sunlight trickled and dripped through the dewy fronds, setting wet earth on fire.

Balarama dared to look at Krishna again. The celestial system in his eyes were gone, replaced by the normal human eyes of Krishna, his brother in flesh and spirit, son of Vasudeva and Devaki and also Nanda and Yashoda, Slayer of Kamsa, Govinda of Gokuldham, Flute of Vrindavan, Lord of Mathura, Rage of Jarasandha, and Dwarkadisha.

“She is here, bhai,” Krishna said. “My Lakshmi is here upon earth, among us, in the flesh. She has taken rebirth to be with me in this life as in all others. I must go to her.”

3

Rukmini woke from strange dreams of oceans and islands, flying chariots of gold and utopian cities. There were other things too in her dream that she could not name or describe, even to herself. Strange sense-memories of encounters she knew she had never had. How could she? They were all involving a person she had never actually met.

Of course, she had seen him. Once.

At the historic wrestling tournament in Mathura on the day that Kamsa son of Ugrasena had grappled with and been defeated by the young Vrishni. She had watched in amazement as the young dark-skinned cowherd had faced and fought a man twice his size and allegedly tenfold as strong, thanks to some mysterious potion he had drugged with by the sorcerous Jarasandha, or so she had heard. When Krishna broke Kamsa's back and she saw the son of Ugrasena drop to the dust, she had been among the many tens of thousands who had gasped and clutched her chest and risen to her feet, raising her voice in amazement.

But her entourage had been compelled to depart almost immediately afterwards. She had never had a chance to actually meet Krishna in person. Though she dearly wanted to. So how could she be having memories of him...touching her, caressing, embracing...? She blushed, looking down at the red-tiled floor of her bed-chamber, embarrassed at the audacity of her own dreams. It was quite scandalous. Or was it? She wondered if she was perhaps simply besotted with the new Lord of Mathura. After all, it was only natural for her to be attracted to him.

But this was something more than mere attraction. It was like the memory of a relationship, a much deeper, darker, more serious and enduring relationship than a mere infatuation based on a single glimpse of a prince performing a heroic act. And the details were so...specific! It was like remembering, not dreaming or imagining. That was what confused her now.

What did these strange dreams and sense-memories of Krishna of Mathura mean? Why did she think of him so intimately as if they had been...lovers. This time she did not blush for despite the inappropriateness of such intimate fantasies, the term seemed apt. Almost perfect. As if, they had indeed been intimately entwined. But of course, that was hardly possible. She was only a virginal young woman. She had refused her brother's offers of suitors time and again, even refused to exercise her privilege to hold a swayamvara to select her own husband. For reasons even she could not explain she had not been ready to engage in a relationship.

This was unusual as her mother and aunts and cousins and everyone else constantly saw fit to remind her. An Arya princess possessed of such beauty and position had no reason to stay unmarried. Indeed, the fact that she remained unattached itself begged the question. Another year and people would start wondering and asking Why? Why indeed. She didn't have the answer. She hardly understood the question.

It was as if she felt...previously committed. As if she had given her word and must wait for it to be accepted or denied.

Her eldest brother Rukmi was the only one who seemed to understand her, showing his cracked upper tooth and grimacing his bearded bear-like features in what passed for a smile by Rukmi, winking broadly at her as if

they shared some common secret. She knew he was misinterpreting her lack of desire to be married. That he misread it as being on account of his old promise made to Prince Kamsa of Mathura, back when she was but a child and Rukmi and Kamsa barely young men themselves. She knew that Rukmi still hoped secretly to forge an alliance based on marriage and as his only sister, she was his only chance of forging such an alliance.

She was content to let Rukmi assume what he assumed: it did not directly affect her in any way. He could not simply give her away without her expressly acceding to a match. That was Arya law and custom, apart from being dharma. Rukmi might do many things in private or off in the Dandaka-van—rumors of his atrocities and brutal methods against the outlaw tribes were legendary—but he was always careful to give the appearance of upholding dharma in public. Vidarbha was not a large and powerful enough kingdom that it could risk its reputation or attract controversy for any reason.

And besides, he knew that his sister would sooner haul off and deal him one tight slap across his ear than simply go off and marry any man he picked out.

It was this latter fact that probably made him grin when she refused the many offers and earnest requests to court her that streamed in constantly from numerous other kingdoms of similar size and stature. He thought her stubbornness was a sham; that she secretly desired Kamsa and would agree to marry him someday, but did not want to be seen to be pushed into the alliance by her brother or parents or anyone else, because of her pride. And if that was the way she wished to play it, Rukmi was willing to accept that.

But that was not the case at all, of course. And now, in the wake of Kamsa's death, Rukmi's smile had vanished. As the offers and proposals

and suggestions continued to stream in, he merely looked on as she steadfastly but politely refused them all, neither commenting nor showing his cracked upper tooth again. With Rukmi, it was difficult to tell. Perhaps he was unable to understand now why she kept refusing offers and so kept his cool. More likely, he simply didn't care anymore. His great ambitious plan had been wrecked and he had nothing to replace it. With Kamsa gone, his opportunity to ally with mighty Mathura—and through Kamsa, with mammoth Magadha and Jarasandha as well—was gone forever. Old King Ugrasena and young King Vasudeva had no need of Vidarbha and the Slayer of Kamsa was said to not care one whit for politics.

So it was shocking when, as she was still musing over the strange dreams of the night before, she received a summons to attend her father the king in the sabha hall. She stopped the guard who brought the message.

“Was it my father himself who summoned me?” she asked her.

“Nay, my princess, it was your brother Prince Rukmi,” the guard replied before turning smartly and exiting her chambers.

She smelled the set-up the instant she entered the sabha hall. Unlike other larger kingdoms where the princesses were often overly protected and shielded from daily politics, the women of Vidarbha waded straight into the everyday muck and ruckus of court intrigues and double-dealings. She had seen women aristocrats hold their own against their male counterparts in the sabha no less ferociously than they did on the battlefield. Vidarbha women often bore actual scars on their faces, unafraid to sully their feminine aspects by taking up arms. More often the scars weren't visible.

Rukmini was no whiplash-tongue or politician but she had seen and heard enough to know what went on.

So when she entered the court hall and saw Sisupala, King of the Chedis, laughing uproariously and quaffing wine with her brothers and father as if a great trade treaty had just been struck, she knew exactly what it meant. The only trade that interested Shushu, as she had called him during their playtime games since childhood, was the trade of bodily fluids in private chambers.

His eyes turned the instant she entered the hall and the way he appraised her lecherously as she walked the dozen or so yards to the throne area told her the rest of the story. Rukmi had found his next-best alliance. It was basic politics. If one could not ally with a larger power, then ally with an equal who needs you as much as you need him. The Chedi kingdom and Vidarbha shared many common goals and common enemies. An alliance made through marriage would double the strength of each instantly, making them the biggest player in the region.

The rest was noise. She listened as Rukmi and her father droned on in their nasal way about how Sisupala had so graciously come forward with a most excellent proposal of betrothal and of course, she was free to choose whom she wished but surely she could not find any fault with her childhood sweetheart and best friend. She almost laughed aloud at that part—so the little fat boy who had once harried her and her friends until she was forced to turn on him and push him down hard enough to break his wrist was now being elevated to the stature of ‘childhood sweetheart and best friend’. How absurd!

And yet, that farce pushed something free in her mind, something that was even more absurd and senseless than the thought of marrying Shushu,

something that solidified the confused feelings and fantasies floating about in her head since the night before.

She spoke aloud, startling the hall with her tone and volume. “This alliance is unacceptable,” she said. The hubbub died away into a stunned absence of sound. She looked at her brother directly, meeting his eyes and showing him that she meant what she said and would back it up with the full force of her will and strength. “I have already chosen the one who is to be my husband for life.” Then she paused, giving everyone a moment to absorb what she had just said. Her next words came from a place within her that even she did not know existed: the same deep primordial part that housed those sense-memories of dalliances with the Slayer of Kamsa. When, where, how, she knew not. Only that she spoke the truth. Heart’s honest truth.

“His name is Krishna,” she said. “Lord of Mathura.”

4

Bana rubbed his eyes again, then took a little water in his hand from the nearest waterskin and splashed it on his face to clear away any doubt.

What he saw was no trick of the eyes: it was right there before him, plain to see. Still, he could not credit the evidence of vision. Perhaps it was some form of asura maya, perhaps the illusion was designed to delude them into revealing themselves?

When he had volunteered for the post of Watcher, Krishna had informed him and the other Watchers that even if a fishing vessel or passing trade ship happened to come upon their position accidentally, defying the odds and pushing against the currents, the island would appear to be just a blob of land cloaked in a perpetual ocean mist. Only eyes that knew Truth could see it for what it was.

Krishna had used those exact words: “Only eyes that know Truth will see Dwarka, for as the name suggests, it is the dwarf or doorway to heavenly realms and only those whose karma makes them worthy of entering swarga can see the doorway.”

Yet here was a boat. Bobbing on the ocean. Plain as the daylight all around, as clearly visible as the stones of the promontory wall upon which Bana stood, and unmistakably real. It had approached so close to the island-fortress, he could even see the cracked timber of the boat’s hull and

meagre tattered sail that had apparently been the only means of propulsion for the craft.

“I saw we heave javelins at it until we blow a hole in it and sink it,” said the young volunteer Watcher under Bana’s guidance. The young man looked more nervous than aggressive as he said it, and Bana knew that his bravado was motivated by uncertainty and distrust rather than any confidence in arms.

Bana had given the young man some training in arms - alongwith a number of other men who made up the volunteer Protectors that drilled and trained more out of a desire to maintain discipline and fitness than to actually prepare for war. The Yadavas, like all sane beings, were peaceful people but they had suffered enough torment inflicted by aggressors to simply lie back and enjoy their lives anymore. There were always young men and women who wished to be ready in any eventuality.

Young Jigneshwara was one such young man. Unfortunately, his talent for throwing the javelin did not even extend to holding it correctly. If he began throwing javelins at the boat—which was quite out of javelin throw, incidentally, Bana mused—they might still be here when the End of Days came and the gates of heaven truly opened to receive them all.

He did not say this aloud: young men must be permitted their over-confidence. At least until they have an opportunity to prove themselves justified or not in asserting the same.

Instead he said: “Take word to our Lord. Fetch him directly here. Do not stop to tell anyone or do anything else. Do you understand?” He looked directly into the young man’s startled brown eyes. “Jigneshwara? Are my instructions clear?”

“Yes, General Bana,” the young man said earnestly. “But surely we should inform as many people as possible, perhaps sound a general alarm? After all, this could be the start of a major invasion of asuras?”

Yes, of course, Bana thought to himself, because asuras always like to come in little boats with tattered sails, one at a time: it's the latest trend in major invasions, haven't you heard?

He kept that thought to himself and said aloud: “Not a word. Not one stinking word. To. Anyone. Am I clear yet, Jigneshwara?”

The young man hesitated. He might be a military recruit in his own mind but in truth he was only a cheese-maker’s son. *Makes fine cottage cheese too*, Bana thought: he had enjoyed sampling some during the mid-day meals which they had shared often while on duty on the Wall. The cream of Bana’s message finally filtered through the muslin cloth of Jignesh’s brain and reached his consciousness.

“Yes, Senapati,” he said, a little sulkily.

Young too. Young enough to be spanked if he was my son. But of course, under Kamsa’s reign, or even Ugrasena’s, young Jigneshwara would have been recruited as soon as he was old enough to hold a weapon, any weapon, and sent to war, fodder for the blood-field, as they had called it then, also known as Seeding—a cruel reference to the first waves of foot-soldiers who were sent forth to test the enemy’s resolve and tactics, literally seeding the soil of the battlefield with their own bodies and life-blood.

Jignesh did not realize how lucky he was not to live in an age when he would have regarded merely as Seeding for some indifferent general's war maneuver. Bana himself had sent untold numbers of young men like this out to be chopped down and pressed into the mud within moments of setting forth into battle for the first time in their lives. Jignesh still had a look in his eye that suggested he might not follow Bana's orders as rigorously as those young men had in that bygone age. After all, the danda for disobeying orders in Dwarka was not death as it had been back then: in fact, there was no danda at all in Dwarka, because nobody had any need to disobey any order and Krishna-Balarama dealt with those rare exceptions who did.

Jignesh turned to go towards the pushpak platform where he would ride one of the two small single-man crafts that would carry him to his destination in moments. He was halfway there when Bana called out to him casually.

“Vigneshwara.”

The young man turned, eyebrows arched in the ‘what now’ expression characteristic of young people his age anywhere.

“If you say anything about this to anyone other than Lord Krishna,” Bana paused, letting his words sink in, “I will tell your Kanika-Maasi about what happened during your sword-training lesson.”

Vighneshwara’s face contorted in a look of such extreme embarrassment that Bana almost laughed aloud. He resisted the urge, keeping a straight face and stern expression to let the young Watcher know he meant what he

said. Vighneshwara swallowed, his adam's apple large in his thin young throat, and turned and hurried the rest of the distance to the pushpak. Moments later, the vaahan swooped away and sped across the sunlit towers and rooftops of the southern quadrant, vanishing from sight.

Bana smiled as he turned back to the Wall. He had no intention of telling Kanika-Maasi anything at all; the woman was the worst gossip and matchmaker in her tribe, perhaps even the entire 247th block, and since the 247 was one of the most populous in that part of the great island-city, that was saying something. He had been a young recruit once too, a very long time ago, and he could still relate to how embarrassed a young soldier would be if a woman with a tongue that sharp got hold of such a tidbit. Thinking back to the incident in question, even he winced now. No. He would never tell such a story to Kanika-Maasi - after she put her spin on it and told the whole world, every young woman in Dwarka would laugh at poor Vighnesh; the fellow might never find a suitable bride. But it had been an effective deterrent.

Sometimes, one didn't need a danda system to keep errant behavior in check. Just a caution and a warning at the right time.

He turned back to watch the boat that was the subject of this exchange. It was still there, bobbing bravely. It looked so tiny in that enormous ocean. How had it ever survived the voyage all the way from...from wherever it had come? He could not imagine making such a voyage. The Yadavas were not sea-faring people—none of the nations of the sub-continent were in fact. Traveling overland was more than they desired: most tribes and nations were content to remain in the land where their ancestors had sprung from until to the end of time. Why go elsewhere? The world was all one, was it not? Besides, land did not belong to anyone, one only occupied it for a short time. And water? Water could not even be occupied for more than a moment at a time.

And yet, here they were, the nation of Yadavas, on a great island-fortress, in the middle of the vast ocean. But it was different: they never left the island, nor needed to. It was their world. They even had hill ranges, valleys, desert regions, a snowcapped peak or two...nobody knew how such variation was possible, but Dwarka contained a microcosm of the world entire. A generation city, that was the term Krishna used. "Like a craft designed to carry you and your descendants through time itself for an age to come," he had said at their last city meeting.

In contrast, the tiny craft bobbing out there on the ocean, just a few dozen yards from the rocky edges of Dwarka, was a mere speck in the ocean. Bana could not see how many occupied it, or if any occupied it at all. The tatters of the sail obscured the boat itself from this height and angle, making it impossible to tell exactly but he thought that perhaps there could be one person on that craft, surely not more than two persons.

He could not even begin to understand who they were or what reason they might have to risk their lives in such a craft to come all the way here. But Krishna would.

5

The occupant of the boat that braved the ocean sat before Krishna on a golden seat. Krishna had insisted that he take that seat while he himself sat on a lower stool beside the visitor.

The instant Krishna had received word of the boat, he had flown to the Wall in his own Pushpak driven by Daruka, leaving the astonished young Watcher far behind with his blinding speed. Daruka's expert handling lowered the vaahan to the ocean beyond the Wall, as Bana was joined at his position by the curious young Vighneshwara. Both had watched as Krishna himself reached from his golden chariot into the boat, helping what appeared to be an elderly man into the vehicle. Then, the pushpak had risen up to just above the height of the Wall.

For a moment, as the Pushpak rose within easy view of the Wall, the pair of Watchers had seen the visitor from the boat. He appeared to be an elderly brahmin, quite worse the wear for his oceanic voyage.

Then the Pushpak had flashed past overhead and they had seen no more.

They exchanged a curious glance, united in that instant in a common brotherhood of ignorance and curiosity, wondering why a brahmin would be seafaring in a tiny boat but Bana had already warned the young man not to say a word about the incident or ask a question of anyone and the threat of Kanika-maasi still loomed formidably in the young apprentice's memory. So he held his tongue and both senior and junior went about their

daily chores which consisted almost entirely of walking the Wall and watching for any approaching or passing vessels.

In the years since Bana had been at this post, today had been the first time he had ever seen anything other than sea, sun, sky and birds and thereafter he saw nothing out of the unusual either. Soon that incident faded away into insignificance, to be added to a very long list of things inexplicable associated with Krishna.

Meanwhile, back in Krishna's residence, the old brahmin was taken directly into Krishna's private chambers, unseen and unnoticed by others. Krishna himself aided the weary man in washing and repairing himself from the rigors inflicted by the weeks he had spent drifting at sea. Krishna washed the old man's feet then helped him wash his body of the salt and scum of the voyage, helped him sip some water slowly, dried and dressed him in his own garments, fed him some fruit, then bade him rest awhile to recover his strength.

Krishna watched over him personally as the old brahmin slept. At several points in the day and night that the old man was lost to the world, he tossed and turned and thrashed in Krishna's bed, like a man tossed in a sea-storm. Krishna had fed him sips of sweet water and spoken to him soothingly till he fell back into sleep.

When the old priest rose from slumber, it was morning of the following day and he seemed a little better, the first steps taken on the road to recovery.

After a morning repast which Krishna insisted on serving and feeding him personally, the brahmin was finally ready to speak. Krishna was willing to

wait until he was fully recovered but the priest insisted that his message was urgent and could not wait.

It was a miracle that he had found Dwarka at all, he said when he was able to speak. There were times he had been certain he was about to die for he had never been on the ocean in his life leave alone made a voyage by boat. But he had sensed Krishna's divine hand guiding him through the currents and shoals and reassuring him during the sea storms and had endured with the belief that the Lord would watch over him and bring him here safe. And here he was indeed, at the place which people said was a mythical city and not to be found by mortals on earth. Truly, it was a miracle.

This preamble ended, he introduced himself.

"My name is Sunanda," he said, "I am a simple brahmin from the town of Kundina in the region called Amravarti. You have probably never even heard of it before."

"It is in the kingdom of Vidarbha," Krishna replied. "Ruled by Raja Bhishmaka."

The brahmin looked surprised at first then smiled wanly. "What is not known to you, great Lord? Indeed, Raja Bhishmaka is titled king of Vidarbha. Although his eldest son Rukmi is king in all but name and has been for some years." The brahmin sighed. "But I will not waste precious time on the politics of that region. It is not on the business of Vidarbha that I came here in search of you. It was at the urging of my mistress who bade me come and deliver a message unto you in her own words which I have memorized and wish to repeat pad-a-pad with your permission."

Krishna nodded. "I shall hear the message with great pleasure. Your mistress is of course the daughter of King Bhishmaka and sister of the heir-apparent Prince Rukmi."

"She is," Sunanda replied. "She is Princess Rukmini and it is on her bidding that I come on this precarious mission."

Krishna fell silent at the mention of the name. "Speak your message, I entreat, good brahmin. Speak it as if she herself said the words, and let it be as if she herself were here at this very moment, addressing me herself."

Sunanda bowed his head once, then began speaking, and as he did so, Krishna closed his eyes and saw...

A woman as dark in aspect as himself, jet-black skin and luminous large doe-like eyes, only a few centimetres shorter than himself, strong and straight of limb and firm of flesh, perfect of joint and angle, comely in every respect, but astonishingly, breathtakingly beautiful when perceived in entirety. No lesser word could be used to describe her. She was a goddess. A dark devi of great power and appetites, rich in passion, possessed of formidable talents and wisdom, a Mistress of Worlds.

Lakshmi, he said in his mind, and she smiled and turned away coyly from him, dropping to her haunches, glancing back over her shoulder as she bent to pick up a lotus in full bloom, dripping with diamond-bright dew.

My Lord, what use is subterfuge between you and I? I am trapped in this mortal form as are you in your's. Yet we both know who we truly are. Who can deny the essential and the vital? I am your's and you are mine and so will it be throughout time. Only our forms and identities may change to suit our purposes but our souls remain united in love eternally.

Until now, I lived this mortal life contentedly, waiting for I knew not what. But now the web from my eyes has been lifted. I see the truth of our essences. And knowing the truth, I cannot bear to be apart from you any longer.

Nor I from you, Krishna replied, reaching out his hand to her as she stood, offering him the lotus flower.

But she turned away, taking one, two, three slow steps from him. Her silver anklets and waistlet tinkled. Her hips swayed as she stepped around the pool beside which they both stood, bathed in moonlight. *In order for us to be united, you will have to come and take possession of me from my father's house.* She looked

up at him, her sight direct, her expression serious. By force. For my brother has made an alliance and means to give me away against my will. But it must not be.

Krishna turned the hand he had offered into a fist, drawing it closer to his body, tightening it until the bones snapped and crackled. I shall come and do what must be done. I sense not only your brother's part in this but another's as well. An old and formidable foe.

She nodded. It is so. But remember, it must be soon and you must come and fetch me or else I will be married against my will to Sisupala, son of Damaghosa.

Never, Krishna said, his own aspect turning dark and fearsome, his eyes blazing out golden flames. The water in the pond evaporated as before a great raging blaze, the lotus flowers shrivelled and turned to ashen husks, the trees of the dark jungle surrounding them were blasted into scorched fragments. Even the moon turned dark and bloody. *No jackal shall touch the mate of a lion, lotus-eyed one. I shall come and I shall do what must be done. I, Vishnu have said so.*

She smiled, her eyes brimming with tears of relief. *I am relieved. I had feared that perhaps your mission in this avatar might require you to leave me unprotected, to ignore my plight in order to serve some greater mortal good. After all,* she said as tears trickled down her dark cheeks, *you serve dharma above all other masters and mistresses.*

Krishna's anger abated. Never, my beloved, he said. I serve dharma, it is true, I am but a Sword of Dharma sent to serve its purpose here on earth. But to protect you is also my dharma. I shall come. And I shall do--

Yes, she said, interrupting him. *For if there was a person in the three worlds who could dare to interrupt Vishnu or Krishna, it was she. I am glad you shall come. Now pay heed to my words. I have crafted a plan that will serve our ends. You need only follow it and all will be well. Listen well and communicate the details to my bhraattr-in-law Gada as well. Tell him, bring his mace!*

She paused to wipe the tears from her face and casually flicked the moisture aside. It fell to the ground and on the spot where it fell, the trees that had been blasted to withered sticks grew instantly fresh and lush, the

pond appeared again, as crystalline as before, the lotus flowers bloomed, and the moon was clear and cleansed of blood. All was as before.

Then Vishnu listened as Lakshmi told him her plan.

6

Kundina had never looked so beautiful. The capital of Vidarbha was not a large metropolis. Its thoroughfares were simple uksan-cart pathways, its only raj-marg led from the palace to the marketplace. Its houses were of simple construction.

But that day the town was dressed in her finest. Her roads, crossroads and bylanes, every last one had been washed clean, swept and then sprinkled with fragrant water. Ornamental banners flew alongside official krta-dhvaja, heralding all the major houses of not only Vidarbha kindom but the entire region, for the event had been announced to be a swayamvara and every king who had ever gazed upon Rukmini's beauty and coveted here had added his flag to the fray, hoping to win her comely hand that day.

Even those who spoke of Rukmi's prior intention to give the preference to his friend Sisupala felt confident that given a fair chance they would prove themselves superior to the prince of Cheddi. And with so many of them present, even Rukmi would not dare to simply hand over his sister: at the very least, Rukmini would have to be given an opportunity to garland her chosen one herself. And when each man imagined himself standing beside that arrogant half-wit son of Damaghosa, they felt certain she would rather choose him over that mutt.

For days beforehand, the wedding parties had been arriving. King Bhishmaka had set up enormous camps in the fields outside the city. Farmers moaned and lamented the loss of their crop but when they saw the banners of those who would occupy their lands, they forgot their losses

and began counting the profit they would earn from the extra income they could glean for use of their lands, one way or another, for Vidarbans were shrewd traders first and foremost.

Ornamental arches were raised on the king's orders, many leading nowhere, merely providing decoration. The exteriors of houses were cleaned and limewashed, then decorated with sandalwood garlands and other shining ornaments. Every priest in seven surrounding districts found himself working day and night performing a large variety of yagnas and havans, some of purification and renewal, others of propitiation. The pitris were honored, as were the devas, and the brahmins fed more than they had consumed in the previous three seasons. Everywhere one went, the sound of Sanskrit mantras being chanted loudly came to the ear, as did music performed or being practiced by artists in preparation for celebrations both private and public.

It was the kingdom's first wedding since the wedding of the king, some thirty years earlier, and as such, it was the biggest celebration Vidarbha had seen in over a generation.

As the wedding day dawned, the camp housing the visiting royalty was bustling and filled with gravelly voices and male laughter. Wine flowed like water. The sound of silver anklets, the kind tied to dancing women's anklets, were to be heard from every second tent, tinkling in rhythm to the beat of drums and other musical instruments. Lights burned night and day within the large canopies, most of them interconnected through a passageway of cloth overhanging until the entire space resembled a city of tenting. People disappeared within the folds of colored cloth and did not emerge from days. When they did emerge, they appeared bleary eyed and sodden with soma. The debauchery was a celebration in its own right, only glancingly related to the actual occasion of the princess's wedding! And with over two hundred small and minor kings and chieftains present, the

celebration was an event in its own right as well. People would be talking about the goings on for decades afterward.

But one difference marked the occasion. In Arya tradition, kings and princes attending a wedding or swayamvara usually came accompanied by only a small elite force of champions, the yodhas of their army who had earned a right to seat themselves among the higher nobility and royalty and eat and drink with them as equals. And so every one of the two hundred kings and chiefs had indeed brought a small contingent with him, ranging from as few as one score to as many as ten score. This being customary, nobody saw anything amiss.

But what they did not see, and most did not even know about, was that every single one of those kings and chiefs had brought their entire army with them, ranging from a few thousand to whole akshohini. And all those two hundred armies were camped in clearings and hollows and valleys well away from the capital city yet within a few hours ride from it. It was the largest collective of fighting forces ever assembled in Vidarbha and the first time every single one of those individual leaders had agreed to bring his troops for a collective purpose.

But what was that collective purpose remained to be seen.

In the palace, Rukmini awaited the return of the brahmin Sunanda with growing impatience. When the time of the first rituals arrived and there was still no sign nor word of him, she began to fret. For whatever her inner essence, in this life and form, she was a mortal woman, and subject to all that a mortal woman felt and endured. Chief among those endurances was the will of men, often forced or harshly applied.

She had attempted to have words with her father, to make him see reason, still hoping for some reconciliation. For the plan notwithstanding, Rukmini, daughter of Bhishmaka, had no desire to see her family and near and dear harmed or to see bloodshed caused on her account. But her words had no effect.

Her father, normally more than accomodating to her entreaties, seemed oddly distant and detached. She noticed that he often mistook the day, the date, the season of year, and at least once that she observed, he even seemed to forget the year. It was as if he were passing over entire swatches of time, missing out on months or weeks, and was puzzled at their passing without his noticing. Yet he had been right here, in the palace, every one of those days and weeks and months. How could he simply forget?

She worried that his health was deteriorating and that it could be the sign of some greater ailment. She tried addressing her concerns to the royal vaid, but was surprised to find that he had been replaced by a new man, a somewhat sinister and very un-vaid-like person who appeared to be administering a course of medication of some sort to her father and brother.

But when she tried to enquire what herbs that medication might consist of or at least what it was meant to cure, she was told off with rude brusqueness bordering on outright uncivility.

Unaccustomed to being insulted in her own house, she stormed off, angry and frustrated. But there was nobody else she could appeal to for help. She consoled herself in the end with the rationalization that rude though he might be, he was only trying to help her father and brother, nothing more.

But as time passed, she grew less certain of this intention.

On the day of her wedding, for instance, both King Bhishmaka and Prince Rukmi appeared to be either drunk or not in their senses. The signs were fairly subtle, errors in day and date, confusion about the season, her age--all things related to time, she noted--but in and of themselves, they were not indications of anything sinister. So she was forced to bite her tongue and keep her counsel.

She was bathed and made to undergo the full ceremony of preparation, from the application of unguents to the washing off with cow's milk and then scented water. She was dressed in the traditional garb and ornaments as well as two new items of clothing that were also customary for a Vidarbha bride. The highest priests in the kingdom performed the rites, reciting mantras of protection and blessing from the Vedas: Sama, Rig and Yajur. The purohita who specialized in Atharva Veda rituals, offered propitiation to the nav-graha, the nine celestial bodies that governed all mortal existence.

Then came the customary gifting of kine, gold, silver, ornaments, sesame seeds mixed with molasses and other ritual items by the king to the brahmins of the land. She had never seen so many brahmins present in one place before though a bridesmaid whispered in her ear that this was nothing, she should see the army of brahmins that gathered on leap years in Mithila, where the Chandravanshi kings famously hosted their great spiritual convocations, upholding a tradition from the times of legendary Raja Janak, father of the even more legendary Sita Janaki, wife of the great prince Rama Chandra of Ayodhya.

"But even Sita was nowhere near as beautiful as you, Ruk-Ruk," said the bridesmaid, giggling. Ruk-Ruk, meaning Stop-stop in colloquial idiom,

was the nickname given to her because of her constant refusals to marry over the years. She didn't mind it. It was an apt one after all.

Then the parade of kings began, ostensibly to present gifts to Raja Bhismaka on this happy occasion and offer their blessings on the occasion, but really an excuse for all participants in the swayamvara to take their first close look at the woman whose hand they would compete to win that day.

As the day wore on, she grew bored and tired of the constant litany of names and the leering, moustached and bearded faces of men, some even older than her father by a decade or two, who grinned and smiled and stared unabashedly at her, emboldened by the ritual occasion, as if a woman agreeing to choose a husband was fair game for any man to lech to his heart's content.

She felt like standing up and yelling: "All right, so it's a swayamvara, and I'm the one who gets to choose, not you to choose me!"

But of course, one logically followed the other. If they did not come to lech at her, how would she be able to examine them in turn and decide which one might perhaps be close to her ideal desired mate? The problem was that she had already chosen her ideal mate and all she wanted was for him to come and take her away. But for the sake of appearances, she sat formally and tried to present herself while going through the motions of glancing at the parade of men who pranced and preened before her.

Her indifference and her clear lack of interest in the suitors, further stoked the controversy over her brother and father pre-arranging her union with the prince of Cheddi. But Sisupala denied it nervously and Rukmi himself appeared more befuddled--or drunk, more likely--than conniving, and so

the other suitors let the matter drop. They contented themselves with the thought that perhaps she was content to simply choose the winner of the contest, regardless of his appearance. After all, they reasoned, a sensible woman appreciates a winner more than winning looks.

It was late in the afternoon and surely amongst the last of the suitors to arrive, when she heard a name spoken that shocked her out of her indifferent reverie. She sat up, staring despite herself, and found herself looking into the face of an impossibly thin, tall man with a face that looked like it could cleave a wooden table in two pieces. He smiled knowingly at her, lowering his face until only his eyes and the tip of his nose and jaw were visible to her.

“God Emperor Jarasandha of Magadha,” the court announcer proclaimed, presenting the suitor to the prospective bride.

Jarasandha was greeted with huge smiles and grins from his coterie of supporters. “The look on her face was worth a fortune, your lordship,” said Shalva. “She looked as if she had seen her own death come striding up to her.”

“Aye,” said Dantavakra, swigging from a wineskin carried by his aide--he drank far too much to bother with goblets and cups. “You shocked the virginity out of that one, you did, Jara!”

Viduratha and Puandraka made a few lewd comments, one bordering on the obscene and Jarasandha listened impassively.

“It may be so, but our goal is Krishna, remember that, all of you. That is the whole point of this plan. And he has not shown himself yet.”

“Oh he will,” said Dantavakra cheerfully. He was always cheerful; his patent greeting was *Cheers!* because he was always drinking and expected others to be doing the same as well. “The hook has been lowered, the fool will take the bait.” He tilted the wineskin carried by his burly aide and drank freely from it, spilling wine over his fine clothing and self and upon the palace tiles. He did not even bother to wipe his dripping chin after he finished, because he would only wet it again in a moment.

Jarasandha looked at him with a lack of expression that was more scathing than open disgust. “Only a fool would mistake Krishna for a fool. But to use your crude fisherman’s analogy, even if he were foolish enough to take the bait, he is capable of tearing off the arm holding the rod. Remember that.”

Paundraka shrugged. “That may well be so, great one, but if he comes into Kundina, he will not leave alive. That much we have made sure of.”

Viduratha grinned. “It is as Paundraka said. We have more forces hidden in the nearby forests and within hours march that Krishna can neither enter Vidarbha without us knowing about it, nor can he hope to leave Kundina alive once he comes in. This time, he will not elude you or delude you as he did before.”

Jarasandha shook his head. “There is no point arguing this. Krishna and Balarama have Pushpaks, they can fly and fly out in an eye-wink. Even the greatest armies in the world can’t prevent that. No, you fools. Remember the plan. It is not to reel in Krishna, but to keep the bait on the hook and make him reel himself in willingly. That is why I changed my ploy and devised this new strategem. Just remember that the plan is not Krishna, it is Rukmini.”

It was true. After the fire on the mountain, Jarasandha had been prepared to believe, however unlikely it might be, that Krishna and Balarama were indeed dead. But unlike Kamsa or so many other young brash conquerors, he was a man of vision. He believed in the axiom: Seed one new field for every one you harvest.

He had known a long time ago that he would need leverage over Krishna, his greatest nemesis. And so he had seeded fields that would not yield

harvests for years, or decades, in the eventuality that one day, he would reap the reward.

Rukmini was one such field. Jarasandha had spasas in her father's court, as he did everywhere. And he knew how to sift the information that was brought from these spasas and how to interpret them.

The day she had made her move, sending the brahmin Sunanda with the message to Krishna, word of the message had come to Jarasandha's ears. At once, he knew that Krishna was alive. And he had immediately set to work, preparing to spring a trap. The most tender trap of all. And now, the trap was about to be sprung. But unlike his allies, who were over-eager to prove themselves in battle against the most formidable champion of their age, the legendary Slayer of Kamsa, Lord of Mathura, and leader of the Yadava people in their exile to the fabled city of Dwarka whose location nobody had ever ascertained, he was wise enough to know that merely confronting or trapping Krishna would not succeed.

So he planned to watch Rukmini. All he had to do was stay close to her and prevent her from leaving and Krishna would be forced to stay as well. There were forces even a flying chariot could not battle against, odds even a Sudarshana Chakra could not best. Jarasandha controlled Rukmini's father and brothers and near and dear in this kingdom. If she attempted to leave with Krishna, he would dispense such horrendous torture to them that she would never be able to live the rest of her life happily. She did not know this yet of course. She did not need to be told.

It didn't matter whether or not Rukmini knew. It did not even matter whether his dunderhead allies knew--he had allied with them not for their intelligence or their military knowledge, only for their strength in arms and common hatred of Krishna, Slayer of their friend Kamsa. It did not matter whether anyone else knew or not.

Only that Krishna knew.

That, Jarasandha knew, was a tighter chain than any made of iron or steel.
One that even Krishna would not dare to snap and walk away from.

And that was *his* plan.

Now all he had to do was wait for Krishna to attempt to execute his plan
and the rest would play out as it played out.

8

Rukmini hardly knew what to say or do after Jarasandha's introduction. Even now, glancing across the great hall to where the God Emperor of Magadha stood with his coterie of sycophants, drinking and behaving like boorish buffoons--except for Jarasandha himself, who seemed not to care about either women or wine--she could barely resist the urge to rise from her seat and rush back to her chambers. Damn this charade. All she wanted now was for Krishna to come and take her away.

And so I shall.

She started, surprising an elderly tribal chief, an old ally of her grandfather who was seeking a new wife to bear him children and add to his tally of a thousand sons, when she clapped her hands to her breast.

Krishna!

I am here, close by, and I am coming to present myself to your father and brothers now. Calm yourself and do not react again that way. Act as if nothing is amiss.

What? But that is not the plan! The plan is for--

As you perhaps noticed, there is a new addition to the scenario...

You mean Jarasandha. I had no idea he would be here. I have never seen him visit my father's house until today.

That means that he has his own plan. And so we must change our own.

Yes but...

There is no time for buts. I am here. Compose yourself.

The old chieftain was gazing at her with wizened interest. He spoke to his aide in their local dialect, a commonspeak variation of Sanskrit, and from the resemblance, she guessed the aide was one of his many sons: the son himself looked older than her own father. She lowered her hand, and saw both men track the movement with more interest than the innocent gesture warranted. The son said something to the father which made the older man look sharply at the younger. She guessed the son had suddenly decided that

the gesture was intended for him, not his father. *Oh, spare me*, she thought.

I am trying. But...

But then he was in the sabha hall, entering as innocuously as any other suitor. Quite alone and, she noted with some concern, unarmed.

Krishna, my love...

But already he was announced and heads turned to look at him, all curious, many shocked, some instantly flickering with anger, others coldly hostile, a few gasping and then smiling happily. But there were very few of the last--and those few were minor leaders, mostly out-caste or low-caste achievers who had worked their way up through society through rigorous struggle and extraordinary accomplishments, people who did not matter when compared to the enormous caucus of power and numbers that was gathered under her father's roof this day. And that caucus bristled with hostility and hatred the instant Krishna's name was spoken.

In that moment, she realized that her birth in this house, this family, had been no coincidence. Why else would the consort of the Deva who upheld Dharma be married into a house of adharma? For that was what this reaction meant? All those gathered here identified with Kamsa and as such, stood against everything that Krishna stood for. Had the occasion not been what it was, the collective hatred directed against the newest suitor now entering her father's hall would have exploded in a storm of swords and words.

But protocol had demanded that every suitor leave his weaponry and men of war outside the door, precisely to avoid such confrontations and rivalries. And every suitor wanted this alliance through marriage dearly. That, and the fact that Krishna's visit was sudden, low-key, and over in a very short while, kept the situation from getting out of hand.

She watched discretely as Krishna was greeted by her father and brother with a mixture of puzzlement and pride. Pride at being honored by a visit from the legendary Dwarkadish, lord of a kingdom so great that nobody knew where it was situated! And also puzzlement at why he was here. He was offered the traditional welcome drink, madhuparka, the gift of garments and other ritual items and Krishna complied with the Vidarbha custom by honoring the father and family with prescribed gifts in turn. The pride soon wore thin but the puzzlement remained and at least in Rukmi's case, threatened to turn to hostility. She knew it must take every gram of her brother's self-control to restrain himself from demanding loudly how in Naraka the murderer of his best friend dared to come ask for his sister's hand in marriage. But Rukmi remained silent, only exchanging a glance with one person to show his displeasure.

That person was not in the least puzzled, nor proud. She saw Jarasandha's hatchet face acknowledge Rukmi's heated glance as he himself watched Krishna. The God Emperor's face bore an absence of expression that was more revealing than her brother's false toothy grin of greeting.

The Magadhan sensed her watching him and glanced slyly in her direction. She felt a sizzling on the nape of her neck as if she had been scalded there with the hot froth of a steaming bath into which she had lain back too quickly and looked away--to Krishna, who had his back to Jarasandha.

From the way Krishna held himself, she knew he was in fact looking at Jarasandha through eyes other than those on the front of his face, and as he finished the pleasantries and stepped away from the royal dais, he glanced up at her. The look from Krishna had a totally apposite effect upon her from the one Jarasandha had evoked: She felt her left thigh, army and eye tremble and recalled that these were the signs of an auspicious union.

Accompanying Krishna's look was his mind-message:

The Devi will unite us. Go to her and she will bring you to me.

And then he was gone as suddenly and discretely as he had come. She realized afterward that he had not even come to look upon the prospective bride, as was his right.

Then again, he hardly needed to see her to decide if he desired her. He was her's already. And she his.

It was bringing them together that was the daunting task.

9

Vidarbha tradition required the bride to begin the swayamvara proceedings with a visit to the shrine of Devi Ambika, also known as Bhawani. After touching the feet of the Goddess and asking her blessings, she would then proceed to the swayamvara hall--which was actually an open field to accomodate the many kings present--where she would then preside over a tournament of skill and wits.

Every suitor then had to vie for her hand by winning each of the various bouts of strength, skill, arms or wit, and for all rounds, the prospective bride and she alone would be sole judge of who won or failed. When the tournament was over, the purohits would then chant their mantras and begin the last phase of the wedding rituals and incantations--the preparatory rituals and mantras had begun weeks earlier--as she took the great garland of victory and went around the entire hall, making her final selection.

The suitor she selected, she would adorn with the garland, and he would then take her hand and lead her to the sacred agni chaukat, to perform the last rituals of holy matrimony before all present.

The swayamvara was designed to be a transparent and fair process, providing every suitor with an equal opportunity to prove his worth, and the bride to choose her own husband guided by good judgement and free will.

Some women chose the paramour they had dallied with earlier, using the ceremonial proceeding to disguise their private indiscretions even as they sealed their love with social approval. Others dallied with one man but eventually chose another, as was their right. Many remained virginal by choice or compulsion, depending on their house or their own desire, and simply chose the winner of the contest. Still others permitted their family and elders to choose on their behalf, using the ceremony merely as a seal of authentication so that no rival could later claim he had been treated unfairly by the house and not given a chance to present himself as a suitable match.

When the bride chose her groom, regardless of her choice, every man present was expected to understand and respect her decision. It was not only the norm, it was the only honorable way. For anyone who was foolish enough to question her choice, object, or let his own frustration and disappointment show at that moment, would only ensure that he was never invited again to any decent woman's swayamvara or permitted to offer himself as a suitor elsewhere.

The threat of social ostracism and being barred from seeking a wife in another house were usually sufficient to deter any hotheads or loose-tongued fools but for those who remained undeterred and grew abusive or offensive, a contingent of the toughest punishers in the kingdom stood aside, ready to take hold of the offender. And under Vidarbha law, and even Arya law by and large, the host was within his rights to mete out any punishment he saw fit to the offender. Most swayamvaras ended with at least a few less suitors returning home than the number that had arrived.

Jarasandha and his coterie had laid their trap carefully and brilliantly. They knew he would have pre-arranged with Rukmini to have her garland him at the final selection: she would go through the motions of the tournament and the events but in the end, her garland would go around Krishna's slender neck. And then nobody could deny her her choice

because the ritual would have been conducted in a fair and honorable manner. Krishna would then take Rukmini to his golden chariot, which was parked with the other royal chariots, the cynosure of every charioteer's eyes, and fly away back to his mythical magical city of Dwarka. And once that happened, Jarasandha would be back where he was before: with nothing in hand and a vengeance crying out to be fulfilled.

So Jarasandha intended to challenge Krishna at the swayamvara itself. His plan was to make the contest personal and two-fold. Since Krishna had killed his son-in-law Kamsa, he was entitled to demand an opportunity to confront Krishna honorably in a champion's duel. What better occasion than this one? But in deference to the bride's earlier declaration that all contests would be individual and no violence or combat would be brooked, Jarasandha was willing to challenge Krishna to a two-man contest instead. And for this particular contest, the bride would not be entitled to pass judgement: Jarasandha wished to let the crowd decide the victor. And of course, the crowd was his!

It was a foolproof plan. Krishna could not refuse or he would lose face. Rukmini could not object for Jarasandha had every right. And once pitted against him, Jarasandha knew that he could match Krishna in every respect. Especially given the sports he had in mind. Moreover, to ensure Krishna's acceptance, he would hurl such insults at him over his murder of Kamsa, his own maternal uncle, that even the supremely calm young man would not be able to resist.

He had seen Krishna's veneer crack that time on the battlefield when he realized how shrewdly Jarasandha was using the Vortals to perpetuate the siege of Mathura. And he had seen Krishna's desperate ruses to escape fighting again--with the Yavana, then with the armies of Magadha, and even today with Rukmi's forces. It was clear that Krishna did not wish to risk his Yadavas in any more war and bloodshed. He regarded this as his personal mission and so he had come alone, unarmed (at least so far as

Jarasandha could see) and without even his inseparable companion, Balarama.

Krishna did not wish to fight.

But he could not refuse a fair challenge. Not when his own honor and that of the entire Yadava clan was being questioned before all the chiefs and lords and kings of Vidarbha and this entire region of Aryavarta.

Jarasandha was certain Krishna must and would concede.

And once he did, then Jarasandha would change the rules--and engage Krishna in direct combat.

Certainly, Princess Rukmi would object in dismay and cry out to stop the fight.

But Jarasandha had just cause and the fact that Krishna had engaged his own uncle in direct combat in much the same way, showing him no mercy and killing him on the akhaada field in full view of Mathura, would cost him all sympathy at this forum. King Bhishmaka and Prince Rukmi would not stop the fight.

And then, with Krishna's slender neck in his grasp, Jarasandha would kill the cowherd of Vrindavan as mercilessly as he had killed his son-in-law Kamsa.

Perhaps when he was done, he would have the Yadava's body chopped up and prepared with that new recipe he had acquired here in Vidarbha. Yes, he thought, stroking his freshly oiled moustache, Krishna would taste quite delicious roasted and seasoned, he was sure of it.

His twin tongue-tips flickered between his slightly parted lips, tasting the sweet savory flavor already.

It had been a very long time since he had tasted godflesh.

10

Rukmini's feet trembled as she set foot on the threshold of the women's palace, the female-only enclave of the main house. She was barefoot and the stone floor was cold: more so because she was flushed and feverish with anticipation.

She stepped out before a hushed crowd of sakhis, the bridesmaids whose task it was to protect and tend to the bride-to-be on her final journey as a maiden.

Excited young faces watched her every move, every gesture as minutely as if memorizing it for their own reference: as the only daughter of the king, she was every young woman's ideal and aspiration figurehead. Everything she did influenced women across Vidarbha.

She knew that the way she walked, moved, the silver nose-ring in her nostril, everything would be copied down to the last detail, or imitated as closely as was possible. She was what every Vidarbha girl wanted to be and in this moment, through her, they were vicariously living their own fantasy.

As she began walking barefoot, her pathway was showered with flower petals by young pre-pubescent girls carrying wicker baskets that were replenished constantly through the walk. The path had already been washed and sprinkled with Gangajal, the holy water of the mother river of the sub-continent. Everywhere she looked there were young girls and women, a river of eager shining female faces, all turned towards her, walking with her and following in her wake. A veritable army of women.

Young maidens. Old grandmothers. Matronly daiimaas, some with their wards suckling. Young housewives. Middle-aged women. Little girls. Women of all ages, shapes, sizes, colors, tribes, castes, classes, faiths, commingled in this unifying tradition, united by their common love for their princess, the closest they had to a queen since Rukmini's mother had died of an ailment a decade ago. The love she felt, the blessing, the warmth and affection, were overwhelming. She walked in the shadow of their love and aspirations.

The way to the temple of Devi Bhawani was perhaps a kilometre, winding through back roads and behind the market area, passing stablery and other places of trade. But today, it was a river of women, and she saw not a single man's face among them all the way. Beyond the immediate press, she sensed the roar of a great number of people: the town was filled with more numbers than it had ever seen in its entire existence. Music was everywhere: the masculine rhythm of Mrdnga, the triumphant trumpeting of conch shells, the heart-thrilled beat of smaller drums, the gay tweeting of flutes, and an orchestra of other instruments played all around, singers adding their sonorous voices to the acclaim and celebration.

Courtesans huddled immediately outside the temple, for it was their privilege to honor the Devi most fervently, through their own services as well as their private devotion. This was the only time that even the wives of brahmins rubbed shoulders with the dancing women and pale features were visible alongside painted ones--all made resplendent with garlands, fine garments, ornaments and redolent with perfumes that clashed and filled the air with an intoxicating miasma. The singing was very loud here, near the temple and within it, the fervent rhythm of ecstasy, the half-maddened bawling of the temple musicians seeking to reach the ears of godhead through their heartsongs.

Rukmini was made to pause at the temple steps, rituals performed, feet bathed, mantras recited, unguents and ashes applied, then she was given a sip of the water of ablution--Ganga water again--and a narrow gap parted to permit her entrance into the inner sanctum of the Devi.

Here, democracy ended and only the elder brahmin women remained, guiding and managing her through the final rituals. She offered her respect to Ambika in her form as Bhavani, named so for her consort Bhava, namely Shiva. She paid homage with water, scented oils, wholegrain, agar, fine garments, flowers, sandalwood garlands, silver and gold jewellery, with clay diyas, each offering a ritual in itself.

Then she respected the brahmin wives of the priests who managed the temple, for no men could yet be present until this stage was past, honoring them with gifts of fruit, tambul nut, pieces of sugar cane, and ritual food items. The brahmin women performed the ritual, then returned the balance of the items to her, now blessed by the Devi's grace. She broke her fast only with a token morsel and a great wave of excitement rippled back down the river of women all the way across the city.

Now, her vow of silence was ended and she could speak and express herself freely.

Her prayer to the Devi was brief and unctuous, yet deeply sincere:

As you have Krishna, father of your children, great one, grant that my eternal consort, my Krishna, be my mate in this life as well. Grant this sole wish of mine.

And then, it was time to proceed to the swayamvara. A maiden approached bearing a cushion upon which was presented to Rukmini a jewelled signet ring: the official seal of the Queen of Vidarbha. The ring had last been worn by the Late Queen and it was inextricably linked with Rukmini's last memory of her ailing mother during those last weeks of suffering. She recalled kissing the ring over and over and praying that her mother would recover, somehow. But there were some wishes even goddesses could not grant.

"You must wear it, Princess," said the maid in a voice that cut through Rukmini's commingled emotions. "It is the sign of your ascencion to bridehood. Now you are blessed by the Devi and ready to choose your husband under the laws of your nation."

Rukmini looked up into the maid's eyes and saw her future blossom.

Jarasandha's felt his interest prickle as the crowd of women parted and the Princess of Vidarbha stepped out into the open. Like the petals of a lotus touched by water, the colorfully clad and ornamented women shifted to reveal Rukmini as she emerged from the temple precincts.

The God Emperor of Magadha was not easily moved but the first glimpse of Rukmini took his breath away.

Jet-black her skin color, as dark as Lakshmi herself. Her face was colored with her own excitement and anticipation. Clad in the customary low-

waisted garment revealing her abdomen and leaving her shoulders and throat bare, she was as alluring as Lakshmi made flesh. Her narrow waist was spanned by a jewelled girdle that hung on the edges of her hips, swaying as she walked, the tiny silver bells adorning the girdle swaying and tinkling softly.

Still bare-footed she walked with a careful cadence which emphasized her feminine form, causing her feet to swing around each other and step directly before one another, like a mare attempting to cross a narrow pathway. But her gait was that of a swan rather than a mare, a black swan with eyes that glowed like clay diyas in the ebony angular shape of her beauty. Her lips were red as bimba fruit, her teeth as white as nightqueen blossoms. Her feet jingled with anklets. A jewelled signet ring upon her finger appeared too large for that slender hand and delicate fingers--or indeed too large for her entire slender body.

Around him, Jarasandha sensed the reactions of the other kings and chiefs. Across the swayamvara field, the collective gaze of men fixated on this vision of feminine perfection approaching them. He knew that if he, with his asura powers, could be so deeply aroused by this mortal wench, then they must be overwrought with lust and desire. Every man present must be clenching his fists and wanting to step forward here and now to claim her for his own. It would not surprise him if many did so.

If they did, he would be the first to step out and hack them down before they reached within yards of the Princess.

He would brook no man approaching that vision of ethereal luminescence.

She was too beautiful to permit any mortal man to come close, let alone touch.

This was no mere mortal woman. This was a goddess incarnated upon earth. There was no question about it now. Earlier, he had not seen her with such clarity or vision. Somehow, his obsession hatred of Krishna had caused him to overlook this unspeakable gift of perfection set upon the mortal realm.

Now, his eyes were opened, the webs removed. He could see her for what she truly was: a woman too perfect for any mortal man to deserve. Only a god could truly appreciate and exalt such celestial excellence.

And what a god could possess, so could an asura.

Not just any asura--he would not brook *anyone* coming before her, now that he had seen her in all her heavenly glory.

Only himself, Jarasandha.

How could he ever have thought to permit that fool Sisupala to possess this divine creature?

She deserved no lesser being than the God Emperor himself. Only he would do for her. They would make the perfect pairing of all Creation.

Jarasandha. And Rukmini.

Yes. That was how it must be, would be.

Jarasandha had decided.

11

Rukmini glanced around in perplexity at the wan, drawn faces of the kings and chiefs gathered at the swayamvara. They stood, each and every one of them, exactly where they had risen from their seats, transfixed like men hypnotized by some heavenly phenomenon. Their eyes were glazed, their mouths slack, their hands hanging limply by their sides, their bodies swaying from side to side like men struck on the heads in the moment before their bodies received the message that their brains had been struck unconscious. Even Jarasandha, the frightful man she loathed and feared most of all, just stood in one spot, staring.

The odd thing was though they all stared at her, their eyes turned to follow her, their chins jerking, necks craning, bodies twisting to keep sight of her, they seemed unable to do anything else but look. It was as if their bodies were frozen, fixated in some muscular rigor that prevented them from performing any other action.

“What is wrong with them?” she asked her companion as they moved across the field. “Why do they all stare that way at me without moving or speaking?”

Her companion smiled. “Such is the shakti of Devamaya.”

She looked at him. Krishna grinned at her and winked once. “The effect will not last long. We must hurry before they begin to recover and realize what is transpiring. The miasma only works when you are clearly visible.

The instant they lose sight of your face, the effect begins to wear off. Still, they will be groggy awhile, so that should give us enough time to make our escape.”

After the ritual in the Devi’s temple was complete and she had stepped out of the inner sanctum, she had been shocked when she saw that the maid who offered her the royal signet was none other than Krishna himself, clad in a woman’s garb. But then her heart had filled with joy for it was clear then that the Devi had answered her prayers. “I have come to steal you away from yourself,” he said to her quietly. “Just continue to walk with me and say or do nothing to arouse suspicion.”

She had done so and nobody, not even the women thronging her, had even realized that there was a man among them. Then again, was Krishna merely a *man*? Surely not.

Now, they were in the middle of the swayamvara field. Various items had been laid out for contests of skill, archery, strength, weaponry and the like. Krishna glanced back before stopping in an open area. “Here. We wait here a moment.”

She took the opportunity to glance at the men around them. They were all staring at her blankly, afflicted by the same miasma, standing stock still, staring mutely, slack-jawed and glaze-eyed. They did not even lift a finger or raise a foot to step towards them although by now, Krishna had dropped the shawl that had covered his head and it was quite obvious that he was a man and not a lady companion. Still, they just stood and stared, enraptured, at her face. At more than her face, of course, but it was her face that held them and hypnotized them, she saw. What had Krishna said? Devamaya? Of course. It came to her as a faint memory. Deva Maya, the Illusion of Gods. A phenomenon caused by mortal beings looking upon a divine aspect.

The mortal mind was not designed to see gods. The closest they could manage was to perceive that aspect of godhead most like themselves: the eternal mistake that mortals made, assuming that they were made in god's image. In fact, they were only made to resemble one specific form of a god's image, not the complex and humanly incomprehensible whole. DevaMaya occurred when mortals actually had a glimpse of that incomprehensible complexity. She knew that the shock could drive all memory and functionality from a mortal mind forever, rendering the person senseless and witless.

In this case, the men looking at her had all seen this particular mortal aspect of her's before, which perhaps accounted for the fact that they were not driven senseless permanently. From the looks of them, they seemed as if they might recover and regain their wits. Or she hoped so. Suddenly she realized that her father and brothers were present here too and undoubtedly stricken alongwith every other man.

"They will recover, will they not?" she asked suddenly, clutching Krishna's arm.

He grinned. "Completely, and within moments. That is why it is only affecting the men, not the women. This is the after effect of the Devi's protection give to you during the ceremony in the temple."

She was puzzled. "But I did not even know about it, how then did the Devi know to grant me this protection at this time?"

"I asked her for it," he said.

Then a golden sky chariot descended vertically in a rush, landing as softly as a feather on the ground before them. The instant it was on the ground, Krishna took her aboard and they looked back at the field filled with captivated suitors.

“Take a last look at your homeland, Princess of Vidarbha,” he said gently.
“You may never see her again in this lifetime.”

She sighed. “After marriage, every wife goes to her husband’s home. My homeland is where you are, Krishna.”

Krishna leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

The Pushpak rose as suddenly as it had landed, carrying them away.

12

Jarasandha bellowed with rage. He was the first to break free of the miasma of the DevaMaya. He shook his limbs, raging with fury as he realized how he had been duped. It did not matter that every other man present had been deluded by the same illusion. For Jarasandha, only one person mattered: Jarasandha himself.

He could not brook being deceived by his own mind and perception.

DevaMaya depended on the looker being taken unawares and being transfixed by the shock of viewing an actual god in person. But in this case, he had known that Rukmini was no mere mortal. He should have been able to resist her allure and miasma. The fact that he had been as captivated as the other mortal fools around him meant that he had allowed his masculinity to rule his asura strength. He had reacted as a man in short! Not just a mortal man, just a male.

Now, he stormed out onto the field, shaking his fist up at the sky where the pushpak was only a wink of gold against the azure blue. Around him, kings and chiefs were shaking their heads and staggering like drunken men trying to shrug off the night's excesses. Many clutched their heads, moaned and fell to their knees, unable to stomach what they had experienced. Others were still overcome by the overwhelming emotions that had blinded them and staggered away, unable to see or hear anything in the real world. But by and large, the majority were recovering and struggling to shake off the after effects.

Jarasandha's resounding tenor shout brought every head up and made every pair of eyes turn in his direction.

"Kings of Vidarbha!" he shouted, his mid-tone voice an advantage because though it lack bass, it carried more clearly than any deep voice would have. "Aho to you all! Shame upon all the men in your kingdom. I have eunuchs in my service who are more manly than you all! Even though you have arms and bodies muscular with strength, bows and arrows and swords and maces aplenty, yet you permitted the Princess of your realm to be carried away by a single unarmed man looking like a girl!"

His shouts cut through the confusion and after effects of the DevaMaya, helping focus the confused gathering's attention upon something that made sense and distracted them from the potential madness of dwelling too long on the contemplation of the vision they had all experienced. Men began to stand straight and stare at him, listening angrily.

"Krishna of Dwarka has stolen our prize! The Princess was to be won in a fair contest by the best man here today. We all came prepared to prove ourselves and wrest her hand fairly according to dharma by showing our prowess at arms, our skill, our wits, or in any way she chose. Yet she was not given the opportunity to view our display. Nor were we given an opportunity to demonstrate our capabilities. Instead, a man used subterfuge and illusion to delude us all and steal the Princess away. This is unacceptable!"

Many heads nodded in response. Clenched fists greeted the words in agreement. More men had recovered now and were snarling as the full import of what had happened came home to their addled brains.

“He has taken her away in his flying chariot,” said one king, pointing up. “I saw them climb aboard and leave! How are we to follow a flying chariot now?”

Jarasandha lashed out with his tongue: the twin tips shot out a full one score yards to where the man stood, weaving around other men’s heads, bodies, necks and shoulders to strike the speaker’s eyes hard enough that both were punctured instantly and exploded in twin splashes that ran down the unfortunate king’s face.

He screamed briefly then collapsed.

Nobody glanced at him again. They were more interested in what Jarasandha had to say.

Men glanced fearfully as the yards-long tongue retracted into Jarasandha’s mouth.

He tasted the moisture on the tongue tips before speaking again:

“Shall we just stand around here and feel sorry for ourselves now that he has gone? He may have a flying chariot but we have armies. I have watchers everywhere around the town for yojanas in every direction. The DevaMaya will not work again. If we ride after them, my spassas will tell us which way to go to follow him. Sooner or later, even a flying chariot must land on ground. Even if he flies back all the way to Dwarka, he cannot elude my network of spassas. I promise you we will be informed which way he goes and where he lands eventually. But we must ride at

once, in full force, and ride with full resolve to track down and slay Krishna, and bring home the pride and honor of Vidarbha.”

Almost every hairy arm shot up at once. “AYE!” came the resounding response. “RIDE!”

And they ran towards their chariots, horses and other means of travel.

Rukmi and his associates came up to Jarasandha. Viduratha and Shalva seemed almost wholly recovered and Dantavakra was only holding his chest in dismay but Paundraka seemed confused and sluggish. “My Lord, what do you wish us to do?”

Jarasandha addressed Rukmi: “Sound the full alert. Inform your armies and your countrymen that the Vidarbha nation and its allies are at war with the Yadavas now. Magadha fights beside you as do her allies. I speak for King Viduratha, Shalva, Paundraka and Dantavakra as well.”

When Rukmi hesitated, Jarasandha asked sharply, “Do you object to our assisting you, Prince Rukmi?”

Rukmi’s eyes cut this way then that as his crooked upper tooth showed itself beneath his lip. “Of course not, great one. But is a declaration of war necessary right at once? After all, it was the Princess of our house who was stolen, not a matter of the entire nation’s daughters.”

Jarasandha snarled, showing his split tongue as he did so: “Yatha raja tatha praja. As does the king, so do the people. If you will not fight for the honor

of your own sister, then every man everywhere will say that the daughters and wives and sisters of Vidarbha are easy prey and can be picked up and taken at will. Is that what you desire?”

Rukmi’s eyes stopped shifting and focussed on Jarasandha. “No! Never! WE RIDE NOW!” he yelled.

Jarasandha moved toward his own chariot. Krishna had tricked him by outmaneuvering his well-laid plan. But he would out-maneuver him again. Now, all the kings and warriors fighting Krishna would not only do so out of the usual misplaced heroic impulse but because it truly mattered. If Krishna would not fight him in Kundini, then he would follow Krishna to Dwarka and find him there.

13

RUKMINI looked at her Lord adoringly as the chariot sped through wisps of clouds high above the earth. “I know why you did not fight your enemies or provoke a clash,” she said. “You did so in order to spare my home town and my family.”

Krishna smiled at her. “My heart is an open scroll to you, my love. Yes, though they are but your mortal family for this lifetime, I could never cause pain or suffering to any whom you care about. I too am linked intimately in my own life to many mortals and their welfare is always my primary concern.”

Rukmini clasped his arm and leaned her head against his shoulder. “I thank you for that consideration.”

Krishna sighed. “Do not thank me too soon, Rukmini. I fear that your loved ones may not show me the same consideration.”

She frowned. Before she could ask him what he meant, Krishna turned away to speak to the charioteer. At once Rukmini sensed that they were descending again.

Krishna took her shoulders in his hands. “My beloved. Soon this will all be over and we shall be able to live the rest of our mortal lives in Dwarka in peace. But for now, I must fulfill my dharma as a kshatriya in this form.”

She glanced over the rim of the chariot well and saw that they were descending earthwards in a region just north of Kundini, at the open plains near the edge of the Dandava-van. She felt her heart leap. "Why are you descending? Why are we not simply flying back to Dwarka? What do you mean to do, Krishna?"

Krishna continued to hold her, gazing directly into her eyes. His raven-black eyes bored into her consciousness.

This game must be played out, my Beloved. Jarasandha and his spasas will be seeking this chariot out now. I cannot simply lead them back to Dwarka and risk them following and besieging the city. However invulnerable it may be, all fortresses can be taken eventually. I do not wish to start our life together by gifting the people of Dwarka a generation of siege of war. I built Dwarka to free them from violence and warcraft forever. And as a new wife, how would you feel if you brought home armies of enemy forces determined to destroy you and your husband's people?

She knew he was right. Yet she could not accept it. *But my brothers. My father. If you wage war against them, you will surely kill everyone. I cannot be*

responsible for having caused their death, Krishna! Whatever they may be, they are still my brothers and father. I cannot start my new life with you by walking over their corpses.

Krishna nodded. I understand this. That is why I drew them outside the city, where we can fight safely. I give you my word, Rukmini. None who love you or whom you love will be harmed. I swear this.

She felt greatly relieved on hearing his words. Because she believed him. *In that case, I cannot object any further. If you feel this confrontation is necessary, then go ahead. But take care, my love. Remember that you too are one of those I love, the one I love the most in fact.*

He smiled at her. And the one who loves you the most as well. Fear not, beloved. Violence is for a moment. Love is forever. Daruka shall steer the chariot and keep you safe until the conflict is over. Whatever happens, stay in the chariot, I beseech you. I shall return to you soon.

And so saying, he turned and dropped from the ledge of the chariot, leaping the final three or four hundred yards to the ground. She looked over the well's rim to see him land in a puff of dust below, then stand and wait, a solitary figure between the outlying plains of Kundina on one side, and the great dark dense mass of the Dandaka-van on the other side.

Krishna did not have long to wait. Although his pushpak had reached the spot in mere moments and Jarasandha and the rest would take at least several moments to ride this far, the enemy was already at hand. What had not been visible from the sky due to the dense overgrowth of Dandaka-van was instantly perceptible at ground level.

The forest was swarming with soldiers. Within moments of his touching ground, they began to appear at the edge of the forest, many pointing towards him and shouting to one another. He glimpsed riders farther away, coming and going from the direction of the town and elsewhere: couriers, conveying tactical commands. And soon enough, the first wave of enemy soldiers began emerging from the woods in a coordinated pattern. Once in open ground, they regrouped, forming ranks, lowering spears, and took up positions preparatory to a charge. As more and more emerged constantly, it was soon evident that this was no reinforcement force but an entire army. Or several armies.

He had expected something like this. Not on this scale, it was true, but an aggressive show of arms. What he had not been expecting were Rukmi's links to Jarasandha and the carefully orchestrated campaign of retaliation the Magadhan had swung into motion once he became aware of Krishna's coming. More so because now Krishna was ham-strung.

He dearly wanted to fight Jarasandha to end this conflict with the self-declared God Emperor once and for all. But to do so would put Rukmini's brothers and father at risk. For they would surely come with Jarasandha on this field and participate in the battle. However carefully Krishna proceeded, there was always a risk of injury or worse to them. Even if he did not assault them directly, this was after all a battlefield now and war could result in strange outcomes.

For the first time since leaving Dwarka, he wondered if he had made a mistake in leaving Balarama out of this. He had not wished to involve anyone, and leaving Balarama had been a tactical decision: With bhai home to protect the city and the people, he could complete his mission to fetch Rukmini without any distraction. But he could not help thinking now that it would have been useful to have the burly brother along for the ride as well. Balarama could be exceedingly useful in situations like this.

You called, bhraatr?

Krishna swung around, looking in the geographical direction from which the mind-voice had come. **Bhai? Where are you?**

To the north and east of you, about a yojana away.
Approaching some heavy interference now. Nothing
we can't handle though.

We?

The army is with me. Everyone knows about your trip to procure your wife. Did you really think we would stay in the dark about it? You know us Yadavas. Gossip spreads like wildfire; secret gossip spreads twice as fast!

So you found out and told everyone.

Krishna saw Balarama grinning in his mind's eye. His brother was in his chariot, hovering above ground, the entire Yadava military force arrayed behind him. They were facing an army almost as large.

I can't take credit for this one, bhraatr. Apparently a young apprentice Watcher on the Wall was witness to your visitor the other day--the very wet brahmin you fished out of the sea? Young tongues being what they are, his wagged a bit. Before you could say Yashodamaiya, the whole of Dwarka knew that a brahmin had come to meet you. One of your servants who delivered food to your apartment the next day couldn't help but overhear him speaking to you and learned that he was named Sunanda and was from Vidarbha. The rest I

gleaned together from what you had told me about finding out that your soul-mate was here in this time and place. Are we done with the update now?

Yes, Krishna sent back, smiling and shaking his head ruefully. Apparently even gods couldn't keep secrets anymore! Why? Do you have a pressing assignation elsewhere?

Something like that. I believe the Magadhans wish to attack us or be attacked. We have to make our move now.

So those are Jarasandha's forces. I should have known.

Yes. You should have. But it's all right. We're here now. The Magadhans have encircled the entire town and the surrounding villages. I think it's a burn-and-rule plan.

Krishna nodded to himself. That fit with what they knew of Jarasandha. Regardless of what happens today, he means to raze Kundina to the ground and take Vidarbha for himself. Because Bhishmaka and his line are not strong enough for Magadha to bother allying with. He intends to make vassals of the entire kingdom.

You're the military genius, bhraatr. Me, I just fight good. Which, by the way, I am now about to do. Permission to proceed, Dwarkadisha?

Krishna nodded once, grimly, letting his teeth show. "Wipe them clean."

14

JARASANDA seethed with rage. A courier had just brought word that the Yadava army had appeared and was engaging his army even now at this moment. Balarama was there and he was wreaking havoc in his ranks as usual.

He was enraged because the losses he suffered now were irreparable: he could not go through a Vortal and re-engage the brothers once again if today's outcome did not suit his purpose. If Balarama wiped out his army as he had before in the siege of Mathura, then that would be the end of Magadha and its forces.

But the next instant he came within sight of Krishna and his mood changed. The Lord of Dwarka stood alone on an open plain, flanked by the armies of the suitors still emerging from the Dandaka-van, and the suitor kings and chiefs themselves, alongwith their champions and elite forces, Kundina behind them.

It was obvious that Krishna meant to stand and fight rather than run. That was why Balarama was here too, with the Yadava army. So be it. This was a situation Jarasandha knew how to handle. Waging war was what he did. It was dealing with gods who flew away and hid on mountains that were vexing in the extreme.

Jarasandha rode his chariot around to the front of the advancing column of suitors, all staring angrily at the lone Yadava ahead. He turned the vehicle

around to face them, holding up his palm to indicate to them to halt. They did so.

“Rukmi,” he called out loud enough for all to hear, even though Rukmi had been riding beside him all this while, “There stands Krishna, Slayer of Kamsa, murderer of his own uncle, Usurper of the throne of Mathura, fleer from battles, craven who hides rather than fights. I have named him Ranchodri Gupta! Ranchodri for his penchant for running away from battle rather than standing and fighting. Gupta because he hides rather than shows himself to the enemy. Today we have him cornered between our pursuing forces and the armies of your allies and friends. Here is your only opportunity to face him and fight him fairly. Go! Attack him with all your might. Cut him down where he stands and regain your stolen pride and honor!”

Rukmi rode out to him, reigning in and speaking softly so only Jarasandha would hear. “I have heard tales of this Yadava. Some say he is a god in human guise. Others say he is possessed of superhuman strength and skills and slays asuras as if they were children. Why do you not lead us in the attack and challenge him yourself, Jara? You are by far the strongest here, both individually as well as in military strength.”

Jarasandha gave him his response by shouting it out loud to the entire gathering. “Brave words, Rukmi! You speak truly. I offer to lead the attack and avenge your sister’s theft but she was after all your sister and it was your family’s honor that was sullied. Therefore your wisdom and courage are well directed: it is only fitting that you and your brothers should lead the attack. I know your father will back you up, despite his ailing health. Go then, brave Rukmi. Lead us in a charge of such noble rage that all Vidarbha shall remember your actions here today. No matter what happens, let the world south of Dandaka-van always know the bravery of Prince Rukmi in defending his family’s honor and his sister’s desecration.”

And with those words, Jarasandha turned his chariot away before Rukmi could say another sentence and resumed his position in the line. Rukmi stayed where he was on horseback, glancing at the stormy faces of the other kings and suitors. He could refuse now or he would be seen as a coward or worse in their eyes. Nobody would ever respect him again. Yet, he was not that much a dullard, nor that badly addled by Jarasandha's potions--artfully slipped into his drink and food over the past several weeks by spasas loyal to Magadha--to know that Krishna was no ordinary foe.

In the end, Rukmi showed his true mettle. He sucked in a full lungful of air, looking to his brothers. They came forward on his call, looking as uncertain as he did. Jarasandha saw their eyes flick to the lone figure on the mound on the plain and then back to their eldest brother. He spoke briefly with them, and from his tone and decisive manner, Jarasandha knew that he was telling them why they must do this and how they must do it, and there was no way out. They were all brave enough young men in their own foolish Vidarbha way, Jarasandha knew, and agreed without further ado.

Then Rukmi turned his horse around and his five brothers and he all drew their swords and raised them high, as Rukmi gave the order to charge. And with that order, every king, chief, and yodha worth naming in the Vidarbha and neighboring region, attacked Krishna in a do-or-die assault. At the same time, their armies massed on Krishna's far side, charged forward as well, both forces converging in an angular trajectory on the lone Yadava.

Jarasandha chuckled even as he waited for the last of the suitors to follow Rukmi in the charge. Then, with nobody watching him, he wheeled his chariot away and sped away as quickly as he could flee. He had no intention of staying to fight Krishna. His only intention was to go save what was left of his army and escape from this war as quickly as possible.

He had done his part for now, the rest of the plan did not require his presence to unfold.

The fact that he was doing exactly what he had accused Krishna of doing in the face of battle: escaping and hiding. Ranchodri Gupta!

So be it.

After all, there was no shame in learning from the best!

Krishna saw the five riders at the forefront and knew that once again Jarasandha had played a shrewd hand. By sending Rukmini's brothers against him first, Jarasandha had put Krishna in a difficult position. Now, if he defended himself by retaliating, he risked maiming or killing one of his own brothers-in-law. Even if he did not care how that might worsen his reputation among the enemy--"First he killed his uncle, then he killed his own wife's brothers, after he kidnapped her from her own swayamvara!"--he had to care for his oath to Rukmini. The fact that she was watching this entire battle from the pushpak hovering above did not help.

Bhraatr, I am having a fine time, Balarama bellowed, sending him a quick mind-image of himself wielding his great divine Gada, slaughtering hundreds at a blow. The air around Balarama was filled with spattered gore and flying body parts, the ground littered for miles in every direction as the Reaper of Dwarka literally ran through the Magadhan lines, harvesting a bloody crop.

I am happy for you, bhai. I wish my task were as simple and I could just flail about too. Krishna watched morosely as the cavalry of the advancing armies broke into a full gallop now, riding down on him like a tidal wave on a beached seal. He sent back a quick mind-image to Balarama as well.

That looks like a good fight to me, Balarama sent back. What's the problem?

This is my problem, Krishna replied and sent a mind-image of the other force bearing down on him, also now in a full-on galloping charge, led by Rukmi and his four brothers.

Oh that, Balarama replied, but said no more, sizing up the dilemma in a jiffy. Krishna sensed his brother continue his rampage but with somewhat reduced glee.

It's all right, Krishna said reassuringly but glumly, I think I have an idea--let's hope it works.

And then both forces were upon him and the battle was joined.

15

Rukmini cried out as she watched her beloved pinned between the two apposite forces. The army that came from the Dandaka-van seemed to literally ride over Krishna, rendering the lone figure invisible for several moments as the charge led them past his position and hundreds of yards beyond before turning back and circling around him. At the same time, the force led by her brothers wheeled away at the last moment to avoid clashing with their own armies, riding around and waiting until the first wave had passed. The instant the army had ridden over and past Krishna, they began attacking him mercilessly even as they circled around in the opposite direction to trap Krishna in a circular maze of hostility.

Arrows rained at Krishna in such vast numbers that Rukmini could barely see her beloved. It was like trying to see a puddle in a great rainstorm. She could not believe that anyone could withstand such a storm of arrows, yet Krishna remained standing, remained alive. She could see him riddled through with arrows, his body pierced by an untold number of missiles and could barely bear to watch.

The Vidarbans favored iron arrows, for their hills were filled with rich mineral veins and mining was a major activity. Wooden arrows, one could simply pull loose, but these iron missiles were immeasurably more painful to be struck by, and exquisitely painful to pull out. Even though she knew Krishna could survive even a hail of wounds and injuries, it did not absolve him of feeling mortal pain. She not begin to understand how he could endure such punishment. And she knew he was doing it for her sake: to avoid harming her brothers.

But this was too much. Surely, he could not endure this much torture and still repair that mortal body?

“Take me down,” she told the sarathi, who was also watching the battle with a curious mixture of horror and empathy on his round face. “I wish to speak with my Lord.”

“Forgive me, my Lady,” he replied, joining his palms in respect. “My Lord’s instructions were clear. I was not to bring you any closer to the fray.”

She slammed her fist onto the rim of the chariot. If only she was not fettered by this human body. If only she could do as Krishna could do in this lifetime: use her mortal form like a horse ridden by a divine rider. But she could not. And so she must watch and trust her beloved to deal with the dilemma.

But when the second wave struck, even she could not bear to watch it all over again. She turned her face away and slumped to the floor of the chariot well, sitting and staring down at the golden pattern of the chariot’s floor. She noted that the pattern was a moving one that kept changing, never showing the same design twice. But in her mind all she could see was her beautiful beloved’s body riddle through with the iron arrows of her kinsfolk.

How can you endure so much pain for me? her mind cried out to him, speaking the words her heart felt but could not voice.

Because you are worth enduring all the pain in the world, my love, he replied.

The kings and chiefs of Vidarbha as well as their yoddhas, their most elite fighters and their armies, all paused to gaze in awe at their solitary enemy.

Krishna stood on the battlefield, a figure so riddled by black iron arrows that he appeared to be only a target for them, not a mortal man anymore.

How could one man endure so many and still stand? they wondered. Their assaults had broken off as they stared at this marvel of nature. How could any warrior not succumb to so many wounds?

And even if he was immortal and could not be killed by mortal weapons, he must surely feel the pain of those wounds, must he not? How could he endure such epic pain without once crying out or showing the pain in some way?

Even above the thicket of arrows that bristled from his dark body, his face was still clearly visible, barely a dozen arrows sticking from his ears and cheeks and the fleshy underpart of his chin. Enough to see that he was not crying or moaning with agony.

It was impossible. But yet there he was, right before their eyes.

The forces of Vidarbha paused to show their respect for a fellow warrior with such epic endurance and courage as none of them had seen before.

Even Rukmi and his brothers exchanged startled glances and marvelled at the sight, while they wondered secretly why Krishna did not fight back.

Surely a warrior who could take a thousand arrows and still stand could fight back just as prodigiously? Then why did he not attempt to at least defend himself, leave alone raise a weapon against them?

Thus far, he had not lifted a finger in aggression. Nor had he begged them to spare him. He had simply stood there on that grassy mound and endured all.

It made no sense.

Then, even as they were debating aloud what to do next, Krishna moved.

Daruka cried out to her. “My Lady!”

She looked up at him and saw him gazing down at the ground below, his expression completely changed. She leaped up to her feet--she was still barefoot, her feet still caked with the mud from the temple grounds and the swayamvara field--and looked over the rim of the well of the chariot.

Krishna was raising his arms. The enemy had surrounded him on all sides, as densely as a forest grown around a single sapling. They were no longer attacking, simply observing him, no doubt wondering how to defeat an enemy who could take a thousand arrows and still survive.

Then Krishna made a flicking gesture with both hands, as if indicating that someone should leave him at once and go forth.

Not someone, Rukmini thought, something.

And then the arrows from Krishna's body all shot out, with exactly the same force as when they had struck him, returning back in exactly the same trajectory as when they were loosed at him, snaking outwards in impossible zigzagging lines, twisting and turning and spinning, until each and every one of them found their sender, and instead of returning to his bow whence they had come, punched into *his* body, bringing back to him the exact same wound he had caused to Krishna.

It was the most incredible sight imaginable.

A man with a thousand arrows embedded in his flesh.

The arrows sent flying outwards, spinning, whirling, turning, then striking the flesh of the thousand men who had shot those very arrows.

Punching through cloth, leather, armor, skin, flesh, muscle, gristle, cartilage, bone, vital organs...wounding, killing, maiming.

A thousand men fell as one, in a storm of collapsing bodies. Off their horses, chariots, feet.

The ground around Krishna was strewn with corpses now.

And his body was freed of almost all the arrows that had struck him.

All except three arrows.

Rukmini's hand shot to her open mouth. She knew who had loosed those three arrows and why Krishna had not sent them back hurtling to the sender.

They were the arrows fired by Rukmi and her brothers.

Krishna had done exactly as he had promised: he had spared her loved ones, even while he fought his enemies in battle.

And then the real brawling began.

16

Balarama had cut a wide and awful swathe of destruction in the Magadhan ranks. Yet it was hardly anything by his own standards. He had barely destroyed an akshohini or two. Part of the reason was that this time the Magadhans were spread much farther apart, and he did not wish to venture too close to the town of Kundini in case that caused damage to his new sister-in-law's hometown and kin.

The Yadava army was still engaged with the Magadhan forces. As happened with any battle, things got complicated very quickly. Part of the complication came from the fact that the Magadhan forces were not arrayed in a standard battle confrontation formation; they were spread all over, directed inwards at Kundina. It was evident from this formation that Jarasandha's intention was to box in his own allies, preventing them from leaving and putting them in awkward, even indefensible positions which they could only retreat from or stay and be slaughtered.

On the plus side, when the Yadava forces came up behind them, the Magadhans were taken by surprise. Turning around, they now found themselves with their back to Kundina, boxed in by the same indefensible positions in which they had meant to push their former allies. The only difference was: there were many more Magadhan forces than Kundina and her allies. And the Yadavas had come prepared for war against Magadha while the Vidarbha forces would have the disadvantage of being taken by surprise when they found their own allies turned against them.

Thus far, the fighting was going in their favor, Balarama knew, but he also knew this would not last long. Magadha was a far superior force in numbers, experience and resources. Already, he had word that another three, perhaps four akshohini had been spotted coming around the Vidarbha hill ranges. When those additional Magadhan forces arrived, the Yadavas would be trapped on all sides. At that point, regardless of how fast Balarama and Krishna fought and how capable they were of wiping out the entire Magadhan army, their own losses would be grievous.

Nor could they deploy the dev-astras as freely as they had back in the Mathura battles. There was too much risk of harming their own troops and also Kundina's citizenry and population. There were villages all around and much of this fighting was taking place beside, between, around, and even within those unfortunate hamlets and villages, taking a sad toll of ordinary farmers and herders. Magadha knew this and it was to Jarasandha's advantage to keep them engaged as long as possible: at least that was what Balarama assumed. It was what he took for granted based on his knowledge of Jarasandha thus far: push, push, push until something gives.

That was until he saw the chariot riding across the plain, fleeing the battle.

He paused, his mace dripping with Magadhan blood, and stared in the direction of the chariot. It was travelling fast, its dust cloud drifting overhead to curl like a canopy, partly obscuring its occupant. But he recognized that krta-dhvaja and knew that the sigil meant that was the royal chariot of the God Emperor of Magadha himself. It was less ostentatious than the one Jarasandha had used at Mathura but that might be precisely for this reason: to enable him to speed away at will. At Mathura, Jarasandha had come to camp and lay siege. Here, he sought to burn and run. And right now, it seemed he was choosing to run.

Balarama strode away from the field, causing a whole company of frontliners who had fully expected to die next to raise their swords and cheer hesitantly, assuming that their formidable foe was quitting the fray. At the sound of their cheering, he turned and pointed the gada at them. At once, they were silenced, eyes wide in their stark faces, and backed away. He turned around in a full circle, meeting their eyes, pointing the gada menacingly to make sure they knew that he was not fleeing out of cowardice--as if!--but for other reasons. "Throw down your weapons and run back to Magadha and I will let you live. Otherwise, I will come back and finish this job."

They stared at him blankly for a moment, then, with an enthusiasm that was quite amusing, every last man threw his weapon on the ground. They landed in a great clattering of metal. Before the echoes had died away, they had turned and were loping away to the north-east in great eager strides, yelling to their comrades to do the same. They reminded Balarama of the young gopis and gopas in Vrindavan when the day's chores were done and the last calves penned--Krishna and he and the others had all run yelling just like that. He smiled wistfully and shook his head.

Then he turned and began running towards the fleeing chariot. After several strides, he launched himself in the air, leaping a hundred yards over his own Yadava troops engaged in a clash with another Magadhan company. Heads turned to gaze upwards, the Magadhan faces showing their fear: however hardy the toughest Yadava warriors might be, not one of them wished to trade him for Balarama. Many sighed with relief as the hefty form passed over their heads and went on by, then resumed fighting.

Krishna endured the pain of the many wounds he had sustained. Every arrow that had been shot at him, he returned to its sender forthwith. Soon

the barrage of arrows ceased.

They tried javelins and spears next.

That was a mistake: not only did he send the javelins and spears back to their throwers with a simple flick of his wrist, but each javelin punched through a man, passed *through* him accompanied by the horrific sound of bones being crushed and flesh ripped, and then went on to slaughter half a dozen other men behind him before finally coming to a halt, embedded in some unfortunate's body. It was the greater weight of the larger missiles that made this possible.

After a few volleys of javelins and spears, perhaps one score thousand Vidarbhanas lay dead around him, a toll so horrific, he could see the shock on the faces of all present. After this, there were no more volleys for a while.

In the lull that followed, he heard Prince Rukmi's voice, yelling at his fellow kings and allies--and at his brothers too. None of them seemed inclined to make the first move to attack Krishna directly. He did not blame them: how could they hope to fight someone who could kill half a hundred thousand men in such a short while--without even using a weapon of his own? They were terror-struck. Besides, what was at stake here? Krishna had already taken Rukmini, she was nowhere to be seen. They might not retrieve her, let alone have her for themselves, even if this conflict was resolved. Participating in a tournament to demonstrate skill was one thing, even fighting a fair battle was acceptable: but this? This was like fighting gods!

Finally, Rukmi came to the inevitable conclusion that Krishna had come to before beginning this fight. It was the reason why Krishna had adopted the

tactic of fighting unarmed, killing thousands at a time and showing off--there was no other word for it--his divine power. This was not the army of Magadha, which Balarama could slaughter mercilessly. These were tribal chieftains and minor lords on whose crowns even the title Raja was an exaggeration. He had no desire to prolong this battle until those involved had invested so much that they felt honor-bound to fight to the last man.

By demonstrating his superiority at the very start, he had hoped to curtail the battle, scare them off. He had succeeded, it seemed. Now, all that remained was for Rukmi to accept the fact. Unfortunately, Rukmi was not just a king or chieftain here, he had something far more at stake: his honor, his family's honor, and after the way Jarasandha had built him up publicly, for him to back away now would brand him a coward and dishonorable man forever. He had no choice now but to kill or be killed.

Krishna saw Rukmi arrive at this conclusion. The Prince of Vidarbha wheeled his horse about, cursing his allies and brothers with equally colorful phrases. Then, raising his sword in a grandiose gesture that Krishna knew well, he turned his horse about once again, facing Krishna, pointed it forward and launched a one-man charge with an intensity that left no doubt about his intention.

He meant to kill Krishna now--or be killed by Krishna.

Balarama covered the few miles to the escaping chariot in as many moments. Thumping to ground on one foot, he struck with the other foot's heel to launch himself upward again, covering a hundred yards with each leap. He approached the chariot's dustcloud wake, leaped over it, cutting through the curling dust--he turned his head aside to sneeze briefly--then landed a few hundred yards ahead of it, blocking its only way through the hilly ranges. The chariot would have to get past him to continue its escape.

He watched as the chariot driver drew up the reins, calling out roughly to the horse team. Slowly, with a creaking of wood and metal and much neighing by the horses, the heavily armored battle vehicle came to a halt. The dust cloud caught up with the chariot and passed overhead, obscuring it for a moment.

When it passed, Balarama saw Jarasandha standing alone in the chariot, glowering at him. He could see the God Emperor assessing his options and coming to the same conclusion: there were none left. It was either face Balarama and fight or continue fleeing and be caught anyway and beaten dishonorably.

To Jarasandha's credit, he chose to fight honorably.

The Magadhan tied his team, dismounted, and began walking towards Balarama. When he was perhaps three score yards away, he stopped.

“Yadava, I ask that you leave my path.”

Balarama chuckled, placing his hands on his hips. Rather than respond with words, he just flashed a toothy smile.

Jarasandha shook his head slowly. “You do not wish to fight me, you fool.”

Balarama chuckled again, then wiped a little dust off his chin with the back of his hand. “I do not *wish* to fight you, Magadhan. Wishes are for those who aspire. I *want* to fight you. And I have you before me, so there is no wishing involved. Fight me or run and I’ll catch you and thrash you anyway.”

He saw the thin long face show something like a grimace--or perhaps it was a sardonic smile. Krishna was much better at reading the expressions of these types of fellows than he was.

“Perhaps I did not make myself clear. If you fight me, you will die. It is as simple as that.”

“Really?” Balarama arched his eyebrows, then waggled them alternately. “That is such a sweet thing to say to your opponent. I hope you die too!”

Jarasandha shook his head and began walking towards Balarama at a slow, sedate pace, like a man walking down an empty pathway with nothing in

his path. “I don’t hope or wish. I do. You can tear me to pieces, boy, but you cannot kill me. Nobody can kill Jarasandha.”

Balarama nodded grimly, cracking his knuckles and slamming his fist into his palm. “We’ll test that assumption right now then, shall we? Besides, you forget, I’m not nobody. I’m Balarama. And I kill asuras like you everyday.”

Balarama ran towards Jarasandha at full speed, sprinting with all his might and force at the Magadhan. Jarasandha began running as well and both came at each other with the ferociousness of two lions at war.

Krishna swung around at the last instant, deflecting the force of Rukmi’s first charge and knocking him off his horse. The Prince of Vidarbha tumbled over several times but regained his feet unharmed. His horse snickered and looked around uncertainly. Krishna glanced at it, caught its eye and jerked his head. The horse whinnied, its eyes flaring wide, and galloped away before Rukmi could mount it.

Rukmi hefted his sword and strode towards Krishna. His face was apoplectic with rage. Never very handsome to begin with, it was ugly with anger now. He ranted and raged as he approached, shouting loud enough to be heard by the entire assembled army of watchers. “I swear by all that is sacred to me, I will not return to Kundina without having killed you in battle, Krishna, and without bringing my sister home.”

Krishna sighed inwardly. “That is an oath you can never fulfill, Rukmi. Why promise what you cannot deliver?” He kept his voice just loud enough for Rukmi to hear but not the others.

Rukmi swore and ran at Krishna, swinging his sword wildly in both hands, as if intending to chop Krishna in half. Krishna deflected him with a single raised finger and Rukmi tumbled backwards, head over heels, landing on his backside. The sword flew out of Rukmi’s hands and flipped over several times before embedding itself upto the hilt in the ground before the watching kings. They balked but stayed where they were once they saw the sword was not threatening them.

Rukmi spat out grass and regained his feet. Unslinging his bow, he notched an arrow and pointed it at Krishna directly.

“I will kill you first, Yadava,” he shouted, “and then take my sister home!”

He loosed an arrow. Krishna deflected it and it went spinning past harmlessly, over the heads of the massed ranks of soldiers at the forest’s edge, sticking in a low-hanging branch with a quavering sound.

Rukmi loosed more arrows in quick succession. Krishna noted that his bhraatr-in-law was a good Bowman, if only he could learn to control his anger better.

All Rukmi’s arrows ended up in trees or in the ground.

Rukmi roared at Krishna: “You are a coward who does not dare to fight me man to man!”

Krishna gestured at his wounds, healing fast but still visible as slits and nicks all over his body. “Would a coward endure a thousand arrows?”

Rukmi snarled. “They caused you no permanent harm! That is obvious. Your supermortal powers make you invulnerable to our weapons. Any craven can use such powers to fight ordinary men. If you were truly courageous and honorable you would fight me as a mortal, man to man!”

Krishna indicated his own body. The six arrows fired by Rukmi still remained in his flesh, sticking out at various angles. “Your arrows remain, Rukmi. I did not send them back to you as I did the others. Shall I do so now?”

“Send them!” Rukmi said. “Do you think I fear your powers? What you have done today has shamed my sister, my father, my family. Our honor will never be repaired unless I kill you now.”

Krishna shook his head. “Rukmi, I did what I had to for reasons too complex to explain now. But if you wish, I will sit with you and attempt to make you understand why I had to do things this way. After all, we shall now be brothers-in-law. I have sworn an oath to your sister that I will not harm you and your family in any way.”

Rukmi shook his head, showing his crooked tooth in scorn. “Harm? You have destroyed our family! What else did we have but our honor. You took that from us when you took our sister. Return her at once and perhaps I

may yet let you live. But know this, you will never be my brother-in-law, you Gupta Ranchodri!"

Krishna recognized the twin insults and could guess who had put those names into Rukmi's ears. He shook his head, attempting a smile: "We may yet repair this damage. Shake my hand and let us solemnize this match with the blessings of all Vidarbha and Dwarka combined."

Rukmi hawked and spit on the ground at Krishna's feet. "Never! We of Vidarbha honor our sisters. We do not make peace with those kidnap them like rakshasas. How did you become such a coward, Ranchodri? I expected better of a Yadava. Was it your birth parents who made you into a coward or was it your years living among the cowherds of Gokul and Vrindavan?"

Krishna stiffened at the words but still attempted to speak calmly. "Be careful what you say next, Rukmi. I too can say things about you and your family that you will not like. About your alliance with Jarasandha and Magadha for instance."

Rukmi walked to and fro, shouting even louder now. "That is all you can do, is it not? You will not fight me like a man. You will not give me the opportunity to avenge my family's dishonor. You will not even grant me an honorable death! After all that I have heard about you, Krishna of the Yadu dynasty, you are a sore disappointment. Perhaps you spent too much time among the gopis of Gokul! Or perhaps you were fed so much Vrishni milk from your adoptive mother's breast that you have no blood in your veins anymore, only milk!"

Krishna stared at him coldly, his eyes flickering with a deep blue glow. "Stop speaking of my parents and family in that way, Rukmi. It will not be tolerated. Not another word."

Rukmi showed his tooth again. “So you can insult my family but I must not speak of your’s? That is so fair and just, is it not? Is that your dharma then? And does your dharma count for more than my own? You are nothing but a cowherd who murdered his own uncle in an unfair fight. Not just a *cowherd*, but also a *coward*, like all the cowardly cowherds of Gokul!”

“Enough!” Krishna said, still keeping his voice at a loud but conversational level. “I ask you one last time, cease this pointless bickering and return home to Kundina. The real enemy of your people is Jarasandha, not I!”

Rukmi drew an arrow and shouted: “You dare not order me, you who dishonored your own Yadu dynasty. You are nothing but a thief and a kidnapper of women. I will kill you here and now. If you dare, then fight back and kill me like a man. Or prove yourself to be the *cowherd* you truly are!”

18

Balarama saw brilliant yellow light scorching his vision and blinked, raising a hand to cover his eyes. Dust trickled from his raised hand onto his chest. He blinked and rose to his elbow, looking around. His head felt as if it had been struck by a gada as indestructible as his own. The yellow light was the sun, he saw now, and he was laying sprawled in the dust, some two score yards from where Jarasandha had left his chariot. But where was Jarasandha?

He got to his feet, shaking off the dust from his clothes. All he remembered was running directly at Jarasandha and Jarasandha running towards him. Then everything went white. He looked around, moving several yards in one direction, then the other. Finally he spotted something that he recognized at once. Except...there was something strange about it. Something not quite right.

It was a piece of a body.

He had seen enough corpses and partial pieces of corpses not to be disgusted. But this was unlike anything he had seen before in his life.

It was a piece of Jarasandha's arm, the part where the arm met the torso, part of a shoulder, torn off like a joint of meat lopped off by a clean sharp blade. He could understand that happening: The full force of impact produced by Balarama running at a person could tear the body to pieces.

And Jarasandha had run at him too with considerable force. Balarama had torn entire companies to shreds this way, with or without his mace.

But this was not a mere joint of meat with tendrils and blood oozing, torn muscle and flesh, ripped from the body. It was sliced off as cleanly as a chopped section of meat. Like a block of wood that could fit back into the larger log from which it had been chipped.

He looked around and saw there were other pieces laying about. Some dozens of yards away. He spotted part of a leg, another leg, a hip, a bit of torso, a belly, a neck, half a head...he blinked and stared at that one again. *Half a head?* Cut cleanly in half as if severed by an executioner's blade.

How was it possible to shatter a body to pieces this way, as if it were but a block of wood or stone?

The answer, of course, was that it *wasn't* possible.

And yet, the evidence lay all around Balarama.

He was still musing what to do when suddenly a golden object descended into his frame of view. He snatched up his mace, ready to fight, assuming it was one of Jarasandha's allies or champions come to belatedly fight for their master.

But it was Krishna's Pushpak. Daruka was steering it and he brought it low enough that he was hovering only a foot above ground, a yard from

Balarama. Rukmini was standing behind the sarathi, in the chariot well and she looked as if she had been weeping.

“Bhaiya Balarama,” she said, pleading with her hands joined together, “I beg of you, please come and stop it before it is too late. Please.”

Balarama didn’t need any further urging. He leaped into the chariot, landing with a thump beside his sister-in-law-to-be. Normally his weight would have caused most ordinary chariots to shudder and the horses to rear in panic but the pushpak didn’t budge a fraction of an inch. Daruka steered the vehicle away, flying them back in the direction of Kundini.

Balarama glanced back and saw the pieces of Jarasandha’s body still lay spread across the ground. He could not believe he had just killed the God Emperor of Jarasandha with a single impact yet that appeared to be the case.

“Enough!” Krishna said.

His body bristled with arrows, not just the six Rukmi had shot earlier but others he had shot now. Krishna had endured the arrows and insults until now but still Rukmi would not be satisfied. His taunts had grown more insulting, more offensive until finally, it was more than Krishna could bear.

He gestured and his divine Bow appeared in his hand. With one fluid gesture, he loosed a flurry of arrows.

Rukmi's bow was shattered, his sword shattered, his quiver destroyed-- every arrow in it shattered to bits--and then Rukmi himself was struck by arrows. One in each arm, one in each leg, one in each side. He grimaced but the wounds were all in his flesh, not one struck a vital organ or caused permanent damage.

There was no shortage of weapons lying on the field around them. Rukmi took up an iron mace and swung it, coming at Krishna with rage on his face.

Krishna loosed an arrow, shattering the iron mace into smithereens. The fragments went flying away, not one touching Rukmi directly but showering the air over the ground. They clattered onto the helmets and armor and weapons of the fallen soldiers.

Rukmi picked up a spear.

Krishna shattered the spear.

Rukmi raised a lance.

Krishna shattered it.

Rukmi took up a javelin.

Krishna broke the arrow to pieces.

Rukmi found a sword and came at him, Krishna bent the sword into a twisted curl.

Rukmi flung a shield at him, Krishna melted it like molasses.

Then Rukmi looked around, saw that every weapon he chose was useless, and understood what he had to do.

He unclipped his helmet and tossed it aside. It rolled across the grass and came to a halt by the fallen body of a horse and its ride, both pierced by javelins and arrows.

Rukmi unbuckled his leather-and-metal armored chestplate and let it fall heavily to the ground.

He removed every bracelet, chain and protective covering he had one.

Finally, clad in only a langot, as near naked as a man could be, he threw himself at Krishna without another word.

All that needed to be said had been said. Now, this was a fight to the death. He was attacking Krishna with the last weapon a man had left in battle: his own body.

In one smooth motion, Krishna swung around, avoiding Rukmi's headlong rush, turned back and grasped hold of Rukmi by his hair, holding him at bay.

Rukmi continued to spout insults, directed at Krishna's mother, father, friends, brother, community...

"Enough!" Krishna said.

He grasped a blade that lay at hand, a sword dropped by some fallen soldier. He set the edge of the blade to Rukmi's throat, drawing blood.
"Cease now."

"Kill me then!" Rukmi taunted. "You chose to fight me as a god. Now at least kill me like a man!" Then he said something about Krishna's mother that no man, god or asura could tolerate being said about his maatr.

Krishna paused a moment then brought the blade up and with one swift motion, sliced the hair off Rukmi's scalp. Thick oily hair fell like sheaves of wheat to the ground.

The blade flashed in Krishna's hand, again and yet again.

When he was done, he tossed the blade aside and rose to his feet, turning and walking away. There was almost no expression on Krishna's face but in his eyes blue lightning flickered and in his mouth, a typhoon swirled.

“Krishna!”

Balarama leaped from the pushpak, landing on the ground with a resounding thump that the watching kings must have felt in their bones. He ran to where Rukmi lay and examined the prince of Vidarbha. Rukmi’s eyes flashed in his rage-mottled face. Trickles of blood ran down his scalp and sides of his face.

Krishna had not harmed Rukmi himself. He had shaved off the hair from his head and face. Shaved him clean as a son mourning for a dead parent.

Balarama swore and strode away from Rukmi, going after Krishna.

Krishna beckoned with a finger and Pushpak descended to ground level.

Balarama reached him and caught hold of his brother’s shoulder. “Why did you do that?”

Krishna turned and looked at him. Balarama lurched involuntarily. He had rarely seen Krishna so angry, so dark before.

“I could have done far worse,” Krishna said. “He gave me just cause. It was your mother and father and people he insulted as well, Sankarshan.” The voice that spoke was Krishna’s and yet not Krishna’s. Balarama remembered that voice from another time, another age, another

incarnation, deep within a haunted forest, surrounded by corpses of hybrid monsters, and he remembered this Krishna, this being, this brother.

Balarama looked into Krishna's eyes for a moment, seeing that brother across all lifetimes, past, present and future. "You should not have disfigured him in that manner, bhraatr," he said gently, admonishingly, as only an elder brother can admonish, "For one like he, it is worse than dying on the battlefield. You may as well have killed him."

Krishna looked back at him, hearing his words but as if from a distant and remote corner of Creation, one where the laws of mortals did not matter. "He wanted to die. I granted his wish. Yet I also upheld my oath to Rukmini. There is only so much even a god can do, Sankarshan. Now leave me be."

And he climbed aboard the pushpak.

Balarama stood for a moment, looking around. The kings and chiefs still watched, as did their army.

In the distance, he could hear the sound of the conch shell sequence that signalled retreat and withdrawal of the Yadava forces. They were pulling back and starting the long journey back to the staging point. Krishna and he were to meet them there and arrange for the transport back to Dwarka, using the usual precautions to ensure they were not followed and their destination remained unknown.

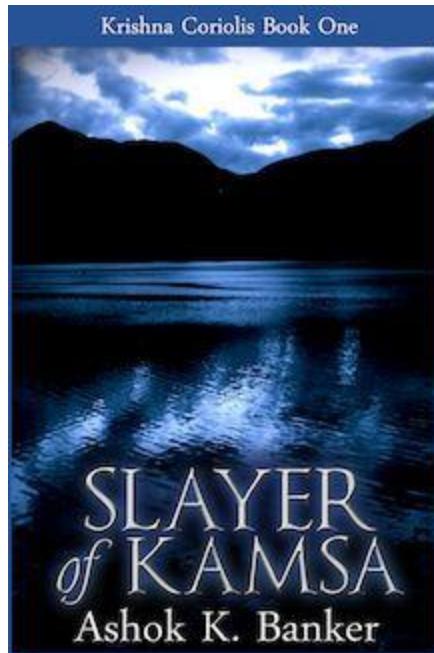
It seemed that Jarasandha was dead and the day was won. Once again, the sons of Vasudeva had triumphed. It was time to go home. Yet he could not

help feeling that something vital remained to be done. That the victory was a hollow and fleeting one. That the real threat still lay at large, looming, ominous, approaching when one least expected it.

From the chariot, he heard the sound of Rukmi's voice, speaking softly to Krishna. He could not hear Krishna's voice replying. He knew that although his brother had gained the bride he desired in this lifetime, he had paid a dear price for it. But then again, nothing came without a price, not even love.

Balarama boarded the chariot and watched as the ground fell away at blinding speed and the pushpak carried them home to Dwarka.

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*of the child-god and the terrible forces of evil with the
birth of Krishna...Slayer of Kamsa!*

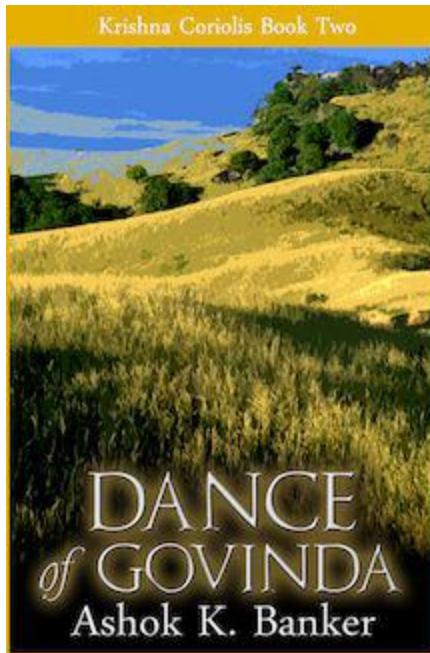
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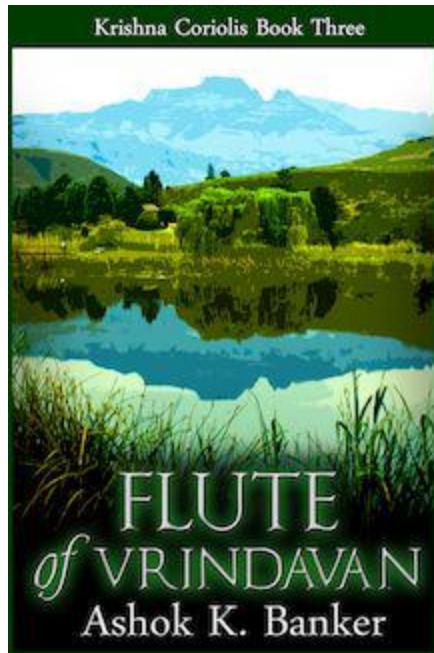
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As Krishna survives one horrific asura attack after the other, she comes to terms with the true identity of her adopted son. Meanwhile, Kamsa despatches a team of otherworldly assassins to slay his nemesis. Harried by Kamsa's forces, Krishna's adoptive father, the peace-loving Nanda Maharaja, is forced to lead his people into exile. They find safe haven in idyllic

*Vrindavan. But even in this paradise, deadly demons
lurk...*

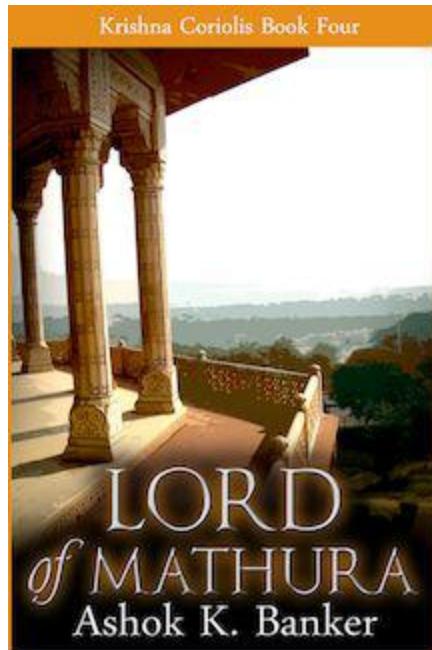
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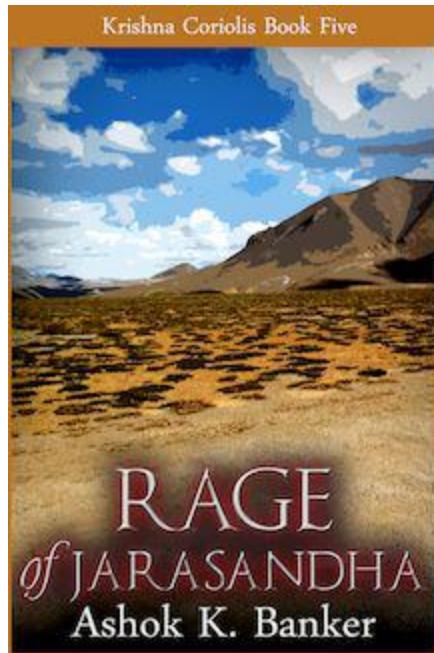
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KRISHNA ⁷ CORIOLIS

RIDER *of* GARUDA



ASHOK K. BANKER

KRISHNA 7 CORIOLIS

RIDER *of* GARUDA



ASHOK K. BANKER

Rider of Garuda

KRISHNA CORIOLIS – BOOK VII

ASHOK K. BANKER

HARPER

*For Biki and Bithika:
My Radha and my Rukmini.*

*For Yashka and Ayush Yoda:
My Yashoda.*

*All you faithful readers
who understand
that these tales
are not about being Hindu
or even about being Indian.
They're simply about being.*

*In that spirit,
I dedicate this gita-govinda
to the krishnachild in all of us.
For, under these countless
separate skins, there beats
a single eternal heart.*

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preface

If it takes a community to raise a child, it surely takes a nation to build an epic. The itihasa of the subcontinent belongs to no single person. The great epics of our culture – of any culture – may be told and retold infinite times by innumerable poets and writers; yet, no single version is the final one.

The wonderful adventures of the great Lord krishna are greater than what any story, edition or retelling can possibly encompass. The lila of god Incarnate is beyond the complete comprehension of any one person. We may each perceive some aspects of his greatness, but, like the blind men and the elephant, none of us can ever see everything at once.

It matters not whether you are hindu or non-hindu, whether you believe krishna to be god or just a great historical personage, whether you are Indian or not. The richness and wonder of these tales have outlived countless generations and will outlast many more to come.

My humble attempt here – within these pages and in the volume to follow – is neither the best nor the last retelling of this great story. I have no extraordinary talent or ability, no special skill or knowledge, no inner sight or visionary gift. What I do have is a lifelong exposure to an itihasa so vast, a culture so rich, a nation so great, wise and ancient, that their influence – permeating into one like water through peat over millennia, filtering through from mind to mind, memory to memory, mother to child and to mother again – has suffused every cell of my being, every unit of my consciousness.

And when I use the word ‘I’, it is meant in the universal, you are ‘I’ as I am she, and she is all of us. krishna’s tale lives through each and every one of us. It is yours to tell, his to tell, hers to tell. Mine as well, for as long as this tale is told, and retold, it lives on.

I have devoted years to the telling, to the crafting of words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters, kaands and volumes. I shall devote more years to come, decades even, yet, all my effort is not mine alone. It is the fruition of a billion Indians, and the billions who have lived before us, for each person who

has known this tale and kept it alive in his heart has been a teller, a reteller, a poet, and an author. I am merely the newest name in a long, endless line of names that have had the honour and distinction of being associated with this great story.

It is my good fortune to be the newest reteller of this ancient saga. It is a distinction I share with all who tell and retell this story: from the grandmother who whispers it as a lullaby to the drowsy child, to the scholar who pores over each syllable of every shloka in an attempt to find an insight that has eluded countless scholars before him.

It is a tale told by me in this version; yet, it is not my tale alone to tell. It is your story. our story. her story. his story.

Accept it in this spirit, and with all humility and hope. also know that I did not create this flame, nor did I light the torch that blazes. I merely bore the torch this far. now I give it to you. Take it from my hand. Pass it on. as it has passed from hand to hand, mind to mind, voice to voice, for unknown millennia.

Turn the page. see the spark catch flame.

Watch krishna come alive.

author's note

At the end of *Fortress of Dwarka*, we saw a somewhat changed Krishna, one who was fighting not for his people or a cause, but to regain his long-lost love, the very incarnation of Sri upon earth herself, the darkly beauteous Rukmini. How he slipped away with her under the vigilant eyes of not just her brother Rukmi and father Bhishmaka, but also the god emperor of Magadha himself, Jarasandha, with his powerful coterie of allies, and then faced them all on a field outside the city limits to avoid causing more fatalities than were absolutely essential formed the conclusion to that sixth book in the Krishna Coriolis Series. But as we knew, even the great Krishna and Balarama could not have succeeded that easily or quickly. Nor could the dreaded Magadhan be put to rest that simply.

Rider of Garuda begins almost exactly where *Fortress of Dwarka* left off. With Krishna and Balarama's enemies pitting all their resources against the sons of Vasudeva. I won't say much more here, except to add that this book and the next, *Lord of Vaikuntha*, form a thrilling and yes, even a heart-breaking, culmination to this eight-book series. And when I say thrilling, I don't just mean the kind of thrills that involve bloodshed and death. Some of the hardest battles are fought on the battleground of the heart and mind. And in this case, even the landscape of the soul has no safe refuge. The final countdown has begun. Even Pushpaka may not be able to keep pace this time, for we are ascending now into the very mindspace of Hari himself. The essence of Krishna's consciousness and self-awareness, where anything is possible. Happy reading!

	yadrcchaya copapannah	
	svarga-dvaram apavrtam	
	sukhinah ksatriya partha	
	labhante yuddham idrsam	

*Blessed are the warriors
Who are chosen to fight justly;
For the doors to heaven
Shall be opened unto them.*



Prarambha

Rukmi howled with rage. The prince of Vidarbha remained where Krishna had left him – on his knees in a field strewn with corpses. His sword, bow, javelin, all lay shattered around him, along with a multitude of other weapons he had attempted to use against Dwarkadhish. Blood trickled down the shaven pate, which was all that remained of his beautiful head of hair. For a Kshatriya to be thus shamed was a sign of abject defeat. Death in battle was honourable, maiming acceptable. Strategic defeat by superior forces or tactics was a learning experience.

But *this*? This was humiliation.

It exceeded the limits of Kshatriya pride. Not only had the Slayer of Kamsa, this upstart Dwarkadhish, stolen Rukmini, his sister, from right under his nose, he had then taken the time to stop his flying chariot, disembark and engage the forces of Vidarbha and all her allies, which included the god emperor of Magadha, Jarasandha himself.

The odds had been impossible. Tens of thousands of yoddhas, kings, princes, prize archers, mace champions, javelin masters, heavy armoured cavalry and wheel – all against a single man. And yet, this was all that remained: a field on the edge of the Dandaka-van, carpeted with the corpses of all those champions and kings. And Rukmi himself, outmatched, outwitted, outfought, and left thusly – pate shaven with a few quick strokes of Krishna's deft blade, utterly and completely humiliated.

The Pushpaka had flown, vanished from sight. His sister, pride of Vidarbha, gone. The honour of his great nation sullied forever.

And now, to press a boot heel to his shattered ego, a rider had brought the news that the other engagement, the battle of the Yadava armies versus the forces of Magadha led by none other than Jarasandha himself, had ended in a complete rout. Magadha was defeated. And Jarasandha had fared worse, far worse, than Rukmi himself. The Magadhan was dead.

Rukmi cuffed the rider from the horse, unseating and toppling him to the ground where he fell roughly in the dust. The prince leaped aboard the gelding, swung the head of the horse and galloped in the direction the rider had come from. The crowd of milling warriors and leaders, still battle-shocked, began to follow him raggedly, leaving a trail that wound out behind him for miles. It was hard to believe that a single man had bested such a force. The finest of Vidarbha had gone up against a single Yadava and had lost the day as easily as Rukmi himself had lost his hair.

A trickle of blood rolled down his cheek. He rubbed it roughly with the back of his hand, smearing blood on his face. Not caring, he dug his heels in and rode harder.

It was not hard to find the plain where Magadha had battled Balarama. The ruins of an army are always easily discernible from a distance. Riderless horses browsing aimlessly. Hordes of crows and carrion birds circling overhead. Hyenas and jackals skulking through the thickets, watching and biding their time. The hoarse cries of fatally wounded men suffering their way to a slow death. Men with blood-spattered garments and armour, wounded limbs and bodies, lying around, sitting around, staggering around, dazed. A chariot with a broken wheel lying half in and half out of a ditch beside the marg. Dead mules with their complete loads fallen on their sides, struck by stray arrows or javelins. Body parts scattered in assorted arrays. Tall grass stained with bodily fluids.

Rukmi read all these as a hunter-tracker might read a deer's spore and tracks in the forest. The son of Bhishmaka had been in enough battles and skirmishes to be able to read the aftermath of a conflict and discern its narrative.

What had happened here was unlike anything he had ever seen. He reined in his horse, cursing liberally as he viewed the field of carnage. The centre of the battle was unmistakeable. Everything else he had come across until now led to this one point: a place where a single man had stood, wielding a mace, and had resisted an army.

But what a mace it must have been.

And what a man he must be to have wielded it thus.

The carnage was epic. A thousand mace-wielders with a thousand maces could not have wreaked such havoc so quickly. And here was the proof of Balarama's mastery.

Bodies lay strewn outwards from a central point like blood spatter from a single body, as if the Yadava had smote them all at once, in one epic circular

swing of his mighty mace, scattering the army of Magadha the way a farmer thrashes ripe stalks of wheat in a harvest field.

Indeed, what was it ... the legend about Krishna's brother? That he wielded a plough rather than a mace?

Yes, that explained the distinctive wounds and the unusual pattern of slaughter. Not a simple bludgeoning mace with a weighted bulbous head but a plough, reaping lives like sheaves, harvesting.

After searching for he knew not how long, he realized that the rider had spoken truly. Not only had Balarama reaped the army of Magadha like a field of wheat, he had slain the god emperor himself.

The proof being a severed hand upon which was a set of rings that Rukmi recognized seeing on the hand of his mentor and ally when he had greeted him last, earlier this very day in the great hall of his father's palace.

He sank to his knees again, head between his fists, the shaven scalp feeling so strange to the touch that he did not wish to let his fingers or palms touch it. He bent his head and rocked forward and back, trying to regain his grip on sanity, his life, his will.

After what seemed like an age, he raised his head and brushed the trickles of blood that had rolled down his face like tears. The sensation in his burning chest was beyond anger now. It was fearful awe.

What beings *were* these brothers? How had they wrought such destruction?

Perhaps the legend was true, after all. Perhaps these Yadavas were not mere men. Perhaps they were ... devas? Could it be true? Could Vishnu truly have descended upon earth to rid the world of evil one more time? Rukmi could not believe that the Magadhan was dead. Jarasandha had known the truth about the brothers, and had believed it even when lesser men like Rukmi had doubted.

Something caught his attention at the periphery of vision. He turned but saw nothing at first. Just bodies and body parts, mangled and mashed together until it was impossible to tell which belonged to whom.

Then he saw it again. Behind the corpses and limbs piled atop one another where they had fallen.

Movement.

Something moving in a peculiar skittering motion, unlike any creature, human or otherwise, he had ever seen before.

He stood up, suddenly not wanting to be at ground level when anything that moved in that manner was within attacking distance.

His warrior's senses prickled, warning him of grave threat. But he could see nothing obvious. No soldiers rising or enemies appearing. Even the corpses were all friendly soldiers. Yet the feeling was unmistakeable: something was present with him on this battlefield – something infinitely more dangerous than soldiers.

Then he glimpsed it again, in a different direction: the same skittering movement between and through the intertwined limbs of the dead.

There were things moving about in unnatural ways, things that were not human.

The wind was soughing across the open plain, carrying the stench of offal and split-open bodies and the cries of dying or broken men. Long shadows created ominous shapes and patterns, adding to the sinister atmosphere. Rukmi's already harried mind began imagining monstrous things, creatures from old daaimaas' tales heard as a child – stories of vetaals and rakshasas, pisachas and urugas. He glimpsed another scurrying movement and swung around just in time to see something slip behind the contorted corpse of a Magadhan cavalryman and his dead horse. Both man and beast stared accusingly at Rukmi as if blaming him for their death.

He began to tremble uncontrollably.

Suddenly, to his great relief, Rukmi spotted a group of riders approaching at a steady trot, silhouetted against the orange sky of the west. He knew they were his friends and allies, come to see for themselves if the news of Jarasandha's demise was true. After all, he was the prince of Vidarbha. He had taken the rider's horse and come as fast as he could, but they would not simply leave him alone on the field of battle. Scalped he might be, but he was still the royal heir.

It took an effort to resist the urge to run towards them. It would not be fitting for the prince of Vidarbha to run howling in terror across a battlefield, especially after his ignominious defeat. So he waited for them to reach him, their pace considerably slow as they had to dismount and lead their mounts around the bloody debris.

All the while, out of the corners of his eyes, he could glimpse the things skittering and scurrying around him.

He swung around, following one of the things as it appeared from behind a pile of corpses and emerged into an open patch of ground.

'Look!' he cried out as the others approached.

They looked. And were as startled as he was.

He saw that the arrivals were Viduratha, Paundraka, Dantavakra and Shalva. So they had all survived the battle. Quite likely because none had actually engaged the enemy. He did not begrudge them their survival, for they had all given their best men to the fight – men who now lay dead and scattered on this same field as well as the one on which he had been humiliated. Right now, he was too terrified of the skittering things to care about anything else.

‘What are those things?’ Shalva cried, drawing his sword. The others looked confused, Dantavakra even looking skywards as if expecting to see a Pushpaka descending. They all drew their weapons and instinctively formed a circle with their backs to one another. Rukmi joined the circle, picking up a mace from the ground and grasping it firmly in both hands.

‘See how they move!’ Viduratha said in a tone of wonder. ‘They are not human.’

‘Asuras!’ Dantavakra said gaily, as if greeting old friends at a wedding feast. ‘Come to feast on our living flesh!’ He upended a skin of wine and was disappointed to find it drained. He tapped it hard, mashing his lips against his own teeth, and exclaimed abusively.

‘Over there,’ Paundraka said fearfully. ‘They are ... coming together.’

‘A kavi sammelan!’ Dantavakra sang out. ‘Regale us with some ribald lyrics, kusalavyas! Arouse our senses with erotic imagery!’

Everyone looked towards where Paundraka was pointing. Dantavakra looked as well and broke off mid-quip, silenced. His eyes grew rounder and wider, pupils more dilated than they were already.

‘What *are* those things?’ Viduratha gulped. ‘They look like ...’

‘Limbs and body parts,’ Shalva said grimly, raising his sword as if intending to charge. He pointed with the tip instead. ‘See there. Those are the arms and legs and that there is the torso.’

‘They seem to be ...’ Rukmi swallowed hoarsely, ‘embracing.’

‘Not embracing,’ Shalva corrected him. ‘Joining together.’

‘Excuse me, gentlemanly gentleman,’ Dantavakra said drunkenly. ‘Isn’t that the same thing? Joining together and embracing?’ He made an obscene gesture with the wineskin and a circle formed using his forefinger and thumb. ‘Why not just call it what it is?’

Rukmi cried out. ‘Devi protect us! I know what that is ... Who that is.’

‘Yes,’ said Shalva. ‘Exactly. It is *he*.’

‘He who?’ asked Viduratha. ‘Oh wait, you mean ...’

'Yes,' Paundraka said. 'It is him, all right. No doubt about it.'

'Jarashanda of Magadha,' Rukmi said in wonderment.

They watched as the separated parts of Jarashanda shuffled and hopped and slid the last few inches to join together, slipping and adjusting, then suddenly, without any visible effort, melding into each other to form complete limbs and parts of the body, as if they had never been severed at all. The sight was unnerving yet grotesquely fascinating. None of them had ever witnessed anything like it before. They had all heard of the god emperor's indestructibility during battle, but none had understood exactly what that entailed. Only Shalva seemed to have some experience of this phenomenon, though he still looked as blanched as the others.

'So that is how he rises up again after being killed each time,' Rukmi said, a tone of awe in his hoarse voice.

'Yes,' Shalva said, 'it never ceases to be skin-chilling.'

Moments later, the god emperor himself stood whole and complete before them all, utterly naked and absolutely unconcerned about his nakedness. He started to speak, and as he opened his mouth, they saw a tiny crack in his jaw – as if the halves had joined imperfectly. One half slipped open to reveal the flesh and blood vessels beneath the surface. He reached up and, with a hard push, snapped the errant side back into position. Now the two halves fitted perfectly.

He smiled disconcertingly at them all. 'So nice of you all to assemble here. It saves us time having to gather around.'

They looked at each other with varying expressions of awe, fascination and in Dantavakra's case, wild-eyed hysteria.

'Gather around for what, my lord?' Rukmi asked hesitantly.

Jarashanda looked at him and glanced over his shaven pate, making Rukmi squirm inwardly. 'To prepare for the next part of our plan to destroy the brothers, Krishna and Balarama, and exterminate the entire Yadava race from the face of the world.'

Then Jarashanda clapped his hands and the sky boomed and blossomed with purple lightning, outlining him as he grinned, his skin translucent enough to reveal the flesh and muscle and sinew beneath. It was as if a body stripped of its skin stood there, grinning and moving like a man.

No, not like a man, Rukmi thought in wonderment. *Like a God.*

As the sky darkened with dense purple clouds, boiling up from nowhere to flood the sky, Jarashanda raised his arms, spreading his legs, forming an X-

shaped symbol.

Lightning flashed deep indigo between his outstretched hands, silhouetting his outline with blinding brightness. In that instant, Rukmi saw Jarasandha's body parting slowly, in two vertical halves, cleaved straight down from head to groin, exposing a crack through which the lightning was visible, as were the boiling purple clouds and raging sky.

Then the crack grew darker than the sky behind the Magadhan, widening and altering shape to form a gap like that left by two hands cupped together vertically. At the very top of the head, the halves touched. So too at the groin. But in the middle, it widened to something that could only be described as a hole the size of a horse's head. A child could have crawled through it. But what was behind it was no longer sky and clouds and lightning. It was a strange vista, an otherworldly place like nothing Rukmi had seen, dreamed or imagined in his wildest conjectures. Naraka might look like that, it occurred to him wildly, but he pushed the thought away. How could Jarasandha expand his body to form a ... hole that led to naraka! It was absurd.

But he could not deny what he saw and heard. He felt the wind from the otherworldly place, a peculiar mixture of extreme cold and extreme heat both at once, as if he were standing downwind from a fire blazing in a snowy place. He could even smell the strange stench of the place as well as hear the bestial cries and howls of creatures he could not begin to imagine. Even the light seeping in and suffusing that other place was like no light on earth.

A shadow appeared in that other place. A shape like no mortal man or animal Rukmi had ever seen. It was dark, masculine in its shape and form, yet not a man. Its head was shaped like a beast, but no beast he could identify. The head was bullish yet the horns were longer, sharper, more wickedly curved, like a boar's horns, yet with prongs at the tips, like a stag's horns. The fur was densely bridled on top, yet shaggy on the sides and scraggly beneath the chin.

He shook his head, stepping back uneasily, unable to stomach the sight and experience. Its very presence brought deep unease, a sense of death and threat far greater than the fear of battle. He had not felt this afraid even when facing Ranchodri Gupta on the field of battle earlier. This being was not of this world or of any world he knew of. And yet, he did not think he was witnessing an illusion. It felt and smelled and sounded far too real. He could sense the raw male stench of the bestial being, a mixture of man urine, bull semen, boar offal and stag blood. A dozen warring odours and creatures came to mind and some

primitive part of his mind, the part that still bore the race-memories of an age when man was prey and every beast a threat to survival, whispered the impossible: *this thing is Everybeast*. That was impossible. A creature that was all creatures rolled into one. No such being could possibly exist ... or could it?

The being that he thought of as Everybeast plunged its massive head into the portal in Jarasandha's body. The Magadhan shuddered with what was either ecstasy or agony, or both, and raised his hands to the skies where purple clouds were seething with angry red rain. Dark lightning flashed at impossible angles, rising *up* from the earth to strike the belly of the cloudbank, shattering it open and releasing great pent-up loads of vile dark fluid that did not deserve to be called rain. It gushed out of the rent in the cloudbank in great dark gouts, pouring down over the Dandaka-van. The lightning that rose with such ferocious intensity was black, with a shimmering white outline. Or so it appeared to Rukmi's bedazzled eyes, for each ragged burst left him blinded and after a moment or two when his sight returned, all he could see was a whirling of multi-hued kaleidoscopic colours bleeding into each other.

Through this miasma of black lightning, purple clouds, red rain and jaundiced yellow light, he watched with horror as Everybeast tore its way through the hole in Jarasandha's body. The god emperor howled with agony and something more, an emotion that had no counterpart in mortal hearts, as he spread his arms akimbo and flung his head and arms back as if to encourage the coming of the Beast. The creature roared with fury, its harsh cry tortuous to Rukmi's ears, and struggled ferociously to tear and rip its way through the gap between worlds. Strange fluids and gases smoked and reeked and dripped viscously from Jarasandha's being, and the entire scene put Rukmi in mind of an elephant cub's birthing that he had once witnessed in his father's stables, late one night. Even Jarasandha's straining body and agonized yet ecstatic face resembled the contortions and efforts of a birthing mother. Yet if this was a birthing, it was like no normal birthing intended by nature or God. This was a coming of Everybeast from its nightmare realm into the mortal plane, and it was a terrible, sickening sight to behold. Yet it was also momentous and powerful in its raw animal intensity.

Finally, the emergence was complete. Everybeast fell out noisily, wetly, landing on its back on the blood-spattered ground of the battlefield, and lay curled amid the debris of human body parts left by Balarama's golden plough. It curled and

made whimpering, grunting sounds, like some newborn horror that resented its own existence.

Standing over it, Jarasandha began to relax his strained, expanded body. The gap between the halves began to close, limiting Rukmi's view of the otherworld. But he saw eerie shapes throwing themselves forward, as if racing towards the gap, seeking to follow Everybeast into the mortal plane. But he could only see glimpses of them, all needle-point teeth, great jagged fangs and slashing claws. They were almost at the gap when Jarasandha exerted one final effort, roaring his fury and pain to the world, and used both hands to physically push the two halves of his torso into place. The gap closed, and Rukmi caught a final glimpse of a grasping, taloned limb reaching into it as if attempting to hold the gap open so the creature that owned the limb could crawl through. Jarasandha howled again and pushed his halves the final inch, crushing the limb. Blackish-red ichor oozed from the hairline crack down his naked chest, and splintered yellow talons, each as long as Rukmi's short dagger, fell like woodchips to the ground. Jarasandha slammed the heels of his palms against his temples, pushing his head shut and the last red glimmer of light from the otherworld was gone.

Jarasandha stood still, straining visibly. Quite literally gathering himself together. Finally, his taut form relaxed, head bent low, eyes shut.

At his feet, Everybeast stirred at last, its grunts and moans stilled. It rose on all fours, great hunched back bristling with porcupine-like needles – each the length of a throwing spear. It shuddered like a hound about to vomit up its last meal. Even hunched over, it was at least twice the length of any mortal man, and at least half a width greater. Then, by degrees, straining and stretching, its bones and limbs issuing crackling and snapping sounds, the creature began to straighten itself, to assume the approximate stance and posture of a mortal man. Or some grotesque imitation of one.

Rukmi took another step back as the creature groaned and moaned, then howled and gnashed its needle-sharp, dagger-long teeth, its hide rippling and altering texture, shape, colour. Its fur receded in places, grew out thinner in others, shaggier in some pockets, and altered hue. Its limbs straightened, the change seeming to be forced upon the creature, judging by its outraged wails of indignation. Rukmi saw blood vessels boil and recede, other sensory and internal organs grow and change shape and push up against each other and the changing, rippling skin. It was the most extraordinary sight he had ever witnessed. A snake shedding its hide, an antelope being skinned – nothing in nature or experience

compared to this abomination. It was an offence to Mother Earth herself, yet strangely organic and natural in its process. Everything resembled some animal change or alteration, whether the emergence of a butterfly from the pupa, or the alteration of a pup's bone structure into that of a grown wolf.

Imbued with supernatural power that enabled it to collate all these separate animal processes and forms into a single cohesive whole, its integrity seemed challenged at every instant, as if the beast could barely hold itself together or endure the agony of the collective change. But somehow it prevailed and the alterations continued, as did the yowls of pain and dismay.

Finally, it was done.

The creature that loomed over them all was neither man nor beast, nor animal or mortal. Yet it was of the earth, somehow animalistic and organic in its brute beauty. It had a masculinity that was overwhelming, intimidating even to a warrior of Rukmi's bulk and build. A virility he could *smell*. The size of its maleness would put a bull to shame. Even a bull elephant would hesitate to take on such a being, even in masth. The menace in its lowered head, bulging shoulders and arms, the rippling torso covered with a matting of furry pelt, those eyes raised in glowering contempt at the men standing before it, all spoke of a demoniac, bestial power.

Rukmi glanced at the other kings and saw they were as unnerved as he, as afraid for their mortal lives as any man would be in the presence of this ... creature.

What was this thing? Whence had it come? What were its intentions?

As if on cue, Jarasandha, still and apparently recovering from his own traumatic experience of birthing the creature from its otherworldly home into the mortal realm, raised his slender, wedge-shaped head.

'Narakasura,' he said softly.

Naraka, Rukmi thought, *the level of hell notorious for its tortuous punishments of the wicked and the demon races that inhabit it.*

'Narakasura,' Jarasandha said again, louder.

Asuras, the demon-brothers of the godly race, cast out from amidst their tribe to descend to the lowest levels of existence, from whence they had never ceased their wars of terror against the devas and their mortal allies.

'Narakasura,' the Magadhan repeated, in a voice that brooked no disobedience or resistance.

Naraka and asura. A demon imbued with godlike powers, residing at the most venal level of the hellish realms.

‘NARAKASURA,’ the god emperor cried, and the sky, earth, wind and rain all howled and echoed his belligerent command.

No, not merely residing in naraka. The lord of naraka itself. An asura imbued with the bestial powers of every beast that had ever existed, all combined in a single immortal body – for the asuras were immortal like the devas. Lord of the worst realm in hell!

‘NARAKASURA,’ Jarasandha cried, shaking from side to side, swaying with ecstatic fury. The lightning answered him. Thunder echoed. The earth shuddered underfoot. Oceans gnashed on distant shores. Moonlight grew brighter, colder.

And the beast replied.

Raising its mighty head to the lightening skies, opening its great maw of a mouth, revealing its gigantic jaws and bone-crushing teeth, it wailed its anguish to the world.

In response, a collective sigh rose like a banshee scream from the mouths of the thousands of mangled and battered bodies upon the field. Like a gaseous exudation from a long-putrefying corpse, it entwined with the demon’s wail and Jarasandha’s final call, and nature’s own responses as the earth herself cried out in shock and horror at the knowledge of the birthing of this, her most terrible child.

Rukmini exclaimed as the Pushpaka descended. She clutched the golden bar tightly even though the Pushpaka neither exerted pressure on its occupants nor disturbed their equilibrium in the slightest. You could sip from a brimming goblet of madhupark while the celestial chariot performed acrobatic manoeuvres and flipped end over end without spilling a single drop, so immaculate was its control. But she had not been expected the sudden descent, or the sheerness of the drop. The Pushpaka had fallen like a stone from the sky, dropping the entire miles-long distance to the ground in a wink.

'My lord, why do we descend?' she asked of Krishna who was standing beside her. 'I can see the ocean mere miles ahead. You said Dwarka was upon the ocean.'

Krishna stared into the distance for a moment. She noticed that he was staring back the way they had come, in the direction of her homeland, Vidarbha. There was a peculiar tilt to his head, as if he were hearing a sound she could not catch. She listened as she turned to gaze in that direction and heard something as well, a strange keening sound, like wind in a distant rock canyon gnashing its toothless maw against granite walls. A disturbance could be seen as well – a dense cloudbank and coating of fog that had not been there when they had left the outskirts of her kingdom only moments ago. It was incredible to think that they had covered so many yojanas in so brief a time, yet here they were at the ocean already, a farther distance from her childhood home than she had travelled in many a year. As she peered curiously, she saw lightning flash deep in the belly of that distant storm. How odd. It was not the monsoon season. *There should not be rain at this time of year, let alone thunderstorms.* The purplish-blackish cast of that cloud and the peculiar flash of that lightning – it was like no Vidarbha monsoon storm she had seen before.

She had no doubt Krishna's abduction of her had something to do with that unnatural thunderstorm. The memory of her brother Rukmi, scalped and bleeding from the close shaving of his pate by Krishna's sword, still troubled her. But she pushed that memory aside. *He could have done far worse. He could have*

killed my brother. Rukmi gave him more than enough cause. The look in Krishna's eyes at this moment was not unlike the one she had glimpsed when he had raised his sword to Rukmi. Even Balarama, standing behind them now, had looked as if he feared Krishna would end Rukmi's life for the things he had said and the way he had said them.

But he spared my brother and few men would be that restrained on the field of battle. The scalping was a sad but necessary act to demonstrate to Rukmi as well as all the other kings present that Krishna spared the crown prince of Vidarbha by choice, not out of cowardice. All in all, he had acted as honourably as any man could have, while her brother had deserved all that he had received. Now, she felt a twinge of unease as she saw the distant lightning reflected in Krishna's deep brown eyes. As if lightning flashed there as well, not merely a reflection, but an actual storm that was kept carefully banked and controlled by Krishna's tremendous resolve, which if loosed, could devastate worlds and demolish planes of existence.

Rukmini, she admonished herself, you have a very active imagination. She reached out and touched her saviour's shoulder. 'Dwarkadhish—' she said, about to ask him whether he knew the cause of that storm over her homeland.

Then she heard it too.

A wailing that tore at her soul – a deep, keening howl that was like no animal cry she had ever heard before, yet could not possibly be human. A cry too terrible to hear, it tested the limits of human endurance.

It was too distant to be clearly audible, more felt than heard.

But it was unmistakeable.

Something or someone was wailing with anguish, pain, resentment, fury, and a rage so epic, it threatened worlds – someone or something back there, within the belly of that great storm, a half hundred yojanas distant.

She withdrew her hand, raising it to her mouth.

What creature could make such a sound, such a *human-yet-not-human* sound? None she had ever heard.

As suddenly as it was in her mind, it vanished, not fading away gradually, but simply cutting off.

She frowned. Had she truly heard it? It had been audible only at the instant she had touched Krishna's shoulder and had been cut off the instant she retracted her hand.

But what could touching Krishna have to do with hearing the distant cry of some beast?

Krishna said something softly, under his breath. Something ending with the word ‘asura’. He said it balefully, head lowered, eyes glowering at the remote speck of storm, jaw tight with anger. Beside her, she felt Balarama move forward, and glimpsed him looking in the same direction, his body as tense and filled with anger as his brother’s.

‘Narakasura,’ he said, softly but audibly, and she knew it was the same word Krishna had spoken.

What on earth is a Narakasura? ‘What is a Narakasura?’ she said aloud.

Krishna seemed to become aware of her presence. He blinked and turned to look at her. His eyes still held banked fires.

As she stared, he exerted visible control and the fires diminished, then were extinguished, the lightning flashes ceasing, and his eyes returned to their deep brown normalcy again.

‘Rukmini?’ he said.

‘Yes, my lord?’

‘Do not say that name again.’ His voice was gentle but his tone decisive.

She swallowed. ‘Yes, my lord.’

‘And Rukmini ...’

‘Yes, my lord?’

‘Stop calling me your lord. I am Krishna. *Your* Krishna. No more. No less.’

She felt certain he was far more than just her Krishna. But she understood the sentiment and respect he was proffering and felt her mouth break into a smile. ‘Yes, my ... Krishna,’ she said, subverting her phrasing in the nick of time.

He smiled back. ‘There is a village here, an auspicious place.’

For a moment, she had no idea what he meant and her face reflected her puzzlement.

He raised an eyebrow in that arch way he had. ‘You asked me why we were descending. Even though we are at the ocean’s edge and presumably not far from our destination.’

She remembered her original question then, which was posed when the Pushpaka fell out of the sky – ahem, descended – only moments ago. With Krishna, every moment was such an adventure that aeons seemed to pass in a wink of his beautiful brown eyes and minutes passed like ages. ‘What village, my ... Krishna?’ she asked, catching herself in time again.

He smiled to acknowledge her self-correction. ‘It is called Madhavpur Ghed, I believe. It is an auspicious place and quite suitable for our purpose.’

‘What purpose is that?’ she said, this time dispensing with the ‘my’ as well as his name. Simpler to just speak her mind until she accustomed herself to addressing him so intimately. The deeply ingrained habits of a Vidarbha princess, raised to always use the title before a person’s name, even for her own husband and brother and close family members, would take a while to change. *Oh well, I have a lifetime with my lord to change my habits – all of them, if need be.*

He smiled again, gesturing to what appeared to be a quiet, peaceful village in a hamlet. She saw that the occupants were not fisherfolk although they were close enough to the sea that they must partake of its bounty and depend on it for their living to some extent. It was a lovely hamlet, with a small hillock in its midst, and atop that hillock, a small stone temple. She could not tell to which deity the temple was dedicated.

‘To take our marriage vows,’ he said, and grasped her hand in his as if he had every right to do so – as indeed he did.

She did what any princess of Vidarbha or any other place would do under the circumstances.

She blushed deeply and covered her profile with the edge of her garment, turning her face away from him.

He laughed and led her down from the Pushpaka to the hillock, and to the temple.



They underwent a simple ceremony presided over by the village pundit, who was surprised by their appearance and garb and asked their names and castes, gotras, etc., but otherwise gave them no difficulty at all. It was well within the rights of any man and woman of marriageable age to marry within the sight of God, with or without a priest’s benediction, and their asking the priest to preside was a courtesy on their part, not a requirement.

The priest instructed his acolyte – a thin, sallow boy whose face seemed all eyes as he eyeballed the strangers with their exotic air and accents and garments – to fetch the fresh flowers required for the ceremony. The boy went and came in a flash, and spent the rest of the time constantly peering behind them as if trying

to espy where they had come from and how. Krishna had left the Pushpaka under an overhang, hidden by a clump of trees, and the assistant could not fathom by what transport they had arrived, especially since the pathway that led from the village was in the other direction.

If either he or the priest himself recognized who Krishna and Balarama might be, they gave no indication. The names were not uncommon – Krishna being the most common name for a black-skinned male, apart from the other common one, Rama. Balarama was an epithet meaning literally Rama-of-the-plough, and since Balarama, ever vigilant, kept his golden plough upon his bulging shoulders, the priest probably felt no desire to ask too many questions. Rukmini introduced herself as Rukmini, daughter of Bhishmaka, but gave no titles, following Krishna's and Balarama's examples. Without the titles, she could be anybody, and the border of Vidarbha was a good many yojanas west and south.

There were villagers visible in the hamlet below, going about their daily chores. One or two noticed the strangers at the temple and pointed them out to their neighbours who also paused and looked up curiously. When the acolyte went down to fetch the flowers for the ceremony, they called out to him questioningly; he paused, holding up his dhoti with one hand and the wicker basket with the other hand, and called out his answers breathlessly, intent on his important mission. After talking amongst themselves briefly, they went about their way and soon appeared to have all but forgotten about the visitors.

Some children, no doubt alerted by the passage of the acolyte and his flower-collecting, paused in their play to come running up the hillock. They slowed as they reached the top and crouched behind a stone overgrown with grass, giggling and nudging each other as they pointed out the fine lady's jewels and the men's various accoutrements and qualities. They were particularly impressed by Balarama, with his massive bulk and muscular physique; the golden plough he carried was of particular fascination.

Rukmini could hear almost every word they said, for it was a quiet evening and they were gossiping upwind of the temple. She heard them sneer in disbelief at the golden sheen of the plough, insisting that it could not possibly be what it appeared to be. 'Dyed,' concluded one of the older boys, scratching at the side of his nose vigorously. 'That's what I hear city folk do with their clothes. The plough must be dyed that colour.'

Rukmini couldn't help but smile. She covered it with her hand but Krishna noticed and also saw the direction she was glancing towards. He looked back at

the children and heard their conversation and smiled at them warmly. This made them crouch down and chatter excitedly.

'I think they're afraid that Balarama-bhaiya might attack them with his gold-dyed plough,' she said, stifling her own urge to giggle.

Krishna raised his eyebrows, waggling them at his brother who frowned back. 'He might. He has been known to take a swing or two at errant children, right, Bhaiya?'

Balarama stared at him with a deadpan expression and added, 'Errant brothers too.'

Rukmini burst out laughing. The pundit, engrossed in stringing the fresh flowers into garlands, raised his head, startled. He looked at Rukmini who turned away, hunched over with laughter, then at Krishna and Balarama, both of whom stared back impassively. He lowered his head again, resuming his stitching. A moment later, he held up the garlands. 'It is time,' he said.

The ceremony was not quite as simple as she had expected. She had thought it would be an exchange of garlands like any village boy and girl might undergo. But the pundit conducted a thorough ritual, starting with the chanting of propitious shlokas from the sacred Vedas. He then proceeded to sprinkle fresh water, anoint them with milk, rice, tambul and fruits, then knotted the ends of both their garments and made them take seven circles around the sacred fire, and ended with the exchange of garlands. Finally the couple had to pay guru-dakshina to the priest and his acolyte and give gifts to the witnesses. In this case, the children counted as witnesses since they sat and watched the entire ceremony with varying degrees of interest, showing more interest in Balarama's plough than the wedding itself.

When the time came to hand out the guru-dakshina, Krishna whispered into Balarama's ear. The elder brother nodded and lifted his plough off his shoulder, at which the watching children jumped up from their hiding place and prepared to flee. Balarama took hold of the tip of the plough and grasped it tightly, then broke it off with a resounding metallic crack as if snapping a dry twig. He handed the broken tip to the Brahmin pundit who took it with an air of bemusement and then staggered beneath its weight, almost dropping it to the stone floor.

The children exclaimed and chattered amongst themselves. The acolyte came forward and took hold of the piece of gold plough, helping his master carry it, and set it down on the stone floor. It made a heavy clinking sound and both of

them stared at it, round-eyed. Even in the dim gloomy light of evening, inside the little stone temple in the shade of the banyan tree, it gleamed and caught the light with tantalizing refractions. Even the zigzag edge where Balarama had snapped it off shone golden. There was no doubt that it was anything but gold.

'It must weigh a kilo at least,' Rukmini said to Krishna as she looked back at the pundit and acolyte, sitting on the temple floor, staring at the chunk of gold.

Krishna smiled at her. 'Almost two score kilos,' he said.

Forty kilos! She raised a hand to her mouth, agape. She glanced at Balarama striding beside them, hefting the plough with its broken tip as if it were but a wood axe. If a tiny piece weighed that much, what about the whole plough?

'Over a ton,' Krishna said casually. He glanced back at the watching children, fidgeting as if uncertain whether to run or stay. 'Balarama, you forgot to feed the witnesses to the ceremony. Do your dharma, Bhai.'

Balarama glared at him. 'You're a fine one to talk about dharma, Mr Dharmanator.' But he walked over to the grassy rock where the children stood about. So quickly did he approach, and so distracted were they by the gleaming of the golden chunk in the temple that they looked up only when he was almost upon them. They began to scream then, but Balarama shushed the children with an upraised finger and stern eyes and then held out his hands, offering them something.

Rukmini saw the children come forward with reluctance, yet overcome by curiosity. At a word from him, they held out their open palms, hesitantly but still too curious to refuse outright. Balarama opened his hands and dropped something in each of their little palms. She saw it glitter and gleam even at the distance she was at, catching the slanting evening sunshine.

Balarama strode back to where she and Krishna waited. 'What did you give them as "food"?' she asked.

'A few crumbs of gold,' Balarama said.

'Each several tolas,' Krishna added for her information, using the traditional measurement for gold, a tola being roughly equivalent to ten grams.

For each of those crumbs to be several tolas would mean that each of the children had several hundred grams of gold clutched in their grubby little fists as they ran down the hillock back to their parents, screaming and calling out excitedly. She saw the villagers come running out of their houses, alerted by the shouts of their children, before Krishna and Balarama and she passed over the rise and went towards the overhang where they had left the Pushpaka. Moments

later, as they were airborne and rising above the hillock and the village, she saw a great commotion down below. The whole village was aflutter with excitement as news of the rich guru-dakshina and 'food' for the witnesses of the visitors' wedding spread. The pundit and his acolyte were still sitting in the temple, staring at the golden chunk, as villagers crowded around, gaping in amazement.

That much gold would be enough to enrich the entire community and sustain them for quite a while. She guessed that the tiny hamlet would not forget the visitors who had stopped by their little temple for an impromptu wedding very soon.

'What did you say was the name of the village?' she asked Krishna, as the Pushpaka turned and shot out to sea, taking her breath away as she finished speaking.

'Madhavpur Ghed,' came the reply.

It struck her then with the force of the wind – evidenced only by the blurring at the edge of vision as the wind collided with the extremities of the vahan – buffeting the sides of the flying chariot: she was married now. To her beloved.

And free at last of the yoke of her father and brother's tyranny. Free to live a life of joyful married bliss with her Krishna. Her eternal paramour, reunited with her at last.

And they were going home to their island-paradise where they would be safe from the world and its villains.

Safe and free and married.

What more could she possibly ask for?

She sighed and pressed herself against Krishna's chest, snuggling into the crook of his shoulder, pressing her nose against his bicep.

He put his arm around her protectively.

She was content. Her life was complete. Nothing could trouble her now. Nothing and no one.

She closed her eyes and dreamed of vaikuntha and a moment later, Krishna whispered softly in her ear that they were home at last.



Kaand I

Dwarka had never looked so beautiful.

Krishna and Rukmini stood on the roof of the palace, looking out at the island fortress. The city had come out as one to celebrate the triumphant return of their saviour and protector after a successful campaign against the Vidarbhanas. The news that he had brought home a bride was unexpectedly joyous. Life was good for the denizens of Dwarka. Nobody wanted for anything, no chores were too urgent, no work left undone would result in empty bellies at night. The only break from the unending monotony of leisurely existence was a celebration. And what celebration could be more exalted than the wedding of their most beloved son!

Balarama had gone to make the arrangements for the festivities, leaving the newly-weds together. 'Now at last your arms are free to hold your beloved Lakshmi Incarnate.' With this, he had arched one eyebrow then the other in succession. Krishna had responded with both eyebrows raised. Balarama had left, chortling.

The city was lit with a million oil lamps and lanterns. Gaily coloured lines of cloth, favoured by the gopis and gopas of Vraj, were strung across the streets from house to house, criss-crossing in waves of primary colours. Krita-dhvajas fluttered from the roofs of each mansion, marking the various tribes, houses and clans. The sound of drums underscored the laughter of children.

Young Yadavas flirted and cavorted on the streets, clad in their finest garb – which usually meant the most colourful! Women, young and old, preened in their choicest jewellery, necks awash with gold, ears encrusted with twinkling gems, fingers adorned, wrists and even arms and anklets heavy with bracelets, hair arranged in elaborate styles, oiled and perfumed with sandalwood smoke, eyes lined with kohl, faces patted and complexions smoothed with powders and unguents, lips reddened with vermillion, foreheads dotted, the parting of their hair anointed with sindhoor.

Women sang in groups, men joining in lustily, singing bhajans dedicated to Balarama and Krishna as well as their liege, Ugrasena and his wife Padmavati. In the somaghars, the bards sang inventive, ribald limericks about the erstwhile demon-king Kamsa and his hair-raising exploits, turning painful history into fodder for humour. Fishermen hauled in their nets on the banks of the Yamuna which, through some miracle unfathomable to anyone, Krishna had engineered to flow through a section of the city, appearing from a well-spring in the ground and disappearing again a few miles further into another hole in the ground. How a river situated hundreds of yojanas inland could possibly flow, even for a few miles, upon an island in the middle of the ocean was a mystery, but it was no more a mystery than any of several other miraculous things in Dwarka.

'It is a magical city,' said the new bride, her opalescent eyes shining like the upala gems of her motherland. 'I have never seen anything like it before.' She glanced up shyly at her husband. 'Please show me around, Krishna.' She blushed instantly, embarrassed at having used his first name in direct conversation. It contravened all the etiquette of her culture. But from the smile that lit her face when she blushed, it was evident that doing so pleased her too. After all, she had eloped from her father's home, her family, her clan and her nation; addressing her new husband by his first name counted as a very small transgression in the larger scheme of things.

Krishna smiled. 'Of course, my love. Let me summon the Pushpaka.' He gestured and the celestial vehicle descended from some unknown height. Krishna was surprised to see Daruka aboard the sky chariot. The charioteer greeted his master and mistress with folded hands and a warm smile as he welcomed them aboard. He too was clad in festive clothing.

Krishna smiled briefly at him as he ushered Rukmini onto the golden vehicle. 'Where were you just now, Daruka?' he asked in a pleasant but curious tone.

Daruka's eyes lowered in deference to his master. 'Lord Balarama asked me to be on the lookout and inform him in the event of anyone approaching the city.'

Krishna nodded at that and climbed aboard with Rukmini. She gasped as the vahan rose again with unexpected ease and swiftness. 'A chariot drawn by a thousand horses could not move this swiftly. Is it not so, sarathi?' she asked Daruka.

'Nay, my lady,' he replied. 'Nor could a chariot and horses move in this manner.' To demonstrate, he moved the sky chariot upwards a half-mile, then sideways to the left, then suddenly banked to the right, then dropped a half-mile

again, then turned them upside down and hung the chariot there, motionless. A herd of geese squawked indignantly and wheeled away from the offensive flying object that dared to defy the rules of nature so rudely. Rukmini looked up at the ground several hundred yards above her head – or was it below her head? – and laughed.

‘Oh, if only I had a chariot like this when I was a girl. What fun my playmates and I would have had!’

Daruka righted the chariot and flew in a full circle around the perimeter of the island, and she was excited by the sight of the ocean waves crashing against the rocky abutments that skirted the fortress walls. She had never actually seen the ocean this closely before in her life.

She told Krishna about her childhood friends with whom she had grown up and many of whom were still in Kundina. She was the first of the group to marry as all the others were a year or two younger, and because she was older than all as well as the daughter of the king of the land, she had been the terror of the lot. As she spoke, Krishna saw the joy in her face, eyes and gestures and could not help but feel a little sad that she had had to leave those beloved friends behind.

Had he wished, he could have them transported here in the blink of an eye and he could well imagine the joy she would feel on seeing them again. However beautiful Dwarka looked today, however happy she was at being by his side, she was a bride at her own wedding with not a single familiar face in sight. What was a wedding, or any celebration, without one’s closest friends and loved ones present to share your pleasure?

Yet these were the very things he could not give her. He had the power to grant her any wish, any boon, any object of desire. But her break from her past had to be clean and complete. No trace of Vidarbha or her family and clan could abide. For to bring even a single Vidarbhan here would mean risking the disclosure of Dwarka’s location and permitting an outsider into the Yadava stronghold. Their enemies were too many, the threat too great and the decision was not his to make. If he could bring his wife’s people here, a thousand other Yadavas could request the right to summon friends, associates, distant relatives from other nations, or simply demand the right to travel to and fro, trade with, or otherwise have concourse with people in other lands. And he could not allow that. Not while Jarasandha and his campaign remained a threat. Especially not with the new threat looming on the horizon.

Rukmini prattled on happily yet nervously, venting her anxieties and guilt over her elopement through idle chatter. At some point, she noticed Krishna's self-absorption and the way he acknowledged her every query or comment with a smile or a tilt of his handsome head without actually participating in the conversation. She quietened down at last, and he remained quiet as well. She read the distraction in his eyes, and even though she was still unfamiliar with him and his ways, she understood that he was feeling sad that he had taken her away from the things she had loved so much, the things that she had been prattling on all this while.

Foolish woman, she berated herself. Here you are, with the man any woman would dream of possessing. Dwarkadhbish himself! And you're chattering like a hungry sparrow about all the people and things you miss back in Kundina? Rukmini, return to prithvi, please!

'Tell me,' she said to him, moving closer until she was snuggled against his side.

He looked down, surprised. 'Tell you?' he asked.

'About Dwarka. About your people.' She gestured at the battlements below, towering stone walls and towers manned by armed sentries at every vantage point. 'How was this great city built in the middle of the ocean? How did you manage to bring the whole Yadava nation here? Is it true what they say about you killing your own uncle? Kamsa? I know so little about you except the legends and tales I heard from visiting kusalavya bards, I am eager to know more. Tell me everything!'

Krishna glanced down at Rukmini sharply. ‘Are you jesting with me, Sri?’ She frowned, tilting her head to look at him. ‘Why would I jest about such things?’

He stared at her intently until she grew uncomfortable and pulled away.

‘I am sorry if I offended you, my lord,’ she said, lowering her gaze and pulling the end of her garment over her face like a veil, in the Vidarbha manner.

‘Krishna,’ he said. ‘I said you could call me Krishna. Why are you speaking and behaving thus, Lakshmi? You speak as if you have forgotten everything about me, including who I am.’ He paused. ‘And who *you* are.’

She glanced up at him with a disconcerted expression. ‘I am flattered that you call me your Lakshmi, my lord. May my entrance into your life bring you all the prosperity and bounty of the universe. But my mind is not quick enough or my knowledge sufficient to comprehend your meaning. How could I forget you? You are Lord Krishna Vasudeva, Dwarkadhish, Lord of Mathura, Slayer of Kamsa, Flute of Vrindavan, Govinda of Vraj, Opposer of Jarasandha, Creator of the Fortress of Dwarka, Saviour of the Yadava nation. Some say you are no less than Vishnu Incarnate, descended upon earth in mortal form to protect prithvi once again from the incarnations of evil asuras. But to me, you are my lord and my beloved. My rescuer who salvaged my life and happiness by snatching me from the arms of certain misery with that scoundrel—’

He cut her off, frowning. ‘Did you say “descended upon earth in *mortal form*”? ’

She paused, flummoxed. ‘Did I offend you in some manner, lord? I sought only to praise.’

He waved her apology away. ‘Don’t be obsequious, my goddess. False humility does not become you. Unless,’ he paused now, considering, ‘unless you are attempting to be coy?’

‘Coy?’ She shook her head, trying to make sense of the conversation. ‘Do you wish me to allure you, lord? Surely that would be better left to the private chambers afterwards?’ She glanced at Daruka, standing only a few yards away,

intent on maintaining his flight path immaculately, unaware of what his passengers said or did. ‘You may trust your sarathi completely, but I am a bashful new bride yet. Grant me my modesty.’

‘Stop this,’ Krishna said sharply, his forehead creasing in two vertical lines. ‘Stop this play-acting at once. It is not becoming of you, devi. You are the queen of universes, creator of worlds, preserver of infinite galaxies. The stars are your jewellery, the sun and moon your ornaments, the planets your stepping stones. Speak as yourself. As one who embodies power in its ultimate form. The incarnation of feminine strength exalted to the highest power. Not as some coy bashful new *mortal* bride!’

Rukmini stared up at him with an expression of pure, blanched horror. Without another word, she threw herself at his feet, grasping his legs tightly, and began sobbing.

Krishna stared at her uncomprehendingly. What had just happened? It made no sense at all. This could not possibly be Sri Incarnate, his eternal paramour! The goddess who embodied the essence of feminine strength throughout the ages would not clutch his feet and debase herself thus. At the most, she would defer or gently agree to disagree, or even apologize if in error – although, to be fair, she had never been in error yet. She was a being more powerful than himself, after all, all-knowing, all-seeing, omnipotent and omnipresent. She would not grovel and plead!

A juddering rippled through the air, as if the Pushpaka had struck a bump in the air.

Krishna’s eyes narrowed and he lowered his head in anticipation.

There was no bump, of course.

He knew that feeling well. It was a freeze. A stilling of the universe, like a great wheel brought to a jarring halt by a greater boulder, except that the wheel and boulder would produce a series of causal reactions while this stilling was complete, perfect, absolute. The very air froze, deathly still.

The sky chariot stood suspended mid-air, hundreds of yards above Dwarka. It might as well have been there forever, unmoving and immovable.

Upon a rampart wall below, Yadava sentries stopped still in mid-walk, mid-stride, and remained as they were, impromptu statues. Across the city, people, animals, wind, sound, objects, even particles of dust and pollen, all froze where they were. Even outside the city, the ocean waves froze in mid-splatter, seagulls remained bent-winged in mid air, clouds high above stood still. The sun, the sky,

the air, the water, and thought and sense themselves no longer moved anywhere on the mortal plane.

Only Krishna moved and was capable of movement and free thought. He stepped back, away from the clutching hands of the woman he had thought to be his Lakshmi.

Not thought, she is Lakshmi, my eternal beloved. But something happened to change her mortal form, to alter her memory and perception so that she no longer remains aware of her true nature and self.

And he knew that the same power that had caused this freeze was responsible for altering Rukmini's perception and displacing her memories.

The power that now beckoned to him.

With a deep soughing, like wind forced through a funnel of some strange fabric, a passageway opened up in front of the suspended Pushpaka, its mouth only a yard from the railing of the golden sky chariot, its sinuous length curving away all the way to the place where ocean and sky met – not the horizon, for the horizon is merely an illusion of their union – but the *event horizon*, the place where time and space intersected, and dimensions became accessible briefly.

The vortal pulsed with a deep black light which he knew was not light at all, but the echoes of light that had been swallowed and trapped within the maw of the bottomless black hole that powered the passageway between worlds. That black light was not visible to mortal eyes and even he could only glimpse it faintly as a throbbing pulsation, not a beam or flicker in the usual sense. Yet, its pulsing indicated the power being consumed by this particular vortal. And that in turn gave him an indication of how devious a passageway this particular tunnel provided. The greater the leap between worlds, dimension, time and space or planes of existence, the deeper the black light pulsed.

This black light pulsed hard and strong, like something alive. Like the heart of Infinity itself.

It told him that this vortal was an unusually powerful one. And that his leap would be very great, the risk involved very great as well.

Even Balarama, down in the heart of the city, caught in the act of speaking to their father Vasudeva as they both oversaw the raising of a great coloured banner with Rukmini's name embroidered upon it with marvellous skill, was frozen.

That was another indication of its power. If even Balarama was frozen, this was no mere portal conjured up by the likes of Jarasandha or a similar demi-god or asura. Even though they laid claim to the name, those were mere imitations of

vortals; mirrors that fed on the faint trace energy left behind by actual vortals like this one to achieve their transportation.

This, however, was the real thing. An actual vortal.

And only a great deva could summon one this powerful.

He hesitated. Not because he feared for himself. But because he knew this meant that a misstep could plunge him into an incorrect destination, the wrong place and time and world. Or all of the above. And once that happened, he had virtually no chance of returning to precisely this place and time and world. He might search for millennia – and he might have all the time in Creation to search – but finding it was a matter of chance, not effort or skill. The vortal could not simply be summoned to take you through the same passageway twice with perfect reliability. For each time you went through, the very act changed you, so that you were no longer the same you, and the world no longer exactly the same world, the time the exact same time, and so on.

If he misstepped, this life on the mortal plane, with all that he had accomplished thus far, would be lost forever in the mists of the multiverse.

He took a moment to reflect on what he had accomplished, just in case that happened. Rukmini, even in her forgetful, flawed, mortal state, had summed it up quite succinctly. The words echoed in his ears – strong, powerful, passionate, spoken in the tones of his true beloved, the eternal and immortal and all-powerful Sri Lakshmi herself: ‘You are Lord Krishna Vasudeva, Dwarkadhish, Lord of Mathura, Slayer of Kamsa, Flute of Vrindavan, Govinda of Vraj, Opposer of Jarasandha, Creator of the Fortress of Dwarka, Saviour of the Yadava nation.’

He leaped off the edge of the Pushpaka and dived into the mouth of the vortal.

three

He fell up instead of down. It felt so natural that it took him a moment to realize what was happening. His senses rebelled and his instincts told him that something was wrong, this should not be happening. Inside the vortal, there was no up or down, merely through. Yet, here he was, falling upwards, as if he had flung himself off the side of Pushpaka and was being tugged down by the iron embrace of Mother Earth – but Mother Earth herself was inverted and occupied the sky above! He knew this was impossible. There was no Mother Earth within the vortal. No gravitational pull. No normal physical laws applied. Yet here he was, spiralling upwards, impossible though it was. He tried to change direction but it was of no avail. The vortal was a passageway between worlds, between dimensions, and once within its hold, even He with his infinite power, was no better than a mote of dust caught in a whirlwind. If the vortal chose to take him upwards instead of downwards, he had no choice but to go with the flow.

I apologize for diverting you from your intended purpose, Haridev, but there is something you need to see. I would not compel you thus if it were not critically essential.

The voice was as familiar as his mother's, yet different. Liquid syllables that emitted a glaucous aura in his mind, the mind of Vishnu Infinite where the plane of physical existence was a miasma of stimuli, where sounds were visible, light audible, and emotions like the blood flowing through one's veins.

He turned and saw the familiar glacial beauty of Ganga, the mother of all rivers. She appeared to him as a woman formed out of watery molecules, except that the molecules were the black viscous material of the vortal itself, and so, rather than her usual bluish-white watery form, she was like the bust of a mortal woman formed out of black oil. Her features and anatomy rippled and seeped as the fabric of the vortal altered and swept past. Like an ebony statue, she rose beside him and turned her featureless face towards him, the seeping oily material of the vortal hardening to eye-like apertures momentarily before dissolving and

melting again. In that instant, he glimpsed the pristine white glacial form of Ganga as he knew her in her eternal form as a goddess. Then the vortal's power subsumed that brief glimpse and she was the dark rippling approximation of herself again.

Ganga-devi, but of course it would be you. After all, you are the vortal in essence. You are the channel that flows through all worlds, connecting them. You were created thus in order to enable us immortals to pass from one world to another when required. Your power is supreme within the vortal.

She bowed her head in acknowledgement.

You honour me, Haridev. I merely serve the forces of nature. Whether vortal or sky-Ganga or patal-Ganga or just plain Ganga, I am merely a passageway, a thoroughfare for the rushing energies of creation to pass from one dimension to another, one nation to the next, one world to other worlds. I merely perform my dharma. Do not judge me too harshly for forcibly diverting you from your purpose.

I do not judge you at all, Ganga-devi. You are beyond reproach. If you have taken hold of me, it must surely serve some critical purpose. Pray tell, what is it you desire to show me? Can it not wait? My business is urgent and much is at stake back on prithviloka.

Her form rippled and flowed with ebony fluidity as she responded.

I know this, Lord Vishnu. It is in fact a matter related to your own business. What I am about to show you now may aid you in the great battle to come. I have only your best interests at heart. After all, we have known each other since almost the beginning of time, have we not?

That we have, he acknowledged. Very well, great one, by all means, show me what you wish. I desire to finish this detour and return to my bride. It is a long time since I have been reunited with my Lakshmi-devi again, and every instant spent away from her presence is agony to me.

At the mention of Rukmini, Ganga's dark features solidified briefly into a visage of such terrible sadness that a death mask of a person who had died in terrible suffering could not match it. Then, almost as quickly as it had formed, the visage melted away, and the rippling stream flowed on, barely recognizable as a woman's upper body and head.

What I have to show you concerns your eternal consort as well. Indeed, it is Sri herself who asked me to show you this glimpse.

He frowned.

That makes no sense. I have finally met Sri in mortal form as Rukmini. It was she who informed me of her presence here on the mortal plane in this age and summoned me to rescue her from the clutches of our enemies. I have left her in the Pushpaka, returning home to Dwarka, the mortal equivalent of our own vaikunthaloka. How or why would she contact you, Ganga-devi, and ask you to contact me in turn when she was right beside me only a moment ago? I fail to follow your meaning.

Ganga dipped her flowing head again and the dark fluids raced thickly downwards, like a cascade of oil over a sculpted marble bust, briefly revealing glimpses of her emotional state.

All shall be made clear very shortly, great one. Please forgive me for being the one to bring you to the realization you are about to experience. I am only a servant of dharma.

As am I, he said. Now tarry no more. Show me your revelation and let what will be, be.

She bowed her head, melded into the flowing viscous course and was subsumed.

A rumbling pervaded his perception. As if all creation shook and trembled with an impending apocalypse.

Then, with a roar of fury, the world exploded into smithereens, leaving him in a plane of ...

Whiteness

total

and

absolute

Whiteness

followed by a roaring whirlwind of colour, sound and energy that stripped away all sensory awareness. It blasted his mortal form, turning all experiential perception into a numbing fog.

It was like being in a sandstorm blasted by infinitesimal particles of Brahman shakti. The bombardment was relentless and intense, strong enough to make all thought or emotion irrelevant. It reduced him to the simple act of existence, stripping away even that most basic core of self-awareness that governed survival. He knew that he existed, but that was all.

It was the most intense swirling of the force of creation he had experienced since ... since the churning of the ocean of milk, the great amrit manthan at the beginning of ages, back when the war between devas and asuras was still relatively young and the conflict most bitter.

He felt shifting ground underfoot, a texture neither wholly solid nor liquid. His feet sank into the material, yet did not descend entirely. This too put him in mind of the manthan, the way the volcanic mud, soaked in the wash of the milk sea, had churned and clung in sticky clumps to his feet as he held the yojanas-long serpent – the great Vasuki – and hauled it with the aid of his deva brothers and sisters.

Creation was still in its infancy then, time itself newly born, the very universe barely out of the nursery of primordial shaping. The howling of the gaseous winds, toxic in the extreme; the primitive creatures creeping and crawling in that primeval ooze; the blasting of the whirlwind of energy that was the engine of creation, still in violent spate; the infinite energy unleashed by the exploding of the great egg of Brahman still raging wildly.

It even smelled the same in this nameless place.

Where was he?

The whirlwind raged on, numbing him to the point that he no longer knew if he existed any more.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it ended.

And he found himself in a place he had been before, a grove he had stood in during an earlier age, looking down at a person he knew full well, for it was he himself as he had been in an earlier avatar on the mortal plane, standing alongside his eternal consort, his beloved Sri, in her avatar in that previous lifetime.

Rama and Sita, as they had been known then. King and queen of Ayodhya, during that brief happy respite after the war of Lanka had ended and before the

new turmoil began. Before he exiled her to the forest, banishing her ostensibly on the accusation of a washerman, justifying his decision by quoting dharma. Before he began what would turn out to be the worst years of his existence, as Rama or in any other lifetime. Because he had lived those years without Sita, with the full knowledge of the terrible thing he had done to her, the base choice he had made, betraying her love, her trust, his own honour and their marriage vows. Only because a dhobi had questioned her purity? Because it was his dharma? These were not the real reasons, of course. But at that time, reasons and logic were irrelevant. That was another story for another age. All that mattered was that this moment here, when they had stood in this grove, hands intertwined like vines, had been his last happy moment of that lifetime. So it stood as an icon of nostalgia for him. An image that infused him with great and powerful emotions.

'Narayana,' said a voice beside him. 'Pardon me for intruding upon your thoughts. But you were brought here for a reason and my time here is short. Pray, permit me to complete my task so you may resume your life as Krishna.'

Krishna frowned and turned.

He was no rakshasa or asura, but a man who appeared normal and mortal in every way. He was well-built in a way that clearly indicated he was a Kshatriya by profession, with well-developed musculature and sharply indented angles that suggested an active and vigorous lifestyle. His bristling, oiled moustache was matched by unruly, long hair, tamed by a wooden clasp behind his head. He was clad in a simple yet well-woven dhoti and anga-vastra. Even at first glance, there was something about him that instantly caused Krishna to associate him with the specific sub-varna of Kshatriyas whose members called themselves rakshasas in an earlier age. Protectors. Guardians of the warrior race, sentries of the perimeters and borders and thresholds, bodyguards to their brother-warriors. Warriors in reserve who took up arms and joined battle when required.

A sense of coiled power in those heavily muscled limbs and torso, coupled with a relatively less developed lower body suggested that he was more suited to house guarding and site protection than the leaner, wirier physique suited to the rigours of long travel required of a serving soldier. At best, he could be a mace-wielder, but he lacked the exaggerated shoulders and back muscles that macers were known for. There was something not unpleasant about his features, something vaguely familiar, like a family resemblance. In fact, the entire scenario

seemed to have happened before. As if he, Krishna, had done this before, been here before, with this very same man.

'Who are you?' he asked, not afraid, merely curious. The forces that had summoned him through the vortal were benign ones, intending to serve him in some way. This man posed no threat to him personally, yet it was odd that he was here at all. It was dangerous for a mortal and deva to coexist upon these multi-dimensional planes together. Dangerous for the mortal, that is.

The man smiled. He arched his thick eyebrows, his broad, high forehead creasing with a trio of horizontal lines. 'After all we have been through together, do you still not know me?'

Krishna frowned.

Then, with a flash of insight, he remembered. A voice in a dream as he lay asleep at night on satin sheets. Startling awake. The voice summoning him to the veranda of his palace apartment, urging him to jump off the ledge. Compliance. Falling upwards instead of downwards. Landing (rising?) upon a cloudy plateau high above the world. Above a re-enactment of the battle of Lanka waging in all its brutal bloody glory, like some mad god's childplay. The battle repeated over and over again with infinite variations, alterations in some key events. Then this same man, speaking beside him, urging him to follow him up a mountain clothed in fog. A long upward trek ... and then? He could not remember what followed. But that was impossible. He was Krishna. Vishnu Incarnate. All things that had occurred and were yet to occur were known to him in intimate detail. No knowledge was beyond his reach. And yet, try as he may, he could not recall what had occurred after this man had led him, in his Rama-avatar, up that fog-clad mountain.

He looked at the man. 'I don't remember. How is that possible? I remember you, I remember being Rama, I remember following you up the mountain, but nothing after that. That cannot be. I cannot forget.'

The man smiled again, the smile tinged with sadness at the corners of his drooping eyes. 'You have not forgotten, my lord. You *cannot* forget. Your allies and you agreed that so long as you retained even a trace memory of what transpired after you accompanied me up Mount Meru, your loved ones would be in threat. For what exists in memory – even future memory, since devas can know that which is yet to occur – can be stolen through asura maya and made known to your enemies. Therefore, your allies and you determined that you would place those occurrences in a place and time beyond all known space and

time. In a dimension that may or may not exist. The nameless place called lokaloka, or “place that is not a place”.

‘Limbo,’ said Krishna slowly. ‘Yes, that makes sense. By placing it in lokaloka, ‘the unknown place’, no being from any of the known places – prithviloka, narakaloka, swargaloka, and so on – could ever be certain of finding it. For lokaloka is infinitely vast; and even if one knows where to seek out something left there, it could take aeons to find it. Most would not have the resources to embark on such a quest.’ He nodded, admiringly. ‘It is a brilliant plan. To have a secret meeting – for that is what I presume we had, my allies and myself – and to hold it in lokaloka, the limbo lands where even *we* would retain no memory of it.’

The man mirrored his smile, then tilted his head as Krishna stopped smiling and followed his own thought through to its logical conclusion.

‘But if even *we* do not recall what we spoke of then, how would it avail us?’ Krishna asked, slowly. ‘After we left the nameless realm and returned to our given tasks, how would we know what we had discussed and decided? How could we act upon it?’

The man smiled. ‘Cause and effect, lord. Once an arrow is loosed, it does not need to know or remember or be aware of what caused it to be loosed, or when or why, merely to race to its destination and fulfil its dharma.’

Krishna nodded slowly. ‘The dharma of the arrow. Just as an arrow does not need to ask why or wherefore, merely to strike its target, so also the universe relies on causality to move forward through the dimension of time. Of course. Once we had held our secret war council and determined certain things, we were then set on certain courses of action. It would not matter when or where we made those decisions. Most mortals make such life-changing decisions without being fully aware of the moment when they arrive at those decisions. It is only later, looking back in retrospect, that they point to that conversation, that event, that incident, that accident, and say, “That is the day my life changed.” In our case, we are given full awareness of the future consequences of all our actions – all possible consequences. So we went to the ‘nameless realm’, held our secret council and arrived at a decision. What was it? And why have my allies now felt the need to summon each other again?’

The man looked abruptly grim. ‘Because a situation has arisen that warrants it, my lord.’

Krishna looked at him. ‘I see. It must be a grave crisis indeed for you in order to be compelled to pull me out of mortal existence without warning. And where

do you fit into this, good man? I know that *I* did not engage your services for this task. Therefore, it must have been one of my ally devas. Why do they entrust *you* with this duty? Who are you in truth? What purpose do you serve in this whole scheme of subterfuge and secret meetings?' Krishna cocked his head, smiling without humour. 'Why is a mortal privy to such knowledge?'

The man joined his palms and bowed his head respectfully. 'I am merely a servant. I was chosen for my loyalty and steadfastness, and was given just enough knowledge of the situation to enable me to guide you during these disorienting moments between your arrival here and the start of each secret meeting. I know nothing of what actually transpires during the meetings, nor am I permitted to cross over into lokaloka. I merely act as a—'

'Guide,' Krishna finished. He was silent for a moment. 'Yes, of course. For even the wisest man needs a guide on arrival, to smoothen the transition. Very well, good man, as you rightly said earlier, this is not a social visit but a crisis. Let us not waste any more time in idle talk. Pray, lead the way.'

The man joined his hands and bowed his head again. 'By your lord's grace, kindly follow me this way.'

four

Balarama was searching for Krishna, but could not find him anywhere. He was starting to wonder if his brother was playing one of his pranks on him. But then he thought to himself: *No, it has been too long since I saw that playful side of Krishna. In a way, when we left Vrindavan, we left behind that youthful flute-playing gopi-teasing boy as well. The subsequent months and then years battling our enemies, defending Mathura, then the Yadava nation, migrating to Dwarka and dealing with the many crises that followed have taken their toll on Krishna's youthful exuberance.*

Gone was the flute – Balarama could not recall when he had last heard Krishna play it; he missed that rapturous song. Gone was that mischievous brother who had teased and flirted with a thousand gopis in a single afternoon, excited a thousand hearts during the ras-lila celebrations, and left all thousand of them sweetly nostalgic even after they failed to snag the handsome son of Yashoda.

Of late, those two vertical lines on Krishna's handsome forehead had deepened to become a permanent mark. Since his marriage to Rukmini, he had been caught up in a morass of political issues that seemed to only increase in intensity and complication.

The main issue revolved around the Kurus of Hastinapura, beginning with Krishna's father Vasudeva's sister Pritha – better known as Kunti to her in-laws – and her family's epic dispute. There were periods when Krishna seemed to spend more time in Hastinapura or the new capital Indraprastha than in Dwarka. The Pandavas, as the five sons of Krishna's late brother-in-law Pandu were affectionately referred to, were waging a veritable war. Not an all-out pitched battle, but a series of increasingly bitter conflicts waged in the sabha hall, courtyards, communal meetings, family occasions, and even the gambling parlour and dining hall. The issues at stake were property disputes, but the larger causes were historical and the resentments ran deep. Krishna felt the need to act as a mediator and arbiter, seeking to find peaceful resolutions, but from all that

Balarama himself had seen on their visits to Hastinapura and Indraprastha, the mess would only be resolved with a knock-down, all-out, full-blown war between the Pandavas and their hundred and one cousins, the Kauravas.

The thought of such a war gave even Balarama pause. He loved the thrill of battle, the rush that came with risking everything for the just cause, the good fight, the righteous goal. But a war among the Kurus was something too terrible to contemplate. The powers involved, the military might, the sheer numbers of kings, allies, political alliances, armies, military campaigns and machinations, were on an epic scale undreamed of in the annals of history. It would be the mother of all wars. A conflict so gruesome, it could end only in total annihilation of at least one entire race. All war was genocide. Self-genocide. For like Krishna, Balarama knew that the race of men was only one. Indeed, all living creatures in existence were in a sense a single great race. Any massed conflict affected all beings on earth. A war among the Kuru nations would be a war of all the living. It could lead only to one result: the end of humanity as it existed now.

What purpose could such a conflict serve?

The fiercest warriors pray the loudest for peace, for they know the terrible truth: in war, there are no victors, only losers. And so it was that Balarama prayed that such a war would never come to pass. He had had his fill of fighting and killing. While he was always ready, willing and able to take on any enemy that threatened his loved ones or his people, he would much rather settle down to a life of peace and contemplation. The last thing he desired was to go to war with his own relatives, however distantly related they might be to him. That was what would happen if the Kurus went to war. It would be a battle of brother versus brother. Bad as war itself was, that would be the greatest tragedy of all.

He sighed and passed a rough hand across his face, dispensing with such thoughts and pausing to take stock of where he was and where else he might search for Krishna.

He was in the great communal garden of Dwarka, beneath the eternal tree. The great gardens of Dwarka were a city unto themselves. Citizens from all walks of life moved around the garden's many levels – strolling hand in hand past dancing fountains of water; sitting by lotus ponds in which ducklings swam quacking after their mothers; lying on grassy knolls; pointing out cloud animals; sitting perched on the high ramparts overlooking the ocean. Children loved to sit there and spy the longsnouts leaping and the greybacks exuding high white spouts of watery spumes; playing in one of several hundred gardens, hedge

mazes and habitats where animals and birds and even water denizens unique to Vraj and the Mathura region lived in harmony, thriving even more than they had in their natural environment. Sky chariots flew overhead, descended and rose, bringing or taking away people all the time.

With no compulsion to work for a living, the Yadava people devoted a commendable amount of time to the pursuit of art, music, dance, theatrical performance, literature, and other social activities, as well as sports and various entertainments. This was the true capital of the nation now, a place where Yadavas of all ages, all backgrounds, shared their talents and energy in the pursuit of entertainment and culture. Beneath the shade of the vast sprawling parijata tree, itself the size of a township, all natural laws were suspended. People could actually float or fly, hover in mid-air, play sporting games or dance together. He had passed hours just watching the sports of children and elders as they enjoyed being free of the constraints of gravity and played or danced. A group of young children darted away from an elderly white-tressed matriarch as she rolled and spun in the air, tagging them in turn. The tagged ones reluctantly floated up to sit on a branch, cheering their siblings and friends on. It warmed Balarama's heart to watch them. The matriarch had been deprived of the use of all four limbs in a tragic accident with a horse team and chariot years ago: here in Dwarka, thanks to the magic of the parijata tree, she was no less dextrous than any of the young rascals she was tagging. As she tapped the last little tyke on his ankle, making him squeal with disappointment and delight, she cried out 'Jai Shri Krishna!' triumphantly.

It was the salutary cry of most Dwarkaites now. Many even used it in place of the customary 'namaste' when greeting each other or parting from one another. Cries of 'Jai Shri Krishna' were customary in all situations.

Jai Shri Krishna, Balarama echoed silently now with a smile as the matriarch floated slowly down to the grass beneath the magical tree.

Balarama was about to summon his Pushpaka and fly back to his palace when a familiar voice spoke.

'Looking for me, Bhaiya?'

Balarama looked up to see Krishna descending gracefully, arms crossed across his chest, face creased in a grim smile. He noted the grey streaks in his younger brother's hair and wondered: *Were they there the last time I saw him?* He had met Krishna only hours earlier. Yet those grey streaks were new. What could have happened to turn Krishna's hair grey in mere hours?

'Bhraatr, where you have been?' Balarama asked, noticing the vexation in his own voice.

Krishna touched ground and stepped forward. 'Here and there. Were you searching for me since long?'

'I searched all Dwarka for you,' the elder brother replied. 'I was about to try vaikuntha!'

Krishna gestured expansively with both arms outstretched. "This is vaikuntha, Bhaiya. As close to it as I could design upon the mortal plane, remember?"

Balarama frowned. There was something odd about his brother. Krishna was not his usual self. Balarama possessed the ability to see in other planes besides the optical, and he utilized that ability now, observing Krishna in different planes. In some of these, Krishna was no longer the rakishly handsome ageing boy-wonder but a being of light and colour and spangles. In higher planes, he was pure energy, pulsating endlessly to infuse the entire universe. That energy propelled comets, enabled suns to blaze, empowered galaxies and made possible the very act of existence. *The engine that drives creation*, Balarama thought. But unlike earlier times when he had viewed his brother who was in fact Himself in a slightly different form and body, this time, Balarama saw a darkness pervading Krishna's aura. An oily patch discolouring the beauty and glory of Bhagwan. Something had happened to Krishna. Something that had altered the very fabric of his being. He had not seen a discolouration of Krishna's aura this disturbing since the time he had fought and almost been defeated by the thousand-headed serpent-lord Kaliya. What could have impacted the Lord of Vaikuntha so greatly?

'What happened, Bhraatr?' he asked with concern. 'What new villainish scheme or foe have our enemies sent that trouble you so? Point it out to me and I will smash it into the bowels of the earth.'

Krishna looked out at the people playing and dancing in the shade of the great parijata. 'This is not that kind of enemy.'

'Whatever kind it is, I will pound it to dust.' Balarama clenched his fist and slammed it into his other hand. 'Tell me.'

Krishna watched the children laughing and dancing in the air, somersaulting and flying without a care in the world. Their laughter carried all the way to where the brothers stood. 'Not all enemies can be defeated by violence, Bhaiya. You should know this after our struggles with the Magadhan.'

"Then tell me how to defeat this enemy and I will do exactly as you say.' Balarama lowered his clenched fists. 'Use me as your arrow, point me. Use me as your javelin, throw me. Use me as your sword, raise me high. The rest, leave to me.'

Krishna turned to his brother, his eyes golden with the rich light of the setting sun. They were wet with what could only have been tears, even though Balarama knew Krishna never cried. 'Not this time, Bhaiya. This time we cannot fight this enemy, this new challenge. Not you. Not I.'

Balarama stared at his brother's beautiful face. Not just Radha, all humanity loved that countenance. Not because it was classically handsome but because it shone with the radiance of a thousand suns, eclipsing even that orb that cast its daily light upon the earth. He could not bear to see such pain on his brother's features. Not bear to be told that the threat could not be defeated. But he struggled to accept this knowledge, knowing that Krishna was omniscient; if he said physical strength would not end the threat, it would not.

'Tell me, Bhraatr,' he said softly, in almost a whisper. 'Tell me what needs to be done. No matter how impossible the challenge, I will undertake it and deliver success into your hands.' When Krishna did not respond, he persisted: 'If a fortress can be built, it can be destroyed. If a being can be born, it can be made to die. If an enemy cannot be defeated by violence, it can be defeated another way. There is always a way, and I will find it. Just tell me. Where? Who? What threatens us? What causes Krishna such pain? Let me remove it from the root and turn it to ashes. I cannot bear to see you so troubled, not for a moment longer. Tell me, Bhraatr. Entrust this impossible challenge to me and let me end your pain.'

Krishna looked at him with such love and sadness that Balarama felt his heart would break. 'It is not just that the threat is impossible to defeat, beloved white to my black, it is that the threat is not outside us. It is within our walls, our city. I myself carried the source of our destruction into our impregnable Utopia and sowed the seeds of the ruination of our entire race. I, Krishna Vasudeva, am now the enemy.'

Dwarka rejoiced at the union of Krishna and Rukmini. Their most beloved son had found his life-partner and faced great odds to save her from a suitor she did not desire and a family that did not care for her. She had been snatched away from the jaws of certain abuse and lifelong misery and now she was free. Once again, their saviour had triumphed. That was reason enough for celebration. But this time, he had not only liberated a person from captivity, he himself had been captured. The love Krishna felt for Rukmini was writ plain on his face. He glowed with an inner light, an effusion of joy and adoration that exceeded his usual shining aura. He was happy; and if anyone deserved happiness, it was Krishna, who had toiled since birth to save his family and people from demons of all ilks, and worked tirelessly to keep everyone safe. He had delivered the Yadava people into paradise. Everyone cheered at his finding happiness for himself.

The wedding was a grand one, a spectacle like nothing else ever seen before. The city glowed like a lamp lit by diamonds. The people were clad in clothes so rich and fine, even apsaras and gandharvas must have looked down from swargaloka in envy. Every face glowed with joy. Every mouth wore a smile. Every heart danced. It was a time of peace, prosperity and unbounded happiness.

Only Balarama saw the worm within the core, the rot within the trunk, the darkness within the light.

Only Balarama saw the true face of Krishna behind the mask he wore to appease his people.

Only Balarama knew that while Krishna showed outwardly that he was happy, secretly, his heart was in tatters.

There was a shadow over the dazzle, yet both brothers acted as if all was bright and good. Only in stray moments, between words and smiles, did the truth hover briefly on their countenance. A momentarily glimpsed sadness in the eyes that contradicted the heartwarming smiles. A soft sigh that was heard by nobody but felt by his brother. A pause that ought not to have been there at all.

Perhaps Devaki noticed as well. Certainly, Yashoda suspected. But both mothers took these errant contradictions as signs of the usual world-weariness that wears down all monarchs. After all, Krishna was not merely a lover and husband. He was the protector of all his people and the defender of their city-state. He was not merely Rukmini's husband; he was Dwarkadhish, who had other things on his mind as well.

Radha saw. Radha doubted. Radha wondered.

But she was lost in her own heartache and was unable to empathize beyond wondering and doubting. Perhaps she thought that Krishna felt the pain she felt. They had seemed so perfect for each other as young companions in Vrindavan that she had even dreamed of them spending their lives together. But she did not truly believe this was so: Krishna had always made it clear that his first duty was towards the people, his first roles those of slayer and saviour. Everything else must take second place, including love.

Still, to see him loving someone else instead of her, to see another woman standing beside him bedecked with garlands and jewels at the wedding fire, to see all Dwarka roar with jubilation at the union of Krishna and Rukmini instead of Krishna and Radha, was torture and agony.

But she still loved him. And when one truly loves someone, one wishes nothing but happiness for that person. So Radha found herself able, despite the pain and heartache of losing Krishna forever, to feel great happiness at his wedding. More than almost everyone else, except perhaps for Yashoda, Radha knew how much he had sacrificed and endured and done in order to ensure the security and prosperity of his people. She knew he deserved this happiness.

So as the days passed and turned into months, then seasons passed, Radha's pain eased and was replaced by a suffusion of contentment. She found herself able to love Krishna without needing to possess him. To adore him from afar – or from nearby, for she was still able to access him if she needed to, as a citizen of Dwarka.

Eventually, Radha's pain turned into unconditional love. Yashoda's concern became a mother's pride at her son's new state of matrimony. Devaki's doubts were replaced by delight that her family had grown and would now continue to grow.

But Balarama knew that the happiness was only illusory and fleeting.

And he prepared himself daily, going through his martial exercise routine with greater vigour, burning off the little flab he had accumulated from good living

and peaceful times, sharpening and honing his skills to be not just a better warrior than he was already, but a greater general as well. For he knew that a storm was coming. It was only a matter of time. And when it finally hit the ground, the destruction would be epic.

Only Balarama knew and prepared and waited for the inevitable.
And one day, it came.

Dust devils danced on the empty plain like apsaras in Indra's court, swinging to and fro with mindless abandon. Tumbleweeds rolled desultorily, paused to ponder their insignificance, then resumed their rambling. In the distance, the twilight sky flickered with the purple-white conflagration of an ocean storm. The air stank of impending rain. Up in the mountains, upon the ramparts of the great fortress, the night watch took over from the day watch. The outgoing sentries made good-hearted jests to their incoming comrades about watching for ghosts and ghouls that might never come. The mood on the battlements and at the sentry posts was tense and desperately in need of leavening. Nerves stretched so taut were apt to snap in a crisis.

The past several days had worn everyone's nerves to a fray. Word had come from every direction, riders arriving all day long, every day, for weeks. Vague though horrifying accounts of atrocities visited upon the cities and towns and villages for a hundred yojanas in every direction. The very lack of detail made them all the more terrifying. What one knew, one could fight. But this was a foe so formidable that it swept all opponents in its path and rolled like a juggernaut with such fury and speed that none but the few that were lucky enough to flee lived to tell the tale. And what little they recounted only served to heighten the imagination and appal the senses rather than answer vital questions that could help others defend themselves. The stragglers that fell exhausted by the way and were chanced upon by the gatewatch on their rounds were in no condition to speak. Some blabbered incoherently while others gazed in horror at unseen terrors.

The toll on the population was disturbing. In all the generations that the mountain lords had ruled, no single foe had wrought such destruction, brought such terror to the people. The mountain kingdoms were ravaged, first on the east, then on the west, then on the fringes, then straight down the centre, until it seemed the enemy would plough through to the central fortress, only to turn

and twist and suddenly vanish into thin air, then return to harry the towns on the far southern slopes. This campaign of attrition bewildered the lords, making it impossible for them to defend their townships and populaces effectively. Many succumbed in the raids, others went roaring into battle, never to return. Dark tales sprang up about the atrocities visited upon the mountain lords and their people by the attackers. Rumours – of things that were done and things not done – raised the hackles and unnerved the strongest hearts. Nobody knew quite what to make of them. Except fear the invaders all the more.

Now, the surviving populace had retreated to the mountain fortress, the last bastion of defence. The fortress was in fact a chain of smaller forts, walled-in villages, lookout posts and towers, all arrayed along the tops of a hill range that rose in steps to aspire to the heights of the greater Himalayas themselves. Over sixteen thousand villages – some of which were sizeable hamlets occupying entire valleys, others mere villages by rivulets or goat tracks, each with its own lord – were taking refuge in the fortress. Due to the kinship shared by the tribes, all lords shared a part of their wealth – which was abundant because of nature's bounty – with one another, ensuring that all their kith and kin survived and prospered. This meant that none had cause to envy or make war on his neighbours or band together to assault the richest lords. When a man's belly is filled and his home contained all the comforts his family and he desired, there is little reason to go feuding or warring. For generations, the mountain lords had not seen all-out war or widespread violence. This long history of peace had made many of them soft and ill-equipped for the relentless assault of this new enemy. But sixteen thousand lords was a large number, and a great many were still familiar enough with the ways and methods of warfare to defend themselves successfully against intruders, as skirmishes had proven time and again. Mountain living had hardened all, making even the youngest children tough enough to hold a weapon and stand their ground. And once they united, even the relatively untried lords and their followers could mount a formidable defence.

Which was why the rumours made no sense. It was as if the enemy came from all sides at once, simply wiping out the lords and theirsteadfasts, before the latter could even raise a weapon. At the outset, this may have been possible. But once the word spread, how was the enemy able to infiltrate even the most remote canyons and valleys so quickly? No foe that had ever assaulted the mountain forts had ever acted thus or been as devastating. Yet, the numbers were chilling: hundreds of lords had fallen already, their homesteads mere piles of smoking

rubble. Hundreds more had not been heard from, nor had answered the call to rally. And even now, when the lords and their tribes were streaming into the highest forts, preparing to barricade themselves and make a united stand against the coming foe, there were thousands still unaccounted for. In all their history, the lords of the mountains had never known such a time, nor knew how to deal with it.

And so they retreated behind their high stone walls, barricaded the great wooden doors and bided their time. They sharpened swords and spear points, made arrows by the hundreds of thousands and drilled their warriors all day, preparing for the battle of a lifetime. Grimly, with weather-hardened faces, they stared out over the ramparts and waited for the enemy.

seven

Rukmini cried out with joy. The midwives squealed and laughed. ‘You have a son’ they cried, ‘a beautiful, perfect son.’ They exclaimed and cooed and fussed over the new arrival. One of them ran out of the chamber and announced breathlessly to the crowd waiting outside: ‘Boy!’ It might as well have been the most eloquent speech delivered to Dwarka, for it elicited a resounding roar of cheers and applause that rippled through the city streets and mansions, filling the air above the island-fortress with yells of jubilation.

‘A prince is born to us today,’ said old King Ugrasena, dimmed of vision and feeble of limb, but still able to sit on his throne and speak a few choice words when required. This occasion brought out the best in the ageing monarch, his pride and joy evident on his age-lined face.

For the duration of his brief but potent speech, it was almost as if the King Ugrasena of yore, before Usurper Kamsa’s rise, had returned. The strength of jaw, the steely gaze that swept across the audience in the vast masses gathered beneath the great tree, the unwavering voice that carried to every last pair of ears, all reminded the elders of the nation of the days that had once been, the king that had once reigned, and the Mathura of yore, and brought a tear of nostalgia to their rheumy eyes. For there were things they had lost with their old homeland that couldn’t be replaced even by all the wonders of the world.

‘A son to Lord Krishna and Lady Rukmini, an heir to Vasudeva and Devaki’s line, a brother to every Yadava, a yoddha to every enemy, a protector to all the Yadu tribes. Behold, the prince of Dwarka!’ King Ugrasena held aloft the gleaming rajtaru with a withered arm that could only be seen to tremble from up close. At a distance, it appeared as steady as it had always been. The rejuvenating air of the great parijata steadied the hand even more, and for an instant, the ancient monarch himself felt almost as if the glory of the Yadavas was restored as he looked out at the citizens gathered before him. ‘With the birth of Pradyumana, we are each and every one of us born again.’

The city exploded with joy. Men and women had bedecked themselves with jewels and brightly coloured clothes. The city was resplendent with banners marked with Indra's symbol. The celebrations would continue for days.

'Pradyumana' was the name on every Dwarkadeshi's lips, a one-word anthem of hope and joy. The continuance of the line of Ugrasena, Vasudeva, Krishna, and by extension, the line of Yadu itself. For only through birth and new growth can past heartaches be erased.

eight

She was aglow with pride. The sheer outpouring of love and joy at her firstborn's arrival overwhelmed her. The guilt and pain she had felt after her abduction and the tragic events that ensued – the defeat of her father and brothers – had not faded completely, and perhaps never would. But the experience of birthing her child and the response that greeted his arrival burned brightly enough to outshine the sad memories.

She basked in the warmth of Dwarka's affection. The love of the Yadavas was quite something. Her own people were more warlike and aggressive, given to masculine shows of surliness and rarely succumbing to public displays of affection, or 'shameless behaviour', as her brother put it. Here in Dwarka, nobody thought twice before embracing, patting, touching, and otherwise showing friendly filial affection for one another; and when it came to the island-kingdom's most beloved new citizen, they quite went overboard. There were times when Rukmini had no idea where her sweet prince was, and nobody around her seemed to know either. But she could not bring herself to feel concerned. With so many people watching him, he was probably the safest child in the whole world!

The only element that cast a slight shadow over her neo-natal haze of happiness was the absence of her husband. Where was Krishna? He had come to see her for the customary first viewing of the child after birth, accompanied by Devaki and Vasudeva as well as Yashoda and Nanda, and both their extended clans. That made for such a prodigious gathering that Rukmini's head began to swim from the names and greetings alone.

At one point, it seemed as if all the gopas and gopis in the Vrishni clan were gathered in or around her bedchamber. For all she knew, even the herds were in the outer rooms, munching on handfuls of grass. She mentioned this jokingly to one of Pradyumana's daais, a lovely young woman named Radha who gave special care and attention to the newborn and the new mother. Radha smiled and

said, 'No, sister. Only a few of the kine that were close to our lord are here and they are in the akasa chamber, keeping to themselves. They do not like crowds.'

So there *were* cows inside the house: well, inside the solarium, which was almost the same thing. 'They will want to see the baby, then,' Rukmini suggested with mock solemnity, meaning it as a joke.

Radha smiled again. 'I have already shown our Pradyumana to them. They approve.'

That made Rukmini shut up for a while. The young daai had actually taken Pradyumana to be viewed by the cows and they had given their approval? How? By mooing twice and jangling their bells? She burst into a fit of giggles which almost immediately turned into a hiccupping fit.

'Radhey, fetch your sister water at once. Hiccupping is not good for her!' shouted the elder daaimaas.

Rukmini smiled gratefully at the attractive young gopi as she sipped a little water from the raised lota. 'You really do take good care of me and my little prince.'

Radha smiled back at her warmly. 'You are Krishna's beloved; so you are beloved to us all.'

Rukmini liked this young woman. There was something about her that was refreshingly different from the others. She could not tell what it was exactly, but there was a sense of self-assurance that the other daais lacked. For the most part, they were all young women – adolescent girls, really – who were either too awed to be in the presence of the first family of Dwarka or too inexperienced to be of much help. This young lady had both self-assurance and some experience.

Rukmini hazarded a guess. 'You seem to be from the countryside. A gopi, perhaps?'

Radha laughed. 'Do I seem such a country girl, then, my lady?'

Rukmini resisted the urge to chuckle – turning it into a shake of the head and a genial smile instead. 'Not at all. You just seem so confident and experienced about all this.'

Radha leaned forward, close enough that Rukmini could smell her hair, faintly redolent of some pleasantly rustic aroma. 'If I may confide in my lady, it's true. I am a country girl. A gopi, no less.'

'A gopi!' Rukmini said, delighted. 'Why, my Krishna was a gopa too! I have longed to meet gopis since coming to Dwarka. You are my first!'

'You make us sound like some exotic species of sea dwellers, my queen. We are nothing more than simple cowherds. We tend the kine, that is all.'

Rukmini wagged a finger. 'Rubbish. You *simple* cowherds protected my husband when he was among your kind. During the long years of exile, the reign of the Usurper.'

'Hardly, my queen! It was he who protected us and all of Vrajbhoomi. We Vrishnis were blessed by his presence and are lucky to have walked the same hilly paths as he. Every Vrishni owes his or her life to Dwarkadhish.'

Rukmini was excited. 'So you are a Vrishni to boot? One of the very people with whom my Krishna spent his years of exile? Perhaps the same tribe or community?'

Radha raised her chin proudly. 'The same village, my queen.'

Rukmini gaped at her. 'You must surely have known my Krishna, then!'

Radha looked as if about to say something, then caught herself. She raised her hand to the fabric that overhung her head and caught the tip, as if veiling her face in the presence of a foreigner as was the cowherd custom. 'We were childhood playmates, my queen,' she said shyly, 'and close companions.'

Rukmini clapped her hands in excitement. 'How wonderful. Finally! A friend who knew my lord before he was Dwarkadhish! You don't know how long I've been waiting to meet someone like you, someone who knew him back then. Tell me, Radhey. What was he like? Did he really play all those pranks? Did he really flirt with all the gopis? You must tell me everything. Everything!'

Something came over the young daai's face then. Something that made Rukmini pause. A sense of great sadness and some other unnameable emotion that Rukmini could not identify.

'It was many years ago, my lady. We were but mere children then.'

'All the more reason for me to know every last detail! How many legends exist about Krishna's youthful and childhood adventures. How many kusalavyas ply their trade only by singing his praise. Such stories! Such epic challenges! From the time he was an unweaned, suckling infant. Yet the stories and poems are but eulogies extolling his greatness and virtues; they may as well be temple songs praising Lord Vishnu.'

'And is that not fitting?' Radha asked curiously. 'Our lord is no less than the Great Protector Incarnate, is he not? Or the primordial Paramatma himself come down on earth to undo injustice and punish the wicked. Surely it is only apt that we sing his praises, every chance we get.'

Rukmini was struck by the expression on the young woman's face and the reverential tone with which she spoke. She might as well have been speaking of her family deity.

Rukmini was accustomed to her Krishna being regarded as no less than swayam Bhagwan. And that tone and expression were commonplace when speaking of Dwarkadish. Still, there was something about the young woman that made her comments and devotion seem almost ... personal.

She had said she knew Krishna when he was young. Rukmini wondered just how well she had known him.

'No,' she said now in a soothing tone. 'You misunderstood me. It is the human side of Krishna that I long to know about. The little everyday details that are not mentioned in the ditties and lays. The childhood pranks, the clumsy pratfalls, the foolish antics ... I would give anything to know from you what he was really like as a boy. The things that even Yashoda-maa will never tell me or may not even know. His first misstep, his first pastime, his favourite sport, his first ...' She stopped herself short.

'Yes, my lady?' Radha prompted.

Rukmini shook her head slowly. 'I was about to say ... his first friend ...'

She looked at the young daai keenly as she said the last word.

Radha gazed back at her, then something came over her that she could not conceal at such close quarters. A rush of emotion and memory that Rukmini could almost see rising in Radha's senses as the colour rose in her cheeks. Radha turned her face away, using the edge of her upper garment to conceal her expression.

But Rukmini had seen enough.

A pocket of silence surrounded the two women amidst the chaos and cacophony around the queen's chambers.

Radha started as she felt Rukmini's hand on hers.

'You were good friends, were you not?' Rukmini asked softly. 'You knew my lord well in those years, did you not?'

Radha was about to respond when there was a commotion in the outer chambers.

Someone screamed. It was followed by several more screams, then cries of outrage.

Rukmini looked around, suddenly realizing she had not seen little Pradyumana for the past several minutes. Of course, the chambers were filled

with the finest daais in the land, and showing the infant to so many of Krishna's relatives alone would take a great deal of time, so she had no reason to fret or worry. But the commotion outside made her heart leap with anxiety.

The hand she had laid on Radha's wrist turned into a vice. She squeezed harder than she intended, crushing the poor girl's wrist.

'Pradyumana,' Rukmini said, some ancient instinct telling her something was wrong.

A daai came rushing in, breathless and with tears streaming down her cheeks. 'My queen! A tragedy has befallen us. It is the prince! He has been taken!'

Krishna's entrance hushed the discordant noises. The chaos that had fallen after Pradyuman's abduction was stilled completely for a moment.

Every daai, relative and well-wisher went quiet, turning to look at Dwarkadish as he entered his wife's chambers. The look on his face caused many to blanch, look down, step back or simply turn away. Nobody had ever seen the lord of the Yadavas this angry.

His handsome face – starting to display signs of age, yet retaining the boyish charm that had cost countless women sleepless nights – was white with rage. His raven-black complexion was blanched to a frightening paleness, anger replacing the customary grin that everyone was so accustomed to seeing. The brow was lined with the famous crinkling in the centre of the forehead that resembled a Brahmin's caste marks.

He moved through the chambers, packed with hundreds of women, all with tear-streaked faces and dishevelled hair. If not for their gaily coloured clothing and finery, the scene would have resembled a grief gathering. As it was, the mood was sombre. Everyone was in great shock at the bold abduction.

Krishna's iron-hard face searched the room. Women looked away or looked down, unable to meet his gaze. He found the one he was seeking at last. An elderly matron with white hair.

'Tara-daai,' he said quietly. But in the silence, every single soul in the queen's palace could hear him as clearly as if he were bellowing from the rooftop. 'How?'

Tara-daai wiped away the tracks of her tears with the corner of her upper garment. 'I was deceived, my lord. He came disguised as you.'

'As me?' Krishna asked, incredulous. 'Wearing my garb? My mukut, perhaps?'

'No, my lord. I would not be fooled by mere accoutrements. He *was* you! In face and form and voice and every single detail. Right down to the white streaks in your hair.'

Krishna was silent a moment.

People stirred uneasily, exchanging glances. Women clutched each other for comfort, pressing hands.

Krishna spoke again. ‘What did he say?’

Tara-daai replied, ‘He said he would take Pradyumana now. He held out his arms, smiling at me. So I gave our prince into his arms.’ She raised her arms, creased with age. ‘A thousand infants I nursed in these arms, a thousand mouths suckled at my breasts, a thousand sons of Yadu I raised to boyhood. Proud sons of Mathura. Yet when the moment came, I handed the son of our lord into the arms of an impostor!’

She fell before Krishna, striking the marble floor with her arms, smashing her ornaments. ‘Take these arms, my lord! Draw your sword and strike them from my body. They have betrayed me. They have betrayed you. They have failed our race!’

She took hold of Krishna’s foot and looked up at him. ‘Strike my life from my body as well. For I cannot live with the knowledge of my own betrayal. Slay me, my lord! I do not deserve to live!’

Krishna reached down and grasped her hand, freeing it from his foot and using his strength to raise her up to her feet. She staggered, he supported her, and then she stood on her own feet, swaying with grief and self-recrimination.

‘These arms did not betray anyone, Tara-daai,’ he said. ‘Neither you nor anyone else. It was *I* who betrayed Dwarka and all of us today. This was all *my* fault and *my* fault alone. If there is one person who must atone for this, it is *I*.’

And with those terrible words, he turned and started to walk away.

Rukmini had been watching this the entire time, and when she saw Krishna turning to leave, she lurched forward, crying out, ‘Swami!’

Krishna paused and turned his head to look back.

Rukmini took several steps towards him, then realized that he was not returning to her. He was still facing outwards, clearly eager to leave the chambers.

‘What will you do?’ she asked. A simple question; yet, like all questions that come from deep within, weighed with a thousand other questions.

He looked back at her, still without turning around fully, still facing the exit. ‘Whatever I have to do.’

Then he turned and walked away.

Balarama was returning in his Pushpaka when he saw Krishna's sky chariot approaching from Dwarka. He gestured to Daruka to wait and saw the charioteer turn deferentially to speak to Krishna. Balarama could see the simmering rage on his brother's face even at this distance and manoeuvred his flying chariot to a position near Krishna's vahan. Both Pushpakas hovered above the ocean, within sight of Dwarka, and stopped close to one another.

Balarama leaped over the railings of both sky chariots, landing in the passenger well of Krishna's chariot. He nodded to Daruka who nodded back in respectful greeting and turned away, monitoring the sky and both chariots using his mind alone.

'Bhraatr,' Balarama said. 'Everything the daai said was true. I canvassed the palace before leaving. The abductor resembled you to the last detail. He took our prince into the water.'

Krishna looked at him without any expression. But when he spoke, it was with the cracked voice of thunder deep within a storm cloud. '*Into the water?*'

Balarama was surprised. Even Daruka glanced back over his shoulder but in a manner that suggested he had already been privy to Krishna's state of mind.

Balarama ignored the voice and continued with his report. He gestured at the vast blue expanse surrounding them. 'The ocean. The sentries saw them clearly. On the point where the eastern tower extrudes over the water. He simply stepped off the ramparts and fell into the ocean. He landed with a great splash, feet-first, and sank like a stone. He was not seen afterwards.'

'Show me.'

Balarama glanced at Daruka who nodded without looking back. Both Pushpakas rose as one and sped to the place Balarama had mentioned. There were sentries milling about on the ramparts, captains and even senapatis looking over the edge, discussing agitatedly. They stopped what they were doing and looked up as the vahans approached.

'Do you wish to speak to—?'

'No.'

Balarama shrugged and nodded at Daruka who understood and relinquished control of the sky chariots. Balarama guided them to the east tower and then made both chariots drop abruptly, falling several hundred feet to sea level.

He then brought both chariots to a halt, perhaps one score foot above the rolling waves that broke on the rocky base of the fortress walls. The walls themselves continued down beneath the ocean level to several levels below, where there was enough room to accommodate supplies to last the entire population of the city-kingdom for years if required. Krishna had had the lower levels added after the events at Vidarbha. He feared reprisals by Rukmini's brothers or allies – he never spoke of it openly, but Balarama had intuited this on his own. But Balarama was uncomfortable with the dungeon-like city beneath a city. It felt almost like a prison for their own people. As far as he was concerned, if Dwarka was somehow found and besieged, something he did not think possible, he would rather stand and fight to the end. There was only so far one could run and only so long one could hide. There came a time when—Krishna's voice broke into his thong hits:

'Cease your mind-prattling and show me the exact spot where they went into the water.'

Balarama scowled at his brother's back and used his mental control to manoeuvre his Pushpaka a few yards to the north, then a few more to the west, finally stopping to hover dead still over a point approximately a half score yards from the rock-encased fortress walls. Krishna's Pushpaka remained where it was – Balarama relinquished control and nodded at Daruka who acknowledged and retook control of his master's vahan.

"That is where the sentries saw them hit the water. I had my Pushpaka mark it precisely'

Krishna peered over the edge of the railing of his chariot. Balarama looked down too, and in the choppy but still blue surface of the ocean, he could see the golden chariots, and himself and his brother reflected as well. Krishna's aspect was dark and stormy, with flashes of blue lightning and a miasma of celestial bodies reduced to miniature duplicates of their heavenly size swirling around his head. His face was as black as a storm cloud, and when he spoke, his tongue spat fire, and his throat glowed fiery red as if the flames of damnation blazed within his being.

'Daruka, instruct the Pushpakas to find the trail and sniff out the abductor.'

Daruka looked back uncertainly at his lord, then at Balarama who frowned.
'Bhraatr, do you mean—'

'I mean to follow them to the ends of creation if that is where the trail leads!
Instruct the Pushpakas, Daruka!'

Daruka did as bid but then appeared to face a problem. He looked up at Balarama who nodded, understanding. Balarama's Pushpaka had been set to only permit other charioteers to steer the vehicle if so instructed by its master. He relinquished control now, and instructed his Pushpaka to share its knowledge with its brother chariot and seek out the trail of the intruder who had gone into the water, carrying Krishna's son. This took barely a moment or three, but Krishna's anger flared like a crack of lightning.

'Enough dawdling, Bhaiya. Take us down!'

Balarama pursed his lips, resisting the temptation to lash back. He reminded himself that Krishna had lost something most precious. His firstborn. And time was of the essence. He promised himself that he would deal with his brother's attitude later and gave the final mental command.

Without a whisper or wasted movement, both Pushpakas slipped into the ocean and sank below the waves.

eleven

Rukmini heard the uproar and knew it could mean only one thing. She rose from her bed and ran out of her chambers, down the long hallway, the stairway and all the way to the entrance of the palace. The palace thronged with daais and maids and servers, all moving in the same direction. A great crowd was gathered outside the palace. Her maids called for them to make way for Queen Rukmini and the crowd parted to let her pass.

She stood in front of Krishna, just alighted from his Pushpaka. ‘My lord!’ she cried. ‘Where—’ Then she saw Balarama standing behind him, and Daruka too, and registered their forlorn expressions. Her own husband’s face was grim – grimmer than when he had left her the previous day. And his arms were empty.

He stared at her without speaking. She tried to finish her question but it seemed pointless. The wailing of the women, the agitated chatter all around, the hue and cry, all resembled the wailing at a funeral procession.

The world swam around her. She had not eaten for two days and a night, since her beloved Pradyumana was taken from her. Her upper garment was drenched with the milk her child was not there to consume. Her heart was overflowing with the love she could not give him. She was still unsteady from the birthing, her strength not yet recovered, weakened by sorrow and anxiety and guilt.

She forced herself to stay upright, not willing to show weakness before everyone. It was Krishna who had taught her that. The difference between being a woman and being a queen is *behaving* like a queen. She behaved like a queen, keeping her voice level and her eyes on her husband.

‘Where is my son?’ she asked him.

Krishna’s eyes smouldered in his sunken face. ‘He is gone. Taken.’

‘By whom?’ she asked. The wailing of the maids had ceased around her. The hue and cry had quietened. Dwarka was listening.

Krishna looked down, his lips moving as if issuing a silent curse. Then he said, ‘Sambhara. A demon named Sambhara took him.’

A steel arrow pierced Rukmini's heart. A demon! Her beautiful Pradyumana in the clutches of an asura! Intolerable! Still she forced herself to speak levelly: 'Why? What purpose could he serve this demon?'

Krishna looked at her now as if wondering if she was jesting. 'What purpose? Revenge, naturally. I have slaughtered a few demons in my time, milady. He was no doubt avenging some creature or other's death at my hands in years past, when I was a boy and battling demons was my main pastime.'

'But then why take my son? Why now?'

Krishna looked at her with an expression bordering on disgust. 'What difference does it make? Why do demons do what they do? He found an opportunity. He took it. He changed his appearance to resemble me and walked into the palace and walked out with our son. Nothing else matters.'

'Why did you not find him? Why did you not track him down and retrieve our precious one? Why did you come home empty-handed?'

She knew she had said too much from the way everyone looked at her. Even Devaki, her most ardent supporter and well-wisher, looked aghast. But Rukmini did not care. She kept her chin high and awaited her husband's response.

Krishna glanced around at the silent assemblage. He looked at Rukmini. There was no anger in his face then. He seemed almost to understand her fury. But there was also a certain resentment in his manner, as also some guilt and shame. It was rare to see such emotions appear in Krishna; yet they were present now. She could see the shame in his eyes as he wiped them with the back of a hand.

'Why?' he repeated. 'You wish to know why? Because we searched everywhere. We found his trail and went down to the bottom of the ocean. The asura Sambhara leaped into the ocean with our son, diving deep down to the very lowest caverns of the sub-oceanic world. We followed his trail all the way, to places where the rays of Surya have never penetrated since the beginning of time. In that absolute darkness after a great length of time, using the powers we and our intrepid sky chariots possess, we were able to find the only trace of Sambhara and his crime ...'

Krishna paused and looked at her.

'Yes?' She urged him. 'Go on. What trace did you find?'

He looked at her, not unkindly. 'Are you certain you wish to know, my queen?' She nodded once, tight-jawed. 'I do.'

He looked at her for a moment without speaking, then said again, even more gently, 'Are you quite certain, good wife?'

She heard her voice whisper, 'Yes ...' then forced herself to speak louder. 'Yes, please. I must know what became of my beloved Pradyumana. Please tell me everything. Leave nothing out.'

He looked at her with no expression left in his tortured face. 'Very well, then. Prepare yourself. This is the only trace we found of our beloved prince.'

He held out a closed fist. She had not noticed that his fist had been clenched all the time. He held out the closed fist and opened it, palm upwards. A tiny object lay upon it. It was impossible to tell what it was from even the short distance of a few yards. But her heart crumpled at once, for she knew what it meant.

"This is the smallest finger of his left hand," Krishna said. "It is his, beyond the shadow of a doubt. It is all that remains of our beloved son."

The shocked silence that followed lay across Dwarka like a funeral shroud.

twelve

Death came to the mountain kingdoms when they least expected it. The fortresses remained on high alert night and day, taxing the nerves and patience of the lords and their soldiers, for it took tens of thousands of sharp-eyed, able-bodied warriors to man the many hundreds of contiguous miles of ramparts. If it were a known enemy, they would have ascertained which direction to watch more closely. But the unknown nature of the foe made it necessary to watch all walls, all directions, man every tower, gate, window and lookout post. There were young girls set to watch at times, armed with cowbells to warn their nearest colleagues if they saw any threat approach. The distance between posts was often measured in hundreds of yards, even half a mile at places. Instead of resting and drilling and preparing themselves better, the mountain warriors were reduced to watching and waiting for scores of days, until their nerves were dulled and reflexes slowed.

When the assault came, they were unprepared for its sheer force and brutality.

But even if they had been well rested, well fed and well exercised, the warriors of the forts would have been no match for the enemy that came that night. For the method and mode of attack was one that none could have anticipated or defended against.

It began as a deep vibration felt in the bones of those sleeping. It set teeth on edge. Utensils rattled in the kitchens. Water quivered like jelly. Those who were awake, particularly the sentries, barely noticed it, for they were all on the ramparts, watching for approaching hordes or sneaking intruders.

It was a gang of drunken men, asleep in a deep dungeon, who first realized something was amiss. They had been incarcerated for breaking into the wine supply of one of the mountain lords and consuming a good portion of his choicest soma. Once they had slept off their well-won stupor, they would be put to hard labour for the next several weeks.

They were wagon-wheel makers, carters, to use the official guild term, and for the past month they had had no wheels to make or repair. What use were wagon

wheels when everybody in the sixteen thousand kingdoms was behind stone walls, awaiting the invasion? Whatever little makeshift work was there to do, they had done it all weeks ago. The past month had been spent in idleness. Carters were not accustomed to idleness and were the kind of men who needed to keep busy. Being skilled men, they could not simply be sent to the walls to watch, for when the invasion or siege began, they would be required to put their valuable carpentry skills to use in aiding the defence. But in this awkward pause between regular everyday life and the onset of siege, they were idle, and the idleness had driven them to mischief.

Now, as they lay snoring on the cold stone flagstones of the lowest dungeon, they were awakened by the shivering of the earth.

One man opened his eyes and saw the world aquiver. He thought at first that he was still drunk and imagining it. Then he saw the rats and sat up, head spinning, and uttered a hoarse cry.

His companions grumbled and stirred. But a moment later, they began to sit up too, cursing and looking around.

The dungeon was shuddering around them as if it were a box of dice shaken by unseen hands. Dirt and tiny pebbles were trickling down from the ceiling, seeds of whatever rotten fruit they had been given for their last meal were jumping on the stone floor, and rats were streaming out of holes in the walls by the dozens – nay, by the hundreds!

It was the rats that warned them that something truly bad was happening. They were squeaking and running around pitifully, scampering out of their subterranean hideaways and uniting in a common exodus headed in a single direction: upwards.

All the rats were headed upwards, through the bars in the dungeons, up the cracked stone stairs, racing their thousands of comrades in a desperate climb.

But where were they going? Why were they heading upwards?

The vibrations provided a clue.

As the carters stood up unsteadily, the floor began to tilt and shift. One man cursed as his drunken equilibrium proved no match for the shaking ground, depositing him harshly on his rump. The others leaned against walls, the bars of their dungeons, even the low-hanging ceiling in the corners, trying to stay upright as they looked around in bewilderment.

The air was loud with the sound of the shuddering now. And growing thick with the dust of the vibrations.

'Is it an earthquake?' one man shouted.

'Could be,' said one of his fellow carters. 'Would explain the rats running up, towards the ground.'

'Hey!' shouted another man to one of the gaolers outside the bars. 'Let us out! We need to get above ground.'

The gaolers had reached the same conclusion and were already unlocking the dungeon cells. As the barred gates flew open, men staggered out, finding their way to the stairs and picking their way through the carpeting of rats, following their rodent friends upwards. They began to shove at each other, starting to panic. The air was thick with dust now, and it was hard to see anything except the dusty back of the man in front as they climbed the several levels to the ground, which itself was the top of the mountain fortress – the dungeons were sunken levels within the mountain's heart.

The shuddering increased to a fever pitch, setting men's teeth on edge.

The rats screamed and ran faster, several falling off the edge of the stairs in their panicked rush to get above ground. Men stepped on the rats, lost their footing and fell, crashing into their fellows in the dusty darkness.

Suddenly, as abruptly as it had begun, the shuddering ceased. The ground fell silent.

Only the sound of the rats squealing and running upwards, and men cursing and calling out through the blinding dust remained.

For several moments, those were the only sounds.

Then the intruders began to arrive.

thirteen

Dirt exploded from the ground. Solid sods and rocks burst outwards with the force of a hammer striking an anvil. Though the force had been applied upwards, from within the ground, it was no less effective. The intruders burst out of the dungeon floors like battering rams bursting through shattered timber.

The prisoners, already flailing and struggling to make their way up through the rats underfoot and the dusty chaos, heard the explosions and turned their heads. Through the fog of dust, they could only make out the debris flung outwards and upwards by the intruders. Rocks and clumps of sod came flying through the air, striking some men in the back, crushing rats to bloody pulp, adding to the chaos.

All across the dungeons, similar explosions continued, until their sounds ran into one another like a continual popping. The drunken carters heard the sounds and saw the dark shapes bursting out of the ground around them and began struggling upwards even faster, shoving each other aside and shouting to the gaolers – who had gone up first – that something was happening, and that they should send out the alert. The gaolers in turn scurried up through the successive levels, shouting to their fellow dungeon masters on higher levels to evacuate the dungeons. This only served to choke up the narrow stairwells that led upwards in circuitous spirals, and the stone stairs soon ran red and sticky with the stepped-on corpses of rats as the humans panicked.

The last carter on the stairs, a drunken shambling giant of a man still reeling from his indulgences, heard the sounds around him and glanced back. All he could make out were dark, rodent-like shapes scrambling about on the floor. He presumed they were a larger species of rat, emerging from the ground to join their fellow deserters in their upward flight. Then one brushed against the side of his foot and he felt a sharp prickling sensation, followed by a wetness soaking the limb. Something brushed against his other foot and he swore, feeling the

same prickling pain there as well. He felt the familiar sticky damp of blood and knew he had been cut.

He touched the wound and felt his hand turn wet and sticky from the blood seeping out through a number of lacerations. No rat could have done that!

More and more of the intruders burst up out of the floor, running this way and that, jostling against him. He tried to move up the stairs faster, but his injuries were already severe enough that he lost his footing and stumbled. He rolled and fell to the bottom of the stairwell, upside down.

Drawn by the scent of his blood, the intruders converged on him.

He screamed as he saw a furry anthropomorphic snout emerge from the cloud of dust to hover over his face. Deep red eyes glowed in a dark furry head – eyes that seemed to shine like beams in the dusty dimness, lighting the way like some strange phosphorescence. But it was the jaws that scared him the most – jaws that hung open, revealing razor-sharp teeth, and snapped at his neck.

He died in a spurt of his own blood, barely aware of the dozens of other jaws slashing and biting at his body.

Around him, the rats squeaked and scurried desperately to race up the dungeon stairs.

Moments later, their little furry bodies were squashed beneath the weight of pounding hooves as much larger, much heavier, hairy bodies trampled and crushed them. A new exodus began racing upwards, but these new creatures were neither squealing nor panicked. They were hungry for blood and slaughter.



The dungeon master on the uppermost dungeon level gave up trying to make sense of the commotion and turned to look up at the watch commander above him.

'Can't tell what's panicked them, sir,' he said irritably. 'Seems like an earthquake. But it's past now. Should I order them back to their levels?'

The watch commander told him to wait a moment as he himself was waiting for a decision from his own superiors above ground. The watch commander stood by the trapdoor that covered the top of the stairwell that led down to the bowels of the mountain. He was on the stone level that served as the base for the mountain fortress. There were several levels above him as well, but all had

windows and all housed residents and lords of the mountain city. A maze of warrens and grottos housed hundreds of thousands of mountain people for hundreds of miles across the ranges, with only the defensible ramparts and fortress watchtowers looming above it all. Sixteen thousand kingdoms lived thus, protected by the mountain below and around them, and the fortress defences on top.

Yet all those kingdoms and all those defences were about to be rendered useless.

The enemy had come from below.

As the watch commander waited, he busied himself in conversation with a fellow officer. They were discussing the relative merits of certain foods on the virility of men over a certain age when they heard screams rending the air below the ground.

Both men rushed to the open trapdoor and peered down. The dust clouds that swarmed the lower dungeon levels seemed to have risen almost to the uppermost level now. But even through that, the upturned faces of the men, both prisoners and gaolers, as well as the swarming dark furry bodies of the rats climbing upwards, could easily be seen.

Something was running amok among both men and rodents. Something with razor-sharp teeth and claws and dark furry bodies. Slashing, slicing, slaughtering.

‘Sir, the enemies! They are—’ Whatever the poor dungeon master meant to say was lost in the savage wet sound of his throat being ripped open.

Blood splattered high enough for it to splash the boots of the watch commander and his fellow officer above.

Both stared down as the already chaotic scene on the dungeon stairs turned into an abattoir during slaughter time.

By the time one of them thought of ordering his men to shut the trap door, it was too late. The heavy wooden door took four men to lift up and several moments to swing shut. Before even the first man could make a move, the intruders had worked their way through the last of the dungeon masters and prisoners below and had begun exploding from the open trapdoor.

Dark furry shapes leaped up through the air, hooves clicking noisily on the stone surface of the fortress floor as they emerged. Dark red eyes gleamed like fire. Each time the snouts turned, the eyes seemed to send out twin tracer lines of red light, as if marking their quarry for slaughter.

The watch commander blanched as he recognized the enemy. Disbelief was overcome by brutal reality. He didn't have to understand, merely to alert the others.

'Intruders!' he cried out. 'Sound the alarm!'

His attempt to repeat the command was cut off by half a dozen fury bodies ripping into his own, tearing him to shreds in seconds.

Around him, men began to die as the carnage began. Most didn't even have a chance to draw their swords or lower their spears.

The fortress was overrun in a few moments.

Across the mountain kingdoms, the same scene was being replayed as the attackers emerged from inside the lowermost levels of the fortress kingdoms, working their way up to run amok and slaughter the defenders within their own walls, their own homes, even in their beds as they slept.

By the time the alert was sounded and the most able soldiers turned from their posts on the walls and ramparts to deal with the threat that had emerged, it was much too late to do anything but die screaming.

Through the dim corridors and grottos of the mountain forts, twin tracer beams of red criss-crossed endlessly as the invasion continued.



Kaand II

Balarama was troubled by the change in Krishna. Outwardly, he appeared much the same. A little older, perhaps, but even the touch of grey on his temples and the slightly heavier walk only added to his attractiveness. Women still blushed and lowered their eyes when he went by, and when his Pushpaka hovered overhead, people still exclaimed fondly and pointed upwards, hoping he was coming to their house, or at least visiting their neighbourhood. His smile still dazzled. His voice still earned respectful silence when heard. His judgements were still wise and just when pronounced.

But inwardly, he was a different Krishna. Not the brother Balarama had grown up with in Vraj or Vrindavan.

This was a darker Krishna. A man who had changed in some crucial way.

Balarama did not know what had brought about the change, only that it had begun around the time Krishna and he were returning home from Vidarbha, with Rukmini. There had been a period when Krishna had been apart from him in a way that was not merely physical.

The bond between Balarama and Krishna was far greater than the one that bound even identical twins. They had not shared the same womb together; nor even the same mother. Yet they were as one being, separated only by their individual bodies and consciousness. Like two halves of a whole. Balarama might not know where Krishna was at every moment in the literal, geophysical sense. Yet he always sensed Krishna and knew his state of mind.

For that brief time, on the way back home, he had lost contact with Krishna. As if the younger brother had left this plane of existence and gone wandering elsewhere. That was impossible, of course. Where could Krishna have gone? Why would he go without him? And what had happened there that had caused his brother to change permanently?

Balarama suspected it had something to do with Rukmini. He knew that Krishna's bride had changed during the same journey. From the woman he had thought her to be, an incarnation of Lakshmi or Sri Herself, she had ...

diminished in some way. They had left Vidarbha with a Goddess Incarnate, he had no doubt about that. He had sensed the power of her presence, even when she cried mortal tears at the bad behaviour and subsequent humiliation of her brothers. Yet when she landed in Dwarka, she was merely Rukmini, sister of Rukmi, princess of Vidarbha.

What had changed during that trip? What had happened?

He had tried asking Krishna any number of times, but he would not speak of it. And once Pradyumana was born and abducted within days of birth and the quest for the lost child proved fruitless, Krishna withdrew even further into himself – and farther away from his wife.

As the years passed, that sullen silence that fell between them hardened into an iron curtain. And now, it was barely credible that they were husband and wife. Ostensibly, they were together at all ceremonial occasions and appeared no different to the general populace, but Balarama, seeing their hearts and minds, noting the subtle signs, knew better. He realized they were now merely a man and a woman living together in matrimony. Which meant absolutely nothing beyond the basic fact.

The word 'happiness' did not come into the picture.

More and more often, Krishna had pulled away from private occasions with Rukmini. When Balarama and the family tried to get them to reconcile, Krishna avoided them as well. It was not as if he neglected his duties. Not at all. He was scrupulous about his obligations to society as well as his family. Nobody ever had occasion to complain about him not living up to his responsibilities. It was the emotion, or lack of it, that he displayed when performing his duties that made them wonder what had happened. What use was a celebration if the person whose wedding or birth anniversary it was, was not enjoying himself? What use was it for him to simply be present in body when he was clearly not present in spirit and mind?

And yet, at no time did Krishna ever misbehave or give cause for unease by saying a single untoward word or doing anything that could be construed as improper, inappropriate or inconsiderate. He was a perfect man, leader, husband, brother, son, citizen ... yet an unhappy one.

Balarama thought that even the people must surely sense it. Daruka and the palace staff definitely knew it. Yet nobody ever said anything, sympathizing with Krishna's great burden of responsibilities and duties. On occasion, people had even grown angry with Balarama for daring to suggest that Krishna might not be

himself. The saviour of the nation was too dearly loved for anyone to hear even the slightest criticism of him. Everyone ended with the standard aphorisms: 'It will pass. He needs time. So much has happened. He has been through so much. Give him time. Anybody else would be unable to function; at least he is performing his duties.' And so it went, nobody willing to confront the problem head-on, everyone denying or delaying.

Eventually, even Balarama succumbed to the malaise of doing nothing, repeating to himself the age-old mantra that things would change in time.

Thus far, the only thing that had changed was that Krishna had grown even more disinterested and less involved.

Of late, he had taken to playing dice and other games of chance and skill to while away his idle hours, which were many.

Balarama found his brother as usual in the hall of chance, rolling bone dice with the usual companions – the fighters and champions who had little else to do but train and practice all day, and while away the rest of the time gambling and playing games.

Krishna knew without looking up that Balarama had entered, but did not acknowledge him. Balarama sensed that Krishna knew about his presence. The connection between them had weakened somewhat due to Krishna's disinterest and distancing, but it remained strong enough if Balarama exerted more force to make up for Krishna's lack of it. He did so now and observed with some irritation that Krishna was more concerned about winning the game than about Balarama's purpose of coming here.

'Bhraatr,' he said brusquely, interrupting a discussion on the merits of throwing dice with one's sword hand versus one's shield hand. 'You are needed in the sabha hall.'

All conversation ceased. Everyone looked up at Balarama, then at Krishna, waiting for his response.

Krishna jerked his chin at the player with the dice cup in his hand. 'Go on, roll.'

The fighter cleared his throat and indicated Balarama. 'But, my lord, your brother ...'

'Can wait. Finish the game. There are only three moves left' Krishna indicated the stack of coins before him. 'I have a lot at stake in his one.'

Balarama folded his arms across his chest. 'Now, Bhraatr. Grandfather said it was urgent.'

Krishna said to his brother without looking up: 'One moment.' To the player with the dice he said, 'Roll.'

The player hesitated, then rolled the dice.

Everyone groaned except the player next to Krishna who whooped. 'Yes! There go your elephants! Now I have you, Lord Krishna.'

Balarama stepped forward. 'Krishna, I can't just—'

Krishna stood up. 'I'm out.'

Everyone began speaking at once.

Krishna shook his head. 'Whatever happens in the next two moves, I'm going to lose my stash. So I declare and exit gracefully,' he winked at the group, 'smiling, always smiling!'

He backed away, waved one last time at his friends and turned, walking briskly away. Balarama had to walk fast to keep up.

'Dice games, Krishna? Really?'

Krishna glanced at his brother. 'Might do you some good to play a little too, Bhaiya. All work and no play makes us dull boys.'

Balarama shook his head disapprovingly. 'The day gambling counts as play is the day I stop playing. But then, you are setting a good example for our cousin Yudhishtira, I'm sure.'

Yudhishtira was the eldest son of Krishna's father Vasudeva's sister Kunti. Young Yudhishtira was overly fond of playing dice games, even though he had a tendency to lose every time. It was a sore point in the family and Aunt Kunti often complained to her brothers about her eldest son's weakness and how it would ruin him some day. On his last visit to Hastinapura, Krishna had tried, unsuccessfully, to talk Yudi into being more circumspect, but as Balarama had just reminded him, taking up the habit himself was not the best way to teach their cousin by example.

Krishna shot Balarama a sharp look. 'What was so urgent that you had to come yourself to summon me?'

'You have been accused,' Balarama said.

'Accused?' Krishna frowned. 'Accused of what?'

Balarama boarded the Pushpaka waiting for them outside. Krishna climbed aboard too. As the vahan rose swiftly and sped across the rooftops of Dwarka, he said to his brother, 'Accused of murder.'

Murder,' said old King Ugrasena, 'is a serious accusation. You should not make such an accusation without good cause, leave alone accuse Dwarka's most beloved son of such a crime!'

Despite his frail appearance, the old monarch's voice was strong. His face had sunk to resemble a map of withered creases, his handsome features lost, extreme old age having come calling. The years, and the suffering endured during the long decade of imprisonment by his own son, the late Kamsa the Usurper, had not been kind to him. But the air of Dwarka and the reviving waters of her spring of eternal life had kept him in good health. His body and vital functions belied his appearance and were healthier than they had been a decade or even two decades ago. This showed in his firm commanding voice and steady gaze. His grey eyes, cleared of their rheumy cloud, looked upon the richly robed merchant who stood before him with a stentorian frown.

'I have good cause, my lord,' said the merchant, his haughty tone matched by his arrogant, sneering expression. 'I am not the only one who believes that this murder was committed by Lord Krishna. There are many here who will concur with me.'

The chamber buzzed with consternation at this statement. The sabha hall was filled to capacity. In these peaceful times, most matters required only the bare minimum of ministering. But today's crisis had brought every member of court scurrying to take his place, eager for a front row seat to the unfolding drama. Krishna accused of murder! By whom? And why? Who was he accused of having killed and why would he have committed such an act? Those who were not present were following the developments as eagerly from the streets and their homes, for news spread quickly in Dwarka.

Every last minister of state was present, as were Queen Padmini in her usual seat beside her husband. Their daughter Devaki – Krishna's birth mother – sat with her husband, Krishna and Balarama's father, Vasudeva. Vasudeva's second wife and Balarama's mother Rohini sat with them as well. Krishna and Balarama's

adoptive parents Nanda and Yashoda were not fond of courtly affairs and administration, and spent most of their spare time amongst their own Vrishni people in their section of Dwarka. They attended court only on formal occasions or for family meals and gatherings. But today, they were here as well. That itself told Krishna how seriously everyone must regard this allegation.

He was doubly irritated now. First by the manner in which the whole charade was being staged: the merchant in question could as easily have brought his problem directly to Krishna instead of going through this formal accusation in open court. It was clear that he had an agenda, and solving the murder it was not. The second matter that irritated Krishna was the accusation itself. Nobody in Dwarka could have even dreamed of making such an allegation against him. Nobody except the man who stood before the royal dais now, his belly straining the rich brocaded robes that housed his corpulent form.

'I would not bring this accusation to you,' he said now to King Ugrasena, 'unless I had proof. I ask that you see to it that justice is done, regardless of whether or not the perpetrator happens to be your own grandson.'

Ugrasena sighed. 'It is immaterial that he is my grandson. He is Krishna. That is what makes it impossible to believe. How can one even consider that Krishna would harm an innocent man? He has dedicated his life to serving the people and protecting them. The thought of him hurting a single one of us is beyond belief. Nay, Merchant Satrajit, you will have to do much more than accuse or provide proof to support your accusations. You will have to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that it was our Krishna and none other than him that had a part in the heinous act.'

The merchant began to speak, but Ugrasena raised a withered hand, forestalling him. 'You will have your say. But let me speak my piece first. Not as a grandfather but as a fellow citizen who also happens to be your king.'

Satrajit started to speak again, but this time he stopped himself. He stood sullenly with the resigned look of a man who is not really interested in what is being said but endures it anyway.

'The matter before this court is highly unusual,' Ugrasena continued. 'We intend to heed it well and decide how it is to be dealt with.'

Satrajit could not help interjecting. 'That is all I ask, great one. Only that justice be done and the guilty punished.'

Ugrasena glared down at him, admonishing him with his silence.

Satrajit kept quiet.

'Justice will indeed be done,' Ugrasena began. 'As it is always done in Dwarka, land of dharma. But it may not be the justice you think is required, for often what one assumes in the outset of a matter turns out to be other than the outcome.'

Satrajit looked confused. The merchant's talent for counting and multiplying money was not matched by his acumen in other areas of the intellect.

'I see you do not comprehend my meaning, Merchant Satrajit,' Ugrasena said. 'So let me speak plainly and simply. You have accused the First Son of Dwarka of murder. We shall now investigate the matter. If Krishna is indeed found guilty of the crime, punishment will be meted out to him. But if it turns out that he was innocent of the act, *you* will have to face punishment.'

Satrajit stared at the throne dais in horror. '*I?*' he croaked hoarsely. 'But I am the aggrieved party here. It is *I* who have lost a brother and the most precious artefact in all Dwarka, perhaps the entire world. How can justice be served by punishing me?'

'Remember the old saw,' King Ugrasena said, 'when you point a finger at someone, three fingers point back at yourself. Therefore, by accusing Krishna, you are also taking responsibility for tarnishing his reputation. And let me remind you, Krishna's reputation is impeccable. So by sullying his name, you are committing murder of a sort yourself. You are killing a man's – nay, let me amend that – a *great* man's honour. And if found guilty of having accused him without merit, you must be prepared to accept the punishment for your rash words as well.'

Satrajit started to sputter and object, but King Ugrasena raised his hand again. 'Enough. I have said what I had to say. Let us not delay justice any longer. Recount the facts.'

three

Krishna and Balarama listened as a minister explained the bare facts of the case to them, indicating the parties involved as he talked.

The subject of the dispute was the merchant named Satrajit. A man of humble origins, he had benefitted – like every other Yadava – from the move to Dwarka. In a kingdom without worry of death, disease, famine, war or pestilence, where every need was provided for, even the humblest of people prospered.

Some desired more. They sought adventure. Satrajit was one such. He had left Dwarka and travelled far and wide on unknown missions and wild adventures. In the course of his travels, he had somehow encountered the deity Surya, he claimed. And as reward for services rendered, the great sun god had gifted him a magical jewel named Syamantaka. Satrajit had returned to Dwarka in triumph, wearing Syamantaka around his neck, causing much consternation and controversy in the fortress-city.

For the jewel shone like the sun itself, making it impossible to look upon the wearer directly. Even at a distance, the brilliance was unbearable to behold. This made Satrajit seem no less auspicious than the very sun god who, he claimed, had gifted him the jewel. His procession through the city to his home had been no less than a parade as all Dwarka turned out to watch the spectacle. Many fell to their feet, believing that Savita, the sun god himself, had come to Dwarka. It took stern words by Krishna himself to rouse them from their reverential stupor and make them see that the bearer of the luminous gem was only their fellow citizen Satrajit.

That was not the last of the disturbance caused by the jewel.

Syamantaka was installed in a special chamber in Satrajit's house and anointed by Brahmins in a special ritual, after which, it began demonstrating the full extent of its powers. When the proper invocations were recited at a certain time each day, the jewel's light could be captured in containers as a kind of misty liquid that, when stored overnight, solidified into blocks of pure gold. In this

fashion, it could create up to eight bharas of solid gold each day, which totalled almost two kilos.

Even in a kingdom where everyone was rich, two kilos of gold daily added up to a considerable fortune. So, within months of his return home, Satrajit became one of the richest men in Dwarka, involved in every major trade and transaction. Through shrewd transacting, he converted his growing capital into even more profitable sums.

Now, the jewel also possessed other qualities. It could heal ailments, even diseases – though these did not exist in Dwarka, their lesser counterparts still remained. Wants, desires, anxieties ... on exposure to the jewel, even the most minor human frailties seemed to burn away, replaced by a great, all-consuming sense of well-being, rendering a glow to the features and eyes that was no less brilliant than the gold generated by the gem.

Satrajit began charging for access to the jewel.

This was the second time Krishna was summoned. He investigated and found that the merchant was profiting from his fellow citizens and ordered a stop to it. When Satrajit complained, Krishna had ordered him to hand over the jewel to King Ugrasena, as was right and just. Ugrasena would install the jewel in the palace where the daily production of gold would be shared equally among all citizens and everyone would have free access to the jewel's restorative, healing and other powers at any time they desired.

Satrajit refused.

An ugly dispute arose.

Finally, Krishna had let Satrajit retain the jewel, if only to prove that Dwarka's administration believed only in giving, not taking.

But the refusal had rankled many, and Satrajit was shunned by a considerable number of his fellow citizens for displaying petty avarice and mean-spiritedness.

As time passed, he grew even more possessive of the jewel, finally spending so much time in its presence that he gave out a sun-like glow almost all the time. Yet, when he was away from the jewel for even a few hours, rare though such an absence might be, he would look dull and sickly. He had grown addicted to the jewel's power and it had transformed him into a needy, dependent creature that saw only the possibility of some day becoming the world's richest being, and Dwarka's most powerful citizen.

He had even begun plotting ways to install himself as a ruler in his own right, claiming that his immense wealth and possession of the all-powerful jewel gave

him as much right to govern the kingdom as Ugrasena.

But before this unlikely plot could come to fruition, the source and root of this megalomania, Syamantaka, was taken from him.

The person who stole the jewel from Satrajit was none other than his own brother, Prasena. Irked by his brother's repeated refusals to lend him the jewel or share even a tiny portion of its daily production of gold, Prasena took the jewel one night when Satrajit was sleeping. Great power corrupts absolutely, it is said, and Prasena's plan for the jewel was no more ludicrous than any other greedy man might dream up.

Prasena had the bright idea of fastening Syamantaka around his neck and going hunting in the most dreaded jungle of the mainland, the dark and dangerous Bhayanak-van, or Southwoods, as it was sometimes known. Each man has his dream, and Prasena's was to roam like a great king through the jungle, hunting and slaughtering at will. He counted on the jewel's brilliance and potency to protect him against any wild beasts – and once he was done hunting, to provide him with all the gold he desired to purchase anything he wished. Eventually, he intended to build a great mansion for himself, perhaps even a kingdom where he would rule for the rest of his days.

But before he could even get started on his grandiose plan, he was waylaid on the jungle road, attacked and killed.

This morning, the companions who had been travelling with Prasena had returned to Dwarka, bedraggled and bearing fresh wounds themselves. They had confessed to Satrajit, admitting that they had witnessed Prasena stealing the jewel and then accompanied him on his flight to the forest.

They then claimed that they were attacked by a being so powerful and possessed of such god-like powers, that their lord Prasena's head had been parted from his body in an instant, leaving the men themselves all scattered and mauled and scarcely conscious. The body of their lord had disappeared, along with the jewel itself. They had searched as best as they could in that part of the forest but could find no trace of either.

'These are all the facts in the case,' the minister finished. 'As noted in Merchant Satrajit's complaint.'

At this point, Balarama interjected.

'Is that all the evidence presented? An attack in the forest?'

'It is obvious who perpetrated the attack,' Satrajit said loudly.

'It may be obvious to you,' said Krishna. 'But to those of us not gifted with the power of omniscience, it is slightly more obscure.'

The court rippled with laughter at this comment.

Balarama shook his head at his brother, silently asking Krishna to be quiet. He would handle this. Krishna smiled his enigmatic smile.

'As my brother said,' Balarama went on, 'there appears to be no reason to blame him for this attack. What makes you think Krishna would go all the way to Southwoods to ambush your brother? He had no enmity with the man. And why kill him?'

Satrajit replied with a look of exasperation. 'It is obvious! He desired my precious jewel from the day he laid eyes on it. He demanded I give it to him. When I refused, he warned me of dire consequences one day. So long as the jewel was in Dwarka, he dared not make a move. But once Prasena, Vishnu bless his soul, left the sanctity of the city, he was easy game. Krishna knew there would be no one to witness his crime in the depths of Bhayanak-van. He waylaid Prasena, killed him, and stole Syamantaka which he had longed for so long.'

Satrajit raised a hand, pointing at Krishna. 'I demand that he be arrested and thrown into the palace dungeon pending a full investigation. Arrest Krishna for the crime of killing my brother and stealing my possession!'

four

Krishna was silent on the flight to Bhayanak-van. Balarama knew better than to start a conversation at such a time. It galled him that a merchant like Satrajit should dare accuse Krishna of such an act; it infuriated him that he should have hurled that accusation in open court. But it was done now. As Vasudeva had wisely pointed out, pouring some much needed calm over the soaring tempers, ‘The best way to prove a fool wrong is to let him speak and let time show the error of his words.’

Balarama was actually quite proud of his brother. Krishna had seemed erratic and unlike himself the past few years, but at such a moment, when any man would have justifiably been angry, Krishna had stood his ground. He had faced Satrajit and listened to his diatribe, even stopping Ugrasena from having the man arrested for his insolence and asking the court to let the merchant have his say. After the rich fool was done heaping insults on Krishna, the entire sabha was silent. Eventually, even Satrajit’s own companions began whispering to him and tugging at his sleeves to shut him up. When he finished speaking, even he was aware of the hostile glares directed at him.

Only then had Krishna spoken, and said just one thing: ‘If facts bear out your allegations, I will endure any punishment handed down. But if I am proven innocent, as I know I am, you will endure the same. My king, I leave now to go clear my name and learn the truth of his matter. Let all necessary witnesses accompany me in order to ensure that a record is kept of the events that follow.’

And soon after, they were on the Pushpaka, flying to the mainland. Balarama rode alone with Krishna while the others travelled with Daruka in the other sky-chariot. Out of consideration for the other Dwarkans, Balarama was flying at a genial speed of barely a mile a minute. Neither did he want anyone to insinuate that they did not see what Krishna was doing because he was moving too fast. This was no laughing matter now. All Dwarka was in an uproar over the rash accusations. Answers had to be found, and quickly.

But where were the answers to so many other questions? The question of Pradyumana, for instance? Abducted so long ago. Balarama still experienced fits of impotent rage every time he thought of how that asura had simply walked into Dwarka, taken their most precious thing and disappeared without a trace. And his own fury was scarcely matched by Krishna's own. He recalled the tone and voice with which Krishna had spoken during their descent into the sub-oceanic depths, searching for the lost child and the kidnapper. When the Pushpaka's celestial powers had led them to the severed finger that was all that remained of Balarama's nephew, he had thought Krishna would explode with rage, set the ocean on fire, or raze mountains to dust. He himself felt inclined to do all these things, without thought to the consequences.

But Krishna had changed that day, at that moment, standing on the floor of the deepest ocean, in the darkness of a place where sunlight had not penetrated in a thousand, thousand years. Only the Pushpaka's golden glow had lit the scene. He had seen the darkness swirling in Krishna's eyes as he picked up the severed digit – the flashes of blue lightning, the force of pure Brahman coursing through his brother's being, ready to be unleashed and lay waste to entire worlds. And he had watched as that light had gone out slowly, as if Krishna had succumbed to despair at the loss, accepting the tragedy rather than fighting it, and Balarama knew that things would never be the same again.

Even now, Krishna made no effort to while away the time. He simply stood at the railing of the sky-chariot, staring ahead at the shape of the earth, the rust-red slopes of the Deccan plateau and hills, the rolling valleys and rich red loamy soil of the region. No mention of the fact that it was nigh on mango season, and they could stop to feast on a few juicy golden red fruit on the way home. No talk of anything at all.

Balarama wanted to say so much. To tell his brother he stood by him. To curse Satrajit and his stupid, mercenary mind. To lament the way some Dwarkans had taken advantage of the years of peace and prosperity to enrich their own coffers, even though all property and goods were supposed to belong to the community and not be used for individual profit. To say so much that he had either not said before or been able to say until now.

But words were not Balarama's forte.

That was Krishna's strength.

And Krishna was silent.

So Balarama remained mute as well, not wishing to say something that might upset his brother more; respecting his silence, respecting the attitude of going forth and doing what had to be done, without needing to speak endlessly about it beforehand.

This was what they did, Krishna and he. They did not stop to talk, to question, to doubt, to wonder. They simply went out and did what had to be done.

For their loved ones, their people, for Dwarka, for the Yadava nation, for humanity.

Jarasandha and his entourage entered the master gates of the mountain fortress in triumph. Not a single one of his close allies or generals had so much as a drop of blood staining his armour. Nor had any of them so much as unsheathed his sword. Except for young Rukmi who had hacked down a few Brahmins who had dared to approach them and attempt to speak to the god emperor of Magadha. Whatever minor or major differences the group may have had earlier with their Magadhan friend and mentor, they were all in the past now. The most recent campaign had set every doubt to rest, elevating the stature of the god emperor not merely to its former exalted height, but to a new level of adoration.

Jarasandha had proven once again that he truly was master of the known world. After the humiliating defeats at Mathura and then at Vidarbha, he had raised a new challenge to his enemies. The demon Narakasura's summoning had been his most brilliant strategic move yet.

'Sixteen thousand mountain fortresses, along with their treasures and spoils, are yours, my lord,' said Prince Rukmi to Jarasandha as they reined in their chariots and dismounted. The view from the highest fortress was spectacular, overlooking the sprawling ranges, some snow-capped, others still verdant from the past rains, all rolling and undulating in a vast, endless panoply of sylvan majesty. The Magadhan stood on the edge of the viewing promontory, looking at his newest conquest. 'You have done the impossible. You have conquered the mountain lords.'

'A feat never before attempted, never before accomplished,' said Viduratha solemnly.

'Never before dared, you mean,' Paundraka said. 'Who would dare invoke the ire of the Sixteen Thousand?'

Dantavakra shook his head. 'I fought a skirmish with a handful of mountain lords once. They do not yield even on pain of death!'

Only the last man was quiet.

Jarasandha noted his silence and turned to look at him. ‘Why do you not join in the praising, Shalva? Do you disagree with their assessment?’

Rukmi clapped a hand on his friend’s back. ‘Shalva is merely weary after the long journey. Forgive him his silence, god emperor.’

Jarasandha’s tongues flickered out of the corners of his mouth. ‘He has his own tongue, Rukmi. Let him use it.’

Rukmi swallowed and took a step back.

Jarasandha said to Shalva: ‘Speak now, Shalva. Speak your mind.’

Shalva raised his head to look sullenly at Jarasandha. ‘What would the point of speaking be? You do not brook disagreement or dissent.’

Jarasandha cocked his head as a dog might when contemplating whether to attack or simply growl. ‘I do not brook unproductive dissent, yes. But if you have something useful to offer, pray do. Silence itself is just as unproductive as dissent. Indeed, in some cultures, silence *is* dissent.’

Shalva shrugged. ‘This is not victory as it should be won.’

Jarasandha looked around at the Magadhan forces swarming the fortress. Mountain men and women and their children were being led out in chains, forced to kneel in rows. Those who dissented were bludgeoned. The screams of women being abused and children being thrown over the ramparts filled the air for miles around. The stench of fire and roasting flesh, blood and offal was everywhere, despite the cool, fresh mountain breezes wafting across the open promontory.

‘Why do you say that?’ Jarasandha asked. ‘I am curious that you would say such a thing on the day of my finest triumph.’ He cocked a finger with a lethally sharp, long fingernail in Rukmi’s direction. ‘As your own good friend the prince of Vidarbha just proclaimed it.’

Shalva shrugged. ‘This is a victory won by subterfuge and supernatural means. Not one worthy of warriors. We should have taken the mountain fortresses by force, with war and siege machines, through slaughter and ingress, skirmishes and battles, through bribery and fire bombing, if need be. But as men fighting men.’ He turned and spat. ‘Not like this.’

The others were silent. None of them looked at Shalva now. All were carefully several yards distant from their friend. Nobody stood between him and Jarasandha.

The Magadhan observed this and smiled to himself. ‘Ah, Shalva,’ he said. ‘You make me nostalgic.’

Shalva looked up, surprised. The word was not one he or any of the others had ever heard the Magadhan say.

'Nostalgic for the days when I fought wars the old-fashioned way, the way you just described.' He cocked his head again and thought for a moment. 'Well. Perhaps not exactly that way, but close enough. I fought many wonderful wars so. Men fighting men. Slaughtering entire populations. Committing genocide on whole races. Wiping out cities and kingdoms. It was such fun, I tell you!' He shook his head. 'But there is a time and place for everything. These mountain forts could not be won that way. Or they could have, but it would have taken a long time. A much longer time. Years. Decades, even.'

Shalva shrugged. 'War is life to warriors.'

Jarasandha raised his eyebrows, nodding in approval. 'War is life to warriors. Well said! Well said indeed. War is life to us, that is true. But we are not merely warriors now. We are kings of the world. I am god emperor of Magadha. And Magadha is the capital of the known world now. I intend to rule the entire mortal realm and you fine fellows will rule it with me ... if you wish.'

'We wish, we wish to rule it,' Paundraka agreed quickly. The others nodded vigorously, still keeping their distance from Shalva.

'Very good,' Jarasandha acknowledged. 'As Shalva said, war is life to warriors. Because a warrior lives only to fight. But a king must fight in order to achieve other ends. And an emperor fights wars for reasons that may not even be apparent to kings!' He added slyly, flicking his tongues in Shalva's direction: 'Leave alone to warriors.'

The others looked at the ground, or at the sky, looked anywhere but at Shalva and Jarasandha. It was evident they all expected their friend to be killed on the spot.

Jarasandha smiled at Shalva, twin tongues flicking in and out of his mouth. The crack in his face parted ever so slightly, teasingly, revealing not blood, not organs, not the inner workings of a human body, but darkness. Just darkness.

'And this war had to be fought in this particular manner in order to achieve an end that cannot be explained by most kings or even emperors.' Jarasandha raised his arms to the sky, where dark clouds were already starting to gather. 'This war was fought for reasons only a god could understand.'

He clapped his hands.

And thunder and lightning answered back, insolently.

Once in the Southwoods, it was the work of barely a few hours for Krishna, Balarama and the others to track down and recreate Satrajit's brother's last hours. The fact that the man accused of the murder was himself involved in the investigation made no difference: the facts were indisputable, the trail still relatively fresh, and there were even a few tribals who came forth to provide their eye-witness accounts. Desolate as the jungle might have seemed, it was teeming with life and watchful eyes. Everything that happened there was seen by someone or several someones: it only required the skill and wisdom of an expert to draw out those eyewitness accounts. Nobody present disputed the reconstruction and even Satrajit's own men listened without comment as the story of Prasena's last hours emerged.

This is what happened:

An old, blind lion, hunting by scent alone, and half-maddened by hunger, leaped on Prasena from higher ground when he was riding into the forest. Unable to appreciate the brilliance of the jewel around the prey's neck, the old predator simply tore off the poor fellow's head and proceeded to make a meal of him as well as his unfortunate horse. Prasena's companions watched, but were unable to dissuade the old lion from its well-earned meal, and as their own master was already dead, their efforts were desultory at best. This failure on their part accounted for their subsequent lies about what had actually happened. They were afraid of being blamed for not doing their job effectively and letting their master be killed without so much as lifting a finger to save him.

There was also the fact that they had an ulterior motive in lying to protect themselves and in failing to save Prasena's life.

They wanted the jewel for themselves.

But in one of those delicious twists of fate, the jewel Syamantaka was inadvertently swallowed by the lion in the course of consuming its prey. It then retired to a mountain cave to digest its rich meal. Blind, it did not know that the item in its belly exuded light as bright as sunlight, so much so that the lion

appeared to be glowing from within, like a beacon shining in the dark forest. Prasena's companions were able to easily follow the lion through the woods by this glow alone, and marked the grotto it entered before sending back to Dwarka for assistance.

Meanwhile, the jewel itself was set on its own path. As with all objects that possess power and value, the jewel was finding its own way through the jungles of destiny, making its own fate. Freed from the possession of its avaricious human host and his equally greedy brother, Syamantaka now sought the protection of the most powerful being around. While the lion was a good enough carrier to rid the jewel of Prasena, the old mangy beast was insufficient for the gem's greater ambition. So it used its brilliance to attract a more potent patron.

This happened to be someone quite unusual. The light emanating from the lion's belly was so bright, it disturbed the sleep of a bear within the cave. Offended by the bright light as it was resting, the bear killed the lion without a second thought. Piqued by the continuing of the emanation of light, the bear then tore the lion open to find the source of its annoyance. Upon finding the jewel within its belly, it knew it had found something unusual.

The bear then gave the jewel to his young female cub as a plaything, asking only that she play with it far away from her father's sleeping place!

These latter details had been gleaned from the forest tribals, who knew the old cantankerous lion well enough to know to steer clear of his domain, and who also knew that the old predator, confused by his rich meal of human flesh after so long, had blundered into his last, most fatal error. He had chosen a grotto occupied by none other than the great bear himself. For this was no ordinary rksaa but the lord of all bearkind. The great ancient Jambavan, legendary forebear and creator of the race, former ally of the great Rama Chandra of Ayodhya and general of his forces during the invasion and assault on Lanka to retrieve his abducted wife.

Old, decrepit, cranky, the great bear was nonetheless still virile enough to have fathered a new cub, and still fit enough to wreak havoc when enraged.

The tribals recounted all this to Krishna, Balarama and their party as everyone looked increasingly more nervous and unhappy. The lion had been ordinary enough: even during times of peace, the Dwarkans were unafraid of a mere predator. But the legendary Jambavan himself? The king of bears? This was a being from legend and myth. His exploits had been extolled in kathas sung by

kusalavya bards across the civilized world. He was no mere bear to be challenged and taken down with axes and arrows.

This was the god of bears himself. Who would dare to venture into his den?

'The jewel is lost, then,' said Satrajit's man, a sensible fellow who did not share his master's distasteful flair for misassumption and false allegation. 'Our good lord Krishna's name is cleared and our master has much to answer for. Let us return to Dwarka and report what we have learned to good King Ugrasena. After that, let what will be, be.'

Everybody concurred – except Krishna. Balarama had noticed him getting up and moving away from the main group a little while earlier. He looked around now, wondering why he had not weighed in yet. Everyone else turned to look as well. Krishna's opinion mattered the most, particularly given the circumstances.

Krishna stood in the shade of a sala tree, looking up at the hill in which the tribals had pointed out the dark mouth of the cave that housed the great bear god.

'No,' he said at last. 'I will return only once I have retrieved the jewel. I would not want your master to accuse me of being in cahoots with the bear in some elaborate scheme to steal his precious Syamantaka.'

'But my lord,' said another man who had been sent as part of the court contingent as a witness and observer, 'the jewel is lost forever. It is irretrievable. We will all testify to this fact. And as everyone knows, nobody can befriend the bear god. Even the fiercest of Himalayan rksaas stay far away from his domain. There is no question of anyone casting further aspersions upon your character. What happened is obvious; so is the fact that you played no part in any of it.'

'Even so,' Krishna replied, beginning to unbuckle his golden belt and ornaments, 'I will not return until I have retrieved the stolen property. That jewel belongs to a Dwarkan and another Dwarkan was killed while he was in possession of it and the item stolen. It is my responsibility to retrieve it and return it home.'

Balarama stepped forward, speaking cautiously. 'Bhraatr, are you sure you wish to do this?'

Krishna finished undressing and was now clad only in his langot. 'It is not a wish, Bhaiya. It is my duty. Stay here if you wish or return home to Dwarka. I will come back when I have regained possession of Syamantaka.'

And with those final words, Krishna strode naked, except for his loincloth, towards the hill which housed the god of bears.

seven

Krishna made it clear to Balarama that nobody was to enter after him, not even Balarama. ‘No matter what you hear or what happens next, you must wait this out. Do you understand?’

Balarama frowned. ‘But what if—?’

‘No “what-ifs”, Krishna insisted. ‘No “but’s or “if that, then this”. You and the others will do nothing except wait. No matter how long I am gone. Please promise me, Bhaiya.’

Balarama hesitated, then shrugged. ‘Very well, Bhai. I promise.’

‘Good. I will see you when I see you.’ Then he walked into the cave and, in a moment, was lost in darkness.

Balarama waited several moments, then looked downhill at the others. They were looking up at him expectantly for further instructions. He indicated with a raised palm that they must wait, then sat on a rock near the mouth of the cave, prepared to remain for hours, even the rest of the day if necessary.

The sounds of the forest lulled him. It was peaceful here, in the so-called Bhayanak-van, ‘The Forest of Fear’. The reputation stemmed mainly from the history of the forest. In another age, it had been the domain of asuras, with one in particular dominating its history. A yakshi named Tataka had held sway over the Southwoods for centuries, filling it with her strange hybrid offspring, contaminating the water, soil, fauna and flora with her potent asura effusions, and turning it into a dark, brooding jungle of terrors. It had taken a great seer-mage of the ancient world, accompanied by two young yoddhas – champions among the warriors of their era – to rid the world of Tataka’s menace. Men still sang odes to the historic legend of Rama and how he defeated Tataka.

Come to think of it, it was in that same era that the legend of Jambavan the bear god had sprung up. For it was in Rama’s service that Jambavan had enlisted himself and his rksaa army. The greatest army of bearkind ever assembled in memory had been gathered on the shores of the south-eastern edge of the subcontinent, thence to proceed across the ocean to neighbouring Lanka, where

a great ancient war had been waged. There had been other armies, all marshalled and heralded by the equally legendary Hanuman, son of the wind god Marut, all in service of the great Rama Chandra of Ayodhya.

Balarama wondered what had become of Jambavan and Hanuman and the other survivors of the age of Rama – where they had gone, what they had done, how they had spent the intervening centuries.

Where do heroes go after victory? Do they melt back into the annals of history and legend, only to be resurrected when they are called upon again? Or do they simply cease to exist and are reborn in each new era with a new name?

How many Ramas were there throughout history, serving dharma as its sword and shield?

He did not know when he fell asleep, but he began thinking or dreaming of an endless line of Ramas, passing one by one like a line marching through history.

He woke to the sound of a terrible screaming. The earth was shaking underfoot, the hill was crumbling, and as he opened his eyes and sprang to his feet, the top of the hill burst open, sending boulders and debris cascading in every direction, as if the world itself were coming to an end.



Dwarkans, tribals and forest animals, all went scurrying for shelter as the hill exploded and a minor avalanche of debris came crashing down. Even before the dust settled, the sound of roars, blows and thuds attracted everyone's attention. Peeking out from behind tree trunks, boulders and bushes, they looked upwards at the extraordinary sight.

Krishna, naked except for his langot, and covered with dust and mud, was battling a gigantic bear that was the height of a sala tree and several times the thickness of a sala trunk. Its winter coat of fur was thick and dense, each hair bristling with anger. As Krishna dodged, leaped aside and somersaulted to avoid each deadly blow, its massive claws swung through the air. One blow struck the edge of a protruding lip of a solid granite rock and chips flew as the powerful claws gouged chunks out of the stone. Its ponderous feet raised puffs of dust as it jumped in pursuit of Krishna. The bear barked exclamations as it was frustrated time and again by Krishna's gymnastics.

For his part, Krishna was doing all he could simply to avoid being struck, clawed or crushed by the giant rksaa. As he leaped to the top of a boulder, the bear pounded it, swinging from side to side in that unique 'bear' action that no other creature could survive or defend itself against. The boulder resisted a little more staunchly than a man or a lion could have, but succumbed nevertheless, and was reduced to a pile of shards and chips as the unstoppable claws gouged great holes in the rock. Even as it crumbled underfoot, Krishna leaped in the air, somersaulting as he went, to land on a grassy knoll. He rolled head over heels several times, then stood up.

The bear roared in frustration and ran after him. Though his weight made him slow and ponderous, once he began moving, he picked up speed rapidly and bore down on Krishna with murderous eyes, claws ready to slash flesh and rip bone to shreds.

But Krishna was ready. In an audacious move, he somersaulted again – not away from his attacker but towards him. He leaped up and over the bear's left shoulder, then punched the spot behind the creature's left collarbone with an impact that could be heard all the way downhill as a sharp crack, like a branch snapping.

The bear roared and corrected its course, trying to slow down and turn around at the same time. But Krishna was already leaping the other way, over the fury head, groin flying just past the snapping snout and dripping jaws – a few inches amiss and Dwarkadhish would have been unable to father children! The bear tried to turn with his foe but ended up spinning around too fast, losing his footing.

Krishna slammed the bear's right shoulder and neck with both his bare feet, dealing the rksaa a blow that sent the creature sprawling over the edge of the slope. With a roar of indignation, claws slashing the air and snout snapping wildly at nothing, the bear fell head first and tumbled downhill, roaring and barking and crying out all the way. Its ponderous weight precipitated another landslide as rocks, debris and a few tons of earth were displaced by the massive creature's downward descent.

People and animals got away from the path of the creature and the debris, which crushed a tree or two in its course. The bear was tangled and half-buried in it.

Krishna leaped to the edge and waited for the bear to reach the bottom and called out in a forceful tone: 'Lord Bear, I have no enmity with you or your kind.

I ask only that you return the possession you took from the lion's belly. That jewel was taken from a fellow mortal and it is my task to return it home. Give me the jewel and you may go your way in peace.'

The bear glared up balefully at the figure at the top of the hill. When Krishna finished speaking, the creature bellowed and came to its feet, coughing out dirt and leaves. It raised itself to its full height and began pounding its chest. As the spectators watched in astonishment, the bear began to expand in size, growing larger, larger, and still larger, until it towered not only above the treetops but above the hill itself. Now, he was looking *down* at the man on top of the hill, his claws at a distance from which he could easily reach out and swat Krishna away like a gnat.

The bear roared and raised both paws to use as a joined fist, and brought them down on the top of the hill at the exact spot where Krishna stood, pulverizing hill and man alike with one mammoth blow.

eight

The mountain lords stood sullenly on the large plateau-like rampart that passed for a sabha hall amongst their people. For the tribes of the great peaks, all important work had to be done in full view of their ancestors, the mountains themselves. Surrounded by snow-capped peaks, the surviving lords of the original sixteen thousand chieftains now stood before their ancient forebears. How many times had they or their predecessors stood on this same sacred spot, bearing witness to the judgements pronounced on so many wrongdoers, champions, warriors and kings? Now, it was their turn to be judged and their jury was a terrible one.

Jarasandha stood in front of his entourage on the king's landing promontory, the highest point of that place, his thin long arms raised to summon the powers of the nether realms. He had been chanting shlokas invoking asura maya for hours as the mountain lords were assembled before him on the rampart below. The sky boiled and gnashed its teeth with thunder, gargling and spitting out lightning bolts to light up the dusky darkness that had fallen prematurely. Along the fort walls and ramparts that ran along the tops of the mountain ranges in every direction for as far as the eye could see, the mountain people, enchainied and enslaved in their own fortress, stood in large clusters, watching as their lords were judged. The wind carried the wails and lamentations of the mountain folk.

Shalva had been forgotten now. He had been spared the wrath of the god emperor, let off with merely a talking to. His friends had told him he was lucky to have escaped certain death and advised him to keep his mouth shut. He did. Even the most outspoken man present knew better than to interrupt dark necromancy. And this ritual was the darkest any had beheld in a thousand years.

As the light dimmed and the shadows grew longer, figures detached themselves from the deepest corners of the darkness, and emerged into the sickly twilight. Some furry, some spiked, their snouts bristling with razor-sharp teeth that were still wet and dripping with the blood of their victims, the creatures came up from the lower levels to reveal themselves at last. Their hooves clicking

and cantering on the flagstones of the fortifications, they snarled and snapped at the lightning and growled back at the thunder. But Jarasandha's incantations and the imminent arrival of their master kept them in check.

Rukmi stared at the creatures. He had not actually seen these beings that clung to the darkness and slunk away into shadows, keeping to the periphery of vision, up close before, even though he had glimpsed them being created and unleashed by the Magadhan on previous occasions. Now, he saw them clearly for the first time. They resembled no animal as much as wild boars, but they were also unlike any boar he had ever seen.

Their bristles were pointed – capable of cutting open human skin at the slightest contact, slashing flesh, even causing mortal wounds if pressed close in passing. The brindled bristles pointed in all directions, ensuring damage no matter what angle the creatures struck from. In place of the usual two tusks at the front of the snout, they had an array of tusks, and their lower jaw was filled with oversized teeth sticking up and outwards at different angles. Black with red lines deep in their fur, they were the size of large boars. Their eyes simmered like burning charcoal in the gloomy light and shot out twin red beams that converged on whatever object or person they were looking at, no matter how distant. Once those eyes locked on a quarry, nothing could dissuade the creature from its prey.

'Suscrofa of the Suinae!' Jarasandha said in his tenor pitch. 'I thank thee for thy service that you rendered in the taking of the mountain fortresses.' The Magadhan's words were audible to all, no matter how distant, thanks to asura maya.

The suscrofa raised their snouts and issued a long plaintive bark that resembled the sound of a sick dog coughing. It echoed along the length of the fortress ramparts.

'You have done well,' Jarasandha acknowledged. 'And you have been rewarded richly with a feast such as you have not partaken in aeons. The rich taste of human flesh is a delicacy never to be forgotten, is it not?'

The suscrofa moved their snouts in agreement.

'Now, you may watch as your father partakes of his own reward. For it is his due to enjoy the spoils of war.'

At this, they raised their snouts and began a plaintive howling peal that echoed around the peaks for several seconds.

'After he is done, you may retire once again to your subterranean labyrinths and sleep the sleep of the just. Until you are called upon to serve again.'

The suscrofa appeared to be in disagreement with this statement. Many barked, some howled, several gnashed their teeth and danced and spun in rage. Others attacked the Magadhan soldiers nearest to them, ripping them open and eating them alive to show their displeasure. This tantrum went on for several minutes while Rukmi and the other allies looked on with growing nervousness.

Jarasandha smiled at them as if to indicate that he had not lost control of the situation. Then he uttered a mantra that turned the world pitch dark for a brief moment. When the light returned, it was deep crimson – a burning red that matched the red lines that emitted from the eyes of the suscrofa but suffused the whole world.

Shalva and the others looked around, dismayed at the crimson cast that coated them all. Everyone and everything appeared to be washed in blood.

Jarasandha raised his hands, uttering one more incantation. Then he put his fingers to the line that marked the place where his separate halves were joined, and pulled hard. He pulled himself apart, creating a yawning hole.

A portal to naraka, Rukmi thought.

And that was literally what it was. Not a portal. A vortal. That was the correct term. For it transcended time and space and all natural laws. Not merely a doorway between worlds but a corridor that linked the past and future, worlds uncreated and never created.

Jarasandha opened the vortal and released his protégé.

Milady!

The sound of the daaimaas shouting carried all the way to the queen's chambers. Even Rukmini, immersed in her usual torpor, was startled to alertness. Her first thought was that something had happened to Krishna – the only thing she could think of that would warrant such panic. She sat up in her bed, gathering her wits and garments about her. The daaimaas came into her chambers, faces flushed and chests heaving. She got to her feet, holding on to a pillar for support. Surely the devi would not be so cruel as to take her Krishna away from her as well? *Please, Maa Durga, let it not be Krishna. Anything but that.*

It was in that instant that she knew that she still cared deeply for her husband and could not bear to be parted from him. Yet, the tragedy of a decade-and-a-half ago had left its scars on her emotionally. She was not the woman she would have been had she not endured that tragedy. So she trembled and prayed as she waited for the daais to spill their news.

'Someone has arrived,' they said breathlessly. 'Come see for yourself!'

Rukmini frowned. 'Who has arrived?'

But they would not answer. They compelled her to go with them, leading her not down the stairs to the main entrance of the palace but to the large marble-floored terrace on her level that ran the perimeter of the queen's chambers, open to the sky above and with a splendid view of the ocean. The sun was low in the late afternoon sky and its slanting rays were soft and golden on the city, lending Dwarka's palaces and mansions and the enormous parijata tree a golden hue.

She looked around but could see nothing.

'Where is the visitor?' she asked. 'Is he down? Do you mean to show him to me from here? Why not simply go down?'

The women were all silent.

Rukmini marvelled at their rapturous looks and ecstatic expressions.

'What has got into the lot of you today?' she asked, starting to grow irritable. If this was some kind of prank ...

She saw then that they were all looking upwards, at the sky.

She glanced up as well, expecting to see Krishna's Pushpaka descending.

Instead, she saw Krishna himself.

Floating several dozen yards above the royal quarters of Dwarka.

There was a woman with him, a beautiful older woman. They were holding one another intimately, in a lover's embrace, hovering above Dwarka.

Rukmini's heart lurched. What did this mean? Was Krishna bringing home another wife? Was this to be her reward for years of fealty and service, for enduring the loss of their child, for suffering through the years of her husband's denial of her?

Ever since the day her little Pradyumana had been taken, things had never been the same between Krishna and her. It was as if he had become a different man that day. She had *loved* the Krishna she had married, but that man left her the day they lost Pradyumana; and the person who remained in his stead was very different.

Still, she had endured and survived. Remaining loyal to her lord all these years.

Only to see this? Her husband embracing another woman – an older woman at that – in full view of the city–kingdom?

Oh, the humiliation!

'Why show me this?' she blurted out, pushing the daaimaas away angrily. 'Is this how you care for me? By showing me such hurtful sights?'

They looked at her, then at one another.

'Beloved queen,' said one, 'you misunderstand our intentions. We meant you no harm or pain. We thought you would be filled with joy when you saw him.'

'Yes,' said another daaimaa. 'He descended close enough to speak with us a moment earlier, but would not come to ground unless we summoned you and you agreed to let him come home.'

Rukmini wiped her tears angrily with the end of her upper garment. 'What does he need permission for? To come home or to bring home another woman to take my place?'

Again, the daaimaas looked puzzled. 'We do not follow your meaning, great mistress. Are you not happy? Are you not overjoyed? The entire city is coming

out of doors to witness his homecoming. It is a great day for Dwarka. You of all people should be happy and proud.'

Rukmini shook her head. 'Proud? Happy? What fools you all are. How can a wife be happy and proud at her husband bringing home a new wife? Nay. If he wishes to act thus, let him go to another home. Let him build himself a new palace. A new city for all I care. Let him have his own island-fortress elsewhere. This is a great ocean, with plenty of space for him to build another Dwarka someplace else where he can dwell in conjugal bliss with his new beloved. I will not welcome him home here – not now, not today, not ever.'

The women looked dismayed, all except the one named Radha, who had come to be close enough to Rukmini to consider herself and be considered a friend. Radha took hold of Rukmini's hand, clasping it between her own palms.

'Milady, do you fathom the full import of what has happened here? I think perhaps you are mistaking the situation for something which it is not.'

'I know exactly what it is and what is happening,' Rukmini said coldly while looking at Radha without malice. 'It is a common enough story. I never thought it would happen to me or that Krishna would behave like this ... like any ordinary man. But I suppose that's what I forgot to remember: that he is just a man.'

Radha smiled and pressed Rukmini's hand warmly. 'Nay, milady, you are mistaken and your anger misplaced. You think that is Krishna up there, waiting for your permission to come home, do you not?'

Rukmini frowned at Radha, then glanced up again at the figures floating above. 'Of course it is Krishna. I do not recognize the woman but the man is unmistakeably ...' She trailed off.

The figures had begun to descend. Floating slowly downwards like ethereal beings, they landed on the terrace, mere yards away from where Rukmini stood.

She could see both man and woman clearly now. 'Of course it is Krishna,' she said, 'but ...'

But he looked so young. A decade, perhaps even more, younger ... Nay, he looked no more than half her husband's age. There were no grey strands at his temples, no laugh-lines around the eyes and mouth. His back was ramrod straight and his face smooth and unaged. He looked exactly like Krishna, but a Krishna no more than an adolescent. Fifteen, maybe sixteen summers of age.

'It cannot be,' she said, as much to herself as to Radha. 'He is too young to be Krishna, and yet ... and yet he looks like—'

'His father?' Radha asked, touching her arm gently.

Fifteen or sixteen – the age her son Pradyumana would have been had he lived.

Rukmini cried out as the realization struck her. Even as the handsome young man began to approach her, walking in a proud upright manner that was wholly unlike her Krishna. Physically he still resembled her lord and husband, but when he moved – and in a moment, when he spoke – he was his own man. But that alone was not what convinced her. It was a tiny difference between him and her Krishna.

The young man in front of her was missing the smallest finger of his right hand.

The bear roared in triumph as the last echoes faded into the depths of the forest. Great flocks of birds wheeled over the forest, startled by the violence and sound. Animals howled, squealed and cried out all round, terrified that Lord Bear was on the rampage and would destroy them all. Some cried out in joy because they had seen Lord Bear fighting a mortal and were eager to watch him destroy the two-legged hairless monster whose fellow men hunted and abused their kind, destroyed their habitats and ate their young or used their pelts as artificial clothing to stave off the cold. This was not the domain of mortals, cruel two-legged hunter-murderers, hated and feared by one and all of the forest dwellers. Many rejoiced that Lord Bear was avenging the deaths and abuse of so many of their kind by slaying this impudent intruder.

But the bear's exuberant cry had barely faded when the mortal rose up again – bathed in dust and dirt but unharmed, upright. Every watching pair of eyes widened in disbelief. Even Lord Bear himself, proud and gigantic in his moment of victory, paused to peer down, snout sniffing the air to try to make sense of this affront to nature. He had expanded himself to the size of a small mountain and pounded the mortal using enough power to pulverize the hill itself.

But the mortal stood unscathed.

Lord Bear wondered how the mortal could have survived such a blow.

The answer came as the mortal raised his dirt-smeared face and spoke in a tone that was felt in every listener's bones, reverberating like a deep bass growl. Like the voice of an earthquake speaking.

'Jambavan, recognize your master.'

The bear stared.

'Jambavan, I command you in the name of the oath of fealty you swore to me once. Cease this futile battling and hand over the jewel to me, for it is all I seek. Once I have it, I will leave your domain and leave you in peace.'

The bear cocked his head as if listening not only to the words that reverberated through the forest like thunder gnashing in the distant horizon, but

to other, older words, spoken many aeons ago.

'Jambavan, heed me.'

Jambavan appeared lost for a moment, frozen in his reverie. His deep dark-red eyes stared into the distance, not at the endless miles upon miles of dense forest that ranged in every direction all the way to the horizon, but at some ancient event that had once occurred and which he had forgotten – or had been unwilling to recall for much too long.

'Rksaa, I command you, hand over the jewel.'

Jambavan stayed frozen thus for a long moment. Then, with a shudder that rippled through every yard of his enormous body, the fur heaving like a sea of grass swept by a gust of wind, he bent his great back and hooted thrice. The sounds were sharp and loud, and carried for a great distance through the forest, awakening and alerting animals many, many yojanas away. Even rishis and munis, lost in their ghor tapasya, raised their bowed heads, instinctively responding to the call of a living being in distress.

The bear cried – a plaintive series of cries that resembled hooting, barking and coughing more than mortal weeping. Yet the pain and sorrow were unmistakeable. The crying was all the more heart rending for the size of the bear, for it made the sorrow and pain even more tragic.

The mortal waited on the rubble of the hill, staring up at the bear as it worked out its sorrow at those ancient memories. His eyes glowed deep blue, pulsing and waning, as if some great force lay banked behind his pupils, a force as vast and infinite as the blue sky above, the blue oceans that filled the heart of the planet, and the force of which the universe itself was created.

Finally, Jambavan ceased his weeping and daubed his paws at his eyes, wiping away tears or swatting himself to stop crying; it was hard to tell which. He stared down at the mortal with no less malevolence and malice than before.

'YOU!' it cried. 'YOU CLAIM TO BE HIM? THE SWORD OF DHARMA? THE ONE WHO WAS MY LORD AND MASTER ONCE? TO WHOM I SWORE THE ETERNAL OATH OF FEALTY? THE ONE FOR WHOM I SACRIFICED MY ENTIRE RACE IN BATTLE AGAINST THE RAKSHASAS OF LANKA? YOU WOULD HAVE ME BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE HE, THE ONE AND ONLY? THE SAME? HOW IS IT POSSIBLE? HE DIED BY TAKING SAMADHI IN THE RIVER SARAYU, FOLLOWED BY HIS BROTHER LAKSHMANA AND ALL THE DENIZENS OF AYODHYA. CHOOSING DEATH UNDER DHARMA

RATHER THAN LIFE UNDER ADHARMA. YOU CANNOT BE HE WHO DIED A LONG TIME AGO IN A LAND NOT FAR FROM HERE.'

The mortal raised his head. 'I will prove that I am he. On the field of Lanka, after the great war with the rakshasas, you spoke great words to me. Words I have never forgotten, for they sum up the tragedy and futility of war itself. You said, and I repeat verbatim, "The price of war is the prize of war." Do you recall saying those words to me, Lord Bear?'

THE BEAR SNORTED. 'THOSE MIGHT BE MY WORDS. WORDS I UTTERED. BUT WHEN, WHERE AND TO WHOM? TO HIM, THAT'S WHO. NOT YOU. TO HIM I SPOKE SUCH WORDS. YOU CANNOT BE HE. DO YOU HEAR ME NOW? HEAR THESE WORDS: YOU ARE NOT THE SWORD OF DHARMA!'

The mortal shook his head. 'You cannot deny the truth the universe speaks to your senses. Listen to the world. Listen to the forest. Listen to the pores of your being. Listen to every star in the sky, every world on which life crawls, creeps, walks, swims, flies or teems. Ask all creation. Ask the eternal mother herself. Ask infinity. Ask water, river, ocean, lake, pond, stream, brook, teardrop, rain. Ask wind, gale, storm ...'

'ENOUGH!' The bear pounded one clawed foot down on the ground, hard enough that the watching Dwarkans, a hundred feet away, were thrown up into the air several feet with the impact and fell sprawled on the forest floor. They rose to their feet, dazed but unhurt, as the bear continued. 'ENOUGH WORDS. ENOUGH PROOF. I DO NOT BELIEVE YOU. YOU ARE NOT HE. I HAVE SPOKEN AND THAT IS ALL. I WILL NOT GIVE YOU THE JEWEL OR EVEN THE SATISFACTION OF ACKNOWLEDGING YOU AS THE ONE YOU CLAIM TO BE.'

Now the blue light pulsed hard and bright, coldly washing out before the mortal, casting its lurid glow on the forest before him. 'I do not claim to be. *I am that which I am.* Acknowledge it. Return the jewel.'

The bear raised his snout proudly, crossing his paws across his chest in the universal gesture of stubborn refusal. 'I SHALL NOT!' he said firmly.

The mortal raised a clenched fist. 'Then you leave me no choice, Lord Bear, my old friend. If you will not give it willingly, I will have to thrash you and take it.'

Jambavan snorted with derision, then spread his paws, slapping his own chest, raking those terrible claws across his chest fur, which rippled and shivered. 'YOU CAN TRY!'

The mortal rose up through the air like an arrow, flying a hundred yards in a trice, racing straight at the giant bear.

Man and bear collided with a clash that seemed like worlds ending.

eleven

Rukmini had finally stopped weeping. They were seated in her palace now, surrounded by daaimas and palace staff. The family had been sent for and people were on their way. She knew that soon everyone would descend upon them and it would be a melee of emotions. She wished to know so much, to ask so many questions, to be alone with her beloved son. Her Pradyumana. She looked at him – this proud, handsome, perfect specimen of a young man – and her heart filled with joy and motherly pride. This was her son! Alive and well and grown to manhood.

She wrestled with a thousand questions, a thousand confusions, a thousand doubts. Finally, she summed them all in a single question, a single word. ‘How?’ she asked simply.

Pradyumana nodded. ‘It is a strange story, Mother,’ he said in a voice so much like Krishna’s, yet not exactly like her lord’s. It was younger, deeper, lighter and with a different accent – a foreign one. It sounded wonderful to her ears. She could listen to her son speak forever. It would not matter what he said, so long as he kept speaking, kept breathing, stayed with her always – alive, healthy, strong and beautiful. Her son!

It was with great effort that she was able to focus on the conversation. A great part of her simply wanted to embrace and cuddle him, her long-lost baby boy. Even though he was clearly no longer a baby, that was the way she had last seen him and it was hard to reconcile this grown man with her beloved infant. But she was not just a mother now, she was queen of Dwarka; and a queen must comport herself with decorum. So she compelled herself to stay dignified and conduct a formal conversation.

‘I would ask Rati-devi to tell the tale,’ he said, looking deferentially at the beautiful older woman beside him. ‘If she would.’

The woman bowed her head, acknowledging his show of respect and returning it in kind. ‘It would give me great pleasure,’ she said in a mellifluous voice with the same accent as Pradyumana’s. ‘You have lived with the belief that

your son was lost for so long. How do I sum up so many years in so short a time?’

‘Tell me only what matters,’ Rukmini said. ‘Sketch an outline and I will ask you to fill in the details later. I only wish to see the larger picture, to make sense of the whole thing.’

The woman looked at her with beautiful grey eyes. ‘Of course, Queen Rukmini.’

The story made Rukmini’s heart leap and flutter. But she contained herself. It was important to know the facts. For so long she had imagined her infant to be dead, his corpse tangled in the weeds at the bottom of the ocean – or worse, eaten by some sub-oceanic beast. As the mind always will, hers had wandered to outrageous thoughts and fantasies. One of these had involved his being rescued by the sea gods, either Sagara or Varuna, and being raised as an adoptive son, gifted with the power to move water and raise squalls and tsunamis as he willed. A powerful yet fair and just lord of the ocean.

The truth was far stranger and simpler.

Sambhara was an asura who had an old enmity with Krishna and had vowed to avenge himself on Dwarkadish, egged on by Krishna’s arch enemy Jarasandha. How Sambhara located the island kingdom itself, Rati-devi did not know, but somehow he had done the impossible and found the lord after he had shifted the entire Yadava nation to this new city-state. Possessed of the power to assume any form at will, he had slipped into Dwarka in the guise of a mortal, pretending to be a citizen, and he learned all he could about his enemy and how he might hurt him most.

When he came to know that Rukmini had just borne an offspring, his decision was made. Changing his appearance to resemble Krishna in every last detail, he entered the palace and made his way to the queen’s chambers. None of the daaimaas suspected him, and so it was easy to take possession of the infant and flee. Child clutched to his chest, he ran like the wind from the palace, which is what alerted everyone. Leaping up to the towering walls of the fortress, he stopped long enough to show his true form to the sentries as they rushed towards him, and identified himself so that the lord might know that he had taken his revenge. Then Sambhara had leaped into the ocean, sinking to the lowermost depths.

Thus far, everything was as Rukmini had known already – as Krishna had found out and told her, fifteen long years ago. It was from this point onwards

that the real story emerged.

At the bottom of the ocean, Sambhara sought out the most vicious beast he could find and fed the infant to the creature, which accepted this snack with great relish, gobbling up the infant without a second's hesitation.

When Rukmini heard this part, she clutched her chest, unable to imagine that terrible moment. Her baby fed to a sea monster! She felt a surge of anger that Krishna had not been able to stop such a crime. What use was it being Dwarkadhish if he could not save his own son from such a terrible fate? She forced herself to listen, her heart surging with emotions as the ocean itself must have surged that terrible day.

His deed accomplished, Krishna's son destroyed, revenge exacted, Sambhara returned to his own home in another kingdom, quite distant. He went to his wife, Mayavati, who had no inkling of his crime, although she knew quite well of his true nature and his past misdeeds and demoniac acts.

At this point Rati-devi paused and added, 'I am Mayavati, wife of Sambhara. It is myself I am referring to in the story I narrate. My given name in this birth is Mayavati. How I came to be here in this form and with this identity, I will explain shortly.'

Rukmini said nothing. But she noted the way her son sat close to Rati-devi – or Mayavati – and the way he kept looking at the woman and touching her hands and shoulders affectionately. Their manner was that of husband and wife, or lovers at least. And yet, she had just explained that she was the wife of Sambhara the asura! Rukmini listened with rapt attention, eager to know the answers to these mysteries.

NARAKASURA!

Jarasandha's voice was filled with a melancholy that was not typical of the god emperor. It was as if saying that name caused him immense pain and sadness. Yet it had to be done.

The creature that had emerged from the vortal created from Jarasandha's own body stood on the promontory, outlined by the unnatural crimson light that suffused the world. Even the snow-capped mountains in the distance appeared to be washed in red. It was a fitting tone for the bloodshed that had cost the mountain tribes their kingdoms. Hundreds of thousands of tribesmen had been slaughtered, and the surviving mountain chieftains stood on the flat space of judgement.

Narakasura stood before them, looking down at the gathering of kings. They looked up at him and, despite themselves, their fear was evident on their faces. Even in that garish light, the dread they felt could be seen. Brave and bold though they were, they had never faced an enemy like this before.

Narakasura towered above even the person that had 'birthed' him into the mortal realm. Jarasandha himself had to look up when addressing his creation. The asura loomed above him, a larger, more hominid version of the suscrofa that watched from the ramparts all around the mountain ranges, snorting and sniffing, clicking their heels and gnashing their tusks at the sight of their father and lord. Like his children, Narakasura resembled a wild boar. Like them, his body bristled with fur that had pointed tips and was spiked in the deadliest of ways. His tusks were larger and more dangerous than any of his smaller counterparts. His head and snout were as large as their entire body.

But his lower half resembled a man more than a hog. He stood upright on two hind feet and there was something about the way he looked around, raised his snout and turned his head that was undoubtedly anthropomorphic.

'Narakasura!' Jarasandha cried again.

The being raised his snout and barked. It almost sounded like a word.

'Behold. Your children have done you proud. They have completed the task given to them and taken the mountain strongholds. They were exemplary in their stealth, burrowing deep within the mountains from yojanas away, taking weeks to tunnel through millions of tons of hard rock and shale and basalt and iron and earth, until finally they were able to burst through into the mountain forts themselves, slaughtering and wiping out every able-bodied man of the tribes. It was a task admirably accomplished, and they have fed and feasted to their content on the enemy.'

Narakasura bleated approvingly, shaking his snout and showing his shivering tongue. His suscrofa imitated him, displaying their contentment at their rich feast.

'Now, it is time for you to complete the task. All the mountain warriors are dead. The only men of fighting age that remain alive are the lords of the kingdoms themselves. Sixteen thousand there were when this campaign began and most of them still stand before you on the place of judgement below.'

Narakasura peered at the gathering of kings on the flat space some hundred yards below. The mountain lords exchanged glances as they looked up hesitantly but defiantly. They were overwhelmed by the sudden usurpation of their land, the slaughter of their armies and the presence of these foul supernatural beings; but they were still proud, their spirit undefeated. They gave each other courage as they straightened their backs and looked up and glowered at the being

'Go now, my friend,' Jarasandha said. 'Face the mountain lords and challenge them to a duel to the death. Finish this campaign and show my enemies that to face Jarasandha of Magadha is to face certain death and devastation.'

Narakasura raised his snout and howled long and low, the sound as deep and reverberating as a giant bone-horn's wail, and carrying itself far across the mountain ranges.

The mountain lords below looked uncertain but stood their ground.

'But before you go,' Jarasandha said, 'behold the spoils that await you once you succeed.'

He gestured, and a quartet of Magadhan soldiers held upright a giant flag and waved it to and fro so that it could be seen by their counterparts on the peaks of the other ramparts atop the mountain ranges in the distance. From every mountain fort for hundreds of miles around, soldiers dragged out the queen consorts of the mountain lords in chains, still wearing the fine diaphanous silk robes and jewels that befit their rank. Even in the garish red light, the women

were luminous in their beauty and shone like beacons across the mountain ranges.

Narakasura turned his snout this way, then that, gazing at one, then another, then yet another beauty. He sniffed the air, trying to scent out each one individually. It was obvious that he found them attractive. His suscrofa brethren bleated and yelped and shook their tongues in their open jaws to indicate their approval.

'Sixteen thousand queens,' Jarasandha said, tantalizing the asura. 'Each more beautiful than the previous one. Each one a mortal woman worthy of bedding a king and fathering princes. Imagine the pleasures that await you, Narakasura. All you have to do is widow them and in the tradition of the mountain tribes, as the slayer of their kings, you earn the right to make them your own queens!'

Narakasura raised his snout to the sky one last time, taking in the combined scent of all the women. Then he bellowed a single sound – part challenge, part declaration – and leaped off the edge of the promontory.

Shalva, Rukmi and the others exclaimed and ran to the edge to look over. They saw the boar demon land on all fours on the flat space over a hundred yards below, leap up and begin sprinting, gathering speed, racing towards the mountain lords.

The kings – all clad in full battle armour – saw him coming and raised their weapons. Close to sixteen thousand of them in all. Determined to avenge the slaughter of their armies and defend their kingdoms to the death.

The single asura and the sixteen thousand men met in a death match.

It was no match at all.

thirteen

The battle raged across the forest. Both bear and man were empowered with great abilities. The bear swatted at the puny mortal in fury, and when he missed, his giant paw cut a swathe through the forest, severing the trunks of a hundred trees as if they were mere pine needles being snapped.

The mortal leaped through the air, flying a hundred yards, and struck at the bear with both feet. Even though his legs were barely the size of two strands of hair on the bear's back, the impact caused the great bear to lurch forward, losing his footing. The mortal struck again and again, and yet again, until the bear tottered, teetered, and finally lost his balance.

He went knocking this way and that and, trying to regain his balance but failing, he went down crashing through a thicket, crushing trees and pulverizing rocks with his immense weight. His outstretched paw struck a stream, splashing a spume of water above the top of the tree line. The ground shuddered for miles around.

The tribals had all begun to back away, giving both fighters plenty of room. The Dwarkans followed their example, knowing they could be of no use to their lord, but very much at risk of being turned to pulp by the struggle between the titans. But though they retreated several miles, they were still in danger of being harmed. Debris and rocks and trees flung by one or the other opponent came flying every which way, threatening their lives and well-being.

So they retreated further, until, from a clearing almost a score of miles distant, they observed the fight as best as they could. The sheer noise and disruption of the clash was audible and visible even this far away. The details no longer mattered. All that they could do now was wait to see who won eventually.

It was only a matter of time, they assumed. How long could two opponents fight each other? Hours? An entire day? Two days?

But as the hours stretched into a day and then another day, and then a third, and the fighting continued unabated, they began to reassess their expectations. Some of them gambled and bet on how long the fight would go on, and even on

who the winner might be. Almost everyone bet on Krishna, of course, but one or two wise mouths decided that it was worth betting a few coins on the hirsute opponent, just in case. After all, the bear was still holding his own. That itself merited respect.

After a week of fighting, they no longer bothered with estimates. They simply waited. Some were of the opinion that they should build temporary housing, others opined that they go back to Dwarka and await their lord's return. In the end, they simply made the best of the circumstances and waited.

The fighting went on for twenty-eight days without a halt.



The fighters raged on across the forest, devastating the region. The animals and birds had departed in the first hours itself, knowing a natural calamity when it struck. The other denizens of the jungle, both insect as well as plant, could hardly scurry away to safety. The entire fauna and flora of the region was erased from existence. As was the jungle itself.

After twenty-eight days, the area resembled a battlefield where armies of giants had gone to war. This was true in a sense: the bear was the size of a small mountain and had used every weapon at hand, from uprooted trees to boulders and rocks. He had flung or swung everything he could at the mortal.

The mortal had struck back with trees and boulders too, picking them up and heaving them as easily as the bear. But his most lethal weapons were his speed and size. Able to fly and leap and somersault in ways the bear could not, he had been able to slip in far more actual blows than his opponent. And despite his relatively puny size, each blow had struck home. The bear bore the bruises and marks and wounds of a thousand strikes. In contrast, the mortal, while coated with grime and barely recognizable as the handsome Lord of Dwarka, was without any serious injury.

It was not that the bear had not been able to strike Krishna. He had. And each blow had been devastating, landing with the impact of a mountain, followed by a jolt as jarring as a thunderbolt. But Krishna had survived them all, shrugging off some as if they were mere pats of affection, and rising after enduring others with some grogginess but no real impairment.

The bear was weary and tired, hungry, thirsty, hurting in a hundred places, bleeding, cut, swollen, bruised, impaired, unable to move a single muscle without agonizing pain, and most of all, he was exhausted beyond belief. It took all his energy now to simply stay on his rear paws, standing upright. That changed a few moments later as the mortal struck hard at his nether limbs for perhaps the hundredth time.

The bear fell to all fours, a stance which still kept him much, much taller than the mortal, but made him feel as if he had granted a major concession. He grunted in anger and frustration as the scent of cool river water came to him on the wind, bringing with it the unspeakably delicious aroma of fat pregnant salmon, swimming upstream to lay their eggs. He loved salmon and it was never more delicious than when pregnant. He knew his fellow bears would be up there on that mountain slope, knee deep in glacial river water, swatting at the passing streaks of silver, thwacking the fish on the nearest rocks to stun them dead, then biting into those blood-rich bellies to eat the tasty fresh meat.

He almost swooned at the thought. He had not eaten or drunk anything in twenty-eight days. It was different during hibernation when he barely moved. Expending no energy meant needing to replace none. He had been fighting, using more strength and energy than he had ever used in his long life. Never before had he fought an opponent this tireless or powerful. Never before had he struggled this long without success. Never had he endured so many wounds and injuries.

He knew he could not continue for much longer. It was only a matter of hours. He was on all fours now. Soon he would not be able to stay on his fours either. He would collapse, exhausted, exposing his belly to the mercy of his enemy. And then, the great and illustrious life of Jambavan, lord of all bearkind, would be ended.

Heed me well, old friend. I do not intend to kill you. It is the last thing I would ever do. It grieves me even to have inflicted such harm on your being. Pray, stop this senseless struggle now. Let us sit down and speak as we once did. As friends.

Jambavan raised his snout and sniffed, nodding in confusion. The words had not been spoken aloud. Yet he had heard them clearly. In his mind. They were spoken with the manner and sound of the mortal's voice – but were received directly within Jambavan's mind without the benefit of aural delivery.

Who are you? asked the bear, so exhausted, the words were spoken in his mind. *No mortal could fight me the way you did. You are someone other than who you seem to be.*

I am exactly who I say I am. You need only look at me more closely and let your spirit see the truth. Close your eyes, shut your ears to the noise of this realm, and open your heart and soul to my true form.

Jambavan hesitated. He could not trust an enemy. The mortal might be using this subterfuge as a ruse to trick him into letting his guard down.

Then again, Jambavan's guard was already down. He was done for. Finished. The mortal needed no trickery to defeat him. It would take only a few more blows to the head or chest and Jambavan would willingly lie down forever rather than suffer any more punishment. So he knew there could be no harm or loss in doing as the mortal said.

With a weary sigh of hope, he shut his eyes, snuffed out air once, loudly, through his snout, and allowed himself to do as the mortal bid.

fourteen

'The monster that consumed your beloved Pradyumana,' Rati-devi said, 'was unable to digest him. His inherent godliness was too powerful to be subsumed by a mere fish's hunger. Instead of being digested by the creature, he caused it great pain and distress. The sea monster thrashed and rose to the surface, leaving its sub-oceanic depths. It was caught in the nets of deep-sea fishermen who, knowing how rare such a creature was, rejoiced at having captured it and resolved to take it to the house of a great lord who appreciated such rare delicacies.'

"The lord's servants purchased the monster, knowing their master would relish its meat, and cut it open in preparation for cooking. Imagine their surprise when they found an infant inside its belly, still alive and perfectly preserved except for a missing finger that had been severed when the beast had swallowed the child. Astonished by this discovery, they took the infant to their mistress, the wife of the lord of the house.'

Rati-devi paused again, her grey eyes looking soulfully at Rukmini. 'That was none but myself, for the house to which they had brought the great fish was Sambhara's. He was renowned for enjoying such delicacies. At that time my vile husband was still away travelling, aiding and abetting his ally Jarasandha of Magadha in his awful schemes and pursuits. When my servants brought this child to me, I was speechless.'

She looked at Pradyumana, touching his smooth cheek with the back of a finely manicured hand, letting her long, painted fingernails rasp against his jawline. The gesture was unmistakeably sensual in intent and Rukmini felt a twinge of emotion, but said nothing.

'You see, Queen Rukmini,' said the beautiful older woman, 'I had been told to expect the arrival of just such a child into my household one day.'

'You had?' Rukmini asked. 'By whom?'

'By the great sage Narada,' replied Rati-devi. 'He appeared to me in a dream one night, seemingly present before me, yet not really present at all. He was

communicating with me by means of some mysterious passageway between worlds, and he imparted unto me a great secret.'

Curiouser and curiouser. How did the legendary seer-mage Narada figure in the tale of the abduction of her newborn? Had not Rukmini heard talk of Narada among her husband's people before? The half-heard tales she vaguely recalled had been as mysterious as Rati-devi's encounter. She listened with even more interest.

'The great sage told me that I was in fact the reincarnation of Rati-devi,' Mayavati said, 'the wife of the deva named Kama.'

Rukmini stared at the woman seated beside Pradyumana. From his keen expression, she saw that he believed Rati-devi or Mayavati implicitly. How odd! To claim to be a goddess reborn, wife of a god. And not just any god and goddess, Kama and his wife Rati were the bestowers of love! They governed the aspects of romance and erotic attraction among all creatures, mortal and otherwise, in all known worlds.

'I see,' Rukmini said, not sure how else to respond to such an extraordinary claim.

'Yes,' Mayavati, aka Rati-devi said. 'Once Sage Narada imparted this knowledge to me, I grew aware of my past lives. Eventually, I remembered my original form and life as Rati-devi, how much I loved my husband and paramour Kama-deva, how inseparable we were, and how our joining energized all creation itself.'

Pradyumana stroked Rati-devi's forearm gently. It was a relatively innocent, if intimate gesture, but between the two of them, it seemed a powerful acknowledgement of their love for each other.

Rukmini tried not to look away or appear overly embarrassed. After all, her son was now a grown man; and if he truly had feelings for this woman, he had every right to express them. But the difference in age between them still made her somewhat uncomfortable. Why, this woman was clearly older than she herself!

'Narada-muni also told me that one day my Kama-deva would also be reborn in mortal form and return to me, and when he came of age, we would be reunited forever.' She paused and leaned forward, touching Rukmini's knee. 'You must surely have heard the story of Lord Shiva's deep meditation and how the devas required his services urgently in order to confront and destroy the demoness

Tataka, and how, when all else failed, my husband was despatched to awaken the Three-Eyed One from his deep tapasya?’

Rukmini nodded. Everyone knew the story and how it ended. ‘Mahadev was irate at being disturbed during his meditation. He opened his third eye and—’

‘And scorched my Kama to ashes,’ Rati-devi finished. ‘And from that day forth, the god of love lacked a form and body.’ She placed a hand possessively on Pradyumana’s bare chest. ‘Until now. Until the birth of Pradyumana. For your son, Queen Rukmini, is none other than Kama-deva reincarnated. And that is why fate brought those fishermen with the sea monster bearing your abducted infant in its belly to my house and no other. Because it was fated that my Kama return to me.’

Rukmini stared in wonderment at the woman. ‘But he was an *infant*. And you were a grown woman already! There must be thirty years difference in your age!’

Rati-devi made a discarding gesture as if throwing away those dividing decades. ‘Such things are immaterial. We are eternal soulmates. Nothing could keep us apart now that we were reunited in mortal form at last.’

Rukmini’s head spun. But she knew she had to hear the full story. ‘Please go on. What happened next? After all, it was your husband in this lifetime, the asura Sambhara, who abducted Pradyumana and threw him in the ocean. When he realized that the infant had been brought to his very house, did he not fly into a rage and attempt to kill him again?’

Rati-devi smiled. ‘He would have, had he known it was the same child. But he did not. He thought it was my child, or rather his and my child. For you see, Rukmini, fate willed not only that my Kama be brought back to me in this fantastical manner, but that I should be with child at that very time. My own child was stillborn. All I had to do then was substitute our stillborn child with Pradyumana. My daais and I told everyone that the child found inside the fish was dead – something everyone accepted without a doubt – and that this boy was my own child, by which I mean this very same young man sitting beside me.’

Rukmini looked at Pradyumana. ‘But you were Sambhara’s wife! Would he not have recognized his victim?’

Rati-devi shook her head. ‘Why would he? He came home to find that his pregnant wife had finally delivered a beautiful, perfect baby. Why would he ever assume or doubt that his child would be the same son of Krishna whom he had fed to a monster at the bottom of the deepest ocean?’

Rukmini reached out and took hold of Pradyumana's left hand. 'His little finger. It was severed. Surely he would recognize that!'

Rati-devi held up Pradyumana's left hand with the fifth finger missing. 'You mean this finger? This was lost after my villainous husband fed the innocent infant to the sea monster. Sambhara had no knowledge of the finger being severed. As far as he was concerned, the great fish ate the whole infant.'

Rukmini thought about that for a moment. 'So he thought my son was dead. And assumed that the child he found in your arms was your son, his son?'

'Aye,' said Mayavati. 'Now you see the true picture. But hear me out, the most important part of the story is yet to come.'

fifteen

The bear thought he had died and gone to swargaloka. Nothing else could explain this sensation. Every pore in his body felt alive, every cell awakened. His wounds were gone – magically healed. His cuts, bruises, sprains, all had vanished. Even the cracked joints and broken bones were repaired. He felt better than he had felt in a thousand years. Two thousand years! He felt like a young cub again, but larger, stronger, wiser, infinitely more aware. How was this possible?

Then he looked up at the being in front of him and knew.

He looked not with eyes but with the inner senses, the mystical third eye that mortals spend decades meditating in order to open, the eye of the mind, the one that sees what cannot be felt with mere flesh, blood, muscle and bone.

The being before him was resplendent, astonishing, filled with grace and light and all that was beautiful in the universe. He *was* the universe. He was creation itself. The essence of all life. Pure energy incarnate.

‘Swayam Bhagwan,’ Jambavan said gruffly, in his own way as reverentially as he could speak the words. ‘Haridev, it is thee. It is truly thee!’

Aye, old friend. You do not know how good it feels to hear you speak to me with love and affection. My ears have craved the sound of your gruff tones for millennia.

Jambavan realized suddenly what he had done these past twenty-eight days – how bitterly and brutally he had fought and attacked and sought to cause harm ... and to whom.

‘My lord!’ he cried now, tears springing from his closed eyes as he grovelled, lowering his snout to touch the forest floor. ‘Forgive me! I raised my paws against thee. I knew not what I did. I had not eyes to see your true nature. I committed a grave transgression!’

You are forgiven, my dear friend. It was not your fault. Do not waste any more time on these grievances. I have forgiven you and forgotten the whole incident. Now rise up and embrace me as one friend embraces another.

Jambavan did as Krishna bade him. After a hug that would have crushed a granite mountain, he released the mortal at last and wiped the tears from his snout with the backs of his paws. His yards-long claws had long since retracted into their grooves. He had no further need of them now.

'My lord,' he said, 'you have returned from vaikuntha to grace us with your presence. What brings you back to this wretched mortal realm again?'

I have been on this realm for many decades, old friend. It is you who has failed to sense my presence.

Jambavan's fury brow crinkled into a frown. 'How is that possible, great one? I am your servant eternal. How could I not know of your arrival?'

Such is the game of gods. My presence here has been veiled by my closest allies and loved ones. Even if I show myself to a select few, they soon lose all memory of the encounter. This is all part of a larger plot that is unravelling. I still do not know what the end is.

'I see.' The old bear looked sad. 'It is unthinkable that you and I could have been together so much sooner and yet I was not even aware of your presence. I did not even sniff you out, Hrishikesh! I am so embarrassed.'

Do not berate yourself. The fault is not yours. It lies with those who would see me dethroned from vaikuntha forever.

Jambavan's snout jerked up. Even though shut tightly, his eyes rolled from side to side angrily. 'Who would dare plot against Vishnu Incarnate himself? Who would wish the Preserver harm? You are dharma personified. Your deeds and actions and words are beyond reproach. What cause could anyone possibly have to act against you?'

Even gods have enemies, Lord Bear. You should remember that. On our last encounter, you aided me greatly. You risked life and limb and sacrificed millions of your fellow rksaas in order to win me back the most precious thing I had lost. Do you recall it now?

Jambavan peered back into the past with the eye of his memory. He saw the great field of Lanka where enormous armies of rksaas and vanars battled equally great armies of rakshasas and other asuras. He saw his friend and fellow warrior Haridev in his earlier incarnation – a completely different mortal form and appearance, with only one aspect exactly the same: both incarnations were dark-skinned, black as a crow's feather, so black as to appear almost bluish in certain light. He saw himself and his friend standing, looking out at the remains of the

armies after the end of the war, and heard his own gruff growl speaking words of advice to that incarnation.

'I recall it now, with the aid of your powerful presence,' he said. 'What a day that was. What a victory.'

Krishna sighed. The battle ended, and yet, the war goes on.

Jambavan shrugged his great shoulders. 'So has it ever been. There is no end unless there is a new beginning. For nothing is truly created or destroyed. Everything merely transforms, transmigrates, transmutes. Just as you were once Rama Chandra of Ayodhya, and are now Krishna Vasudeva of Dwarka, so the form changes; but the eternal *aatma* remains the same – unblemished, untouched, unscathed.'

My soul does not feel unblemished, untouched or unscathed. It feels battered, bruised and broken.

Jambavan tilted his head with concern. 'You seem unduly troubled, great Lord of Vaikuntha. It is a dark day when even you find no solace or hope. What is the cause of this grieving?'

I will show you rather than tell you, my friend. In order to do this, I must take you to a place where we cannot be spied upon by mortal or immortal eyes.

Jambavan bowed his head. 'Take me where you will, lord. I am yours to command. All that I have is yours.'

Thank you, my friend. When we return, I will take from you the object that you found in the lion's belly. The shining jewel.

'That trinket?' Jambavan scoffed. 'It means nothing to me, lord. Merely a shiny toy for my daughter Jambavati to play with until a suitable husband comes along.'

Krishna sighed. *You could have said that twenty-eight days ago and saved both of us a great deal of time and strife, old friend.*

Jambavan looked at the devastation they had wrought in the Southwoods. 'What? And give up the chance to have such an epic brawl? Never! It was the best fight of my entire honey-stealing existence!'

Krishna stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing.

Jambavan joined him, snorting gruffly.



Many miles away, the Dwarkans and tribals listened with rising puzzlement to the distant sounds echoing through the forest.

‘What kind of fighting is that?’ asked one of them.

‘Must be some foreign technique,’ replied his companion.

sixteen

The bedchambers of Rukmini were hushed as the queen and a few trusted daais listened intently to the story narrated by Mayavati. From time to time, every woman would steal a look at Pradyumana, resplendent in his youthful beauty like a jewel.

He resembled Krishna so exactly in every detail except his voice and walk that so long as he sat still and quiet, it was impossible to believe he was *not* Krishna. Both his biological mother Rukmini and his foster-mother Mayavati looked at him with moist eyes and full hearts, and thought of him as a woman thinks of her husband. For to Mayavati he was literally her long-lost husband Kama-deva reincarnated. And to Rukmini, he was the personification and embodiment of Krishna Incarnate.

And if his own mothers could view him in such a light, how could the other women view him as anything but the most desirable man they had ever set their eyes on? Most affected was Radha who was unable to take her eyes off young Pradyumana. She watched him until her eyes watered – whether with strain or with emotion, it was hard to tell. He was aware of her constant gaze but unaffected by it.

Once, he looked in her direction and smiled; but it was a distant smirk, not the intimate look of affection that her Krishna would have given her; and so she knew he was not truly her Krishna, but it did not matter. For the duration of that period, it was as if she were a young gopi once again and the Flute of Vrindavan was present before her. Life stretched out before them both, wide open and beautiful as the skies and valleys of Vraj, filled with infinite possibilities.

Rati-devi proceeded with her tale. ‘Because I did not wish Sambhara to suspect anything and cause harm to the boy, I forced myself to keep my secret until he was of age. But as he matured to young adulthood, my innermost emotions began to reveal themselves unwittingly to him, despite my best efforts.’

She looked at Pradyumana with an expression that left no doubt as to the emotion behind it. ‘Finally, one day when my conduct and overtures exceeded

normal limits, he reacted. He reminded me that I was his mother and he my son, and such words or gestures were not appropriate to our relationship.'

Seeing Rukmini's curious expression, she hastened to add: 'Now, I had not actually done anything that could be considered improper, but it was evident that my thoughts ran to such actions. After all, remember that I knew he was not my son, not even nominally or by adoption; he was actually my late husband reincarnated in this body. So to my mind, there was nothing inappropriate about anything I might do with him. But for social purposes, I was regarded as his mother, and in order to protect him from Sambhara's wrath, I had to play the part convincingly.'

Rukmini understood, or thought she did. What Mayavati said was true: she was in no way related to Pradyumana. So it could not be considered improper even if she entered into a romantic relationship with the boy. But what Mayavati did not seem to realize was the age difference between them. Rukmini found it scandalous that a woman of Mayavati's age would not see that such a difference might be considered just as offensive as an adoptive mother making overtures to the boy under her guardianship. Why, Mayavati was much older than Rukmini herself! And Pradyumana still only a young adult.

But she held her peace, wanting very much to hear the whole story.

Mayavati continued. 'Once Pradyumana became aware of my true feelings for him, I saw no point in hiding them. I told him the truth, confessing everything. When he heard that Sambhara had abducted him from his parents' house and thrown him to the sea monster, he was roused. He desired nothing more than to confront Sambhara, kill him and return home. It took a great deal of convincing on my part to make him delay his revenge.'

Mayavati then explained how she was possessed of the ability to use maya or the art of illusion to channel the power of Brahman to magical ends. In Sambhara's hands, this was misused as asura maya, but such misuse could not exploit the full potency of Brahman power. Pradyumana, on the other hand, was Kama-deva reincarnated as well as the son of Krishna Vasudeva. He was blessed in Brahman. She taught him her most potent mantras and astras, and he trained in the use of these celestial weapons under her guidance, preparing for the day he would confront Sambhara.

Finally, one day, unable to watch Sambhara abusing Mayavati as he was habituated to doing each time he returned from his travels, Pradyumana confronted the asura with the facts of his own identity.

Sambhara was enraged to learn that he had been raising Krishna's son – the very child he had abducted and tried to kill – in his own house! The knowledge unsettled him, causing him to act rashly and charge at the boy without any thought or preparation.

Pradyumana, on the other hand, was well trained and prepared. While Sambhara's age, experience and fighting skills were formidable, Pradyumana had acquired some skills and abilities of his own. Using Brahman maya, he fought Sambhara blow for blow.

They began with ordinary clubs and quickly progressed to demoniac maya.

Now, Sambhara had acquired his knowledge of maya from the creator of that dark art, the demon lord Maya himself. Taking the battle to the sky above his own abode, the asura attacked Krishna's son with a storm of weapons that could have massacred an army.

But Pradyumana had been taught well, by a good mistress. Despite the terrible onslaught, he kept his calm and resorted to a sattvic mantra – designed for only one purpose: to annul the effect of asura maya.

The incantation served its purpose, thwarting the entire storm of weapons.

Sambhara was shocked and enraged. He had never met a foe who could withstand his asura maya so effectively – except one. That foe had been none other than Krishna himself. At that moment, the veil of illusion that had been cast by Mayavati was dispelled and Sambhara saw for the first time that Pradyumana resembled his true father so precisely that he might as well have been Krishna himself facing him in combat.

Sambhara unleashed every weapon in his arsenal. He used not one or two or ten, but every last incantation, spell, astra that he possessed knowledge of. He used weapons that were known only to guhyakas. Others known to gandharvas. The astras of pisachas. Shlokas hissed by nagas. And most potent of them all, the rakshasa mantras that had been so effective in the Last Asura Wars, which even the great Rama Chandra of Ayodhya's father and forebears had been hard-pressed to withstand in ages past.

But Pradyumana's preparation had been thorough and had included all eventualities, and he withstood everything that was thrown at him. And survived.

Realizing that his violence was futile, Sambhara raged and rushed at his opponent, seeking to do to him with an ordinary sword what the most potent chants had been unable to accomplish.

Obeying the rules of war and Kshatriya code of combat, Pradyumana took up a sword as well and faced Sambhara's attack.

Swivelling easily on his perfectly balanced hips and agile feet, Pradyumana avoided the demon's attack, swung around, and with a single blow, severed Sambhara's head from his body. The demon's decapitated head, still with its shock of red hair and red beard, earrings and helmet, thudded to the ground.

Mayavati stopped speaking and was silent for a moment. She raised her hand and laid it on Pradyumana's shoulder. 'And with that, I and all the others dwelling in that kingdom under Sambhara's tyranny, and all those who had suffered under the demon's yoke of brutality, were avenged and set free. Without wasting another moment, I used my maya shakti to fly Pradyumana and myself through the sky, bringing us to Dwarka to be reunited with you and his father. And that brings us to the end of my tale. Now, all that remains is for Krishna and you to bless Pradyumana and me and grant us your permission to wed and be reunited as husband and wife.'

seventeen

The mountain lords raised a great cry as they charged upon their enemy. The place of judgement atop the mountain was large and flat enough to serve as a battlefield for a small army, and with the sheer number of kings, it was indeed a battlefield now. The watching queens looked on from the ramparts of mountains far away, their eagle-keen mountain eyes able to discern the general pattern of the fray if not every brutal detail. Jarasandha and his allies watched from the promontory above the place of judgement. Ranged along the rim of the promontory, the suscrofa watched as well, the reed-thin beams from their glowing red eyes criss-crossing the battlefield as if marking out their own desired prey. They grunted and squealed in anticipation as the two vastly unequal forces met in combat.

Sixteen thousand mountain lords, each a giant of a man, every one accustomed to hard combat, for in the mountain kingdoms, any man might challenge his king and, if he won, become king in his stead, living with his queen, fathering his children and governing his wealth and property until some other man challenged him and won. This tradition and the hard mountain life made them kings not only in name but in deed. Each one was a champion, capable of holding his own in battle and sweeping entire companies of rival armies.

But this was no ordinary foe. This was Narakasura. The demon summoned from the deepest levels of hell. And he was an enemy such as the mountain lords or people had never encountered before.

He landed at the place of judgement a hundred yards below in a crouch from which he straightened at once, like a man might after leaping down a horse. The mountain lords charged the instant he landed, rushing at him from all directions in a semicircle that closed to a crescent and turned into a circle as they shrewdly trapped him in with sheer numbers. Like a pack of hyenas might circle a lion, they bore down on him from all sides at once with great force and vigour, weapons raised and hoarse voices shouting murder. They closed the few hundred yards to their enemy quickly, collective breaths steaming in the high altitude.

Narakasura ignored them all.

Without even a glance at the onrush, the asura grunted once and lowered his snout, at which, a transformation began to occur.

The watching suscrofa howled in pleasure as they understood what their lord was doing.

Shalva, Rukmi, Paundraka, Dantavakra and Viduratha watched with growing puzzlement as the giant boar-headed asura began to change. The other kings and allies of Magadha watched with uneasy frowns as well. Only Jarasandha smiled knowingly. The thin line separating the twin halves of his divided face flickered with a strange effect as if some force beyond the vortal answered the call of the asura below.

In a few moments, Narakasura transformed into a gigantic version of the suscrofa. Now, instead of having the body of a man and the head of a boar, he was all boar from head to hooves.

Ranging over a score yards tall at the withers, he towered above the approaching mountain kings. His back and haunches bristled with a longer, larger, deadlier version of the same brindle fur sported by his smaller brethren. The razor-sharp ends of the bristles pointed every which way. The tips of his hooves were equally sharp. Protruding from his snout were tusked teeth, each one at least a yard in length, and growing by the instant. The tusks curved and twisted wickedly, like serpents undulating, yet each was bone-hard and as deadly as serrated blades.

The charging lords slowed their onward approach, dismayed by the transformation of their enemy. Whatever they might have expected, whatever their courage and bravado, this was beyond their ken. They had no notion of what this beast was or what he was capable of in combat. How could they face him? There was no hope for them and they knew it even as they slowed. Their faces turned grim and they called out to one another, as brothers might in the last heated onrush of a battle's final moments.

'Courage!' they shouted to each other. 'Courage!'

And with courage on their lips, they completed their charge, picking up pace again as they reached the solitary enemy and struck him from all sides in the meagre hope of wounding him mortally or impairing him so that their comrades behind could finish the task.

It was like watching a naked man throw himself upon a pit of spear points.

The instant the tip of even a single fur touched one of the mountain kings, it ripped him in two. It didn't matter if it touched leather, armour, a sword or an axe. The bristling fur cut anything as easily as a knife through a boiled fruit. Flesh ripped open and burst like flagons of wine. Skin shredded. Metal peeled. Weapons fell to pieces. Bones split apart. Men were reduced to slabs and slices.

Hundreds perished in that first charge alone, ripped and shredded at the lethal points of Narakasura's fur. He merely stood and let them attempt their charge.

Hundreds cut themselves to death on his bristles with the force of their own charge. Heads and limbs went in separate directions, all mingling and falling together in a slippery, wet carnage.

In moments, the area was littered with the butchered parts of what had been perhaps a tenth of the defending force of kings.

The survivors had slowed to a halt, staring up in horror at the adversary. They looked down at the remnants of their fellow lords, unable to believe the destruction wrought so quickly. And thus far, the enemy had not so much as lifted a limb or made an aggressive move!

Now, as they watched with the knowledge of doom, Narakasura raised his head and turned to gaze upon them. Twin beams of red light flashed out with blinding force. While the light that blazed from the beady eyes of the siccrofa simply sought out and marked its prey, this light was very different. The beams were no less than spears or arrows of light, striking out to pass through whatever they touched. Everywhere they travelled, they gored into the bodies of men with the impact of double-edged spears, cutting through flesh and bone and armour and steel like it was warm, soft wax.

He swept his eyes this way and a hundred lords fell to pieces, their slaughtered bodies and severed limbs falling with a strange squelching noise. He turned that way, and another hundred lords died.

Then he lowered his head and swung it around, even as his tusks continued to snake outwards, growing at incredible speed. They shot out in twisting, undulating spirals, criss-crossing each other's paths as they went, producing a mesh of interwoven ivory-yellow serpentine trails that shot through the ranks of mountain lords. The tip of one tusk would punch through the torso of a lord, penetrating his armour and leather carapace, bursting through his chest and lungs and heart, exiting through his back and continue through the man behind him, and the one behind, and so on. In moments, the battlefield was writhing

with a yellowish-white network of twining tusks shooting out in all directions, butchering men by the dozens.

And then he bellowed and charged. The mountain lords stood their ground, knowing they were about to die and wanting the quickest, bravest death possible. And they fought as valiantly as it was possible for any group of men to fight such a being. They threw axes, swords, spears, arrows and even themselves at the beast, flinging their lives away in one concerted, desperate attempt to defend their lands, their companions, their people, their pride.

The floor of the place of judgement ran dark with the ochre of their blood and flesh. Had the whole world not been tinged by the crimson light, it would have been a charnel house.

Finally, the slaughter was done. Narakasura stood alone and alive in the midst of the carnage. The suscrofa squealed in delight, stamping their cloven hooves, their fur bristling with happiness. Their lord and forebear roared one final time, then began the transformation. The being that resembled a giant razorback boar metamorphosed back into a man with a boar's head.

Then he changed even further.

His fur reduced until it was only a hairy patina, no more than a very hirsute mortal man might have; the bristles turned soft and touchable and not harmful to mortal skin. The tusks reduced until they were the size of fingers, sticking up on either side of his stubby nose. The light in the eyes was dimmed until it was only a deep crimson in the depths of his irises. The head still remained boar-ish, the shoulders and back of the head and snout unmistakeably porcine, the walk and manner distinctly hoggish.

He crouched and leaped upwards – a hundred-yard leap – and landed on the promontory where Jarasandha and his allies still remained. The others kept their distance, nervous at being in the presence of this killing machine. But Jarasandha greeted him like a father embracing his son returned home from war.

'Well done, my friend,' said the god emperor. 'Now have you truly earned your reward.' Jarasandha gestured to the queens, the widows bemoaning the brutal death of their husbands. 'All sixteen thousand of them!'

eighteen

Uddhava was waiting when the Pushpaka landed. ‘My lord,’ he said, ‘Queen Rukmini wishes to see you at once. Something extraordinary has happened.’

Krishna sighed. ‘My friend, look at me.’

Uddhava looked at Krishna. He had never seen Dwarkadhish in such a state. Instead of the rich garments he usually wore, he was dressed in a simple langot. And even that modest item of clothing was filthy with mud and dirt. His body was covered with grime, bruised and cut and discoloured like a wrestler’s after a long tournament.

‘You have been fighting, my lord?’

‘I have. For twenty-eight days without a rest. And my opponent was none other than Lord Jambavan, father of all bearkind. We destroyed a substantial part of the Southwoods in the course of our battle.’

Uddhava stared at Krishna. ‘That is extraordinary.’

‘It is. So I have something extraordinary to report to our good king Ugrasena and you have something extraordinary to report to me. But I need to deliver my extraordinary news first. So let us proceed directly to the sabha hall.’

‘But, my lord, Queen Rukmini—’

‘Is my spouse for life. She has waited weeks for me to return from this journey. She can wait a few more hours.’

Uddhava started to say something else, but Krishna shook his head. ‘Enough, good Uddhava. I am going straight to the sabha hall now. You may tell Queen Rukmini that I will join her as soon as my business there is done.’

Uddhava nodded but did not look happy. He watched as Krishna strode away, then turned and walked in the direction of the queen’s palace.



The court reacted with a chorus of exclamations when Krishna walked in dressed only in a filthy langot, looking no less ursine than the great bear he had recently battled.

King Ugrasena peered down at his grandson. Queen Padmini looked intrigued, Vasudeva and Devaki concerned, Devaki rising and wanting to go to her son. Krishna waved her away, reassuring her with a smile and gesture that he was well. She resumed her seat but still looked worried.

'I ask that the court forgive my present appearance,' Krishna said as he strode up to his grandfather's dais and throne. 'But as you can see, Grandfather, I have returned directly from the Southwoods. There, with some effort and expenditure of time, I was able to retrieve the lost object of contention and resolve the truth of what happened to Satrajit's brother.'

Balarama and the other Dwarkans who had made the journey with Krishna entered and explained the whole story, including an account of Krishna's fight with the bear that everyone present found hugely entertaining. When they reached the end of the fight, Krishna picked up the narrative again.

'After Jambavan and I reconciled our differences, he admitted that he had killed a lion that had strayed into his cave. Within its belly, he had found the half-digested head of a man who could be none other than Satrajit's brother, Prasena. For around the neck of the severed head was a gold chain with *this* attached to it.'

Krishna opened his fist to reveal a glimmering, glowing jewel that shone so brightly that nobody could look directly at it. Its brilliance filled every corner of the palace, causing a calico cat curled lazily in a corner to snarl and swat the offending light away with its paws. The sabha hall was suffused with the jewel's power and everyone present felt it and knew that this was no ordinary accessory.

'So the question that Satrajit had posed when he approached this court a few weeks ago is answered. His brother Prasena stole the jewel and fled to the Southwoods, intending to use the jewel's power to build his own kingdom. Like most ambitions of greedy men, this one came to naught. A blind lion leaped at Prasena and his horse, and bit off Prasena's head and swallowed most of it. The jewel was swallowed as well; and later, when Jambavan killed the lion for intruding on his domain, he gave it to his daughter, a mere cub, to play with as a shiny trinket. So we now know conclusively that Prasena was killed not by me but by his own greed and folly. And I have brought back the jewel itself as proof to clear my name of this unfair accusation.'

And with those words, he tossed the jewel to Satrajit who stood there, astonished and speechless. The merchant caught the jewel with difficulty, almost dropping it, then held it up for all to see. Despite its blinding brightness, he examined it as well as he could. Overwhelmed, he embraced the jewel, clasping it to his chest like a mother clutching a newborn babe. For several moments, he appeared to have forgotten where he was and seemed unaware of the presence of the rest of the court, including the king and queen. It was obvious that this was the effect of the jewel and his obsessive fascination with it. Finally, when he looked up, every pair of eyes in the sabha was staring at him. He started, then looked around, embarrassed at being seen displaying such secret emotions in public.

'Forgive me,' he said, repeating the apology several times. Tears sprang up and flowed down his face. 'I am stricken with remorse. I accused Lord Krishna unfairly, maligning his reputation and blaming him of having committed the grossest of crimes. I also blamed him of having stolen this very jewel. Now, looking at his state and knowing from first-hand witness accounts how long and hard he had to fight to retrieve my possession, I am ashamed to the core. Which king would have risked his life and limb, endured such hardship, battled such a fierce being in the deep jungle, for twenty-eight days? We live in an age where kings believe it is their birthright to become emperors. The former outcaste Jarasandha was not content with being crowned king of Magadha; he sought to be emperor of the whole world. In Hastinapura, our own King Vasudeva's sister Pritha's sons struggle merely to be recognized as the rightful heirs to their father's throne and kingdom. And here is Krishna, who has devoted his entire life to saving and protecting our people. Because of my foolish greed, he was sent away from our beautiful kingdom to battle a terrible creature in a dark forest. And for what? That I might have possession of this thing again!'

Satrajit walked over to where Krishna stood and fell to his knees. He held out both hands, palms upwards, offering Syamantaka. 'Take it, my lord. Take it and forgive me my unjust accusations and cruel words. Forgive me for all the trouble I caused. Punish me if you will. I deserve nothing less than the harshest sentence you see fit to pronounce. But take this wretched jewel from me. It has already cost me my brother and you so much. I do not wish to possess it any longer.'

There will a long moment of silence as the court waited. Krishna stood immobile and inscrutable, looking down at the bowed head of the ageing merchant. Then he bent down and, reaching out, took hold of the merchant's

shoulders with both hands and raised him up to his feet again. He placed his hands on the merchant's, closing the fists over the jewel.

"The jewel is yours," he said. "Keep it. Your apology and repentance are punishment enough. I am a servant of dharma. All that I do is in service of the people of Dwarka. It was my duty to find the truth behind your brother's demise and retrieve this trinket. I need nothing further."

Krishna looked around at the court, then turned to the royal dais. King Ugrasena's age-lined face was smiling, pleased by his grandson's response. "And now, if you will all forgive me too, I will go wash off the dirt of battle and dress more appropriately!"

He was turning to go when Satrajit called out. "My lord, please, I beg of you. Hear me one last time."

Krishna turned. "Yes?"

"My lord, you are generous and kind beyond imagining. But I have said things that cannot be unsaid. Your reputation is beyond reproach, but mine will never survive the accusations I have levelled against you. The people of Dwarka will shun and despise me. Nobody will do commerce with me or my family. We will be ostracized forever."

Krishna raised an eyebrow. Everything the merchant said was true. That was the reason why he had seen no reason to punish the man further. "Mayhap. But what would you have me do? I have accepted your apology. I can do nothing about how people feel or think about you."

"They will not think or feel that way if you were to accept a gift from me – something that unites your house and mine. A bond that would link us forever. It would be my way of showing my repentance and gratitude; and on your part, it would show that you have forgiven me and therefore accepted recompense."

Krishna raised his other eyebrow as well. Satrajit was a shrewd man. Not for nothing was he known as the shrewdest merchant in the kingdom. "What gift would ensure such a bond?"

Satrajit gestured and a young woman came forth, beautiful of limb and features, with a face that shone as brightly and purely as the Syamantaka itself. She came forth shyly but looked at Krishna with an open longing that did not conceal her feelings.

"This is my daughter Satyabhama. She is the true jewel of my heart. She has always harboured great adoration for you, Lord Krishna, and has expressed her

desire to be with you many times. Accept her hand in marriage. Unite your house and mine, and link our reputations forever.'

nineteen

Rukmini was glowing with anticipation. This was the happiest day of her life, even happier than the day Krishna had taken her as his wife. That day had been overcast by the shadow of her husband's feud with her brothers and family, his humiliating them on the battlefield and the routing of her homeland's armies.

But today was perfect. Their son had come home at last! Believed dead for so long, not only was he alive, he was a beautiful young man, a demon-slayer, possessed of great powers and strength, a deva reborn in mortal form, no less. She would have preferred to have had only Pradyumana back, without the added complication of his paramour Mayavati – or Rati-devi as she insisted on being called. But there was good there too. He was clearly happy with her. And if that was what was fated, so be it. She would not let anything cast a blemish on this perfect day.

Now, she waited eagerly for Krishnā's return. He had been gone for weeks, off to the Southwoods on some mission to retrieve a lost jewel. She did not know the details and did not much care about them. Her marriage had consisted of unending series of days, weeks and months spent waiting for Krishna to return from some mission or adventure. When he did return, the stories he brought back were so hair-raising, they gave her sleepless nights for weeks. She had learned a long time ago not to ask too many questions and not to care too much, lest she be constantly overwhelmed with anxiety.

She was dressed in her finest garments, ornamented in the best jewels, and the glow on her face outstripped the beauty of all the garments and jewels combined. She knew she looked beautiful and desirable, and she believed that today marked the start of a new phase in her marriage. For too long had Krishna and she been at odds.

She did not deny that she had always blamed Krishna for the abduction of her son. How could she not? He was a supreme yoddha, the greatest Yadava warrior ever born, perhaps the greatest warrior in itihasa. Yet his own infant son had

been abducted from under his very nose, snatched from his own house, and he had been unable to stop it. Worse yet, when he had given chase, he had returned home empty-handed, not only without having avenged himself on the dastardly villain who had committed such a low act but without their beloved Pradyumana as well!

How could the great Lord Krishna Vasudeva allow his enemies to enter his wife's most private chamber and walk out with their newborn child and then continue to parade around as if he were still the champion of the Yadavas, the slayer of demons, the master of Dwarka?

It was a sham, was it not? Either those tales were exaggerated, or worse, they were true and Krishna had failed her and their son. He was a god-like champion and hero who had failed his own family.

How could she forgive him? She had not. She could not begin to forgive him. But somehow she had overcome her resentment and bitterness, swallowed her tears and rage, and accepted the lot that Maa Durga had given to her to endure.

She had stayed faithful and diligent, performing her duties as a wife and a queen, conducted herself with due decorum and perfect protocol, never let her private feelings affect her public behaviour ...

And yet.

And yet she had waited for she knew not what.

For something.

Anything.

A change.

Today, that change had come.

Pradyumana had returned home.

He was not just alive, he was perfect! He had done what even his father could not – he had confronted his abductor and killed him. He had proven himself to be Dwarkadhish's son in act and deed, not merely in name. He had proven himself to be Rukmini's son. He had done what Krishna had been unable to do – return her most prized jewel to her.

Now, she awaited her husband's return to share her triumph and joy. To rejoice in the reunion with their long-lost son and in the knowledge of his exploits.

"The lord approaches!" cried out one of the daais. The news travelled through the palace like the perfumed wind billowing the diaphanous curtains of the queen's bedchambers.

She waited, regal and proud and beautiful.

A voice whispered in her ear, 'You look magnificent, my queen.' That would be Radha, such a source of succour and strength in so many difficult times. Rukmini smiled and waited for her life to ascend to a new peak of happiness.

Krishna entered the chamber like a swirl of monsoon wind. Dark, handsome, intense, and utterly beautiful as always.

But wait!

What was this?

Krishna was filthy, covered in grime – and god knows what else – from head to toe. He was naked, except for a mere langot that barely covered his maleness, and looked like a tribal in some obscure forest ritual!

It was unbelievable!

How could he come to her in this manner, without even cleaning himself or dressing appropriately?

She was about to admonish him harshly when she saw that he had a companion.

A young woman barely half Rukmini's age – perhaps even as young as Pradyumana himself – attractively attired in the current fashions of Dwarka's younger female denizens, stood beside Krishna. As Rukmini's gaze fell on her, the young woman looked back at her levelly, as if greeting an equal.

Rukmini found the young woman's gaze offensive and her presence intrusive. Why had Krishna brought a stranger into her most private chambers? But more importantly, why was he dressed, or rather, undressed, in this vulgar manner?

'My lord,' she said, 'you have returned directly from the forest. You need to refresh and anoint yourself urgently.'

Krishna grinned, his white teeth flashing in his crow-black face. 'You mean to say I need a bath and some fresh clothes. This is true.' He swept a hand down at his body. 'I apologize for my appearance. I have indeed returned straight from the jungle. The reason I came thus was because our good Uddhava told me you had urgent business with me that could not wait even until I had bathed and changed my garb.'

Rukmini pursed her lips. Surely Uddhava could not have meant that her husband present himself in this unseemly manner? It would have behoved Krishna more to use his own judgement and take an hour or two to cleanse himself and wear something more fitting of his stature before presenting himself.

She was glad she had asked Rati-devi and Pradyumana to wait in the other chamber until she sent for them – she had wanted to surprise Krishna.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I suppose an exception could be made under the circumstances. And it is true, I do have some urgent business. Something quite extraordinary has happened, my lord. Something that will bring great joy and pleasure to you – to *us*. If you could ask your young companion to leave ... we can summon her back later to discuss whatever matter you have brought her here to discuss. The news I have is private and meant to be spoken only by a wife’s lips and heard only by a husband’s ears.’

Krishna smiled again, looking at the young girl beside him in a way that Rukmini found offensive. Then he did something even more shocking: he took the young girl’s hand and clasped it to his grimy battle-dirty shoulder. She did not seem to mind the dirt and grime and seemed to relish the intimacy of the gesture. Krishna smiled at the beautiful young stranger and she smiled back at him.

“Then you can speak without any concern, Rukmini,” Krishna said, ‘for this lovely young lady here is my new wife Satyabhama. And she is now as much a part of my life as you are.’

Rukmi and the others were in a fine mood that night as they celebrated their victory. ‘I told you he would lead us to victory,’ he told Shalva. ‘Your doubts were unfounded.’

Shalva nodded, quaffing the fine mead wine that the mountain realms were known for. They had already enjoyed the food and fruit of the realm. Later, he would enjoy the company of the mountain women whose beauty was the stuff of legends as well. He raised his goblet to toast their benefactor. ‘I stand corrected, Rukmi. The Magadhan is truly a god emperor. His powers are boundless.’

Rukmi looked around to make sure nobody else was within listening distance, then bent over and said quietly, ‘You have no idea how far his powers reach.’

Rukmi looked around at his companions. ‘I have come to think of you as my friends and comrades in arms. So I trust you will not repeat what I say here to our benefactor the god emperor?’

Everyone nodded, more eager to hear the secret news than to keep the secret itself.

Rukmi went on. ‘He told me in confidence that he has sent out other demons, asuras from the nether realms of naraka, on other secret missions against our common enemy.’

‘Krishna?’ asked Dantavakra, face twisting with malice. ‘I hope they destroy the Yadava!’

Viduratha elbowed Dantavakra. ‘You fool. Do you think it’s that easy? What Rukmi means is that he sent demons to harry the enemy in other ways. By causing mischief and doing harm to those he loves and cares for. It is an old and tested tactic of war. When you cannot attack your enemy directly, harry those he cares about or loves.’

Rukmi nodded. ‘There are other ways to make a warrior feel pain. I hope Jarasandha’s demons cause our enemy great and boundless pain.’

Shalva said, ‘What have the demons accomplished so far?’

Rukmi smiled. ‘One of them has stolen Krishna’s first-born.’

They all laughed openly. ‘How fitting! Where is the brat then? Bring him over here,’ Paundraka said through a mouthful of wine, spouting and spilling uncaringly. ‘We’ll make a good meal of him!’

Rukmi shrugged. ‘That’s the whole point. He’s lost. Stolen and dumped in the sea, to be eaten by the creatures under the water. How helpless the Lord of Mathura must feel now.’

Shalva put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. ‘Like a brother who had his sister abducted and stolen from him.’

Rukmi nodded. ‘Aye.’

Viduratha was the only one who seemed concerned. ‘I don’t know if that is a good idea.’

Dantavakra frowned. ‘Why not? We’re troubling our enemy, stealing his child, doing whatever we can to cause him pain and suffering. What could be better than that?’

Viduratha looked around to make sure Jarasandha was not in earshot. ‘It could make him angry. Angry enough to come seeking us out.’

They laughed.

‘Good!’ Shalva said. ‘We shall be prepared for him. He owes us a re-match after fleeing the field the last time.’

Viduratha looked at him. ‘You do not wish to see Krishna Vasudeva when he is truly angry. You do not want him to come and challenge you to a fight to the death.’

‘And why not?’ said a voice from above them.

They looked up, startled.

Jarasandha was standing upside down on the ceiling, listening to every word they were saying. As they reacted to his presence, he unstuck his feet from the roof and leaped down to the ground, landing lithely beside them. He seemed to weigh no more than a small boy, despite the copious amounts he ate and drank.

Rukmi wondered if it was something to do with the vortal that was accessible within his own being – perhaps he required much more nutrition than an ordinary man in order to sustain the unimaginable amount of energy needed to access such inter-dimensional passageways.

Jarasandha looked around at all of them. They had all stopped eating and drinking and laughing, and were sitting stone-faced, unsure of how their emperor might react.

'Have no worry,' he said, grinning to reassure them. 'I am not offended by your talk. I have heard worse.' He chuckled softly, thinking perhaps of the other 'worse' things he had heard. 'Much worse.'

'My lord,' Paundraka said, putting down a leg of meat. 'We did not mean—'

'Oh shut up, you fool,' Jarasandha said good-naturedly. 'I am in fine spirits. Don't go and spoil it.'

Paundraka paused mid-explanation.

Jarasandha's eyes finally found Viduratha. 'What you said about Krishna Vasudeva. It is true. He is a formidable foe. One that almost deserves to be pitted against me. Although, ultimately, I will destroy him of course. There can be no doubt about that. But it will be an interesting dalliance whenever it occurs.'

Nobody said a word, unsure of how to weigh in on such a topic.

In the distant night, a sharp bellow sounded, followed by a feminine shriek. It sounded like a man's cry of satisfaction and a woman's wail of loss.

Jarasandha chuckled again. 'I see our hog is enjoying his meal of female flesh tonight!'

Nobody commented but everyone seemed a little more at ease.

Jarasandha went on, speaking to Viduratha but addressing them all. 'I want him to come.'

Viduratha frowned, unsure of the meaning of those words. 'My lord?'

'Krishna Vasudeva,' Jarasandha said. 'I wanted him to be angry at the taking of his son. That was why I ordered it done. Now that he knows I was responsible for encouraging Sambhara to commit the abduction, Krishna will be beside himself with rage. Even the calmest father will lose his head when someone dares to harm his infant child. This is all part of my grand scheme. I want him to lose his temper and seek me out. I want him to come seeking revenge. I want him to come and attempt to attack us here.'

He gestured at the mountain fortress. "That is why we took this place. That is why we are preparing for his assault even as we speak. While you bright lads celebrate, the suscrofa of the Suinae are already at work."

'At work?' asked Rukmi. 'Doing what?'

'Rebuilding the fortress,' Jarasandha said. 'Making it the most impregnable fortress ever built. With more traps and dangers awaiting any invader than can be imagined.' He spread his arms. 'Let Krishna Vasudeva come to me this time. Let him attack me here. I will be ready. And when he comes, he will face his

nemesis and destruction. The one demon he cannot kill. Narakasura. If he wants to fight me and take his revenge, he will have to face Narakasura first.'

Jarasandha smiled as another porcine bellow rang out from deep within the mountain fortress. 'Let him come!'

Softly, his twin tongues flickering, the god emperor of Magadha hissed sibilantly, 'We await your arrival, Lord Krishna!'

Balarama landed his Pushpaka by the parijata gardens.

Uddhava was waiting for him. Uddhava had begun to resemble his father more and more with each passing year and in the past year or two, he had seemed to age faster than ever. Things had been harder of late. Something had changed in Dwarka. Even having all their needs met did not seem to be enough for many Dwarkans.

Perhaps it was the isolation from the rest of the world: more and more people were petitioning to open up trade and communication with other nations in the subcontinent as well as overseas. The world was changing rapidly. There were ships and caravans travelling in every direction, seeking the rich silks, spices, precious gems and other treasures of the subcontinent. They were willing to trade or pay well for these treasures and, more importantly, they came with news, change, innovation, other cultures, other languages, exotic ways of life. Dwarka had been at peace without any external threat for a long time and its citizens were getting restless to rejoin the world. Not just individually in forays and trips as they did now, but as a nation.

They were prosperous, content, and bored – a dangerous combination.

‘Pradyumana has built another palace for himself and Mayavati,’ Uddhava said.

Balarama nodded. ‘I know. My nephew took me to see the site and asked me to do the ground-breaking for good luck.’

‘Of course,’ Uddhava said. Balarama’s patent symbol was the plough. He had used it as a farmer, and then as a weapon in the struggles against the asuras and armies of Kamsa and Jarasandha in years past. It symbolized his link to the earth, to the community, and also his ability to plough through the enemy. He was much in demand for ground-breaking every time someone wanted to build a new house or structure. ‘Once it is built, Pradyumana will live there with Mayavati.’

'She prefers to be known as Rati-devi,' Balarama reminded Uddhava. 'How does Rukmini feel about that?'

Uddhava shrugged. 'She accepts it because that is what Pradyumana wants.'

'But?'

'But she likes it about as much as she liked Krishna bringing home a new wife.'

Balarama passed a hand across his face, groaning inwardly. 'That was hard on her. To have her long-lost son back home with her, alive and well, only to hear that her husband had chosen a new wife.'

'Well, it was not actually our Krishna's choice, was it?'

Balarama shrugged. 'Satrajit insisted but Krishna could still have refused him. The man deserved to be an outcaste for his allegations against my bhraatr.'

'Even so, Krishna could hardly have refused him. Besides, I think Krishna likes her very much.'

'Satyabhama?'

'Yes. They spend all their time together. They look so happy. Our Lord Krishna looks a decade younger when he is with his new wife.'

'And Bhabhi Rukmini looks a decade older when Krishna is with his new wife.'

They walked silently for a few moments. Around them, the children played, the old sat and enjoyed the rejuvenating power of the parijata tree, couples dallied arm in arm. Balarama loved it here. It was the one part of Dwarka where he felt they had achieved something. The rest was all politics and trading, or so it seemed on most days.

He sighed. 'Where is my brother now? With her as usual?' He meant Satyabhama.

Uddhava shook his head. 'He left this morning for Hastinapura. Did you not hear, Balarama? Your aunt Kunti-devi sent an urgent message.'

'What about?' Balarama was concerned. The Pandavas in Hastinapura were undergoing great hardship; their cousins, the Kauravas, were refusing to acknowledge their claim to the Kuru throne, and as King Dhritarashtra was father to the Kauravas, he could hardly be counted on to be unbiased.

Uddhava paused and bent closer to Balarama. 'There was an attempt on their lives. The Kauravas tricked them. They built a palace of lac and tried to burn them in it when they were sleeping.'

Balarama stared at him. 'And?'

Uddhava clenched a fist to show his own anger at the unfairness of it all. 'The Pandavas survived but only just. They managed to slip out through a secret exit.'

They are all well.'

'And our father's sister Pritha? Kunti, I mean? Is she well?'

'She made it out alive as well. They are all safe and sound and in good health. But there is no doubt now. The Kauravas would rather kill them all in their sleep than let them stake a claim to the kingdom.'

Balarama snarled, slapping a fist into a palm. 'Why should they stake any claims? The kingdom is theirs. It is their birthright. How can King Dhritarashtra not acknowledge that and let them take over?'

'Because the moment he does that, his sons will be disinherited forever. From being the family that rules the most powerful kingdom in the world, they will be reduced to mere relatives of the family that rules. The Kauravas will never surrender their stranglehold on Hastinapura. Not without a fight.'

'Then a fight they shall have,' Balarama swore. 'And if they persist in this foolish treachery ...'

'Krishna left word that you should join him in Hastinapura. He fears you may be required as well, in case things get out of hand.'

'I shall leave immediately after you finish bringing me up to date with events here,' Balarama said. 'Now about the trouble between the Vrishni tribes ...'

Before he could finish, the Pushpaka descended to eye level, hovering alongside them. Children pointed and clapped, thinking Balarama would give them rides in the sky chariot. But only Balarama could sense the message conveyed by the celestial vehicle.

'Come, Uddhava,' he said, climbing aboard and heaving up his friend with a single hand. Barely had Uddhava found his footing than the chariot shot up and swooped sideways, taking them both away.

They landed at the palace a moment later.

The sabha hall was full. The court was waiting for Balarama. He was surprised to see his new sister-in-law Satyabhama present as well, and in tears.

'King Ugrasena, Queen Padmini,' Balarama said, bowing his head. 'How may I be of service?'

Lord Vasudeva came down the dais and put his hand on Balarama's shoulder. 'Dark days are upon us, my son. The day we never thought could come has arrived after all. Dwarka is on the verge of a civil war.'

'And it is all because of that stupid jewel,' Satyabhama said. 'It cost my uncle his life and now my father his. He was murdered, brother Balarama, and the killer must be brought to justice.'

'Of course,' Balarama thundered. 'Who was it that committed this deed? Father, do we know the culprit?'

Lord Vasudeva's normally calm face was creased with anxiety. 'We know him well. And what Satyabhama says is quite true. He was murdered. And the killer was none other than my old friend and ally, Akrur. His tribe and he have declared war against Satrajit's family and tribe. You can see for yourself, they have rejected our rule, saying that they intend to make their own government and take over the kingdom. They have made a hostile declaration in the old feudal tradition.'

Balarama stared at him, then looked around at the court. Half the seats were empty – the seats that would have been occupied by his elder Akrur and his clan. 'But how can that be? If Akrur's people are against Satrajit's people, it means they are against us. For Satrajit is – was – Krishna's father-in-law, which makes our clans one. They cannot declare hostilities against us!'

'Yet they have done so,' Vasudeva said. 'And they have stolen Syamantaka along with all of Satrajit's wealth. They are using the jewel's powers and the riches they stole from Satrajit to finance a feud against us.'

Balarama was stunned. He looked at Uddhava and saw his own feelings reflected in his friend's face. The day they had all dreaded had finally come to Dwarka. The Yadavas were at war again. But this time the threat had come not from outside, but within.

Krishna was summoned back from Hastinapura by Balarama himself who went to pay his respects to his aunt Kunti-devi and his cousins, the Pandavas, as well. They were in hiding in the jungle, living like hermits and Balarama was filled with anger at this sight. These were princes of the Kuru nation. It was unseemly that they should be forced to live like penitents, hunted down like animals. The might of Hastinapura was set against them and it would not be easy to rise up and resist it, leave alone reclaim their rightful place. It made Balarama's blood boil to see such injustice.

He took Krishna aside at the first available moment and brought him up to date on the developments in Dwarka.

Krishna made no comment and exhibited no outward emotion.

Balarama waited. But when minutes passed without response, he had no choice but to press his brother. 'So?'

Krishna shrugged. 'So. It is as I expected. Even paradise decays and falls to ruin. Mortals are not meant to live in peace and harmony together – not for long anyway.'

Balarama frowned. 'Be that as it may, we must act, and act swiftly to quell this before it gets out of hand.'

Krishna sat on a fallen tree trunk. 'Why?'

'What do you mean, why? This uprising by Akrur and his clan is nothing short of civil war. He murdered your father-in-law, Bhraatr! That is a serious offense and crime, amounting to treason against the throne.'

'True. But it is not as if Satrajit is innocent. He had promised his daughter to Satadhanva and to give him Syamantaka as dowry when they were wed. He went back on his word when he got Satyabhama married to me instead and kept the jewel for himself.'

'Yes, but ...' Balarama's voice trailed away as he tried to think through the morass of politics involved.

'Was it Akrur himself who committed the murder?' Krishna asked.

'No, it was Satadhanva,' Balarama admitted.

'And Satadhanva had just cause to confront Satrajit and challenge him. It is not his fault if Satrajit had become too softened by the wealth and power of Syamantaka to fight him like a man.'

'Yes, but even if Satadhanva killed Satrajit because the merchant went back on his word, we know for a fact that the rebellion was instigated by Akrur and Kritavarma. As elders, they should not have involved themselves in this quarrel.'

Krishna spread his hands. 'As elders, how could they not involve themselves?'

'Yes, but by doing so, they have roused the entire clan against the house of Ugrasena, which means their entire tribe is now aligned against Dwarka itself. This is nothing short of civil war!'

Krishna nodded. 'The Yadavas are notorious for their clan feuds. This may well end up being the greatest and last of those feuds.'

'Exactly. Which is why we must return quickly to Dwarka and stop this before it gets out of control.'

Krishna looked at his brother. Balarama noted the presence of more white hair on Krishna's scalp, and more age lines on his face.

'Events are now on a certain path that will lead eventually to a certain end,' Krishna said. 'Bhaiya, since we are both possessed of the same ability to know all that is knowable in this universe, you know this as well as I do. If you search your heart and mind, seek out the truth, you will know that what I say is so. Nothing we do now can change the course of events. The Yadava nation is set on a path of self-destruction. What could not be achieved by the enemy without is being accomplished by the enemy within.'

'Then let us fight the enemy!'

Krishna smiled sadly. 'How can a body fight itself? Can one arm attack the other? Can a warrior use his sword to stab himself? What would the point be? We would only hasten the end. In civil war, the innocent suffer the most while the violent thrive.'

'But we have to do something! We cannot simply stand by and let this happen. We are protectors of our people. They depend on us.'

Krishna indicated the hut in the clearing nearby. Kunti-devi was visible in the doorway, lighting a lamp to ward off the lengthening shadows of twilight. 'Our aunt depends on us. Our cousins need us as well. They are being unjustly hunted and hounded. We cannot simply do nothing and let them be harmed.'

Balarama looked confused. ‘Yes, but they are strong men and great warriors with fantastic powers. They can fend for themselves. Dwarka’s innocent cannot.’

‘There are innocent citizens involved here as well, Bhaiya,’ Krishna replied. ‘And here in Kuru-jangala we can make a difference. We can turn the tide of this family feud and ensure that the righteous win. The Yadavas on the other hand are beyond saving now.’

Balarama raised a fist, wanting to pound it into a tree. He held back only for the sake of the Pandavas who were supposed to be in hiding and could not attract attention to themselves. He lowered the fist with an effort, his powerful muscles standing out on his arm, neck and shoulder. ‘I cannot let our people slaughter each other over a mere jewel.’

Krishna shook his head. ‘Then let us go and fetch it. That is the bone of contention, is it not?’

Balarama frowned. ‘I suppose it is. Even Satadhanva has to accept that Satrajit’s daughter is now your wife and cannot wed him. I think it is the jewel and its power that have corrupted Akrur, Kritavarma and Satadhanva and their clans. That damn Syamantaka has caused far too much trouble.’ He shook his head. ‘It is hard to believe that Surya-deva himself gave it to a person as mercenary as Satrajit. Surely as one of the higher gods he should have known the trouble it would bring to Dwarka.’

Krishna sighed and looked into the dark forest. ‘Perhaps that was his very intention.’

‘Why would he do such a thing?’

‘The game of gods trumps the game of thrones, my brother,’ Krishna said morosely. ‘There are forces at work in this universe that have neither good nor evil as their goal, merely certain ends they aspire towards, whatever the cost.’ He clapped a hand on his brother’s massive shoulder. ‘Now, return home to Dwarka and try to delay the rebellion as long as you can. Failing that, quell it using as little violence as possible.’

‘And you?’

‘I will go to seek out the jewel and retrieve it.’ Krishna summoned his Pushpaka which descended like a golden carpet from the sky to land without even a whisper on the forest floor. ‘We each have our missions. Let us do our best to delay the inevitable. The age of Kali looms before us, dark and monstrous. All we can do now is struggle to do whatever little good we can before the storm descends upon us all.’

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a great wind buffeted both brothers, stirring up dust and dried leaves in the clearing. Birds left their roosts and took to the air in great flocks, expressing their shock and amazement. The creatures of the forest trumpeted and lowed and roared and growled and otherwise vented their surprise. A shadow fell over Krishna and Balarama, covering not just the space where they stood, but the entire clearing and beyond, falling over the trees like a dark canopy.

'What in the name of—' Balarama began, raising his head, shielding his eyes against the wind and dust with one hand.

Krishna grasped his brother's shoulder, eyes alight. 'There is only one name, Bhaiya,' he said. 'Only one name for the phenomenon that causes such a flutter and flurry.' He grinned, a change coming over his sombre features that put Balarama in mind of the younger Krishna, the playful Flute of Vrindavan who faced asura after asura with not just confidence but eagerness. It was an expression that said, 'Bring it on, I am ready to take on anything.'

The disturbance of wind and the amount of debris increased, as did the heavy leathery sound from above. Something was descending from the sky. Something with a movement and energy quite unlike the Pushpaka's silent gliding motion. It felt as if a storm itself was descending into the forest clearing, buffeting everything and everyone into near-blindness. The forest erupted in a cacophony of animal sounds. Yet it was evident that the animals were not panicking or fearful but excited ... exultant even. Could animals be exultant? Balarama had no idea. But that lion's roar he heard in the distance sounded proud and magnificent and welcoming, not alarmed, threatening and intimidating. It was as if the forest itself were greeting the new arrival that descended from above.

Krishna pointed upwards, shouting to be heard above the noise.

'Now we shall prevail, Bhai. The time has come at last for our final mission on earth. Let us dispense quickly with these trivial tasks of retrieving jewels and apprehending murderers. A greater mission awaits us. Our enemy has amassed his forces and awaits us. We must not disappoint him.'

Balarama tried to peer out of the fingers covering his face, but the whirlwind of dust and debris made it impossible to see. All he could glimpse was a great dark shape, like an impossibly huge bird descending to earth by slowing the flapping of its wings. Even as he wondered what bird could be so huge, so powerful, it came to him, like a sweet memory of a past life. 'Bhraatr,' he said,

then shouted the next words, 'you are right as always. Our time has come. Now no enemy can stand in our way. All those who stand against us are doomed.'

Krishna smiled grimly, his eyes gleaming black mirrors that reflected the enormous wingspan of the descending being. A deep bluish glow fired within those dark eyes. Unperturbed by the dust and debris, he stared up unflinchingly at the creature that came to ground, lowering its enormous wings one final time, then bending its great feathered head until its giant beak touched the ground at Krishna's feet. The tip of the massive beak ploughed through several feet the ground. Then the bird – if you could call a creature the size of a small hillock and wings each as long as an oak tree a bird – raised its head and looked at Krishna with glistening black eyes, each about the size of a man's head. Each eye reflected Krishna, resplendent and glowing with Brahman shakti now, revealed in his true form.

'Garuda,' said the man who was Dwarkadish but was much, much more than a man. 'Welcome, my old friend. Are you ready to carry me into battle once again?'

And the great bird raised its beak and issued a cry that carried for yojanas across the land.

twenty-three

The sky boiled and seethed with bilious clouds. Purple lightning flashed over the high mountains and cast into sharp relief the new fortress-kingdom that had risen over the past several months to replace the old mountain fortress. The new fortress had sprouted like an insect hive out of the blood-spattered ruins of the former. While the old one had run along the peaks of the ranges, like a fortified wall running hundreds of miles, this one enclosed the entire mountain range itself. A whole section of the lower Himalayas was now cordoned off by dark black-red fortress walls, rising a hundred yards higher than the peaks upon which they rested.

The walls rose up as the mountain ranges ascended, forming layers upon layers, creating an enormous fortress that encompassed a hundred yojanas and rose a mile high, darkening the entire region. The structure was enormous beyond all imagining. An entire nation could be contained within its towering walls. It was believed to be larger and better fortified than a certain island-kingdom built by the former Lord of Mathura to house his entire nation.

Jarasandha stood atop the highest point where a great flat space had been created on an elevation. Open to the skies, it was surrounded by a great drop on every side. Another lash of the purple lightning illuminated the thin long face of the god emperor. Around him stood his usual coterie. And in the centre of the vast flat space in front – a space that was even greater than the clearing where the mountain lords had perished not too long ago – stood Narakasura.

As the lightning flashed and thunder growled, the demon lord raised his snout and barked a response. The thunder seemed to quell, withholding its fury, and when the asura lowered his tusked snout again, his red eyes flashed like beacons in the dark night. Rukmi, Viduratha, Shalva, Dantavakra and Paundraka all looked in different directions, none daring to meet that crimson gaze.

‘Why have we been summoned here?’ Shalva asked, almost in a whisper. The past few months had taught all of them to respect their new master and his pet asura without question. Gone was any trace of insolence. They were all happy to

be alive each day and glad to have what they had, which was a considerable amount. Each of them was as rich and powerful as a hundred mountain lords had been. And each had a harem consisting of as many mountain queens as well. None wished to lose anything he possessed, least of all his own life!

The answer to Shalva's question came a moment later when a multitude of beings began swarming up the fortress walls, climbing the wet black-red stone and squatting on the flat space. Each newcomer bowed and scraped before the boar-snouted demon lord. Narakasura acknowledged none of them, and merely waited with rising impatience.

Finally, he snarled, barking a challenge.

At once a creature appeared, crawling over the edge of the precipice. It rose to its feet, bent over due to the unnatural structure of its body. The being had five heads, three of which were perched more or less in the usual place, upon its shoulders. The other two were embedded in its belly and in its back, providing it with the ability to look in all directions at once.

'Narakasura,' it coughed in a hoarse, unnatural voice. 'Your loyal servant Mura is here to serve you, lord of naraka. Our tridents – mine and those of my sons – are yours to command.'

The five-headed creature raised its weapon – a long iron trident that glistened with ichor and other bodily fluids. Clearly, it was not a decorative piece. Those tines had seen the inside of a living body very recently. Several living bodies. Or, to be precise, several formerly living bodies.

'Here are our seven sons,' said the five-headed one. The same number of creatures came forward, some not unlike mortals in overall shape and form. One or two even had reasonably attractive features. Not all monsters were inhuman. Nor were all of them ugly and misshapen.

As Mura called out their names, each of his seven sons raised his trident and uttered a short, sharp declaration of loyalty.

'Tamra.'

'Antariksa.'

'Sravana.'

'Vibhavasu.'

'Vasu.'

'Nabhasvan.'

'Aruna'

An eighth being stepped forward, brandishing a trident with three tines on each end.

'And this is Pitha, general of our forces.'

Narakasura swept his gaze scornfully over the gathering, which looked meagre on that enormous flat space. If the earlier place of judgement had easily accommodated sixteen thousand mountain lords, this new place of execution, as it was now called, could accommodate twice that number. He seemed unimpressed by the showing.

'Is this all you have to offer me?' he asked, the rage audible in his grunting tone. 'I am disappointed in your loyalty, Mura. I expected far more from you. In naraka, we fought side by side and you summoned up great numbers in my service.'

Mura bowed his three heads while the other two tilted their chins as best as they could. 'My lord Bhauma,' he said, using a name familiar to them from their former association in the hellish realms. 'I would not presume to appear before you with just this tiny force.' He raised his trident high in the air. 'Behold the army I have summoned up from hell itself to serve you in your conquest of the mortal realm.'

Mura struck the trident on the stone floor, working it like a man might strike one twig against another in an attempt to catch a spark. The striking did produce a bright red spark with smoke, which was doused at once.

Mura grunted and struck again, putting all his strength into it. This time, the spark caught and billowed instantly into a cloud of smoking red heat and flame. The cloud grew, swelling across the place of execution, swirling around the feet of Mura's sons and the general Pitha, all of whom raised their own tridents and howled with eagerness.

Jarasandha and his allies watched as the red cloud spread across the entire flat space, covering every last inch.

Then, from the cloud, shapes and forms began to emerge – red-skinned creatures out of hell itself.

"The demons of the lowest realms," Jarasandha said, his voice revealing his pleasure. 'How wonderful it is to see them again.'

Now, a great army stood on the place of execution, surrounding and dwarfed by Narakasura who looked around, examining his forces and looking more appeased. Each red-skinned demon had horns on its bald skull, a writhing tail with a point at the end – like an arrowhead – and held a trident with three tines.

'Much better,' Narakasura grunted. 'Now I can say you have done yourself proud, Mura. I am pleased.'

'I thank thee, lord,' Mura said. 'But there is one more thing I have retrieved from the hellish realms that will serve you well here. The fire weapon Sataghni.'

Even the red devils cringed at the mention of the word. In their mountain crevices and caves, the suscrofa, who were watching and listening to everything, bled in alarm. Every asura knew and feared the weapon Mura had just named.

'Sataghni as well!' Narakasura said as he examined his army. 'That is well done.' He turned to look up at Jarasandha, standing on the fortress level about the place of execution. 'God emperor,' he growled. 'Friend and ally.'

'Speak your mind, Bhauma,' said Jarasandha, also using the name with familiarity.

'We are now ready for the final battle. Lure the Yadava here and he will not leave these mountains alive. This I promise you.'

'I am glad to hear that, my friend. For that is the reason why I resurrected you from the lowermost depths of hell and brought you here by use of the vortal. The Yadava is already being lured here through an elaborate ruse. He will not suspect anything until he is already inside this mountain fortress. Only then will he understand – too late – that the fortress is not impossible to penetrate, merely impossible to leave. And then, with him trapped here, you and your armies can tear him to shreds and slivers and eat him alive if you wish. He is yours to destroy.'

'Yes,' said Narakasura. 'For as his blood and flesh incarnate, I am his true son. His firstborn. And I intend to pay him back for abandoning me so long ago. Bring my father before me and I will do the rest. He will never leave these mountains alive.'

And with that, Narakasura raised his powerful hairy arms and bellowed to the purple clouds above. **Krishna! Come to me now! Face your death like a man.**

And from afar, across mountains and valleys, plains and plateaus, rivers and forests, came an answering call, partly the language of birds, partly that of gods and men. From afar, the Rider of Garuda replied. And the sky crashed with thunder that shook every creature on the mountain fortress to the core.

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About the Author

Ashok K. Banker is the author of the internationally acclaimed Ramayana Series® and other books. His books have been published in fifty-seven countries, thirteen languages, and have seen several hundred reprint editions, with over 1.9 million copies currently in print.

He lives in Mumbai with his family. Visit him online at www.ashokbanker.com.

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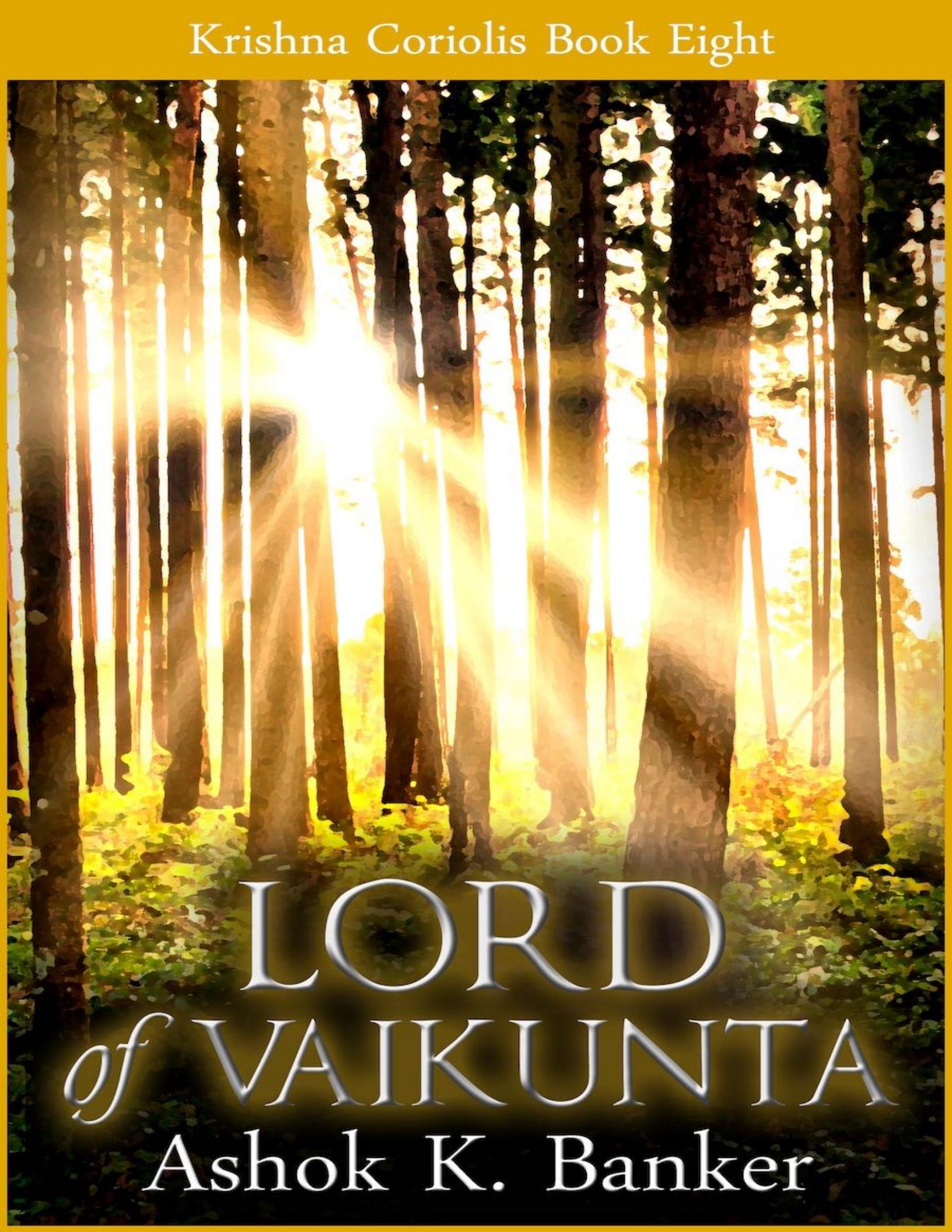
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Krishna Coriolis Book Eight



LORD
of VAIKUNTA
Ashok K. Banker

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Dedication

*For Biki and Bithika:
My Radha and my Rukmini.*

*For Yashka and Ayush Yoda:
My Yashoda.*

*All you faithful readers
who understand
that these tales
are not about being Hindu
or even about being Indian.
They're simply about being.*

*In that spirit,
I dedicate this gita-govinda
to the krishna child in all of us.
For, under these countless
separate skins, there beats
a single eternal heart.*

preface

If it takes a community to raise a child, it surely takes a nation to build an epic.

The itihasa of the subcontinent belongs to no single person. The great epics of our culture – of any culture – may be told and retold infinite times by innumerable poets and writers; yet, no single version is the final one.

The wonderful adventures of the great Lord Krishna are greater than what any story, edition or retelling can possibly encompass. The lila of God Incarnate is beyond the complete comprehension of any one person. We may each perceive some aspects of His greatness, but, like the blind men and the elephant, none of us can ever see everything at once.

It matters not whether you are Hindu or non-Hindu, whether you believe Krishna to be God or just a great historical personage, whether you are Indian or not. The richness and wonder of these tales have outlived countless generations and will outlast many more to come.

My humble attempt here – within these pages and in the volumes to follow – is neither the best nor the last retelling of this great story. I have no extraordinary talent or ability, no special skill or knowledge, no inner sight or visionary gift. What I *do* have is a lifelong exposure to an itihasa so vast, a culture so rich, a nation so great, wise and ancient, that their influence – permeating into one like water through peat over millennia, filtering through from mind to mind, memory to memory, mother to child and to mother again – has suffused every cell of my being, every unit of my consciousness.

And when I use the word ‘I’, it is meant in the universal. You are ‘I’. As I am she. And she is all of us. Krishna’s tale lives through each and every one of us. It is yours to tell. His to tell. Hers to tell. Mine as well. For as long as this tale is told, and retold, it lives on.

I have devoted years to the telling, to the crafting of words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters, kaands and volumes. I shall devote more years to come, decades even. Yet, all my effort is not mine alone. It is the

fruition of a billion Indians, and the billions who have lived before us. For each person who has known this tale and kept it alive in his heart has been a teller, a reteller, a poet, and an author. I am merely the newest name in a long, endless line of names that has had the honour and distinction of being associated with this great story.

It is my good fortune to be the newest reteller of this ancient saga. It is a distinction I share with all who tell and retell this story: from the grandmother who whispers it as a lullaby to the drowsy child, to the scholar who pores over each syllable of every shloka in an attempt to find an insight that has eluded countless scholars before him.

It is a tale told by me in this version; yet, it is not my tale alone to tell. It is your story. Our story. Her story. His story.

Accept it in this spirit and with all humility and hope. Also know that I did not create this flame, nor did I light the torch that blazes. I merely bore the torch this far. Now I give it to you. Take it from my hand. Pass it on. As it has passed from hand to hand, mind to mind, voice to voice, for unknown millennia.

Turn the page. See the spark catch flame. Watch Krishna come alive.

author's note

All my books are long in the gestation, some conceived as many as thirty-plus years earlier, none less than a decade. It takes me that long to be sure of a story's longevity and worth and to accumulate the details, notes, research, character development and other tools without which I can't put my fingers to the keyboard. This particular story, Krishna Coriolis, originated in the same 'Big Bang' that was responsible for the creation of my entire Epic India universe – a series of interlinked retellings of all the major myths, legends and itihasa of the Indian subcontinent, set against the backdrop of world history. I'm using the term 'Big Bang' but in fact it was more of a series of carefully controlled delayed-time explosions over the first fifteen to eighteen years of my life.

At that time, the Krishna story was a part of the Sword of Dharma section of the Epic India library, which retold the 'dashavatara' storyline with an unusual twist as well as an integral part of my massively ambitious retelling of the world's greatest epic, the Mahabharata or the Mba. I began work on my Mba immediately after I completed the Ramayana Series in 2004. After about five years of working on my Mba – a period in which most actual MBA students would be firmly established in their careers! – I realized that the series was too massive to be published as it was. I saw that the Krishna storyline, in particular his individual adventures, could stand on their own as a separate series. So I separated them into a parallel series which I titled Krishna Coriolis. Naturally, since the story now had to stand on its own, rather than be a part of the larger Mba story, I had to rewrite each book to make it stand on its own, with a reasonably complete beginning, middle and end. This process took another three years, and resulted finally in the form the series now takes. You're holding the eighth and final book of this parallel series in your hands now, titled *Lord of Vaikunta*.

Lord of Vaikunta is the culmination of the eight-book Krishna Coriolis, which is interlinked with the much larger Mba series, which itself is only one section of my whole Epic India library. To read the Mahabharata Series, start with the first book, *The Forest of Stories*, available in all good bookstores online and near you. While I've tried to make *Lord of Vaikunta*

stand on its own and be a satisfying read, I can't tell you it's a complete book in itself because it's not. Nor was it meant to be. The point of telling a long story in several volumes is not to charge readers more money or sell more copies. It's to give the story the length and space it requires. In the case of Krishna's story, it really is a massive one. Even subtracted from the main Mahabharata narrative, in which he plays a crucial role, there is just so much in his life that to sum it up in a single book or even three or four books, would mean truncating and condensing some of the best parts of the story. The point of a story is not simply to get from the beginning to the end. Like life, the journey itself is the destination. You have to enjoy the ride. Otherwise, what's the point? We already knew the ship sinks when we all went in to see *Titanic*. It was how James Cameron involved us in the story and characters that made those hours worthwhile. It's the same with series fiction. You already know the end, more or less. Yet you choose to spend hours reading—and years or decades waiting. Why bother if it's only to know what happens? You can know that by Googling Krishna's story right now!

Nor is even the Krishna story completed in this book. How could it be? Vyasa himself extracted portions of Krishna's life and parceled some into the main Mahabharata narrative and others into the Harivamsha. And in addition to both the Mahabharata and Harivamsha, there are still episodes that could not be told in either work. Because these are essentially stories in themselves, not a compendium of a person's life, or a biography. And stories focus on the events and people that matter to the story's purpose. It's cruel and ruthless, refusing to permit anything that doesn't move the main plot forward—or helps us understand the characters better. Just as with my Ramayana Series, I had no choice but to elect to leave out many minor incidents that had no direct bearing on the main storyline, and didn't add anything new to our knowledge and understanding of the people in the story.

So you should go into this book knowing that despite my best efforts, it is still just a portion of a (very) big picture. But even the longest journey must start with a single step and if you permit, *Lord of Vaikunta* will take you on a short but eventful trip, one packed with action and magic, terror and adventure. The reason why the book, like the remaining books in the series, is so short, almost half of the length of my earlier *Ramayana*

Series, is because that's the best way the structure works. By that I mean the individual parts of the story and the way in which they fit together. Sure, I could make it longer – or shorter. But this felt like the perfect length. In an ideal world, the entire series would be packaged together as one massive book and published at once – but that's not only impossible in terms of paper thickness and binding and cover price affordability, it's not the right structure for the story. Stories have been split into sections, or volumes, or, in our culture, into parvas, kaands, suras, mandalas and so on, since literature was first written. The Europeans followed this approach when print publication began, with even religious texts issued in volumes. Later, all books were published in parts. As was journalism and scholarly works. Even today, the tradition continues with newspapers, journals, magazines and even online zines releasing new editions on a periodical basis. How does an author decide whether to split the work into three parts, five parts, eight parts or more? If we could ask the same question of Krishna Dwaipayana-Vyasa--‘Sir, why did you split the Mahabharata into so many parvas and each parva into smaller sections and so on?’ it’s possible he would answer, ‘The story asked for it.’ It’s true. A story demands its own structure and always, the story itself decides which structure works best. All I did, all any author can do, is listen to the story and obey its command.

The Sword of Dharma mini-series, as I called it for a while, is now incorporated into a series titled Rama's Return, which acts as a sequel to both my Ramayana Series and Krishna Coriolis while extending both stories, revisiting parts of each of them, expanding and illuminating, as well as telling an exciting and thrilling new epic adventure in ten volumes with stunning covers. To avoid any confusion, I've retitled the Rama's Return 10-volume series with completely new titles, one of which happens to be, of course, The Sword of Dharma. It is in that series that this journey truly finds a form of closure. For like his predecessor Rama Chandra, Krishna Vasudeva is but yet another form of the infinite Vishnu. And Vishnu's story is far far greater than can be encompassed in any one retelling, no matter how many volumes, words and pages it covers. No matter how much I may show you in the Ramayana Series, Krishna Coriolis and Mahabharata Series, all these ‘mortal’ tales are ultimately being affected and altered by events taking place at the ‘immortal’ level,

and only by seeing that story-beyond-the-story can we fully comprehend the epic saga of gods and demons that forms the basis of Hindu mythology in our puranas.

Coming to the book at hand...

At the end of *Rider of Garuda*, we saw the beginning of the end of the Yadava people, an end that Krishna foresaw (as he foresees all things always) and the knowledge of that impending end affected him deeply. In this volume we see that ending approach steadily until it is inevitable and imminent. The actual end of the Yadava people takes place in the main Mahabharata storyline, after Krishna's own demise. Even his demise does not happen in this eighth book. Lord of Vaikunta is not a typical ending to a series. There is no finality. No Happily Ever After—or Unhappily Ever After. Yet it is an ending because Krishna's main purpose in taking this incarnation has been served. He has one major role to play and that is a part of the Mahabharata storyline—which you can follow in my ongoing Mba Series, also fast approaching completion

Lord of Vaikunta begins almost exactly where *RoG* left off. With turmoil back in Dwarka, a civil war looming in Hastinapura, the forces of Magadhan Jarasandha growing stronger once more, threatening a new wave of terror, and most of all, with the Demonlord of Hell himself challenging Krishna to a death-match. At the end of *RoG*, Narakasura revealed that is the half-son of Vishnu himself. And the stage is set for another epic showdown between Krishna-Balarama and this new demonic challenger.

But before the brothers can face this new challenge, they have other problems to solve. A crisis is developing in Dwarka. The idyllic island paradise is being churned by insidious forces that threaten to destabilise the kingdom and undo everything that Krishna has worked so hard to accomplish. Some of this is the normal course of politics and the inevitable dissent and conflict that any nation faces over time; but there is another side to this growing crisis. It involves the theft of the magical Syamantaka jewel and the murder of its owner. And this seemingly small crime is part of a larger series of events that unravels the shining reputation of Krishna himself!

How is this possible? Well, as the Mahabharata tells us more than once, the Yadava nation was fated to end in that age. But on a more human, mundane level, it's the simple fact of politics: The longer any person stays in power, the more powerful and beloved they are of the people, the more they are resented by their rivals and enemies, some of whom will resort to any means to discredit them and drag them down. To put it in simpler terms: The bigger they are, the harder they fall.

But Krishna will not fall just yet. He can't! Too much depends on him. The very future of Dwarka rests on his slender shoulders—and the muscular shoulders of his brother. But the son of Vasudeva is about to face perhaps the most challenging crisis of his life to date. Because even though he has the power to summon the godlike Garuda to act as his mount in the battle against Naraka, there are limits to even his power. What are those limits? He (and you, dear reader) will discover that at the most unexpected moment! And don't fret. Because in the penultimate moment of the battle, a most unexpected person comes to his aid. Who would that be? Someone very close to Krishna - but not whom you would expect!

Lord of Vaikunta culminates in another epic battle, but the course and outcome of the battle are not as you might expect. I would like to tell you more - and I will! But in the course of the narrative, which is the right way to tell a story: As it happens! Come now, spend a another spell of time in the company of Swayam Bhagwan. Listen once again to the Flute of Vrindavan, watch Govinda perform another mesmerising dance, cheer the Slayer of Kamsa, visit the Fortress of Dwarka, witness the Rage of Jarasandha, and behold the Rider of Garuda as he descends upon the Mountain Kingdom of Pragjyotisha to face the one foe who might undo him at last.

As the epithet goes: Hari Om.

Hurry home indeed!

To the newest adventure of our Lord Krishna.

Happy Reading!

acknowledgements

R. Sabarish, my first reader, who read the first drafts of the first book in this seriesback in 2005 when it was still a part of my larger MBA (Mahabharata) retelling. Back when Sabarish read those first drafts, he was based in India, as was I. Ironically, he will now be reading this last version of the last book in the USA, which is where I happen to be writing it. Talk about Serendipity. Read on, Sabs!

Tapas Sadashivan Nair, who read through the final draft of the first two books in the Krishna Coriolis Series years before publication and suggested many valuable corrections and amendments. If not the first, certainly one of my best readers and whose feedback I value greatly. Read on, Kanjisheikh!

For the members of my erstwhile Epic India Group, Forums and the 62,000+ (and counting) readers who have contacted me through my erstwhile blogs at ashokbanker.com and ashokkbanker.com, at Facebook.com/ashokkbanker or at Twitter.com/ashokkbanker over the years. Too many now to name, so I'll settle for ululating without the benefit of a vuvuzela: 'EI! EI! YO!' Proud 2B an Epicindian. Always hamesha forever!

As always, my family, starting with my beloved wife Bithika, my daughter Yashka, my son Ayush, whose love and support are the fountainhead of my life and work. Our story is the one story that I can never hope to better! Love, always. One member of our family, my furry companion Willow, was lost to cancer last year,

but her love and companionship inspires me even today. She is deeply missed. Goodbye, Willow.

And finally, you, dear reader, whether you're new to my work or a long-time familiar. If you've never read anything by me before, you should know that I approach every book as if it's my first and only book – never expect the same thing twice because I don't write the same book twice. And if you've read every single thing I've written to date, you probably know that already, in which case, you won't be surprised when you turn the page and find that this book and series is quite unlike everything else I've written before. But what really matters is that you like reading it as much as I loved writing it.

Because I really did. That, and that alone, is the reason why I wrote it. Because I love writing.

And love, like most communicable viruses, is extremely contagious, though thankfully not as harmful to your health.

—*Mumbai / Los Angeles July 2012 / May 2016*

Epigraph

	yadrcchaya copapannah	
	svarga-dvaram apavrtam	
	sukhinah ksatriya partha	
	labhante yuddham idrsam	

*Blessed are the warriors
Who are chosen to fight justly;
For the doors to heaven
Shall be opened unto them.*

PRARAMBHA

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sanjay led them toward the guarded entrance that led to the sabha hall of Hastinapura, attached to but separate from the main palace itself. But as he approached the heavily manned barrier, he stopped and turned back. Glancing this way and that, he lowered his head and his tone as he spoke.

Both Krishna and Balarama drew closer to prevent other ears from overhearing. In Hastinapura, there were always other ears listening.

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

Krishna and Balarama glanced at each other, frowning.

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

Krishna ventured no guess but just then a shadow passed overhead. It was a very large shadow, like that of a bird, but the shadow was far too large and moved much too slowly to be any bird flight, and there was no bird sound from above nor any sound of wings. Yet Balarama saw the distinct outline of a feathered tail as the shadow completed its passing over Krishna’s face. There was an expression on Krishna’s face that told Balarama that there was something vital he was missing here. He stared intently at his brother until Krishna glanced at him briefly, their eyes meeting.

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

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

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

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

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

‘Satyabhama?’ Balarama said, unable to hide his surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He turned to Krishna for help but Krishna raised his own eyebrows in mock-surprise. ‘What noblewomen are you talking about, bhai? I don’t

know any noblewomen in this city. Do you?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘What crisis?’ Balarama asked, staring at her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Balarama's eyes widened. 'Then how—'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and fight the ones we can when we must.' He looked at Satyabhama. 'He awaits?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

KAAND 1

1

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

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

Even though it was an island, Dwarka was far more than just a metropolis. It was a kingdom, vast and sprawling, and nobody who resided there could claim to have mapped its farthest extent or covered every hill and dale, valley and region. Outside the city and suburbs, the land continued in all directions for an unknown distance until one came to the vaulting boundary walls and fortifications that earned the city its title of Fortress. Somewhere in that unmapped countryside, on a dirt road that could have been anywhere in Vrajbhoomi back on the mainland, a man with his face covered scurried as if the hounds of hell were after him. He kept glancing

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

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

The stranger went around to the rear door, the one that led directly to the stables, and knocked on it. After a moment, the flickering light of a lantern could be seen through the closed windows as it approached. Then the door was flung open and an ancient man with a cowherd's simple garb and long white hair, white eyebrows and mustache and a flowing long white beard stood there, filling the doorway with his height and presence. Even at this age, the old Vrishni was still a formidable man to confront. Thin yet tightly muscled with long angular limbs and a broad frame and hands, the wood-axe gripped in his right hand hung discretely by his side. Yet the visitor knew that if he made the wrong move or said the wrong words, that axe would swing like a bolt of lightning from the sky above, parting him

from his life in an instant. Age had not slowed the old revolutionary's fighting skills. Farm life had only toughened him further. The retired life of a rich Dwarkan had not mellowed or softened him at all. He looked ready to take on any threat—and seemed capable of surviving it as well.

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

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

Krtavarma turned and glared at him. In the yellow light of the lantern, his dark features and white hair made an odd contrast. The light caught the whites of his eyes, flickering in his pupils. He looked formidable, every inch the man who had once led his tribe in revolt against the dreaded Kamsa the Usurper and his demon army. His was a face that had seen a great many things, both done by others to him and his people, as well as those things he had done to other people.

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

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

'Yes,' Krtavarma said. 'You wanted everything of value that your clansman possessed and were willing to kill him for it. His daughter. His

wealth, power, position. And above all, his magical jewel. Those were your reasons, were they not?’

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

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

Satadhanva raised his eyes to the older, much taller man. Though not short of stature himself, he was a good head below the towering tribal chief. Even with a thinning head of white hair and a body eroded by age and war injuries, Krtavarma was still a formidable specimen of a man. Satadhanva sounded almost as if he was pleading when he said, ‘It is the truth. I give you my word.’

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

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

‘So it is,’ Krtavarma said, quieting down. ‘And now, you are on the run from King Ugrasena and Vasudeva’s soldiers. Fortunately for you, the brothers Krishna Balarama are still in Hastinapura, intervening on behalf of their cousins the Pandavas in their time of need. You are fortunate they are not in Dwarka or else you would have been in their custody by now.

Once they return, you will stand no chance. They cannot be eluded as easily as soldiers.'

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

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

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

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

The moment passed.

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

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

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

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

Satadhanva was desperate. He reached inside the folds of his garments. Krtavarma’s eyes sharpened with alertness and the aging warrior instantly grasped the hilt of his crook again. But his attitude changed when he saw that the object that emerged in Satadhanva’s hand was no weapon but something else entirely.

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

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

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

Just then a sound rang out in the night

The sound was like nothing else anyone in Dwarka had ever heard before. It sounded like a cowbell echoing in a temple but it was so much louder and more powerful than any cowbell, or even the largest temple bell, and its single tone was so pervasive, it seemed to reverberate within Satadhanva's heart. It came from nowhere and from everywhere at once. It was deafeningly loud, drowning out all other sounds, thoughts, feelings, sensations, forcing one to be instantly alert and pay complete attention to its pealing echoes. By the time those echoes had died away, Satadhanva found himself devoid of all that he had been thinking, feeling, experiencing only a moment ago. It was as if his entire being had been cleansed as effectively as a slate board wiped clean of limestone markings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

were scouring Dwarka for the murderer and it was only a matter of time before someone reported having seen a figure running at this ungodly hour in this downpour up the long muddy marg that led to Akrura's home.

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

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

But then Satadhanva did something unexpected.

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

A single glittering object.

Syamantaka.

Akrura stared at the gem for a long silent moment.

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

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

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

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

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

Akrura shut the door—and sealed his fate.

3

The sun was high in the sky when Dwarka came into view. Despite his load of worries, Krishna felt his spirits lift at the sight of the island fortress. Even though just a speck on the western horizon, it warmed his heart to return home. The past weeks—nay, the past years—had rushed by in a never-ending queue of crises and conflicts, leaving him with no time to simply stop and revel in the beauty of his new homeland.

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

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

“Bring us in slowly and stop within view of Dwarka.”

Daruka smiled and turned back. Even though Pushpak was controlled by will and not by reins or physical means, he still preferred to face the way he was flying rather than look one direction and fly another—as Krishna often did. Then again, not everyone could split their attention and consciousness into multiple infinite parts and apply each part to a radically different task, all at once, as Krishna could. Daruka took his job seriously and regarded the control of Pushpak as nothing less than a fine art. Being human, he took pride in giving his all to the task, even though Pushpak was capable of flying precisely to a specific place even if the driver simply thought of said place. To watch Daruka at work, one might think he was manipulating a half dozen sets of reins all at once, controlling an entire sixteen horse team! Krishna smiled at the intentness and sincerity with which the charioteer performed his duty, no less than an artist at work.

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

The view was breathtaking.

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

But were the people truly happy?

Most were, he knew.

The vast majority were content, at peace, happy in their peaceful, safe, perfect paradise.

Here, the war machinery of Jarasandha's empirical juggernaut no longer threatened them.

Here, they were safe from the Kamsas of the world, the grasping greed of those powerful, entitled lords and princes who always sought more, more, at any cost. The one percent who sought to control ninety nine percent of all wealth, land, possessions, power.

In Dwarka, there was no disease. No child suffered more than the usual growing ailments, those that were essential for building immunity. No outbreaks, cancers, contagions or plagues.

Crime was non-existent. Or had been, he reminded himself, until Satadhanva murdered Satrajit and stole the Syamantaka jewel. An act that could be considered the exception to the rule, since the jewel was no ordinary gem, and the full extent of its true nature remained unknown to even Krishna himself. It was conceivable that the allure of the gem had somehow corrupted Satrajit and driven him to this transgression. Not forgivable, but yes, conceivable.

People wanted for nothing, had everything, craved nothing.

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

And yet.

And yet, there was something amiss.

Something that was not quite right.

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

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

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

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

These were the ones that troubled him.

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

There were casualties. Many fatal.

And these incidents were growing more frequent and closer together.

There was no denying it anymore.

Something was rotten in the state of Dwarka.

But what was it?

What had tipped the balance of this perfect world?

What snake had crept into paradise and poisoned the apple?

As he stood at the railing of Pushpak, buffeted by the aromatic breezes from Dwarka, even scenting the delicate fragrance of the flowering Parijata tree, Krishna sensed another colder wind touch his skin.

He glanced out to sea and glimpsed a faint speckle of grey on the far south-eastern horizon.

A storm was brewing there.

He sent his consciousness up into the ether and saw in a moment that the storm would not even pass within a thousand miles of his beloved Dwarka.

As all storms did, for Dwarka remained untouched by the vagaries of Nature in the world at large.

Back in the Pushpak, looking out of his own eyes again, he glimpsed the middle-aged charioteer looking in the same direction, sniffing as if trying to read the wind.

'Squall,' said the sarathi. 'It will pass us by at a goodly distance.'

Krishna raised his eyebrows.

'Are you certain?' he asked with a hint of playfulness.

'Aye,' Daruka said, with utter conviction. 'But it will cool the winds on the western quadrant and slow the ripening of the mangoes.'

Krishna's playfulness evaporated. 'What do you mean?'

Daruka looked at his master. 'Even a storm that passes us by must affect us somehow.'

Krishna shook his head. 'What happens outside Dwarka does not affect Dwarka.'

Daruka squinted at his master. 'By and large, that is true. The coming war between the Pandava brothers and their cousins the Kauravas does not concern us directly at all. But it will affect us eventually.'

Krishna was about to reply but stopped himself. 'Perhaps. But how could you know that for a certainty?' He gestured at the faint speck of grey on the horizon. 'Or that a storm so far distant would affect the ripening of

fruit in Dwarka? Are you not drawing too great a conclusion from too little information?’

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

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

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

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

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

Krishna nodded silently, still absorbed in thought.

Daruka flew them home.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Balarama shook his head. He did not know that.

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

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

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

To his surprise, Krtavarma reacted by grasping hold of Balarama’s vastra and leaning in close to his face, close enough that Balarama could smell the ripe odor of soma on the old warrior’s breath. ‘Young un, heed me now,’ said the man who had once famously beaten down a score of Mathura’s finest soldiers with nothing but a cowherd’s crook, leaving every last one maimed for life or dead. ‘I did not withstand the gem

because I am strong. It was the gem what rejected me! You hear me, boy? That jewel is evil in the form of a precious gem. It pulses with life within, and possesses a mind wicked and cunning as any sorcerer wielding asura maya. It tried to seduce me and I was seduced! But it did not find me a fit match for its purpose, and so it released its hold on me. That was the only reason why you are standing here bandying words with me and not lying dead and brainless on my floor. Do you ken my meaning, son?’

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

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

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

Balarama looked at him cautiously, not sure whether to be irritated by the old man’s agitated manner and tone, or grateful for his well-meant advice. ‘I hear you and ken you well, Lord Krtavarma. But my brother has charged me with the task of reclaiming the jewel and bringing the thief and

murderer Satadhanva to justice along with any others who may have aided and abetted his flight. It is my dharma to fulfil that task.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps the old man was not babbling after all.

Perhaps he had spoken a grim truth that even Balarama himself had glimpsed but had not wanted to examine too closely: Dwarka could not

stay *in excelsior* forever. Entropy would take its toll eventually. All good things, even great things, must come to an end. The same held true for this island-fortress in the sea.

The gem will hasten that end.

5

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

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

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

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

They had managed to stem the fermentation but the rot was in the core. Dwarka was a basket of fruit waiting to spoil. A few bad mangoes had used the frequent absences of the brothers to spread their rebellious seeds and the discontent had taken root now. The theft of the Syamantaka jewel had somehow given impetus to the civil unrest, providing a trigger point and rallying cause around which many of the naysayers built their edifices of outrage. To hear some of these angry-eyed young men and women speak, one would think that Krishna and Balarama, and their father Vasudeva, had done more harm than good to the Yadava people. Balarama found his fists clenching and jaw tightening hard enough to crack betel nut to bits more than once during these sessions, and it was only the long years of statesmanship and the mellowness of age that gave him the endurance to tolerate such talk.

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

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

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

‘That’s a disgusting habit,’ Krishna said.

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

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

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

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

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

Balarama looked at him and shrugged. Point taken.

They had reached the Parijata Gardens. Krishna often walked here after a long day in the Sabha. Balarama knew the sights and sounds of children playing, young lovers wandering hand in hand, old’uns sitting and enjoying the magical healing airs of the sacred tree eased his tension. He had to admit it did the same for him too. *Though there’s nothing like a good hammering to relieve stress far more effectively.* Merely letting go of his anger might work for Krishna; Balarama needed more concrete *action* to achieve his relaxation.

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

‘I will have to go back to Hastinapura,’ Krishna announced.

Balarama looked at him silently. He could say a great deal but what was the point? He knew the gravity of the situation in Hastinapura as well as Krishna did and he knew that the crisis there was far greater than the civil unrest here in Dwarka. Their cousins the Pandavas were suffering and enduring far too much for far too long. There was no doubt that war was coming to the Kuru nation, and when it did, it would sweep the Yadavas and all the other Bharata nations up with it, in a tidal wave of bloodletting.

There were a hundred reasons why he should have said, “*No, you can’t go now,*” but he spoke not one of them aloud. If Krishna said he had to go, then he had to go.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Krishna had joined him en route, coming directly from Indraprastha, the new city-kingdom built by the Pandavas in Kurujangala after the last settlement with their cousins the Kauravas. Balarama was careful not to comment on the weariness on his younger brother’s face but it had shocked him more than a little. It was not just that Krishna had aged a little more visibly in the past several months that he had been with their

cousins, it was the darkening of his spirits that was shocking. He had wanted to embrace Krishna and ask him everything, but there was not enough time. They had to reach the fugitive before he went on the run again.

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

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

Balarama instructed his pushpak to descend as well.

Time to catch a murderer and thief.

6

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

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

Krishna ignored him, striding forward through the trees.

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

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

Balarama followed him, cursing softly.

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

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

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

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

The biggest complaints concerned Krishna's increasing involvement in Kuru politics. The injustices being served upon their Pandava cousins did not find as much sympathy among the Yadavas as with the Vasudeva brothers. Many argued that the Kauravas had a legitimate claim and the Pandavas should accept their lot. All agreed that Yadava concerns outweighed Kuru concerns and the biggest bone of contention was Krishna's long absences. Of late, with the rumors of imminent war growing to something more than mere gossip, the mood had begun to turn ugly. Why was Krishna dragging the Yadava people into a war that did not directly concern them? Perhaps Krishna's loyalties lay with his cousins more than with his own people? The last few sessions in Sabha had degenerated into ugly shouting spats. Krishna, of course, had not even been present to defend his actions or his absences. As usual.

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

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

The stench was overpowering, making him gag. He took a step back, retracing the step he had taken to enter the hut. Hut? It was not fit to call a hut. Or even a hovel. It was the length of a man lying down and its breadth

was about as much as a child lying across. The filthy darkness within couldn't possibly harbor a living man, it was impossible. Balarama had seen dungeons smaller than this in Mathura when they had liberated the city from the Usurper's tyranny.

Even Krishna seemed taken aback.

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

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

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

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

Balarama backed away, gagging and retching as he went.

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

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

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

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

'It destroyed him,' Krishna said.

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

Both, Krishna replied.

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

Then he does not have the jewel, Balarama asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Krishna put a strong hand on Balarama’s powerfully muscled shoulder, seeking to calm him. ‘Shantam, bhai. There is more at stake here than simple betrayal and justice. This could well be the conflict that pits Dwarka into the civil war we have been struggling to prevent. Indeed, I fear that there is a larger conspiracy behind the repeated thefts of this Jewel, a conspiracy aimed directly at the heart of our peaceful democracy.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rukmini noted the shudder and looked over Satyabhama with that curious mixture of contempt and disaffection. ‘Yes, you shudder at the sight of what you have wrought. A peaceful people at war with themselves. A

nation torn apart by civil strife. It is good that you acknowledge your part. But what are you going to do about it?’

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

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

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

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

‘So at least you admit that you did wrong.’

‘I did no wrong, sister,’ Satyabhama said gently, ‘but I can see you are greatly troubled, and it grieves me to see you suffer thus.’

‘What do you know about my suffering? What do you care?’ Rukmini’s mood flared into open anger. ‘You come into our lives, insinuate yourself between husband and wife—’

‘I am his wife too,’ she pointed out.

‘—And act as if you belong here. As if Dwarka is your own home.’

‘My husband’s home *is* my home.’

‘You stir up rebellion in our peaceful metropolis. Stoke the flames of war. Foment unrest. All to serve your own ends.’

‘I am not the cause of this rebellion, or this violence, as you well know.’

‘You are the cause!’ Rukmini cried out. ‘Everything wrong is your fault! We were happy here before you came. We were content. And now everything is ruined, nothing is as it used to be.’

‘Sister, Dwarka’s problems were not my creation. The civil unrest—’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But this was not Ayodhya in the time of Rama.

It was Dwarka in the time of Krishna.

And peace and harmony were nowhere to be seen.

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

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

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

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

Dwarka lay in chaos.

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

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

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

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

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

Krishna and Balarama looked at each other.

Krishna replied, ‘There is only one thing that might appease them.’

Balarama said bitterly, ‘It is their primary demand.’

Satyabhama looked at each of them in turn, unable to understand. ‘What is it?’

Neither answered.

‘Surely if there is a way to resolve this, we must take it, my Lord? Anything that ends this madness!’

Krishna sighed. ‘Indeed. Both your brother-in-law and I agree wholeheartedly. Anything that ends this madness is worth undertaking.’

Satyabhama frowned. ‘Then why are we not attempting to give them what they desire?’

Balarama said in a strange tone. ‘We are, dear sister.’

‘We are giving them exactly what they desire,’ Krishna said, his voice sounding strange too.

Satyabhama looked from one to the other again. ‘I don’t understand. What is their demand? Why do you both speak of it in such an odd manner? Is it something too terrible to acquiesce to?’

‘No, dear wife. It is something quite easy to concede. For now at least. In the long run...’ Krishna shrugged. ‘In the long run, it will hardly matter anyway.’

‘And you are already arranging to fulfil this demand?’

‘We are doing so even as we speak,’ Krishna said.

‘Then why do you both look so sad? Should you not be happy that you are ending the civil violence that plagues Dwarka?’

Krishna looked at her sadly, saying nothing for a moment. ‘We are happy for Dwarka. But we are not happy.’

‘What does that mean?’

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

‘Both of us,’ Balarama added, ‘The ouster of Krishna and myself from all political and administrative positions in the kingdom. We are to have no

say in any decisions concerning the governance or welfare of Dwarka, now or in the future.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Detractors?' Satyabhama cried. 'Call them what they are. They are your *enemies*, no less! Worse than our worst enemies because you have done

everything for them and yet they treat you in this way!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘We were restraining them from fighting each other,’ Balarama interjected. ‘At no time did we use force to assault or attack any of them.’

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

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

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

‘I will watch and protect from afar.’

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

‘You need say nothing, Satyabhama. You speak only the truth, your words are wise, and your heart is honest. But the Yadava nation is set upon the path of self-destruction. Balarama and I have known it for a long time. We have tried to do everything within our power to prevent it, delay it, stop it. Nothing has succeeded. Now, we must endure it.’

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

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

Satyabhama had no more words left to express her sorrow.

She leaned her head against her husband's chest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Worse, there was no sign of Jarasandha either - the God Emperor of Magadha had departed some time back, saying he was required in Kurujangala urgently. Kurujangala! Narakasura cared nothing about the Kurus and their empire. He was here, risen from the depths of hell, for one reason and one reason alone: to exact vengeance upon the being that had seeded his birth. Krishna, Lord of Mathura. Every day that his father still lived was a day squandered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'That is mercy,' Narakasura grunted.

The Suscrofa descended with the mortal still screaming.

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

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

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

‘Lord?’

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

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

‘Mura,’ he grunted.

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

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

'Wisely thought. Present the report at once.'

Mura turned several of his heads and uttered a chitinous clicking sound.

At once, a half dozen forms as misshapen and bent over as Mura scurried up to join their father.

'*Lord!*' they coughed in unison.

Narakasura grunted, acknowledging. He noted the presence of Sravana, Vibhavasu, Vasu, Nabhasvan, and Aruna. 'Where are your eldest sons, Tamra and Antariksa?' he asked.

'With Pitha,' Mura said. 'Marshalling our forces.'

Narakasura's nostrils flared. He smelled violence.

'*Explain!*' he barked.

Mura's chittered and scuttled a yard or two away from Narakasura, their multiple heads eyeing him cautiously.

Mira chittered and snapped his claws at them, shoving them towards Narakasura again.

Hastily, in a round-robin flow, they chittered:

‘*Garudas!*’

‘*Sighted!*’

‘*Approaching!*’

‘*Rapidly!*’

‘*Westwardly!*’

‘*Southwardly!*’

‘*Northwardly!*’

‘*Eastwardly!*’

‘_____! ’

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

Mura chittered, bowing his heads and waving fronds in apology. ‘_____ means a very large number.’ He paused, cocking his three top heads at different angles. ‘In mortal numbers, perhaps a dozen?’ He chittered and turned completely around, twice. ‘No, no. A thousand? No, no. A hundred. Yes. One hundred.’

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

‘Is that all?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mura bowed his heads eagerly.

‘Now go!’ Narakasura barked. ‘Prepare!’

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

Narakasura raised his snout, examining the skies. The cloud bank appeared to be denser, the lightning buried somewhere deep within, flickering

faintly. Like a purple boil festering, close to bursting point.

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

10

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

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

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

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

Now, Narakasura and his demoniac hordes were here on the mortal realm, in Pragjyotisha. And they were ripe for battle. Rama Chandra had been the avatar of Garuda's Lord Vishnu in that era. In this age, it was Krishna who was his Lord's amsa, more than an avatar, a clone of Vishnu himself. For Narakasura and his hordes, that was a golden opportunity for vengeance

and retribution. By destroying Krishna and defeating his forces, they would thwart his purpose here on Earth, and also exact revenge for their defeat at the hands of his earlier avatar Rama Chandra.

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

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

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

Very well.

Soon, they would have a chance to see for themselves what a hundred garudas were worth.

And they would also get a chance to show what a million Suscrofa and Mura were worth.

May the better force prevail.

Garuda moved a single one of the million feathers in his left wing.

Enabling himself to turn around slowly while remaining in the same place.

One final survey of the region.

There was no sign of any other force apart from the Mura and Suscrofa.

The mountain dwellers themselves he did not count. They were captives of Narakasura and his forces. The widow queens of the former mountain kings were confined in their underground palaces, dreading the return of Narakasura or the other lords of the invasion who treated them as chattel for their use and abuse.

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

But they would not be given this opportunity today.

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

Garuda thought that wise.

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

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

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

But this was no ordinary mortal battle.

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

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

The battle itself would be another matter.

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

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

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

Not Rama Chandra, a mortal avatar.

Not merely Krishna, lord of Mathura.

But Krishna, amsa of Vishnu, Lord of Vaikunta.

His survey completed, the moment of anticipation arrived, Garuda flapped his mighty wings once, using unrestrained force.

* * *

That single movement raised a blast of wind that travelled down, blowing a hole in the cloud bank that had concealed him until now.

Down below on Pragjyotisha, Narakasura and his minions ceased their anticipatory hooting and grunting and chittering and raised their heads.

They looked up and through the hole in the clouds they saw, high above, the magnificent form of Garuda.

Wings spread wide to reveal his full span of a hundred yards wide.

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

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

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

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

KAAND 2

1

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

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

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

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

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

Krishna smiled at that.

‘What is it?’

He turned to see Satyabhama staring at him curiously.

‘Garuda is looking forward to clashing with the enemy.’

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

Krishna nodded. ‘The first assault is about to begin.’

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

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

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

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

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

She looked at him. ‘The madness that has swept Dwarka like a forest fire —,

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

‘Still—’ she began.

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

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

‘Your instinct is right. It is all interconnected. Everything affects everything.’

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

‘The end of this phase, yes. Not The End.’

‘What comes next?’

‘We shall find out when the time comes.’

‘You know all, see all.’

‘Knowing is not understanding. Seeing is not believing. There is the matter of free will. We cannot wish the river out of existence, but we can change its course.’

She gestured at the mountain city, the descending garudas, the cloud bank.
‘And we are attempting to change events here today?’

‘Here, there, everywhere, everyday. It is what we do. It is why we came.’

She nodded slowly.

He watched as a change came over her.

The anxiety drained from her face.

A new strength and conviction replaced it.

Her eyes brightened, her cheeks reddened, her chest rose and fell, exhaling.

She raised her small but perfectly shaped jaw to him.

‘Then, let us go to battle. I am ready.’

He smiled and kissed her gently on the lips.

‘Then I am ready too. We live as one, now we fight as one.’

She took his preferred hand and clasped it tightly. It was a warrior’s clasp, strong and unwavering. A hand fit to hold a sword or a thunderbolt. He

kissed her hand.

And if need be, we die as one.

He left the last unsaid.

Together, they descended from the Pushpak and stepped onto a grassy mound.

They climbed up the rise to a place where the valley met the rising cliff.

There, at the junction, was the mouth of a cave. From the looks of it, it had not been used for years. That was why they had chosen it as their point of ingress.

Both Satyabhama and Krishna removed their weapons.

Krishna's weapon was a simple golden disk, no more than the size of a child's fist. He took the disk from a pocket and placed it on his fingertip.

Satyabhama's weapon was a bow and a quiver of arrows. She selected an arrow by touch from the quiver at her back and fixed it to the bow. It was a compound arrow, made up of a number of smaller missiles joined together.

'Ready,' she said.

Krishna's eyes glowed deep blue, the blue of brahman, and the golden disk on his fingertip began to spin, gathering speed.

Balarama, Garuda, he said in his mindvoice.

<Ready, bhraatr> Balarama replied.

Ready, my Lord, Garuda replied.

Begin, Krishna said, his eyes glowing brighter as the disk began to spin at an unearthly speed.

Krishna went into battle.

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

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

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

A garuda ended its run by sweeping the guard tower, screeching its shrill piercing eagle cry. Narakasura watched as the humanoid torso of the garuda worked his powerful arm and back muscles, using his wings to sweep Muras off the tower. Dozens of Muras fell screeching helplessly. More took their place instantly. The garuda swept over the tower and beyond, turning back sharply to come back for a second attack. Muras

leaped off the tower to grab at him. He drew up sharply in mid air, performing a halt no mere bird could ever achieve; hovering with a blinding flicker of his wings, he used both talons and beak to savage the Muras leaping at him. Narakasura watched in admiration as the single garuda killed a handful of Muras at once, moving with deadly accuracy and speed.

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

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

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

He understood as he watched more such skirmishes.

The garudas possessed the ability to grow back their feathers instantly! Within moments of cutting off a garuda's feathers, they were replaced by

new feathers every bit as strong and thick as the old ones. How extraordinary! He grunted happily. Such wonderful beautiful creatures—and great warriors too. In contrast, how ugly and undisciplined were his Suscrofa. Don't even speak of the Muras. Horrible and detestable in appearance, and ill smelling to boot.

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

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

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

He ran towards her, clumsily at first, then picking up speed, then grunting with effort as his short boar legs carried his heavy muscled torso. He shoved Suscrofa and Muras out of his way as he ran, chopping the heads or limbs of more than a few that did not move in time. Then he acquired his full wind and roared, startling his soldiers into scattering quickly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He attacked first.

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

She shrieked and rose to avoid him.

He slipped beneath the blurring powerful wings.

The blast from their vibrating could have thrown him yards away if they struck him right.

He tucked his head onto his chest, burrowing, then jerking upwards with a diagonal zigzag angle.

She saw the danger at the last instant.

She shrieked, loud and piercing even above the cacophony of his hordes and the battle.

She threw herself backwards, seeking to fly back.

But he had his moment: her belly was exposed.

Her humanoid belly, soft and lightly furred at that point.

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

He disembowelled her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In moments, the Suscrofa and Mura were upon her.

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

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

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

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

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

3

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

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

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

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

'Which way?' she asked.

Krishna whispered.

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

They waited.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Krishna paused and turned his face, lighting up the interior of the prison.

Satyabhama gasped.

There were people inside.

Hundreds and hundreds of people.

They peered out at the two intruders. Every last one of them was filthy and decrepit from incarceration and abuse. Men, women, children, all crowded together in hordes. From the ragged remains of their apparel, she guessed that they were all honourable people, citizens and perhaps even lords and ladies of the mountain kingdoms. They stared back at Satyabhama, shielding their eyes from Krishna’s blinding glare. Her husband had deliberately brightened his eyes, to make it impossible to see his face except as a blinding source of blue-white illumination.

They stared at her as she stared at them, neither knowing what to say.

‘We are friends,’ she said reassuringly, ‘We have come to free you from this unjust rule.’

A fellow with bony limbs who might once have been a strapping big man, a warrior even, perhaps, raised his shivering arms slowly to show the chains that bound them together. His eyes stared back from a hollow, skeletal face. ‘Free us,’ he said weakly.

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

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

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

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

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

She felt a great urgency to join that battle, to confront the enemy that had done this to these proud mountain dwellers. Perhaps the mountain kingdoms were not the most gentle or kind of cultures, but to have invaded them, massacred their people, and taken them prisoner was intolerable. And then there were the queens. The wives of the 16,000 mountain kings whose tribes made up the united mountain kingdoms. She had heard of the terrible treatment they had received from their captors, reduced to chattel and slaves serving the hideous appetites of Narakasura and anyone he chose to favor. They must be somewhere in the bowels of these mountains

too. They must find them and free them as well. But first, they had to win this battle.

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

‘No need. They are coming to us.’

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

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

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

She could hear them now, running down the tunnels. Their footfalls and noises were more easily distinguishable. *There must be thousands of them*, she thought. And with that, her heart thudded louder in her chest, louder even than the sounds of the approaching enemy. She could hear their strange clicking and chittering sounds, their grunting and screeching and squealing, their cloven footfalls and chitinous clattering. What manner of creatures were these?

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

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

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

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

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

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

The battle she was eager to join was here in front of her. Was swarming straight at her, rushing headlong in a horde of clicking, clattering, clopping, monstrosities that were part insect, part unnameable thing, part-boar part-human part-unknown.

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

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

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

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

Then she thought of the skeletal figures in the cages, thought of the atrocities that had been committed upon the mountain people, their queens, of the injustice and outrage, of the fact that no other kingdom or

leader even cared about what happened here in this remote corner of the world, about the fact that she, Krishna and their forces were the only hope of Pragjyotisha.

And with these thoughts, strength, honor and pride grew within her.

Her arms grew steady.

Her eyes sharpened their gaze.

Her mind steeled itself.

Satyabhama raised her bow and loosed the first shot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Come. Sudarshana will clear a way.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Krishna said something to it.

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

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

‘Alert, Satyabhama!’ he warned.

She turned her attention back towards the enemy.

Something was coming at them from across the chamber.

Several somethings.

They were racing *under* the bodies of the slain asuras. She could see their progress by the way the corpses heaved and fell, like a swell racing across the surface of a lake.

She counted seven, no eight, such swells.

Eight enemies then.

She tightened her grip on her bow, already reaching for the appropriate missile.

How hard could it be to down eight enemies when she had been able to drop almost a hundred with a single volley?

Then again, what kind of enemy could withstand the power of Sudarshana, and send the disk speeding back to its master?

She braced herself, as alert as she could possibly be.

The swells reached the corpses about thirty yards away, then burst free of the pile of bodies and revealed themselves.

They were asuras, of course.

Similar to the insectile ones, with the mandibles, claws and chitinous bodies that left a trail of slime. But each of them was much larger than their soldiers, each with a distinct appearance and a personality of its own.

The Eight Muras.

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

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

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

This was intolerable. He had known it would not be easy but he had not expected such resistance. His expectation that his children alone would be able to face the enemy and clear the ramparts now seemed ill-founded. Even with each garuda slaying a hundred enemy, there were still thousands more teeming over the fortress, and more still pouring up from within.

How many of these damn things were there anyway? He knew that Krishna and Satyabhama were already battling the majority of them down below, while Balarama's attack was intended to split the enemy on a third, separate front. Even if there were a million split in three hordes, that still

left over three hundred thousand hellspawn for each group to battle. Those were formidable odds.

But he was Garuda.

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

reeling from the wind blast. Those close to the edge lost their balance and were swept over. Fools!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

He struck the top of Pragjyotisha.

The fortress exploded.

Battlements and ramparts were smashed to smithereens.

Stone buttresses, pillars and floors strong enough to hold ten thousand men, were shattered like glass.

Muras and Suscrofa, by the thousands, were tossed helter skelter, thrown off the mountain, or smashed by the force of Garuda's impact. Those who were not killed instantly, were battered and killed by debris and collapsing stone.

That entire section of Pragjyotisha, the top of one entire mountain, was destroyed instantly.

Debris exploded outwards like a cloud of dust. Chips and slabs of stone several times as large as a man, fragments of boulders, pieces of bodies, blood, all blew out, falling hundreds of yards away, falling across the valley, crashing down into the woods and river far below. Bodies of dead Suscrofa and Muras fell like hail everywhere.

The impact was akin to a meteorite striking the mountain.

The top one third of the mountain was destroyed completely.

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

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

6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

These customs had been forgotten when Jarasandha invaded Pragjyotisha.

The Queens had been subjected to the worst, most inhumane treatment at the hands of their captors. After the slaughter of their husbands, the Queens had to endure the horror of watching their own children torn from

their arms and dragged away to captivity. They were only permitted to view them from time to time, at the pleasure of their sailors.

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

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

Now, as he paused inside the Queens' palace entranceway, he steeled himself. There had been no sentries or soldiers anywhere yet that he had encountered. It had been all too easy. Surely Narakasura was not going to let him just take his hostages away without a fight?

He entered the corridor and stopped short.

People were emerging from the many, many doors lining the long corridor.

Hundreds upon hundreds of them.

He had expected soldiers, sentries, assassins, asuras.

But these were women.

The Queens themselves.

'Do not fear me,' he called out. 'I am Balarama, prince of Dwarka. I am here to free you from your bondage.'

The Queens stood silently in the doorways to their apartments, saying nothing.

Their silence and stillness was unnerving. He had expected them to be in a bad way, but surely they were not so far gone that they could not understand they were about to be set free? Their ordeal was over. There would be no more abuse. Soon, he would reunite them with their children.

He started to tell them these things, to reassure them, when they began moving towards him.

All with the same glassy eyed stare, strange gait, and unusual stance.

As they stepped into the centre of the corridor where there was more light from the torches, he saw their faces clearly for the first time.

Distorted faces, bulging eyes, lolling tongues, mouths opening and closing wetly, hands bent into claws, bodies bent forward.

He took a step back.

What was wrong with them?

The next instant, he knew.

'Welcome, bhraatr of Krishna.'

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

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

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

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

He sheathed the sword.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Balarama watched in horror as the Queens began to climb the walls and ceiling, some crawling upside down in spider like stances, sidling towards him at astonishing speed. Some dropped to all fours and began bounding down the corridor, leaping over one another, eager to attack him. Saliva

dripped from their drooling mouths, their teeth bared and snarling. Eyes filled with madness. Hands bent into claws reaching out to scratch out his eyes and gouge his flesh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To her side, she heard Krishna fighting them too, using his sword too but in his own inimitable fashion. Krishna swept the sword in a pantomime dance, moving it this way and that way in an elaborate arabesque, as if fighting an invisible dancing enemy. She sensed the Muras attacking him too, but they were thwarted just as effectively—cut, bleeding, flung aside. She loved to watch Krishna's sword dance, it was a sight to behold. But she had her own dance to mind. And this was a dance of death. One slip and the Muras would be on her person, ripping her flesh to shreds. All that kept them from her was her skill with the swords and her footwork. She danced on.

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

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

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

They looked at each other.

He nodded at her. ‘**Good.**’

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

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

Where had they gone?

Suddenly, she felt a cut on her shoulder, at the point where her muscle ended and her shoulder bone began. It spurted blood and she cried out, unable to help herself, so unexpected was the pain.

She turned, swords spinning.

There was nobody there.

A sharp burning slash across her back, diagonally. Wetness.

She turned, swords ready, moving like lightning.

Nothing. Nobody.

Another cut from the other side, across the meaty part of her left ankle. She winced. Turned again.

Again, nothing.

Krishna was bleeding from three places too, she saw.

‘**What—**,’ she began.

‘**Spin. Spin now as fast as you can, Satya. Do it!**’

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

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

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

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

‘**Faster now. You will see them soon. Be ready.**’

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

She felt a prickling in her chest and inside her head. Then, suddenly a roar of noise from nowhere. A popping of some sort, as if some enormous cork

had burst free from a jug. A rushing of air inside her head. A cessation of time, a sense of free falling, as if time itself had ceased to function, and her body possessed no weight, as if light and time and the sky itself had bent and folded to form another shape and form.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Satyabhamā raced through dimensions, chasing the Muras.

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

‘Garuda!’ he roared.

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

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

Narakasura had no intention of letting that happen.

‘Garuda!’ he bellowed again.

One of his tusks had chipped off. Only the very tip, but that was enough to infuriate him. The tip now jutted out unnaturally, rasping against the hairy palm of his paw. He grunted in fury. A boar-asura’s tusks were his pride. To lose even a part of one was to be crippled, dishonored. It was proof that

an enemy had bested you at one time. He would have to sharpen it again, to restore it to its former state but that was not enough. He would be avenged for the insult. He would cut out Garuda's heart and eat it as he had eaten the heart of the Lord of Bird's child not long ago.

'**Garuda!**' he shouted a third time.

The pile of rubble stirred and shifted.

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

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

Narakasura roared again and leaped, flying three hundred yards up in the air, throwing himself at Garuda.

Garuda shrieked and flew straight at him, launching himself through the air.

They met in mid air, colliding like two avalanches smashing into each other.

The impact shook the ruins, resounding like a clap of thunder.

Narakasura swung his axes, attacking Garuda the same way he had attacked and killed his children, seeking out his softer torso.

Garuda let Narakasura's axes find his torso.

Narakasura swung the axes with all his force, hacking at Garuda's midriff.

The axes struck Garuda's midriff and snapped, the blades breaking off from the shafts of the axes.

They left not even a mark on Garuda's bare midriff.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Narakasura looked around, found a large shard of jagged metal from some contraption that had been smashed by Garuda's attack. A metal trapdoor

perhaps? It mattered not what it had been. What mattered was what it had become now, in Narakasura's hands. A weapon.

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

It could not have come a moment too soon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

Krishna smiled at her. ‘Well done.’

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

‘Now you have one final task. Your greatest challenge yet.’

She raised her chin proudly. ‘Say the word.’

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

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

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

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

‘Dwarka is burning,’ he said. ‘The civil war spiralled out of control and an enemy was lured to the gates. Unable to storm the city because of the protections Balarama and I have placed around it, he set fire to the entire kingdom. It will burn to the ground before dawn. I must return and save as many people as possible before they are all lost.’

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

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

She nodded. ‘Very well.’

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

‘Your cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas,’ she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Satyabhama will deal with Narakasura.

<Satyabhama? But, bhraatr—!>

It is time, Balarama. Let us go home.

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

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

Balarama sighed. <Yes, there will be.>

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

He summoned Pushpak and followed Krishna. Back to Dwarka.

* * *

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

But he knew the answer. All things served Krishna. And Krishna served all things. What had to be would be, it was all part of Krishna's plan, the spinning world on his fingertip, the Coriolis of Vishnu incarnate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

‘Narakasura!’

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

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

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

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

He snorted, spewing snot and fluids out both his nostrils. The Suscrofa and Muras who had emerged from below also snorted in laughter. He was pleased to see that there were still a few hundred thousand left. The enemy had cut his army in half, it was true, but he still had more than enough to

hold the Mountain Kingdoms and to invade other mortal kingdoms too. After he finished this battle.

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

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

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

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

And he leaped through the air at Satyabhama.

* * *

Satyabhama watched as Narakasura leaped at her.

He covered the distance of almost a hundred yards as easily as a child jumping a rain puddle.

She braced herself, reading her body for the impact she knew would come when he landed on the slab she stood on.

He landed on the slab. The impact was bone-jarring. She felt it in every joint of her body.

But she stood her ground.

From a hundred yards away, he had looked hideous.

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

She recoiled in disgust.

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

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

She shuddered but said nothing.

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

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

She raised her arms and unhooked the bow rig and quiver from her shoulder and back. She let it drop to the ground behind her.

Then she unhitched the belt that held her sword sheaths. She let that fall to the ground too.

She untied her dagger and dropped it to the ground as well.

Then she raised her hands, showing him her empty palms.

‘I am unarmed as well now,’ she said.

Narakasura snorted, his boar's face twisted in some confusion. '**Unarmed**,' he repeated as if he did not understand.

'I do not need any weapon to kill you,' she said. 'Because I myself am the weapon of your destruction!'

And she launched herself at Narakasura.

10

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

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

Narakasura barely budged an inch.

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

The blows did not even turn Narakasura's head.

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

Narakasura grunted and honked in amusement.

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

Garuda called softly in dismay.

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

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

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

A sound from below distracted Garuda.

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

Narakasura was bleeding.

The asura was dribbling blood from his snout, from two, no three, places.

He was also clutching his chest as if experiencing pain there.

Garuda looked into the asura's body and saw that he had two broken ribs.

From Satyabhama's kick! And the wounds on his snout are from her blows!

Garuda called out in excitement, telling his children what was happening. They answered him, sharing his excitement and asking him what it meant. How was the mortal woman able to cause bodily harm to Narakasura when the asura was supposed to be immune to attack by all beings?

I do not know, Children. But it is happening! He is injured from just a few blows already! That means he can be hurt and Satyabhama has a chance!

They called back, expressing shrill pleasure.

* * *

Satyabhama struck at Narakasura again, hitting him below the ribs, then on the other side, then spun around and struck him from behind, then on

the legs. She continued her barrage of blows, striking him at every vulnerable point again and again, inflicting as much damage as possible.

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

But it was working.

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

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

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

Satyabhama relaxed her stance. He was already mortal injured in a dozen organs. He would not last more than a few moments even if she did not hit him again. She could afford to give him a moment to understand the cause of his destruction.

‘You forgot one person,’ she said quietly.

He looked at her, frowning. **‘Who?’**

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

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

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

The Suscrofa and Muras fell silent.

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

She nodded. 'Of course not. I appear to you now in a different body, a different life form. But I am still the wife of your father in this lifetime as well. That should have been enough. You knew Krishna was your father. You forgot that I was your mother. That was your failing. Did you think I would let you get away with trying to kill your own father? With all the destruction and death you have caused in this lifetime? The pain you have brought here upon this earth? It is intolerable, my son. You do not deserve to enjoy the life I have given you. What I gave you then, in that last lifetime, I take back from you now, in this lifetime.'

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

He staggered, falling to his knees.

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

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

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

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

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

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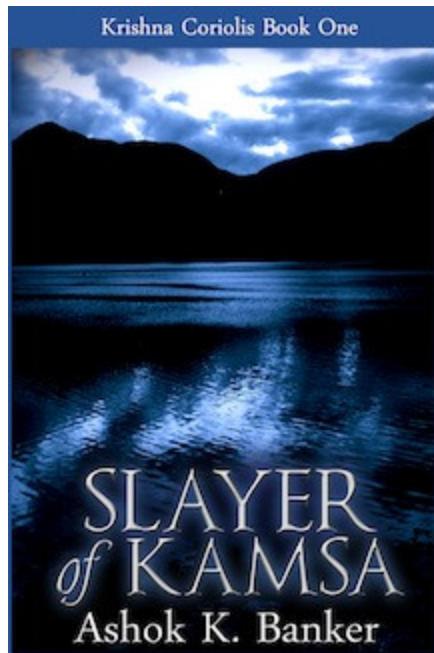
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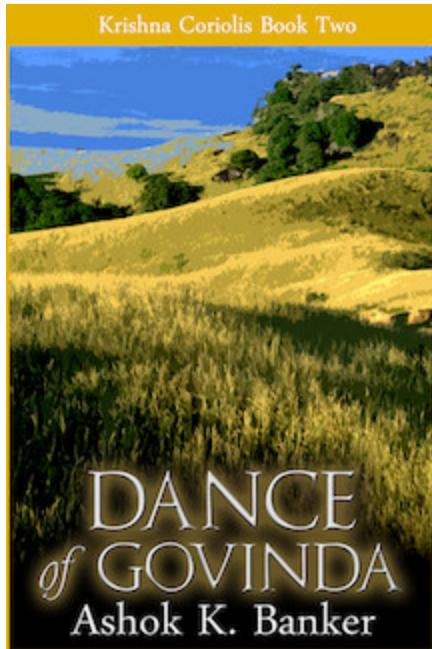
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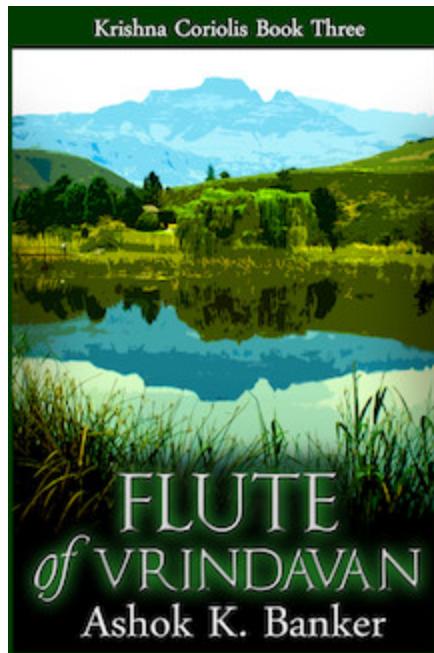
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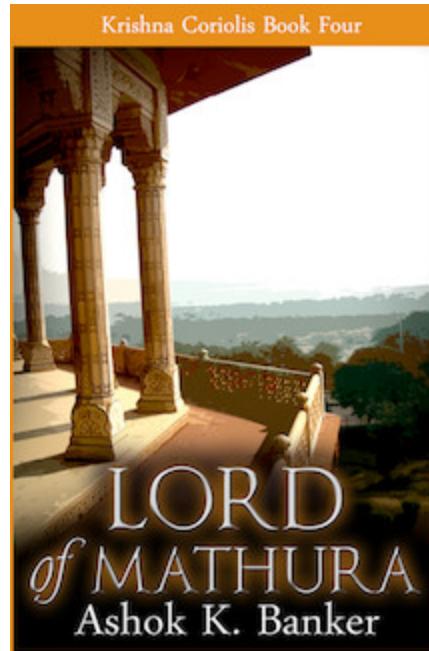
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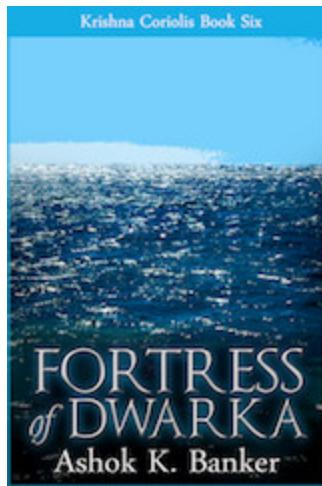
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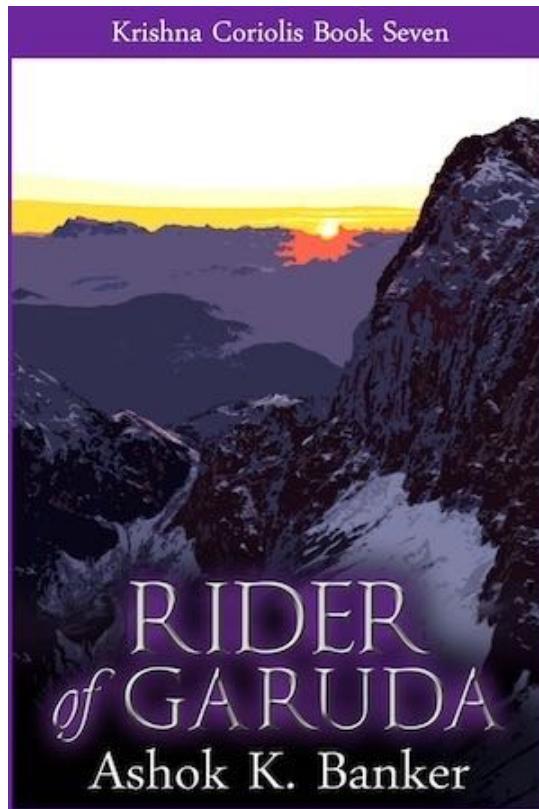
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