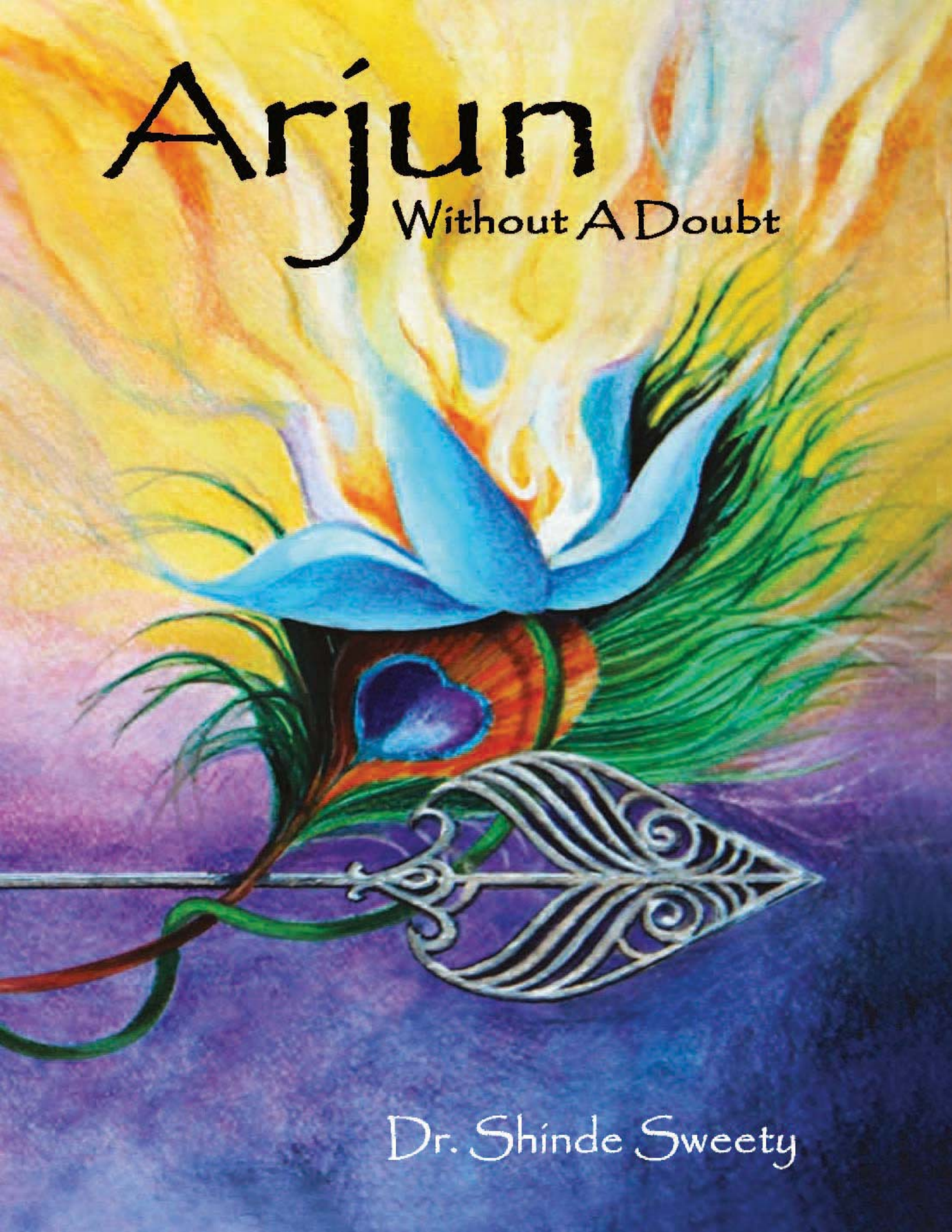


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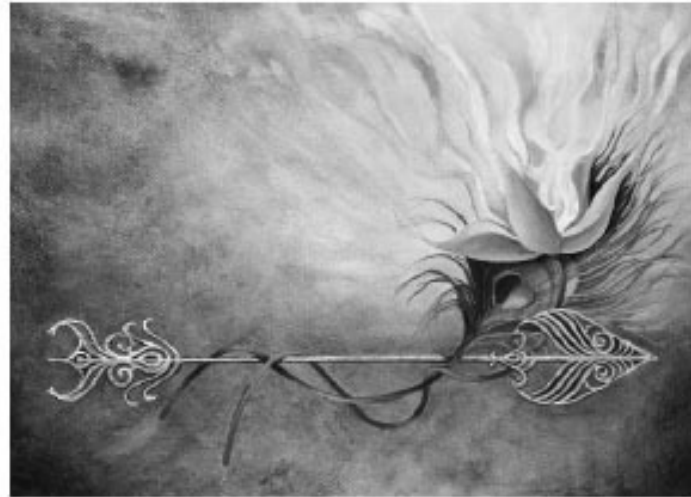
Without A Doubt



Dr. Shinde Sweety

ARJUN:

Without A Doubt



Dr Shinde Sweety



To,
Rhea

As Always

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



The heart can be dissected, the brain can be spliced open, but I love to unravel the mind and emotions.

Dr Shinde Sweety holds a Doctorate in Medicine, with numerous publications in Indian and International Medical Journals. She is an avid Mahabharata fan and a voracious reader. She loves to day-dream, swim, sketch and learn new languages – currently trying Spanish & Sanskrit. She can be contacted at **sweetyshinde@hotmail.com**

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Feel free to share quotes, reviews, debates and more about ‘Arjun: Without a Doubt’ on **<http://sweetyshinde.wordpress.com>**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Vyas – for penning the most labyrinthine epic. A writer so prolific that even his pregnant pauses provide fodder to authors over centuries.

Arjun and Draupadi – for being the most dazzling and awe-inspiring protagonists.

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PREFACE

Mahabharata, the Indian epic, is classified as Mythology. Myth pertains to fable, legend or fiction.

However, our ‘mythology’ mentioned: airplanes (Pushpak in Ramayana; Matali’s air charter in Mahabharata) much before the Wright brothers’ momentous flight; weapons of mass destruction (Brahmastra, Brahmashira, Pashupatastra) much before the atomic or nuclear bomb; Yashoda who saw the Universe in Krishn’s mouth (Sun revolving around the Earth and the Earth as a round planet aeons before Pythagoras and Socrates claimed the same); test-tube babies (Kaurav princes?), gender-transformation (Shikhandi & Brihannada), Tsunami (Dwarka’s sea-burial), Parthenogenesis (Kunti /Pritha’s aspermatogenic progeny) and the most stupefying miracle of all – a man and a woman being pure friends! Vyas’s mere imagination cannot enfold all these miraculous events.

Our ‘mythology’ has warriors who could harness forces of nature into Agniastra, Vayuastra and Varunastra merely by chanting verses. Impossible? Take the statement, ‘*Specific sound wavelengths can shatter glass*’; wouldn’t that seem impossible to someone ignorant of the Resonance principle? Perhaps verses chanted in a specific rhythm achieved a similar phenomenon. I firmly believe our ‘mythological epics’ are historical narrations.

What about the Hero of Mahabharata

Arjun is forever shackled within the confines of duty, discipline, dedication and devotion.

He is blessed with Bhagwad Gita and boons, Krishn and Krishnaa, weapons and wars, laurels and triumphs and, to top it all, an heir to carry on his bloodline. What possible agonies can such a child of Destiny have?

But how was the man behind the warrior? How did he feel practicing what others only preached – being told his noble ideology existed only in theory, wandering from exile to exile in constant quests, searching for a

soul mate in unworthy substitutes, being exploited by the three people that he worshipped – his mother, brother and tutor and finding his moment of compassion misconstrued and concreted for eternity?

Dronacharya's arena, Draupadi's schism, Yudhisthir's dazed madness at the game of dice, Urvashi's curse, Keechak's death, Karn's secret...all we get is silence from Arjun. Where is Arjun's voice? Where are his inner demons, his darkest desires, his dilemmas and his pain?

Draupadi – The most courageous fighter in an epic overflowing with warriors. A woman who battled brute force with cold logic – the savior of Indraprastha, whose name became synonymous with destruction. The feisty Rorschach test that still evokes awe, curiosity, envy and disdain, and whose name is a taboo for every daughter's parent.

Ayn Rand said *“The person at the center of the storm is often taken for granted, his viewpoint deemed to be the least. It needs a middle man to convey his voice.”*

Because silence is golden no more.

Because silence too can be misquoted.

Because we live in times that vilify the heroes and glorify the villains.

Because, as Ayn Rand says, “The central theme can never belong to anybody else but the Hero.

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Whys and Why Nots : Exploring Myths

Arjun, Achilles, Alexander!

Chapter 1: The Blue Magician

I lay sprawled by the lake, my fingers floated lazily along its edge. I ruffled the surface once in a while and gazed at the ripples – perfectly symmetrical ripples emanating from an epicenter ... this is how arrows should leap. My other hand reached up to trace the reassuring curves of my bow.

Last night, a bunch of wandering bards had setup camp with us. They regaled us with stories related to the grand swayamwar tomorrow ... today.

A princess fragrant as the blue lotus and born from fire, indeed! Considering that we had just escaped the murderous fire at Varanavat ... well, we had had enough of fire for a lifetime.

“Arjun does not believe in miracles ... unless they occur at Vrindavan or Dwarka,” Bheem had needled me.

“*Your* Krishn will be attending. You will finally meet your soul-mate tomorrow,” Nakul sneaked in slyly.

“Nakul, if Govind is attending, he will compete. If he competes, he will win. He will be too busy ferrying the blue lotus to Dwarka. I doubt he will have time for us,” I reasoned.

“Maybe Krishn will not compete,” Yudhisthir said dreamily.

“He never has time for us. Our cousin did not bother to seek us out even after Varanavat.”

“He owes us nothing, Nakul. Blood ties are not chains of a dungeon. Besides, he did not seek our help when he created Dwarka, did he?” I asked, partly in admiration and partly with regret at the fact that he was so autonomous, so *complete* on his own. He never seemed to need us. Did he even know I existed?

“You could woo and impress him at Drupad’s court. I wonder what insurmountable contest King Drupad has planned. Nothing is impossible for Dronacharya’s students,” Sahdev said.

“The contest is for Kshatriyas, which is what we are trying not to reveal ourselves to be,” I reminded him. *Avenging angel ... Kshatriya purger ...* yet every Kshatriya would flock to her contest, like moths to a flame.

“We can be there as Brahmins to get alms,” said Yudhisthir.

“Who knows, Drupad may be waiting for you.” Sahdev winked.

“For me? His enemy’s disciple, the reason his Panchal Kingdom got split halfway, the person who led him chained to Acharya? Dream on.” I scooped up a handful of water and watched as it trickled out between my fingers.

*** I was born on the brink of ripe womanhood. I had already lost childhood at birth. Now I had to catch up with youth in a frenzied hurry. My education was haphazard and multi-pronged. My maids tried their best to tame me into conventionality.

Cast your eyes down, speak in gentle tones and – most importantly – speak without saying anything of importance. Don’t smile without reason; don’t speak out of turn and the star of all advices – don’t think!

The art of seduction was endless, relentless – and extremely boring. I did not need it to be taught to me. Besides ...

“Are there men worth seducing?” I asked outright, yawning.

“Man!” They said in unison, shaking their index finger, “... not men. The man who will be Husband,” they stressed the word as if it was the be-all of existence.

I had heard of travelers who condensed solar energy with a sliver of glass and harnessed it into fire. That is what I was supposed to do – concentrate my entire being, personality, joys and lassos of seduction upon one person.

“And the rest?” I teased.

“They are the *outsiders*,” they said, aghast at my words.

I envied my brothers whole heartedly. They did not have to waste time on such drivel. Dhrishtadyumn was ‘the King-to-be’. He was drawn into much better, enriching varieties of education. The judicial laws, administrative strategies, the *shastras* – and above all, the art of warfare.

I followed them sometimes into those hallowed halls where weapons were preserved and pampered. I loved to run my hand over the gleaming blades, the metal cool and reassuring against my feverish skin.

If seduction was my weapon number one, should I not be taught its antidote? Survival, weapon number two? Teaching me one without the other left me too dependent on men ... *A* man! I reminded myself.

“Teach me,” I commanded my brothers and father.

My implorations and demands were met with amused eyes, gentle frowns and unbending rules of conduct. I heard tales of women who shared the battlefield with their husbands ... husband. But I was born too soon. Too late. I had blossomed in the blink of an eye. Time could not be wasted on mundane things like war tactics.

It was time to marry me off. Time to set me off on another strange journey armed with the great Art of Seduction ... sans Self Defense.

“*Only one*,” the blue-toned magician had said melodiously. “There is only one that is worthy of you.”

I don’t remember when Krishn came into my life; he was just there. My sounding board – the only man who was never tongue-tied in my presence.

“Maharani Kunti’s third son, the peerless archer Arjun. And my cousin. Even your father agrees with my choice.”

I had heard of this name, countless times. The one who made Father yearn for a warrior son, the one who inadvertently compelled my birth; who else could own me? But still ... an enemy – ally of Dronacharya. *Father would conquer an enemy with another enemy, using me?*

“Without my permission? Why is he peerless?” I asked, my questions jumbling up in irritation and curiosity.

“Your father will seek your permission after he finalizes everything.” He coolly ignored my knit eyebrows and continued, “Arjun is Dronacharya’s best disciple. He excels in all the arts of warfare. Nobody can wield a bow like him, with the exception of Dronacharya, Bhishm and Parshuram. His acute hunger to excel, his quest for perfection, his powers of concentration...”

“How so?” I butted in. He narrated the story of Dronacharya’s archery test, the wooden bird on the tree. None of the students could hit the target, because they were distracted by the trees and the branches. Arjun, however, could focus solely on the eye of the bird and was thus able to shoot it.

I shrugged, “A motionless wooden bird. In war, on a battlefield, the target will not sit still. There will be no time to ponder, think and reflect. What kind of tutor bases his tests on motionless objects? I would, however, be more impressed if he hits a moving target – without looking at it. No, I don’t mean sonic archery, which he is sure to know. Something else, I don’t know ... something more impossible, more difficult.”

He smiled “You like things to be difficult, do you, Princess?”

“I do. How does his skill qualify him to be my soul mate?”

“It doesn’t. It is merely the means to get you.”

“Provided Bhishm, Dronacharya and Parshuram don’t turn up to vie for my hand.” This time I ignored *his* frown and continued, “So give me a valid reason to marry him.”

“Because he is a nice person.”

I waited for him to go on, but he had finished. “Is that all?” I asked.

“It is. When everything else is gone, it is the only quality that remains.”

“How typical of you. Life is still on the first page and you jump to the end of the script.”

“That is because I know,” he said.

“Bhagwan Krishn, I keep forgetting you are God!” I folded my hands deferentially and bowed. He gazed at me patiently. He was very difficult to rile.

I sighed, “Can your Arjun talk?”

“As far as I know, he can both hear and speak.”

“I did not say speak, I said ‘*talk*’. I will be so bored if he just stares at me without getting a word out.” Krishn gave me another of those indecipherable looks. I decided to change tack.

“How do I recognize your genuinely nice cousin? How does he look?”

He shrugged. “Nothing special. He may be ugly. Is it important?”

“Would you reject your wives for being beautiful, even if you married them for other reasons? It is my life — and I have only one.”

“No man is perfect. Be careful what you wish for, you may get it.”

“If he marries me, he better be extra-ordinary.”

“Are *you* so perfect, Princess?”

“Obviously. You would not need to marry so many women if you found the perfect woman. Now don’t give me that scandalized look ...”

“Kshatriya dharma ...” he began. I swatted aside his Kshatriya dharma.

“Never have I known anything more open to interpretation, exploitation and distortion than Dharma.” I conceded, “Alright, tell me why you are so keen that I marry your Arjun. I don’t have to be a puppet to my father’s wishes and your whims.”

“Trust me. You and he belong.”

“A contest in which I don’t get to participate except as a trophy? I don’t like being relegated to this dumb role at all. And if your Arjun decides to play truant ... how will I recognize him?”

“I will guide you. Though, let me warn you - he may already be dead.”

He loved to pepper his speech with such sweetly timed detonations. I took in a deep breath and awaited his explanation. He told me the gory tales of Arjun’s murderous relatives, the repetitive conspiracies and the final lacquer house fire at Varanavat. He refused to confess whether his cousin managed to survive the deliberately accidental fire. He did not seem very sure either.

So, I was to be the beacon and sorceress that would tempt Arjun out of hiding. Arjun – my father’s enemy, the superlative archer, genuinely nice person, ugly and probably dead as well!

“Plus, I have never met him yet,” he concluded.

Great!

Chapter 2: The Fish and Two Baits

We brothers filtered in late. The Brahmin section was already overflowing with those thronging Panchal's court in the hope of alms. We scattered ourselves into different corners, so as to avoid detection. I slouched amongst fellow Brahmins, trying to appear innocuous. I need not have even tried, actually, since everybody in the assembly had their eyes and attention riveted upon the entrance, expecting Panchal's blue lotus.

The entire warrior kingdom had sent their representatives. Draupadi's famed beauty seemed to have attracted every proven and potential warrior to her court. The air was thick with expectation ... and a fragrance. The fragrance was intoxicating. It overpowered the fragrance of flowers, the *attars*, the sacrificial offerings. I could not place it fully, but I felt it sink its heady claws into me.

My eyes scanned quickly through the Kshatriyas. My eyes immediately saw faces I did not want to see.

Then I spied the flicker of a peacock feather. I held my breath on a short, sharp intake.

Dronacharya used to tell me about this miracle getting honed in Sandipani Acharya's ashram. Mata kept telling me about the miracle wandering from Mathura's prison to Vrindavan's meadows; back to Mathura and then to Dwarka. Breaking barriers, rules and traditions; battling assassins, disbelief and ridicule with consummate ease and grace. Finally, finally here he was. I sat erect, my spine taut as in combat, the way I stood a split second before I released an arrow. There are moments in life that remain as milestones.

Govind did not feel like a person, he felt like an event. My cousin ... no, something far more – My Destiny. I knew my life would now forever be divided into two phases – before Govind and after Govind.

His large luminous eyes were speculatively moving around the hall. I waited impatiently until – at long last – they swept over and stilled on me. His glance speared through me, ripping open my mind, gauging and

evaluating me in one searing moment. I felt paralyzed in the fierce spotlight of it. Never before had I felt so vibrantly alive. Never before had I felt so naked. His eyes sparkled bright, but his gaze was inward, attentive to a thought of his own. A slight regret? No! I wiped away the notion. Those eyes would never harm me, purposely or otherwise. Somewhere in the background, I heard the Panchal prince introduce his sister to the assembly hall. The fragrance was now stronger. Richer. Fresher. It was *here!*

Govind blinked first and then he smiled at me. It felt like an arm put protectively around me. He turned away resolutely and faced the princess. I turned my head, dazed. I was now facing the princess.

Drunk on the vision of Govind, I saw her through a haze of green-blue luminance. Any other woman would have been a colossal anti-climax. *This* one felt like an extension of Govind; like variations of the same theme. They were like a fire holding both the cool blue and the searing orange flickers within its womb.

So far, I never had time or inclination to form a picture of my dream woman. But some magic source had known my deepest desires and created a personified version of it. If ever a woman could be crafted specifically for a man, I knew she was.

She was not an artist's dream. She was not a poet's creation. She looked far too vital and vibrant for that. This was not a woman to be won and wedded. She seemed like an Idea, a Muse, a Divine weapon. Like *Vajra* – Indra's thunderbolt.

For a brief moment, I felt acute jealousy for Govind; then a wave of burning shame swept over me. I vaguely heard and understood the conditions put forth by the luminous youth by her side. My heart lurched when I heard it. How could her father set so easy a target? Did he wish to gift away this divine weapon?

It cost many a king their pride, before they learnt that the task at hand was near impossible.

The specially made bow lay inert, but glowing. It looked light as a butterfly and left the strongest kings panting to lift it an inch. Some succeeded. Duryodhan managed to lift the bow, but he was contemptuously tossed aside by the recoil of its string. Jarasandha had the same amount of success, or failure. Shishupal stumbled under its weight.

I felt my arm muscles go tense; I could *feel* that bow within my grasp as clearly as I saw it. But ... the dusky flame on the dais belonged to Dwarka's elegant plume of peacock feathers. I unfurled my fingers and regretfully shelved my dreams.

I saw Kings glowering with their failure, felt their collective grouse turn into resentment towards the slender form standing up there. The embers in her eyes were now frankly amused. So were Govind's.

I saw a tall person stand up. A golden coat of arms. My old time opponent. The one who hated me for reasons of his own. I had no time to spare him either hatred or sympathy. Arrows don't obey caste or class. It only mattered whether he was good or not. I knew he was good but was he good enough for today?

"*Anga-Raj*, Karn," announced the courtier, as the golden head strode towards the bow. I saw the bunching of his muscles as he lifted the bow. He stood a moment, adjusting his weight to balance the heavy bow.

I was no saint. I did not wish him to win. It seemed obscene that any mortal should convert that streak of lightening into a mere wife.

Karn knelt gracefully by the pond. I noticed the involuntary twitch of my fingers. He was holding the bow just a little too tight, too coiled. Besides, there was something about that bow beyond its weight ... the center of gravity? The bow seemed to be lopsided in its balance; its center of gravity was off-center. King Drupad had definitely placed value on his daughter's hand!

I noticed with quiet satisfaction that Karn would miss. I saw Govind relax as he noticed it too. The arrow leapt up and sunk into the rotating machine.

The fish eye grinned down, untouched. A murmur of dissent rippled through the hall.

King Drupad sank back into his seat. He raised a commanding arm, allowing Karn to proceed. I remembered suddenly that the flame's brother had mentioned three chances. Karn would have two more chances! Either he would be able to rectify his mistake, or else ...

Does that happen in battle? One chance is all the difference between life and death. Surely, the King ought to have more faith in Govind's skills. Couldn't he have permitted a single attempt to win his slender thunderbolt? I couldn't fathom what Govind was waiting for.

Karn stood up. I saw the crimson flare effuse into his face. He threw the bow back onto the table, flung his head back once to glare at the fish eye and then marched back to his seat. The crowd drew in a collective disappointed sigh.

At least I could grant him that; he had thought exactly like I would have. *I would not have touched that second arrow.* A second attempt would have been the most vicious insult to Dronacharya and to my self-confidence.

If anyone deserved to win her, Govind did. This ... *Krishnaa* – the dark one. The dusky lotus that would rightfully adorn golden Dwarka.

I heard a confusing melee of voices – a swollen disgruntled wave of audible anger arising from the assembly. They wanted revenge for their collective humiliation.

And now, Govind. Rise up and show what can be done. Claim her.

He sat calm, a smile hovering over his lips. He did not rise, but his eyes rose. To mine. He inclined his head, closed his eyelashes in a brief sweep. It was both permission and command.

I felt a rush of blood. I stood up.

*** A silence enveloped the hall suddenly. A tall figure was advancing from way back, from the corner where the Brahmins had crowded.

He walked lightly, easily, every step a spring for the next. His fingertips reached down to his knees – lovely, long fingers. He had the posture of a warrior and the serenity of a Brahmin.

If Arjun was ‘nothing special’ then this was definitely not him. What a pity! He looked competent and nice enough. And neither dead...nor ugly. Not by any standards.

I decided not to be a pawn for either my Father or Krishn. This was my life at stake, not theirs. I did not look in Krishn’s direction. *I could not be accused of disobeying a signal I never saw.* Just this one chance. If he fails, I will wait for Krishn’s nice cousin. If he does not fail ...

What a curious person! Whoever bows to a bow? He stood gazing down at it possessively. I wondered if he would ever look at me like that. I felt a sudden jab of jealousy for the Bow.

I wondered what unseen, unheard vibes he received from the Bow. I bent all my willpower into his left arm that was cradling the bow. His fingers coiled around it and then he swung it up easily. Lifted it high above his head smiling; as if this was too easy. As if Life should never be grim and grey. As if Life was meant to be this joyous and effortless.

He set the bow upright. It was almost twice as tall as him. He bent the prow towards him. His right arm looped and threaded the bow expertly with a fluid movement, swift, graceful and competent. A movement too practiced. He lifted up the bow again and tweaked the taut string, his eyes closed in bliss. The reverberations cut through the tension in the hall.

He took up three arrows, entwining them between his fingers. My brother stepped ahead, wanting to explain the rules, to warn him that he would get three attempts. The serene stranger silenced him with a gentle shake of his head. He knelt by the pond. His movements were unhurried, but they still happened moments before I could register them. He bent his neck down and

swung up his arms in tandem. All I could see of his face was the winged eyebrows and the lips, sharply etched and indrawn. His breath was steady and controlled. Unlike mine.

I did not believe in God, but this time I closed my eyes in silent prayer.

The silence and then the uproar were both deafening. I snapped open my eyes. It had happened! I had missed the chance to witness the trajectory of the arrows. I did not see the flight of those arrows, or the superb archery that was now mine forever.

Chapter 3: The Defeated Victors

*** Over the tumult of the vanquished Kings, we dodged out of the hall. Our guards blocked the entrance behind us. He intuitively turned towards the north east, where the palace grounds blended with the woods.

It had not been a *swayamwar*; it was a battlefield we left behind. A battle we had won. We were both victors and trophies.

I had hated that loophole my father had left – three chances in return for my life? But my husband had not relied on three chances. When I snapped open my eyes, I had seen three silver arrows; one piercing neatly through the fish's eye, the other two embedded tip to tail into each other and into the first arrow. It was like the end of all arguments. Final.

His steps were brisk and long, as if moments could not be wasted on movements. When I judged that we were a comfortable way away, I paused to ask, “Are we safe now?”

He slowed down and turned to me, “We were never unsafe, Princess. We were just trying to prevent any more bloodshed on their side.”

I stood still to savor the sound of his voice as it seeped into me. It was such a rich, cultured voice. My toes curled in delight. I wished I could run my fingers through his voice; stealthily ... my mind flew to an image of crumpled silk sheets. But a Brahmin ... well, sheaves of crackling hay would also do. I wondered lazily if hay tickles, and if a fire-born is allowed to rustle among hay.

“He will be fine, don't worry.” I guessed he was talking about his companion who had taken the other route as the battle abated. They must have a meeting point decided in advance.

“May I know where we are going?” I asked.

“To our hut. It is a long distance away. It is small, humble and uncomfortable.” He searched my face, “Any regrets, Princess?”

“What is there to regret? You completed the impossible.”

His shoulders elegantly shrugged off my impossible contest. I guess he could afford to be smug, winner as he was. He mused, “A Kshatriya princess marrying a Brahmin is not unheard of, but a Brahmin *allowed* to compete at a swayamwar must be a first.”

“I am not a Kshatriya, just the daughter of one. And you are not a Brahmin,” I said confidently.

I saw the pale bruises over his coppery skin. They looked like dancing rays of sunlight. I lifted my hand and traced one long scar with a fingertip. His nonchalance vanished. Revenge time – time for me to orchestrate his breath. I took back my finger and he breathed again.

“Krishn told me you would win,” I explained.

His eyes widened momentarily in shocked delight. “He knows me? I have never met him before. He may have heard of me, a long time ago. But why would he even keep me in his memory?”

I wanted to add, ‘And heart. Are you The One?’

I decided to bait him into admission instead, “I offer my respects to your Acharya. Unlike Dronacharya.” I murmured deliberately, “*His* students did not do him much proud. Hastinapur’s princes did not fare well today, did they?”

I saw the imperceptible tightening of his lips as his eyes refocused on me, “Princess, why should he bear the weight of their failures?”

“Would he not have taken the credit if they succeeded?”

“No person is great in isolation. It takes many hands to shape a life. Denial would mean conceit, and conceit is not the same as self-respect. ”

I searched his eyes in disbelief, wondering if he always fired sentences like they were arrows. Kshatriyas were bred on insolence, bravado and vastly exaggerated views of self. No Kshatriya would openly admit to self or to an audience what he had just said so easily. There was no audience here to impress – except me. I belonged to him irrespective of whether I was impressed or not. Giving credit to another - that was a sign of dependency, of lack of self-assurance ... or was it?

I reflected back to the events at the contest hall. He had been anything but the above. His posture had been taut yet relaxed – the winged eyebrows on a serene brow, the three arrows nestling within his fingers. No! An admission so munificent only stressed its exact opposite; it could only mean complete self-confidence.

I thought back further to Father's conversation with me, "Why Arjun? His target was to hold me captive; he did not unleash mayhem destruction on our army. His promise to Drona did not encompass insulting me; there were no derisive taunts as he escorted me to Drona. It is a rare trait in a warrior, even rarer for someone so young and almost an impossible trait in a young warrior winning his first ever skirmish. *Success is more difficult to handle than failure. This is an exceptional man.*"

My exceptional victor's narrowed eyes were keenly following my trail of thought to its conclusions. I decided to carry on the baiting, "True. But in that case, Acharya should shoulder the failure of his students too."

He sighed, "Failure is an orphan. Besides, what does a blame game achieve? The accused feels defensive and bitter, the accuser feels absolved of all responsibility ... and neither comes out wiser, cleaner or better than before."

That was true but he still did not admit who he was. There was no point beating around the bush. Discretion and Diplomacy, was Krishn's anthem. I mustered up all of Krishn's advice to come up with, "What is your name?"

"Parth. Pritha's son." He explained. I stared dismayed at him. Arjun was Kunti's son. *Who were Parth and Pritha? Wasn't he the one meant for me?*

His eyes were amused, “You are very brave, Princess. I don’t know how a woman gives her whole life in return for a feat performed in a swayamwar. Back in that hall you were terrified of the wrong person getting it right, weren’t you? It must take a lot of courage to marry a stranger.”

“Are you not marrying a stranger too? Besides, Krishn had already told me how to recognize you. Ugly — and dead. You were not dead and — not ugly,” I ended lamely. He had brown eyes, I noticed, with flecks of gold — and very long eyelashes.

He cleared his throat, “You are so very much not-ugly too, Princess. You should see my younger brother, though. He is the good-looking one.”

I had no wish to see his younger brother at all. *Not ugly*, indeed! What a way to describe Panchal’s fire-born. Irked, I asked “Why do you call me Princess? I have a name.”

I saw his eyes move to the garland still clutched in my hand. In the chaotic melee, I had quite forgotten the actual garlanding. Back in the hall, as the storm erupted, he had got busy with the immediate task on hand. Later, after the opposing Kings were crushed, he had waited for my palm to slip into his in silent acceptance.

“May I call you Krishnaa?” he asked.

I had experienced the thrill of being the unique trophy of an impossible contest. Then I experienced the thrill of abduction; our escape from the hall was almost abduction by mutual consent. Then I had the honor of being won in battle as well. A man who gives credit so generously, whose voice echoes his thoughts and echoes them in such a lovely voice ... which woman gets *that* lucky?

Here, in the deep woods, there was no compulsion from my father or Krishn. I was my own mistress. His eyes sparkled like warm honey as my arms rose willingly to garland him.

I had everything I wanted. Too bad about Arjun. Who told him not to turn up?

*** We hurried to where his hefty accomplice was waiting with a chariot. “What took you so long?” he asked. “Better hurry. We need to reach before dark, Arjun. Ma must be worried.”

I was halfway up the chariot. I caught my breath and stopped dead. He had mentioned a name I knew. I whirled back at Parth to confirm it.

Father had willed it, Krishn had willed it and so had I. *Some things in life are just not a coincidence.*

I wished I had stayed longer to savor his answering smile. I would not see him smile at me for the interminable eight years that would follow.

His brother continued chattering. Neither of us heard him.

The hurried life at Panchal gave me many relatives, but not enough time to form relationships. And now I owned an entire family. Two elder brothers-in-law, like fathers. And two younger ones, like sons. They had suffered far too long. Enough of trials and tribulations. Now I would pamper and spoil them all.

It had been a magical silver arrow. It had not only pierced the fisheye, but it had pierced all our lives and bound us together in so many magical relations.

The miracle has happened! I possess this divine weapon – this tawny tigress with the dancing eyebrows. A pity I have to carry her back to our humble hut. She could have been on her way to golden Dwarka right now and here she is trampling through grass and dust beside me.

And Govind ... must meet him soon again. He looked like all the Universe’s plans had already unfolded before him. Why did he allow me to

proceed before he tried? What kind of self-restraint made him give up this exquisite treasure? Why did he come to the contest if he had no plans of contesting? Did he come to meet ... oh, high hopes!

I was gifting Dronacharya his second Guru-dakshina by winning the contest. Failure of his students indeed! Would I allow that to happen? Would he mind that his enemy's daughter ...? I hoped this new union melted the ancient enmity between Acharya and King Drupad.

She stood straight in the chariot, absorbing our journey with alert, vibrant eyes. This soul-mate of mine looked like she would turn the tide in our favor. My lucky charm. My *wife*! *My wife*, I repeated in amazement.

She had seemed aloof and intimidating in court, an impossible dream. The short walk in the woods had banished that image. It had converted a trophy into a person. As for the touch of her fingertip ...! I took a deep controlled breath. Her fragrance wafted back to me. Her long hair was playing truant, running back to tickle my arms now and then.

I had never experienced my parent's marriage. Love was still an alien, elusive concept in my mind. I had a vague idea that it encompassed something vast, tender and permanent. I wondered if it included this curious mixture of exhilaration and tranquility I felt.

I know Kshatriya dharma allowed me to marry as many times as I wanted. I would never marry another woman. No other woman would match up to her anyways. You are the only one, I promised her unruly locks. My first and last wife.

Fate whooped and doubled over with laughter. It was wiser than me and more cynical. It knew more than I did.

She was my first. She would be the last. But there would be others in between.

We were greeted by a strange reception party. They stood huddled in a defensive group. *Ma* Kunti stood ominously still. Yudhisthir and the twins had left the hall much before us. Yudhisthir stood half turned away as if he was an unwilling accomplice. The twin kids stood staring at their toenails, as if some enthralling scene was unfolding there.

It wasn't the reception I had expected. Then I realized suddenly that I had behaved out of character. We had still been incognito. I had not crosschecked with Yudhisthir whether it was the proper time and place to reveal our identity and presence to the Kshatriya world.

"Welcome, future queen of Hastinapur." Mata Kunti smiled as she stepped forward, "Welcome to my household. Arjun, history will always be grateful to you for bringing this treasure into Yudhisthir's life."

*** He had been helping me down from the chariot. We turned as one, shell shocked at the words. His grip on my wrist tightened involuntarily.

"This goddess Laxmi is the greatest gift you could confer upon your elder brother." She continued, paying no heed to our startled expressions.

"Gift? I have won her in the contest. She is my wife, not a gift." He spoke simply, surprised that he had to even offer an explanation.

"Surely you remember Kshatriya dharma? It is vile and unheard of a younger brother to marry before his elder brother."

"But ... Bheem has already married Hidimba. In fact, you were the one who persuaded him to do it back then."

"That was the need of the hour. Besides, Hidimba is a forest dwelling tribal. She cannot be included in the Kshatriya rules." I glanced at Bheem. He fidgeted, but he kept silent.

I took a deep breath and stepped forward, "My cousin Vibhavari is of marriageable age and of impeccable lineage. My uncle will be delighted to accept the senior most Pandav as his son-in-law."

We both looked expectantly at Mata Kunti and her eldest. She was frowning; his eyes flickered red-tinged. We knew suddenly that Vibhavari's unseen charms would not be enough provocation to stop this madness.

“Do you think this is the first instance in history? From time immemorial, a prince is allowed to win a wife for his elder brother or to get a rightful heir to the throne. The revered Bhishm *pitamah* leads by example. Didn't he procure three brides for Vichitravirya? Custom and tradition permits, nay, it compels you to present her rightfully to the eldest brother.”

Yudhisthir now spoke, “Arjun won her hand in the contest, Mata. She belongs to him too.”

“Too?!” We looked at each other silently, heard the word echo around us ominously.

“You may have won the contest. But I uprooted the giant pillars in that court. I fought shoulder-to-shoulder with you against those Kings. I played a pivotal role in protecting her honor and life. I have the right to marry her.” The unexpected words came from the cheerful Bheem!

“I will not let anyone's rights be trampled upon.” Mata Kunti lifted her chin defiantly, “This Panchal Princess shall be bride to all five of you.”

I felt the blood drain out of my face. I felt Draupadi gasp in dismay beside me. The convulsive clutch of her fingers implored me not to let go.

“No!” I said, shaking my head. This couldn't possibly be happening. This was a nightmare or they were jesting with me.

Mata Kunti put up an imperial hand, “Princess Draupadi is peerless. The desire to possess her will be a constant threat. She will need the protection of one or all five of you. Marriage will have to be the golden thread that binds you all together.”

“For her protection? Pardon me, Mata,” I intervened, “does our dynasty, the lineage of King Bharat — offer protection only to a wife?”

My wife picked up the thread, “My elder brothers-in-law are like my fathers. Are fathers not responsible for the safety of their daughter? My younger brothers-in-law are like my sons. Are sons not supposed to lay down their life to protect their mother? Can I not expect protection from them except in the role of a husband?”

I saw Mata Kunti’s eyes harden. “*Bahurani!*” her voice was icy now, an edge of incredulous anger rimming it. “A princess has no right to question the decisions of her elders.”

“But Mata, it is my life that hangs in the balance. I am your daughter-in-law — almost a daughter. Would you compel your own daughter into so perilous a situation?”

“My daughter would have laid down her life at my feet.”

“I am ready to die for you, revered Mother. But I cannot live for you. Not the kind of life you are demanding of me.”

“You have no choice, no say in the matter, Draupadi. If you insist on rebellion, I am left with no option but returning you to King Drupad. You cannot be the bone of contention amongst my sons.”

That was the worst state a bride could find herself in. An abandoned bride was a disgrace to her family. She, who had been the pride of her parents and lineage, would be made the source of shame. A shame that would be distorted, whispered and spread wide and far. She would get no chance for explanations; none would be acceptable to her parents. They might as well throw her tainted form back into the fire from which she had emerged untainted. So much for divine births!

It had been so easy to hit the fish eye! And so easy to fight those Kings back in the royal hall of Drupad. I had felt no fear, no trepidation, and no iota of hesitation. But I had not expected an attack from my own family.

There was no preceding incident in history to match this. Who had ever heard of such a ghastly order?

I was capable of crushing the resisting Kings. Bheem's assistance had just accelerated events. Was he going to demand payment for every little act of duty?

What would I have done if Nakul or Sahdev had won the contest and the radiant bride? Would I have been able to command respect from them if I made claims on what I had not earned?

If I did not achieve or win, I had no rights over the reward – that much was crystal clear to me. *Then why was its counterpart so blurred?* Why could I not feel assertive enough to claim my reward when I had won it?

My mother and eldest brother were the feet I worshipped. They were the epitome of justice to me. Their wish, their word was law. And now I was accusing them of injustice.

They couldn't both be wrong, I wondered. Was there, then, something twisted and vicious in me that refused to let go? Was I selfish? Self-centered? Immature? Did my pleasure, my desire to possess *her* supersede the wishes of my elders?

I thought the beauty of victory neither diminishes nor tarnishes by sharing credit. I still believed in it. But victory and the fruits of victory were not the same. Or perhaps, this is what they call Sacrifice. One doesn't sacrifice unwanted objects. The hardest sacrifices involve the most precious objects. Yet, why then this disgruntled, queasy feeling within me? This dull, dark resentment in my heart that was close to hatred?

I realized with clarity that sacrifice need not be always noble. Or great. Or uplifting.

Sacrifice could be an Ugly Word.

*** What if I stuck to my resolve and refused to accept this preposterous proposal? But the choice wasn't either Arjun or all five. It was either all five or Yudhisthir.

What did I know of family ties? I had experienced it for hardly a few years. I did not know its power and joys. Could we break ties with this family – isolate ourselves and live in Father's Kingdom? Would Arjun transfer the pain of separating from his family into resentment towards me? I knew what he would face later: accusations of being selfish, of choosing prosperous Panchal over his brothers' poverty, of betraying his family for a virgin bride, for putting self-interest before the Greater Good. Could the journey of a few hours stand up to the journey of years?

I remembered the warm glow in his eyes – just a short time ago – in that glorious time zone when he had looked at me as at a wife. I shuddered, wondering how those eyes would seem bereft of that expression.

Self-immolation was an option too – or was it? My swayamwar had just earned Panchal many enemies. My death would merely snap the bond between Arjun and Panchal. Instead of consolidating the relation, it would alienate Arjun from Panchal. Would my beloved Panchal withstand an attack from its new enemies without powerful allies?

“Panchali is not the first woman to be polyandrous. Do not worry about her chastity. She will always be considered pure. The root of this lies in her past birth.”

The words came from three sages. I don't know when they had arrived. They looked old, wise and weary. And guilty.

They narrated a long story of my supposed past birth when I had asked for a husband with five sterling qualities – ‘He should be righteous, mighty, valourous, handsome and patient’ – from Lord Shiva and been granted five husbands instead.

It seemed an apt summary of Arjun. He had completed the contest that nobody else could; he had righteously not attacked any opponent until they initiated the attack on us. As for patience! Well, the very fact that he did not kill his brothers on the spot for making so hideous a suggestion, spoke for itself.

He had not hesitated in retaliating against the furious suitors back in court. What stopped him from striking down these men here? Are moral codes different for family members?

Kunti Mata was a woman. Surely she ought to understand me. She said I was to be the golden thread that bound her pearls together. Did that conclude that there would be no more threads pulling in different directions? Could she promise me there would be no more wives? I wish I had the sense to extract that promise right then.

Just as I made to speak, I realized why there was something familiar about the proceedings. *A husband endowed with perfection. Be careful for what you wish, you may get it.* There was someone else speaking to me through these envoys.

The master puppeteer. What was the purpose behind this elaborate drama? I felt the curiosity remain intact through the inevitable decision I would have to make. I felt a strange calm in spite of the tumult within me. A woman can promise so much and give so little. They could have my body – but not my mind. That belonged to me alone.

“She is the one who willed it. The boon of Lord Shiva hangs over her. Objecting now is akin to rejecting the Lord’s boon. Beware of his short temper! If she wishes to be the *Kritya*, the carrier of doom, it is her choice.” They kept their guilty eyes averted from both of us.

How smoothly they had shifted the onus onto her delicate shoulders. We were one again a Unit. A unit threatened by this Outsider. *Us versus Her.* Surely anyone could see through this senseless story! Why should she have

to bear a curse carried forward from an earlier birth? Life demands its price fully in this very birth, not the next one.

My brothers wanted my wife; that much was obvious to me. Maybe she had made their individual fantasies come alive in her person. But I had put away my dreams when I thought Govind would win her. Her free will counted too.

Just as I made to speak, I felt her fingers leave mine.

“Your wish is our command, Mother-in-law,” she said. She stood as she had in the court. Calm and resolute. She had willingly put her hand into mine in that court. And now she had withdrawn her fingers. I could not accept one of her decision and not the other.

What had she heard in the meantime that I had not?

Chapter 4: A Kingdom of Tears and Screams

*** Khandav forest. Our future kingdom. Our *Karma-bhoomi*.

It looked like a grey vulture, its head cocked, casting a speculative and malignant eye over us. It looked like a challenge Nature had thrown at us. It looked vast, barren, unyielding and ugly.

I loved it with all my heart!

I loved it with the same passion that I hated Hastinapur, the capital city with its opulence and oily smiles. The love of the adoring crowds was genuine; that of the palaces was grudging. Opulence was not new to me. What I wanted was warmth. I wanted a Home.

This felt like home. No matter how ugly and unwelcoming it looked, I felt perfectly at peace here. I hoped my husbands were happy with this chance to show their ability – to create a kingdom out of a barren land.

I looked around at them. Yudhisthir, the crown prince looked dubious and worried. Bheem glowered at the land, hands akimbo, as if it should be punished for being so ugly. Arjun looked ... I could not gauge his emotions anymore. He seemed to have withdrawn his emotions and expressions to the safety of his own mind, where nobody could hurt them. He was polite and courteous to me. Too polite and too courteous.

The only time he set his emotions free was when Krishn was around. After their first meeting at my wedding, they talked as if they had picked up the reins of a conversation begun long ago. I did not know why they spoke for such long hours if they already knew what the other was going to say.

Krishn had the ability to make everyone around him feel unique – as if they had the entire focus of his warmth. But with Arjun, it was inimitable and genuine. There was much I wanted to clarify with Krishn. But he was always surrounded by people, always had someone vying for his attentions.

He looked at me impersonally – as if I had served my purpose. Arjun claimed him possessively, as if it was compensation for my loss.

I seemed to have lost my husband and best friend simultaneously – to each other. Something warned me that I would get back either both or none. I did not wish to be either intruder or competitor. Krishnaa or Krishn, it did not matter as long as one could be Arjun's confidante. Till then, patience would be my best friend.

Govind stood looking around slowly, a smile lifting the corners of his lips. He was looking at the barren land as he had looked at me. Not seeing it like it was, but the way it would be.

"I defeated Indra a long time ago in Gokul," he said suddenly without context. "I did not know I would be friends with his son."¹

I squirmed. I had never been comfortable with this double paternity weighing down on us. It was supposed to give us the dual advantages of being a prince and a demi-God. It was supposed to be an enviable honor.

It had not however, saved our childhood from being pelted with nasty comments, being plotted against, from forest exile, not even – as I recently discovered at my cost – from being brutally hurt.

As always, he could read my deepest emotions, "Your life and mine, Arjun, run so much in parallel. My fathers – Nanda and Vasudev, both so instrumental to my core, my existence. Who should get prime credit?

"It rained torrentially when I had to undertake that long journey from Mathura's prison to Vrindavan. Your father was a witness to that. But I just had to subdue him later on. He was getting far too arrogant."

"Was he easy to defeat?" I asked.

Govind shrugged, "You will know soon enough, when you fight him. If he chooses to fight us, if he chooses to bring obstacles in our plan. Your

father-in-law needs our help.”

“Maharaj Drupad needs us?”

“Are you the only one blessed with two fathers?”

“Oh! Agni needs us?”

“Correct. He needs food. Real live food, not the bland ghee and flowers routinely offered in sacrificial offerings. We need him to clear this wasteland. He needs us to combat your father. This forest land is under the protection of your father.”

“Burn it? But Govind, more than half of this land lies arid. We can build our kingdom there. We don’t have to burn this forestland corner.”

“This forest is home to the Naga tribes. They are ferocious warriors, fanatically devoted to their land and tribe. Don’t expect them to welcome you into their territory.”

“But we don’t have to invade their territory. Surely we can occupy the barren part. We can search for mines and water resources there.”

“The forest is the conduit to the outside world, Arjun. The barren piece of land lies unused and unguarded between Hastinapur and the forest. You are not safe from either side. And when you want to expand your horizons, the forestland will be your biggest obstacle. Its inhabitants will always be an enemy lurking around. Their ruthless tactics will not yield to chivalry or diplomacy.”

“But Govind, there aren’t just warriors in there. There will be families, homes and animals. We cannot base our kingdom on the destruction of someone else’s kingdom.”

“This gnarled forestland is nobody’s kingdom. It has become a haunt for the lawless evil, for ruthless trespassers who have turned settlers.”

“But it will be a massacre! Are we to be remembered forever as scavengers and destroyers? ” I asked

“You will be remembered only if you survive long enough for memories to form. Think of it as a sacrificial altar. You don’t shed tears over ghee and nectar, do you? Fire is their salvation, their *Moksha*. ”

“A kingdom built on terror and anguish? Built on abuses and curses? I can never expect any peace from such a kingdom.”

“Peace is the first casualty in every ambition. It comes at the price of conflict for every warrior.”

“I have no problem conflicting with soldiers and warriors. But victory at the cost of innocent lives, Govind?”

His voice hardened, “As innocent as the tribal woman and her five companions who burnt in the lacquer house fire meant for you all. Was that sin or just inevitable for survival? Maybe Fate placed them as sacrificial offerings instead of Pandavas – a sure sign that you brothers are destined for a much vital role in the future.

“It is a very cruel world, Arjun ... and it will only get worse with time. How will you fight your own...?” He stood looking silently at me, weighing his words in his own mind. Then he gave a short dismissive shake of his head.

“Reluctant warrior,” he said in a softer voice, “we will give most of them enough time to flee. We need not kill them all...” He observed my relief, smiled and continued, “... Takshak, the tribal King, is the biggest threat. His dominion spells trouble for us. He, his family and all his cruel soldiers will have to be killed. We cannot afford survivors there.

“The womenfolk can be allowed to escape. Those who are monstrous, those who might fight later on will have to perish – unless you wish to gift revenge as inheritance to your children.”

He put up a calm hand, “Don’t look so aghast. These are not innocent dwellers. They rob and murder travelers. A kingdom thrives on merchandise and productivity. Your merchandise and trade cannot continue until citizens are safe. You cannot have visitors and your citizens ravished

and terrorized over and over. Indraprastha needs to breathe freely. It cannot be throttled on all sides. Your citizens are first priority. You owe them complete safety and protection.”

He could sound so soft and so ruthless at the same time. Audacious though it seemed, I could not negate the truth in his words.

His voice reverted back to its soft credence. “And we are not completely destroying Nature, Parth. We are just altering one landscape to rebuild another. We will build an oasis here. Replant trees. Make lakes and water ponds. We will allow a part of this forest to re-grow, but in an organized manner. Nature and life will grow back, but under our control and command.

“Deserts come out of volcanoes. Oceans come out of earthquakes. Nature has its own violent way of balancing its elements. We are just trying to imitate Nature in human form. We may succeed or we may fail. But we cannot live life regretting that we did not try when we could.”

He waited patiently for me to make up my mind, to re-evaluate our options, to come to a decision.

“But these weapons, Govind, are mere toys. Two of us cannot control every nook and cranny of the forest simultaneously. When the forest burns, there will be survivors bursting out from everywhere. We will need special weapons.”

He smiled, “That is where your father-in-law comes in. We satiate his appetite and he gives us the weapons. We need to keep your father at bay, otherwise his torrential downpour will interfere in our plans.”

“These are for you,” said a grave voice beside us. The coppery hued form stood before us, his eyes blazing. I could feel the waves of heat emanating from his person – greedy and impatient. Agni gestured behind me.

I turned and beheld the most ... well, the *second-most* beautiful thing in my life. It lay long and gleaming. It boasted of all the colors of the rainbow.

Its glow stood like a halo around it. I cast my eyes along its impressive length. I felt my fingers curl in the instinctive desire to possess it, to feel its cold, metallic hardness against my skin. I could not bear to look away, in case it vanished from existence. What else had made me feel the same way?

“All yours,” I heard a dry chuckle, “the Gandiva bow is all yours.”

I stepped forward, knelt and touched it. My fingers jerked back, surprised. The bow was not cold and metallic. It hummed and throbbed beneath my touch. Pulsatile and warm, it felt like I was holding a live person. My fingers flowed tentatively over its firm, resilient curves. It snuggled into my grasp. It felt so exactly right. It belonged to me.

“I hope you won’t share *this* gift with anyone,” Agni said in a grave voice – part sarcasm and part resentment.

I remembered with a start what other precious gift he had bestowed on me and which I had frittered away.

*** Arid, barren Khandavprastha was being converted into a beautifully organized, buttressed kingdom Indraprastha. The palace was rising in leaps and bounds. It took shape exactly as I had dreamt. Maya, the architect was literally a magician. What he created out of my ideas and his skills was a vision! He spoke Arjun’s name with great reverence. “He spared my life,” was the only explanation he would give me.

The rooms sprung up at a breathtakingly rapid pace. My husbands and I still stayed in separate rooms. Kunti Mata insisted that our conjugal life would not be initiated till after completion of Indraprastha and the coronation, which gave me plenty of breathing space.

As the palaces grew, so did the town around it. Laborers, artists, plumbers, merchants, goldsmiths, physicians, counsellors poured into our land. Their families followed. People followed us from Hastinapur and Panchal. New relations bloomed on the barren land and new families formed.

The town made families grow. The families made the town grow. It was a symbiotic relation that made Indraprastha an enriched land.

I flitted in and out of the incomplete rooms even when I was not needed. I designed their palace as per their taste. Arjun left the design of his chambers to me. “Just keep it simple,” was his only instruction. I knew he loved Nature; so I kept his room spare, clean and austere. He indulged my enthusiasm but he still did not allow me to invade his private world and thoughts. He neither sought my company, nor shunned it.

I did not worry too much about it. It was a busy time for all of us. There would be plenty of time later on to mollify him. He was my first husband; we would obviously be given our wedding night first, right after the coronation ceremony. We had a lifetime of togetherness stretched out before us. I felt light, cheerful, carefree and confident of my charms.

We all followed a strict code of conduct. We could meet publicly, but not in isolation. None of them were allowed to monopolize my attention or time. We could not broach a topic that could not be spoken before everyone. The nights were spent in solitude.

I tried to break the rule one evening as the sun dipped slowly into the horizon at dusk. As the sun began its graceful descent and the chirping of birds grew incessant, I felt a curious, restless tension in my arms – a molten fire that slowly spread down my veins. Just one moment. I wanted to snatch one precious, private moment untouched by the presence of the others. I wanted to thank him for the beautiful world he had provided for us all.

My guilty feet led me to the alcove where he practiced his beloved archery. He practiced for such long hours! The bow my father gifted him had become an additional limb, an addiction. I perked up my ears as I softened my footfall. I did not hear him.

Then I saw him. He was kneeling by the lake, the bow dangling loosely by the tips of his fingers, the arrow held tight in his other hand. He knelt there gazing into the sparkling waters.

As I stepped forward, my reflection rippled across the water. He registered my presence and resented the intrusion. He stood up slowly. Then his arm rose and the arrow slashed violently into the lake, into my reflection. I stood absolutely still. It almost seemed like a replica of the swayamwar scene. *Was that arrow directed at the image or the target reflected there?*

This was not the polite indifference of late. This was not the serene youth from the swayamwar, the one who smiled as if pain could not be allowed to reign over life. I felt the cold hand of fright enclose my heart.

And then, like a whiplash I felt his fingers curl around my throat. His touch was tender, but there was violence in the stranglehold. In the next moment, he was either going to kiss me. Or kill me. I was ready for both. Anything was more welcome than his cool impersonal courtesy.

I waited and waited, my eyes closed. Then he withdrew his hand and walked away.

*** The coronation ceremony happened. I was now Queen of Indraprastha. It brought with it a fresh code of conduct. A year each with each husband! In the hierarchy of birth. Any breach of privacy entailed a three-year exile.

I was handed the unenviable, stricter code of conduct. I was supposed to be impartial to them all in privacy as in public. I was to be unsullied purity. I was not to compare, contrast or criticize one against the other.

I broke the rule as soon as I heard it. I stole a furtive glance at him. He was intently watching the horizon, but his knuckles were white against the Gandiva. I caught the twins exchange a fleeting look. For some reason, it made a bubble of laughter fizzle through me; they would have to decide now who was elder amongst the two of them.

'Calm down, you are getting hysterical,' I told myself.

My first year as Queen was also the first year as King Yudhishtir's first wife. We both carried our double anxieties into it. His first fumbling steps as both King and husband made him touchy, irritable and nervous. I had no choice but to put away my own worries. I had to be wife, mother, friend and Queen.

After the first night, I asked myself, 'Is that all there is to this?' What an anti-climax!

The sages had promised the brothers my eternal virginity. I wanted to tell Arjun that virginity is not physical. It is a state of mind, a response. Unless I willed it and responded voluntarily, I was virgin forever.

The kingdom was settling down beautifully. It was exhilarating to build and organize our new army, to put into practice what Dronacharya taught – to ensure that every day was well spent, to make safety a habit for every inhabitant of Indraprastha and to make them feel nurtured here.

It was difficult to forget the foundation it was built on. The *Maya-sabha* was Indraprastha's unique jewel, the envy of all those who experienced its splendor. It was an unbeatable feat of magic and architecture. I spared Maya during the Khandav fire and he built Maya-sabha out of gratitude.

And it was so difficult to ignore my bride! The memory of her fragrance, and her fingertip with which she had branded me as her own personal possession. Everything subsequent would have been easier to bear without the memory of that fingertip. And now I had the additional memory of her silken skin beneath silken curls.

I watched her covertly as she flung herself into the creation of our palaces. She talked for hours with Maya, altering and improvising the plans. She had metamorphosed from the stern thunderbolt into an animated bundle of energy, a joyous child-woman building her home. I saw her palace chambers fleetingly – the loveliest amongst all the lovely rooms. It was vibrantly alive with her ideas and persona. A room I would not be allowed to enter for a long time.

It had been tough enough before the coronation, when none of us had access to her sole attention. Once the new code of conduct came into place, the days and nights seemed on the prowl to twist me into vicious anger, that turned into numbing exhaustion and finally, into the yearn to escape. It was difficult to see her emerge from her room every day. Her serene face gave us no glimpse into her previous night. As far as I could infer, nothing changed in her.

Late one evening after the coronation ceremony, Govind and I sat talking in the mangrove. I saw Yudhisthir and his Queen in the royal gardens yonder. She was listening to his instructions as he held her elbow self-consciously. I did not have to imagine the softness that he caressed. I realized that Govind had stopped speaking. He was looking intently at my face. I knew he knew what I had been thinking.

“It is time to leave, Parth.” His voice was firm.

“You don’t have to leave so soon.” I spoke with alarm.

“Not me. You! Indraprastha has nothing to offer you right now. Indraprastha is a mere drop in the ocean. There is a vast world outside it. Seek out of here, Parth.

“The Gandiva bow is not the end of your achievements. There is a lot left to learn and to acquire. Indraprastha was just the beginning, not the culmination of your journey. Meet new people, build up new relations and strengthen your repertoire.”

“I cannot just wander out. I am the Army General of Indraprastha, its chief guardian and protector. We are still training our army. They are not yet ready for full-fledged combat.”

“Don’t take an army along. Your army will make your visits seem like a threat. Indraprastha does not need enemies right now; but it can always do with more allies.

“Hastinapur is a vast empire, it has great recall. It has widespread allies anxious to avoid conflict. Its allies and your allies cannot be the same. Indraprastha is still a new kingdom barely out of the womb. The Pandav princes are good enough to be feared, but they are still upstarts. Especially when compared to stalwarts like Bhishm pitamah and Dronacharya.”

“I should make allies by peace then.”

His gaze was speculative, “I had no idea you were so good-looking. It does open up a whole new plethora of possibilities. It is about time you utilized them for Indraprastha – since your looks are of no use to you.”

I looked at him, bewildered.

“Marriage is a wonderful institution.”

He always had the most atrocious ideas and plans ready. Marriage as a means of subjugation? He made it seem as if all the Kings and all their daughters were waiting for me to come and chain them into matrimony.

“You make me feel like a prize stallion used to breed horses of fine pedigree.” I said.

“You have no idea how close to the truth you are,” he chuckled.

“Why would Kings offer me their daughters? I am and will remain prince of Indraprastha, never its King.”

“Because you are a frog-in-the-well, which is why. I suppose you have absolutely no inkling of your fame. Dronacharya’s guru-dakshina, Draupadi swayamwar, Panchal’s military support, the transformation of Khandav forest, Maya-sabha, Indraprastha – all *your* achievements, Parth! It is about time you took some credit for it. It is absolutely fine to pat your own back once in a while.” His eyes twinkled.

“Indraprastha is not my solo achievement .You helped.”

“Maybe I contributed, but for the outside world it is all you. You are the chief architect of the resurrection of the Pandavs. Make use of this

admiration while it lasts. Capitalize on it now, before people forget. I am sure many a King is eager to make you his son-in-law. In fact, there is a swayamwar scheduled ...”

“Don’t speak to me of swayamwars!” I cut him off tersely, “I am done with them. Besides, I am not marrying again.”

His eyebrows curved up. So did his lips. But his eyes were gentle. “Poetic warrior. Planning to wait and pine, while Draupadi manages just fine?”

It has been hardly two weeks and I can already see the turbulence in your heart. What a pity to waste you on women! You are setting yourself up for torture. Take my advice. Leave.”

I had not paid heed to his words. I had not left, sure that my will power would be stronger than my desires. Tonight, I carefully placed the Gandiva back into its hold beside my bed. I decided to head to the royal library. I gave the Gandiva a last, lingering look before I left. It was the only thing in the world completely mine.

Mine. What a lovely word. There must be some conspiracy in the world against it. Why did I have to learn its worth after I had renounced it?

*** Maharaj Yudhisthir was slowly learning the rituals and customs of ruling Indraprastha. The citizens were content. Taxes were low. Laws were laid down and followed strictly. Our kingdom luxuriated in prosperity. There was abundance of grains and rains.

I had restarted my studies of *shastras* and *Vedas*. My life at Panchal had not given me enough time to learn. I wanted my husbands to know that there existed a Draupadi beyond her body. I decided to converse with Maharaj on topics that fell within his comfort zone.

I tried to talk to him on judicial, religious and philosophical topics. His knowledge was vast and fairly accurate but too theoretical. I needed points

clarified, explained and justified. But he had been put on a pedestal for too long by his brothers.

I was not captive to his lofty ideas and principles. Maybe I read the wrong scriptures. Or maybe he was not interested in the ‘much more’ of Draupadi. Whatever the reason, the conversation waned rapidly. What he really needed was an adoring wife who would never question his word. What he got was Me. Well, he certainly asked for it!

I did not debate with him in front of his brothers. Why embarrass him? Why disillusion them?

I wished I could speak to someone. I wished Krishn visited more frequently. One could talk to him of absolutely anything. But his visits were completely monopolized by the person whose time I would have liked to monopolize. Arjun’s abrupt behavior by the lake made me cringe in embarrassment. If I was taxing his willpower, it was far better to avoid the temptation for both of us.

My sister lived here too, but I was not allowed to talk to her. The Gandiva bow, my half-sister and co-wife! She had captured his heart and attention so effortlessly. He never seemed to let go of her. The wish lingered on and slowly became an obsession. I waited for my chance. I knew he left her alone when he visited the library. I finally had a target, an aim to my day – to spy for a chance to own his beloved companion -for just a short time.

And then came the day when I got my chance. She was a beauty! No wonder he was besotted with her. Iridescent and blazing with colors, she seemed to sparkle with her own glow. Maharaj would be held up in royal court for a long time. Arjun had left for the library and would take two hours at least. I did not want to be caught in his room. I tugged her along to my room. It would not take much time to get her back to his room.

If the guards at both palace entrances were surprised, they did not show it. They were trained to be blind, deaf, dumb and amnesiac whenever needed. I breezed past them with the nonchalance of royalty.

I laughed, amused at my own childishness. It was such harmless entertainment. Besides, I was lonely. I was breaking no rules – legal or moral. I carried her to the mirror. She was quite feather-light for all her length.

She was almost twice as tall as me. If she was uniquely lovely, so was I. Both of us glowed, both were divine, both were born of the same father. We gazed solemnly into our twin reflections.

Two sisters. One who loved him. And one that he loved.

“Maharani took the bow with her,” the doorkeeper informed me with an impassive face, as I hurried to my palace. An anguished Brahmin had sought my assistance to find a thief who stole his cows. Our citizens had the right to ask help at any time – even now, past midnight.

Could this be the chance I was awaiting? Govind had been right, as usual. That was the problem with his ideas. They seemed atrocious at first and made sense later-on. I had reached the point of ‘later-on’.

I ignored the other doorkeeper’s alert plea, “Maharaj is in the company of Maharani,” and deliberately stepped across their threshold. I saw Maharaj’s rumpled hair and impatient eyes as he opened the door to admit me. I dared not look beyond him into the room.

“I came to claim what is mine.” I paused and clenched my jaw, “I need the Gandiva bow. I believe it is in here.”

“Here?” he asked incredulously.

¹ Indra (real) and Pandu (foster) are Arjun’s fathers – just as Vasudev (real) and Nanda (foster) are Krishn’s fathers. Indra and Krishn had clashed long ago when Krishn invoked Gokul’s residents to worship Govardhan mountain instead of Indra, the Rain God.

Chapter 5: Escape from Dancing Eyebrows

I took in deep breaths of the fresh air. The same air wove into the palaces as it did here. But, oh the difference! This air was pure, invigorating and free.

She was intelligent enough to know she had offered me an excuse on a platter. It set me free, but kept her bound to Indraprastha. My exile would last three years. I decided to travel east and then west via south. I would end it at Dwarka. I let Govind know I had finally taken his advice.

A group of sages accompanied me, intent on teaching me ways to atone for my offense. *I wished I at least committed the sin I was being accused of.* I weaned them all off, relieved to be on my own.

I had been bred for wars that would be fought amongst equals, with magnanimous rules of conduct. In Dronacharya's ashram, I tried to wake up earlier and earlier, to go to sleep later and later, trying to stretch my endurance, trying to diminish treacherous sleep and expand the alert period. "You never know when it will be useful," I told Bheem, in response to his, "What for?"

I now met unknown tribes, learnt to communicate with them in their dialect, through gestures or drawings made on soil with a piece of wood. '*Trade?*' their eyes asked. Their skills for mine. Well, it made more sense than trading insults.

I learnt how to anticipate an animal attack, how to read the various calls, whistles and sounds of myriad animals, how to decode the language of Nature, how to protect against unexpected rains, against quicksand, against honeybee attacks, how to utilize a fruit to its fullest, how to make use of its pulp, rind and tree bark for multiple purposes.

Along my travel, I completed a cycle long left incomplete. Parshuram was anti-Kshatriya. Parshuram taught Dronacharya. Dronacharya taught us. I passed it on to the tribals, the yakshas and nagas.

It was almost poetic justice. I realized that knowledge does not diminish with sharing. Knowledge need not always grow *vertically*, descending down generations of the same caste. It could grow *laterally* too and still flourish.

One night I fidgeted, yearning for sleep that would not come. In our last forest voyage, Mata had insisted upon division of work. Now I built, I decided, I protected, I planned and I executed. If one man could perform the function of five men, then perhaps five fingers of one hand ought to function -

I jerked upright, my breath strangled. Feverish with impatience, I tied my right thumb flush to my palm, rendering it immobile. The second finger would be my thumb tonight. I tapped awake the Gandiva and picked up an arrow between the second and third finger. The arrow slipped through before I could align it. I sighed and picked it up again. My fingers felt clumsy and stiff. They resisted, grumbling at the unaccustomed task demanded of them. The fourth and little finger curved around the string, trying to maintain the grip. I took a deep breath and released the arrow.

It flew wide off the mark, veered disobediently and sank. I had never missed, not even the very first time I held a bow-arrow. I frowned at the arrow in the wavering light of my bonfire, and then back at my fingers. I was not going to spare either of them for their insubordination. I clenched my jaw and picked up the second arrow. This, as the subsequent ones, promised to be a long night.

There was no end to learning. I had to begin as a novice over and over again. If learning was a river, then I was forever unquenchably thirsty.

*** Barely a few weeks after Arjun left, I realized that I was carrying the future of Indraprastha in my womb.

Indraprastha rejoiced, but I cringed every time Maharaj cast a speculative glance at me. He had not allowed any more discussions on that fatal night. He would hold up his hand, "Don't try to explain, Panchali. I know it was difficult for both of you. I forgive you."

I discovered the joy of being recognized as an individual. As Govind had said, people actually did know me. By name and deed. Not as one Pandav of Hastinapur. But as Arjun of Indraprastha, the archer and winner of her impossible contest.

The tribal men respected me as equals. Their women were a different equation altogether. They were brutally honest, disarmingly direct. They fought the wars of survival with equal competence, made decisions with equal clarity.

There were some tribes that practiced wife-sharing as a norm. I wondered aloud if they got a similar boon from Lord Shiva and if their religion permitted it. They informed me dryly, 'Religion is nothing but a series of conveniently placed loopholes.'

Some asked me openly about Draupadi, asking if I had willingly given her up. What did they think I was made of? Wood, metal, stone? I tried to explain; but whenever I mentioned duty, obedience and sacrifice, I saw their lips curl up. I guess their codes and ethics were radically different from mine. And perhaps, more honest and less convoluted. They asked with a detached crudity and an engaging frankness that made it difficult to avoid their questions.

There was something about questions; questions opened up unfound vistas and unexplored ideas. *I loved questions.*

Every knowledge starts with a quest, and every quest starts with a question. When people scoff at questions, I wonder if they already know the answer, or just don't care for the answer. Do they fear the answer or just do not understand the gravity of the question? Why does the reluctance to say, 'I don't know' hold them back from seeking answers?

In childhood, when my questions were evaded, I knew the answer involved either the unknown or the guilty.

Like when I asked Dronacharya why Ashwatthama carried a wide mouthed pitcher and the rest of us had a narrow-pitched one;

Like when I asked Kunti Mata how our father died (I was hoping he had a heroic death fighting a grand battle. Duryodhan had asked me the same question, but in quite a different tone, as if he was aware of some smutty secret unknown to me);

Like when Yudhisthir calmly told King Drupad that all five of us were bachelors. But Bheem and Hidimba ... Kunti Mata had not corrected this slip of tongue either.

“Don’t ask too many questions,” I was repeatedly told. That invariably led me to another question, “*Why?*” which nobody answered.

Govind was one person who never evaded questions. He seemed to have replies ready before queries formed and solutions ready before problems occurred.

I missed Govind’s voice, fluid like his eyes and rich like his emotions. I missed his liquid eyes – the kindest and most ruthless eyes I had ever seen. I asked why he had singled me out for his friendship.

“Because you have the right ideas brimming beneath the surface, and packaged in all the wrong emotions. I will need to rip off a lot of surface and, let me warn you, *that* will hurt. Because you need protection from yourself. Because you need to peer into Hell before you glimpse Heaven. Because Life is a beautiful thing and because you also need to learn that responsibilities come with rights – just as you know that rights come with responsibilities,” he answered enigmatically.

Honestly! He toyed with words like they were precise weapons.

His spies were constantly in touch with me. They were the ones who informed me about the birth of Indraprastha’s future ruler. My wife’s first son ... and my first nephew.

I realized that escape from Indraprastha did not mean escape from *her*. She was a constant presence. In the flames that cooked my food, in the flickering heat that kept me cozy at night, in the crackling tongues of fire that kept wild animals at bay, in the golden sunrises and dusky sunsets, in the tawny tigresses that crossed my path.

I gave up fighting her memory. I did not feel the need to remember her. She remained like a constant hum and hymn in my mind. What is a virgin anyways? Untouched? But I had that one brief memory of her searing fingertip on my scarred shoulder. Touched. *Mine*.

*** Was I expected to walk through ice (Fire would not harm me at all) to prove anything? Maharaj had adopted the role of injured innocence. I remained furious and frustrated at my attempts to explain my stand. We finally settled on an uneasy state of compromise, misunderstanding and martyrdom.

I realized that kings and husbands can have feet of clay and egos of fragile crystal.

I knifed through water, felt the exhaustion being coaxed away by the biting cold water. I suddenly became aware of another person absorbed in watching my reflection. A lady, a tribal woman. But clearly she was of royal lineage, as there was a group of armed men and maids trailing behind her. She whispered to her nearest maid without averting her eyes from me. The maid produced a goblet of sparkling fluid and the lady approached me herself.

She enquired about my lineage. She raised the goblet to me, her smile a mystery unraveled only to her, "Welcome to our land. Please accept our offerings, Prince. We bring you salutations of King Kauravya. I am princess Uloopi."

Being safe in strange places meant you had to be friendly with the locals, and surely no woman would harm me. I accepted their greetings and their

gift. The liquid was fiery and fizzy down my throat. I clutched the Gandiva tight within my fingers even as I felt my consciousness ooze out.

Princess Uloopi belonged to the Naga tribe. Her father was a slave to her fancies and she fancied me. He seemed very pleased at the sensible choice his daughter's desire had made. She insisted that she would kill herself if I denied her desire. Was the prince of Indraprastha to be the pleasure toy of a tribal princess?

But one question invariably mushroomed into a million questions in my mind. Uloopi said she wanted a child. How could she be so sure this night would give her a child? But she said she had picked the right day and time ... whatever that means. When I wanted more clarifications, she demurred. How I hated half knowledge!

As a child, I was told that I was born of a divine light that shone on my mother. "*Ah, yes. Maharani Kunti's divine sons,*" our cousins had sneered. Whenever Acharya was out of range, one or the other cousin hissed "*Celestial bastard*". Intuition kept me from asking Mata the meaning of the latter word. Nor Acharya nor Pitamah. Nor eldest, because I think he understood the word.

"*Use it. Turn it into an advantage,*" I used to whisper softly, incessantly to myself. It had helped. By and by, their voices had receded into nothingness. Instead, their barbs whetted my concentration. Focus built on shame. Intensity bred on insults. The bird-eye, the fish-eye; both capitalized upon that smutty, murky feeling.

I shrugged and put forth my brusque conditions to Kauravya and his daughter. If they wanted a child, there had to be marriage. The marriage – if one could call it that – and the union would last only for a day and night. I was on exile and could not set anchor at any place. No false hopes and promises.

As I said, there is no end to learning. Uloopi was a meticulous teacher and she practiced what she preached. She confused me with her

undecipherable “Stop's” and “Don’t stop's”. She scared me with her moans and screams. But when I stopped to apologize, she started laughing. When I resumed, she sobbed and left me even more baffled. I was never quite sure in the end if she was pleased or tortured. Women ... such conflicting signals!

I had spent restless nights thinking of the dark room where the King lay with my Queen, jealous with a directionless murky knowledge. Now, I knew exactly what to be jealous of.

The Naga tribes were worshippers of serpents. The fluid I drank was a potent mixture of wine and snake poison. Their tribes were spread wide and far. Vasuki, Kauravya, Takshak were all Naga kings, rulers in different Naga provinces. Takshak had escaped the massacre at Khandav forest. He was alive, no doubt licking his wounds, gathering his forces and plotting revenge on Indraprastha.

A marital alliance with the Naga princess would make the Nagas an ally of Indraprastha – the perfect antidote to their poisonous weapons. A Kshatriya prince married to a Naga princess. It would be an honor for them and a safety valve for Indraprastha – victory sans bloodbath.

What a way to win my first defense for Indraprastha! I had heard of Kshatriya princesses used as barter in the marital games of power, influence, sovereignty and wealth. I learnt tonight that a prince too can be used in power games.

My spirits lifted as I neared Dwarka. Govind! How I had missed him. He had not met me even once in these three years.

I reached Prabhas, close to Dwarka. Govind met me, enveloping me in a warm hug. I excitedly recounted to him my exile days, its adventures, the tribal exchange of skills and the new-learnt method of using my five fingers interchangeably. He promised to show me his formidable naval force and methods of naval warfare.

The next day, I listened as Govind played the flute – lilting and melodious. It was not mere music, it was deliverance from all pain. I lay watching the snow-white waves breaking into fine spray on the beaches.

“She loves water. She will be bewitched by Dwarka’s ocean waves. Soothing in daytime, turbulent at night. Her palace is full of fountains. My palace – you know, she was lingering on for a compliment. I boorishly, deliberately denied it. When I return home, I will confess that her creation is the loveliest palace I have ever lived in,” I murmured dreamily.

He put down the flute with a small sigh. He sat looking into the distance, a slight frown of worry clouding his face. He noticed my glance and smiled, “You look happy today, Parth.”

“I am going home, Govind. And I am here with you right now. What more could I possibly want?”

“You finally did take my advice. But you chose only the ones who could be safely left behind – Uloopi and Chitrangadha.”

“But they wanted a child each and a respectable title. I gave both of them both of those. What else do they want? Am I expected to invest emotions into them? I specifically clarified that before marriage.”

He looked thoughtfully at me. “Let us hold a funeral for your innocence. How you swing from one extreme to the other! You have changed. You are heartless with those who love you, Parth.”

“They didn’t love me ... they just desired me. I gave them what they wished, in the protective guise of marriage. You know, sometimes I suspect they didn’t even desire me. What they wanted was Draupadi’s husband.”

“Where exactly do you get these absurd ideas?” he looked bemused.

“I cannot explain but there was this constant undercurrent. I mean, I was alive for so many years on Earth. How did I suddenly become irresistible after *her* contest? I think the women wanted, in some way, to prove their worth by marrying her husband. I was the incidental, she was the intent.”

He gave a mystified shake of his head, “I have never seen anyone so self-effacing with such less excuse for it. At least there won’t ever be a funeral for your weird ideas.”

“Govind, I tried to get over her memory when I heard of Prativindhya’s birth, and then Sutsom’s birth. Every time I received the news, I was hit with a kind of blinding nausea. I thought it would erase her from my memory.

“But she has not vanished, nor blurred in my memory. She accepted me as husband when I had no wealth, when she did not know my name, when I did not have the aura of being a Pandav or the allure of Indraprastha as a beacon.

“I won her by archery. I cannot forget her unless I forget archery. They are like conjoined twins.”

He remained silent. It was a relief to confess to him after the loneliness of three years.

“Is it a crime to desire someone else’s wife?” I asked

“The vilest of crimes, Parth,” he said confidently.

“Is it a crime independent of who expresses the desire?”

He chose not to answer that one.

“Isn’t it also a crime to desire someone else’s husband?” I parried.

He was clearly amused by the idea. “Just because you are obsessed with your wife does not mean everyone else is obsessed with her. The inevitable rule of this world - anyone who gets it effortlessly wants to earn it, anyone who has to earn it, yearns to get it effortlessly!

“I carried off Rukmini. But I heard enamored Uloopi abducted you. What kind of marriage would you wish for your sister?” he asked gently.

“Sister?” I had never given it a thought. There was Dusshala, but she had a hundred brothers to take care of her. Surely Govind was not thinking of marrying Dusshala! She was a pale memory, and not interesting enough to recollect. What had made Govind enamored of her?

I felt a sudden stab of jealousy. Why did he want to be allied with Hastinapur? I wish I had a sister to ensnare him. I wished Nakul had been born a girl. He was beautiful enough!

“Well,” I speculated reluctantly, “she would deserve the best, of course. I would wish her unified with the ideal man, if he exists.”

“What if she desired someone already? Would you allow her the freedom to make her choice?” he asked.

Who was I to meddle with his choices? He did not need my approval to abduct Dusshala. Hastinapur would never object; in fact would be delighted to be allies with Dwarka. Oh, why didn’t I have a sister?

“Balram *tau* has made an offer of Subhadra ... to Duryodhan,” he said.

I was hit by a wave of relief. He was worrying about little Subhadra, thank God. I knew Balram adored Duryodhan ever since he taught Duryodhan the mace skills. Besides Duryodhan was crown prince of powerful Hastinapur. He was an ideal bridegroom in Balram’s eyes.

When Duryodhan accepted the offer, Dwarka would become an ally of Hastinapur and Govind would become...

“But Govind!” I said, sitting up straight, realizing the danger at last, “You will become a relative of Hastinapur.”

“True. Oh, the power of marriage! It connects two families like nothing else. And family ties are so tenacious, as you must have realized by now. I will have to accept Duryodhan’s visits, his friendship and his ideas. And if he insists on Dwarka terminating ties with Indraprastha ... my heart lies with you, but Balram tau is the ruler, after all. I am just his subordinate here. This marriage is going to cut Dwarka and myself into half.”

“Listen, I have two younger brothers. Both extremely good-looking,” I volunteered hastily.

“I also know you have two elder brothers. You are Dronacharya’s disciple and Kunti Mata’s son. You don’t need to recite your family history.”

“Either of them will be a perfect age match for Subhadra.”

“The youngest princes of Indraprastha versus the crown Prince of Hastinapur? I doubt Balram tau would be convinced for this lopsided match.”

“Well then Yudhisthir ... but Subhadra cannot displace our Queen.”

“The crown of Indraprastha’s Queen is too cumbersome.”

“Bheem is Balram tau’s disciple too, just as Duryodhan. Why don’t you remind tau of his fondness for both his disciples?” I persisted.

“Finished reciting all your options? I had hoped for an alliance with Indraprastha. But I guess that will not happen,” he said wistfully.

“Don’t look at me like that, Govind.”

“If the bride is willing, her abduction is not a deplorable act. She is more than willing, Parth. The child has adored you since a long time. Rukmini says she used to ask frequently about the coronation ceremony. And she asked a lot about ...”

“Me?”

“No, about Draupadi. Repeatedly and fervently, as if she could not bear to hear but could not bear not to ask. Rukmini frequently caught her staring in the mirror trying to match up to a certain name.”

There it was. In so many words. Draupadi’s husband was what they wanted. And he called my ideas weird.

“But Govind, I am going home to my wife.”

He sat silently, his head tilted, the peacock feathers casting a blue-green shadow over his shoulders. His eyes were tender, and then they grew amused. He ended with a chuckle, “Reluctant warrior. Reluctant lover. Grow up, Parth. Why do you give so much importance to love in a marriage? When did I demand emotions from you?”

His tone turned gentler, “Love cannot be denied, Parth. Enjoy it. Just don’t get so serious about it. Learn to be detached from material things.

“Love brings with it passion. And passion almost never brings joy, only pain. Trust me, it is better to marry a woman who loves you, rather than marry the one you love.”

I wondered why these women were not mutually exclusive.

“Have you never loved anyone?” I asked hesitantly, aware that I was prodding unknown waters.

He did not reply. After a pause, he continued, “Love grows too, Parth, if you allow it to grow. Marriages cannot always be based on passionate love. Being adored blindly too can be a source of joy. I didn’t love all my wives when I married them. I have grown to accept them, their individual emotions and idiosyncrasies.”

“But Draupadi...”

“She will reconcile to it. Yudhisthir got married the next year. She gave Sutsoma to Bheem but even he remarried Baldhara a year later. Draupadi hasn’t allowed the co-wives into Hastinapur, but she cannot negate the marriages.”

Surely she would not apply the same standards to me. Was I no different, not more special than the others? I had won her, not landed her as a gift – and why should I overlook that?

As for Govind’s sister, I was as susceptible as the next man to adulation. But I was in no mood to indulge breathless adoration from a child.

Especially when I had the option of dancing amber eyes and fire-tipped fingers ... I was yearning and ready to be seared.

“Govind, I know she will understand and forgive me the previous ones. But I will never be forgiven a pad_topthird marriage. My exile is ending; I am returning to her.” I persisted.

“So when will you rescue Subhadra? *After* she is married to Duryodhan? Balram tau won’t wait for her consent. Once he announces it to my parents, her fate is sealed. She’s stubborn too, she will threaten to forego her life. You want that to weigh down on our collective conscience?”

“But my wife is waiting for me, Govind.”

“Your wife is a resilient lady, I cannot imagine her threatening to forego her life. Besides, she *is* married to you. I am not taking you away from her.”

“Oh, you cannot understand our complicated life. If I lose her this year —”

He looked faintly amused, “That makes the decision easier, does it not? Time and tide don’t wait, Parth. You were aware of the terms and conditions of your marriage. Your year has passed by. She belongs to Nakul this year, to Sahdev next year. Then the cycle restarts with ...” he stopped.

I was aware this month; my year with her would have ended. I had not forgotten the term of my exile. But I had not expected to be bypassed. I know she had waited, because there had been no news of another heir being born. But had they gone ahead with her fourth year as the fourth Pandav wife? I felt snubbed and somehow, redundant.

“You tried to escape the agony of waiting. The temptation will still be there for four years, and so will the wait.”

“You were the one who gave me the idea to leave.”

“Did I ask you to go on three years of exile? I just asked you to go on an expedition. Really Arjun, do you have to twist my words to your taste and

blame me?”

“I am not blaming you...”

“I am in dire shortage of time, Arjun. It is the only occasion in my life I have asked anyone for help. Is it such an impossible task I am asking of you?”

He fell silent. He allowed me to harness my emotions.

He lifted his hand and ruffled my hair gently, “A fortnight from now, Subhadra will visit the Raivatak temple in the morning. She will be accompanied by twelve maids and twelve guards. Make sure to keep the Gandiva with you. Now listen carefully, the route she takes...”

Chapter 6: The Alliance with Dwarka

*** Maharaj was slow to rouse to anger and slower to cajole back. Bheem was easy to rouse to anger and easier to cajole back. I had fortified my plan of action. I would submit whenever the husband wished. *I could not honor them with a genuine response. I would not insult them with a fake response.* They would have to be fine with that.

In the third year, following Sutsom's birth, I insisted on staying alone. I hovered at the entrance of Arjun's palace, not daring to overstep into it. I knew the room would resent me for the absence of its owner.

I had pushed him out of Indraprastha's warmth and comfort into a nomadic existence. So I lived the way he must be living; I slept on the floor, wore the simplest clothes, wore no jewellery, and had the barest meals.

When Krishn's spies informed us about his marriages, I ignored Yudhisthir and Bheem's sidelong glances at me. I knew the marriages had been political alliances and that he left the women behind, but it still did not soothe the sting left within me.

He had seemed calm enough when he left. But he had still punished me – his two marriages for my two husbands, his two sons for my two sons. Did he think I would not understand the pattern of punishment?

He would return in the next two months. I wanted so much to carry on our conversation that had been so rudely interrupted. Madri's sons, Nakul and Sahdev were uncomplicated. They were pretty harmless and humble. They accepted my decision without questions, even as the fourth year began.

And now here was Krishn with further news. I heard the hushed bustle along my corridor and flew along to welcome him personally. It was unheard of a male guest to enter a Queen's chamber un-chaperoned. But Krishn followed his own laws. He was beyond suspicion, beyond rules.

“You haven’t been here so frequently — especially when your precious friend isn’t around. I suspect you visit only for his sake, the rest of us are mere formality.” I sulked jovially.

“My sister Subhadra is to be married shortly.”

“Why are you so grave about it? That is wonderful! You came to extend us an invitation?”

“I came because I needed Yudhisthir’s permission.”

“Since when does Dwarka need permission from Indraprastha for their family decisions?”

“I need permission when Dwarka and Indraprastha are to be joined in matrimonial alliance,” he said serenely, watching my eyes.

I did not grasp it immediately. Or maybe I did, but my mind revolted against accepting it. I felt a distinct time gap in the period between his words and the moment when they finally registered in my mind.

I felt my fingertips go cold. “Is *he* there?”

The peacock feathers in Krishn’s crown had caught the bright shafts of sunshine. Their union made shadows across his shoulders. In a room that vibrated with a repelling truth, that one blinding spot of golden-green suddenly seemed like the only safe anchor point.

“Why?” I demanded.

“Marriage is a very strong institution. I need your husband bound to me forever.”

“I thought friendship was an adequate bond.”

“It is between two individuals. But marriage bonds two families.”

“If you don’t mind using your sister for a political alliance, why do you forget that Pandavs are five brothers?”

“This is not a mere political alliance, Draupadi. This one has love as its strength and base.”

My breath stopped, strangled. I dared not ask him further. I don’t think I was strong enough to bear the answer.

“It is an alliance of love. I am a brother helpless in his love for his sister. Helpless to choose the dearest, most precious, most perfect man he can find for her. Arjun is the mirror of my soul. I love him more than anyone else.” He was speaking slowly and clearly. His voice held regret – and finality.

I envied him his frankness. He was allowed to be partial, to single out one for his love. And he was allowed to say it out loud and clear. I was not even allowed to think of it.

Alliance of love? He had mentioned his love for his sister and his love for Arjun. There were too many loves floating around and none of them included me.

“Why come to me if Maharaj has already permitted the marriage?”

“I need your permission for Subhadra to stay at Indraprastha.”

It was not a request, it was a statement. I had not allowed my other co-wives to enter Indraprastha. This was my domain, if only for namesake. And now, the only co-wife I could not bear would reside here. Within my vision. Within his reach. She was free to be his companion for four years, for every single year I got. I would rather not have even that year. I suddenly understood why he had welcomed exile!

I looked at Krishn, noticed anew his radiance. The luster of his serene eyes, the lilt of his voice, the luminance of his smiles, the purity of his complexion. Krishn’s sister. I did not have to imagine how lovely she would be. If she was remotely like Krishn, Arjun would find Krishn’s substitute in her. How could Draupadi combat the twin radiance of Dwarka’s lineage?

“On one condition,” I said trembling, aware that I was playing my last card, “There is a very heavy price to be paid for admission into Indraprastha. She has to be shared equally amongst five brothers.”

“No!” His response was immediate and definite.

“Why ever not? Don’t you want to retain unity amongst the five?” I asked softly. “Don’t worry. I am here to guide her.”

He was speechless for a moment. Then he relaxed, “Don’t play games with me, Queen. If I refuse, you refuse permission too?”

“Yes,” I said, unsure why he was so calm when I had the upper hand.

“Well, if Subhadra cannot leave Dwarka, he cannot either.”

“You cannot cleave him away from his brothers and Indraprastha.” I was aghast at the way he had managed to turn around my words.

“Me?” He asked in surprise, “Possessive Draupadi left Arjun with no alternative but to stay away from Indraprastha. Where do I come in?”

I stayed quiet. I knew he was not jesting. This was not idle talk, he could and would do it. My victory had been short-lived.

“You used to call me *sakhi*. But blood seems to be stronger than any other tie, isn’t it?” I asked bitterly.

“You and I, Panchali, are unified by a bond stronger than blood. We don’t choose our relatives. But we do choose our friends. You are more precious than a sister to me. You give me resistance. I need your resistance. It is the energy on which I thrive.”

“Hollow words! You won’t let your Subhadra share Panchali’s fate.”

“Subhadra’s beauty is not the kind to make enemies out of brothers.”

“But adequate enough to enamor the one person I ...”

“Why are you so strong, Draupadi? Fate has a way of reserving its most brutal blows for those who can bear them and still survive. Subhadra would have never survived your life, or your fate.”

He smiled gently now, he knew he had won. “Don’t make it a battle between you and me. You stand no chance of winning. Let it remain a battle between you and Subhadra. You stand a chance of winning there.”

“Winning what?” I asked

“His love, of course. Isn’t what this is all about?”

“Aren’t they in love?” I asked half hopefully, half dreading the answer.

“She is. He isn’t — at least not yet,” He admitted candidly. “Take the opportunity I am giving you. I am doing you a favor. The magnanimous wife who agreed for his sake — the wife he wronged, who deserves his gratitude, his benevolence and, once on that path, I am sure you will manage fine.”

“I don’t want love built on pity. Why the sudden concern for me?”

“You are the most unusual woman I know. And you are a graceful loser. It is such a relief to meet an intelligent woman. Men hate tantrums. Cool indifference is so much more alluring. It keeps men on tenterhooks. He won’t be able to resist it either.”

“You came with poetic descriptions of him. You made the love and marriage possible, now you want me to set it aside?”

“All of you make the same mistakes. I told you to marry him. I didn’t ask you to fall in love with him. You can marry someone without loving them, as you must have discovered in the last two years.”

“Women do not love so easily or so lightly.”

“I know women like you don’t. Let me repeat what I told him too — passion is a feeling born to bear pain. Bear it, or let go.”

“I am sorry I ever called you a friend.”

“I am not. Friends don’t tell you what you *want* to hear, only what you *need* to hear.” He waited for a reply, and then he left the room.

I moved slowly to the mirror, stared at the reflection. ‘I will kill you if you cry,’ I promised the woman in the mirror. I glared at her until her tears retreated. She held her fist clenched tight, the nails biting into her palm. I saw a drop of blood detach off her palm.

But she did not shed a single drop of tear! I felt proud of her. She would survive.

Tears are infinitely more precious than blood. Blood spurts from the body; tears stream from the soul.

Chapter 7: A Comet Fallen out of its Orbit

The abduction had made the marriage thrilling – at least till the abduction lasted. Yes, Subhadra was lovely and achingly young. She glowed with the joy of a person who has her dream come alive; or maybe like a child who has got its most hankered toy.

I cannot deny that her complete adoration was a soothing balm to my battered ego. It felt good to be adored – without reason and without reservations. At least for the moment.

I had hopes when I sent Govind to seek Yudhisthir's permission. Not hopes from Yudhisthir, he would never object.

The Other One. Please, I prayed. Object to it, show me that it matters to you, cry even if it kills you and raise a storm. You are the only one who has the right to deny permission.

I know it made little sense to send Govind as an envoy when he wanted this marriage. But who else did I have?

“Didn't ... anyone protest?” I still asked hopefully on his return.

She had even allowed Subhadra entry into Indraprastha. Why the exception? Perhaps this was her way of expressing supreme contempt for this union.

I looked back into the chariot at my latest bride. Subhadra snuggled down into her shawl, asleep with a smile. She did not seem disturbed about the upcoming battle tomorrow. She already seemed to have shrugged off the burden of Draupadi. She was secure in the life of the last two months. After all, once the marriage was conducted, would Draupadi's welcome or its absence matter to her? The specter of Draupadi no longer seemed to hold any power over her.

*** I survived the night.

After Krishn left, I had picked up my two sons and proceeded to *his* palace. I had a job to do as Queen and eldest daughter-in-law. The rooms had been kept clean, sparse and fresh these three years. Now they had to be re-decorated, as befitting a wedding suite. I gave orders for renovating and decorating the rooms.

There was no confusion in the voice that issued precise orders to the maids and set them on the duties. They went about their job with downcast eyes. If they felt empathy, they had better not express it.

Some women like to fight their own battles; others depend on their brother.

Prativindhya looked around with rounded eyes at the decorations. “Who is coming? Do we know him?”

“Nobody knows him, not even himself.” I replied.

I saw the outlines of Indraprastha at last. My home! All the memories flooded back with a deluge of warmth and peace. Sometimes, the only joy of travel is coming back home.

I jumped out of the chariot when it entered the gates, knelt and ploughed out a handful of soil, smelt it deeply. I kept kneeling there longer than required, feeling the warmth and the fragrance of the soil seep into me, hoping it would forgive me the abandonment.

And then the crowds were upon me. I had quite forgotten in these years that everything related to us was open for public consumption. Nothing in our lives was sacred and private. Here they were, rejoicing at being proud relatives of Dwarka and its green-blue peacock feathers. I wished they would stop greeting me as if I had won a war.

I moved closer to the palaces. I saw my brothers smiling wide. And beyond them, up the stairs, a vision in white – slender and stern, with eyes

like embers not quite extinguished. I stored the image away in my heart and lowered my eyes to her feet – bare tawny feet on white marble steps.

And ... two more pairs of little feet by her side. I raised my eyes a fraction, to see two little boys standing close to her. My bride – the mother of two sons! And me, father of two sons, whom I had left behind somewhere in my journey.

*** The self-discipline did not help at all. I still felt the jolt when I saw them together. Somehow, I had hoped this moment would never arrive.

He and the ... child by his side. His new bride smug in her pregnancy. I doubt if he knew, but it was obvious to me. The years of exile had matured him – made him look leaner and, regretfully, better than ever. His eyes flashed resentment at me for a moment. Then his jaws clenched – the cheekbones sharp against the crescent of eyelashes. What right had he to resentment?

She was all rosy and radiant. How lovely that rosy skin would look against his bronzed one in the moonlight. How beautiful an offering their collective rosy and bronzed heads would make to Goddess Kali! *For the sake of their child, I was glad there wasn't a sword close by.*

The twins would know which one of them was elder. But I had no time for their decisions. This time, I did not feel any bubble of laughter fizzle through me. I came across Nakul's room first on my way back and decided on him. It did not matter either way.

Poor Nakul. He was half paralyzed with guilt and embarrassment. I myself was half paralyzed with bitterness and envy. Oh, what quality of children would such a fantastic environment produce?

*** Subhadra was difficult to get angry with. She was always smiling, always easy-going. She had everything on a golden platter. How much can you grudge someone for their good fortune?

And she completely adored him. Everything he did was right and glorious. Everything beyond him was non-existent.

If he had rounded up all the Brahmins and cows of Dwarka and Indraprastha, and slaughtered them personally before her very eyes, she would probably have clapped in breathless adulation. Blasted idiot!

I tried to needle her constantly, but either she was amazingly impervious or amazingly angelic. Either way, it had to be genuine; no one can carry on an act so long. My vitriolic tongue curled up in a yawn at her unbearable sweetness.

Well, he was welcome to four years of ennui. I could not have invented a better punishment for him. Four years could be companionship. Four years could also be a prison.

A shaky pedestal is never a comfortable position. I wished Subhadra would engage her spare time in something beyond me. I wished she did not have so much spare time. I wished she would contradict or debate over something I did. I wished she would throw something at my head.

But for all her fascination, she quickly lost interest if the conversation lingered on anything that was not romantic. Once I tried to explain the intricacies of archery, but she listened with the overtly bright eyes of the inattentive. What does a woman love about a man if she loves everything except that which defines his existence? I waited patiently for her infatuation to wane.

Tonight I was alone in my room. Govind had taken Subhadra to Dwarka for the birth of her child.

My exile never seemed to end. I looked up at the ordinary roof blocking my sky. Where was the roof that I had loved, the one made of crystal clear glass? It had screens that could be whisked apart, allowing me to see the stars and sky at night. Someone had closed the roof and blocked out the sky. The renovated rooms seemed overcrowded, glitzy and unfamiliar. Subhadra

had loved them. Her presence only stressed my alienation. I felt like a guest here, not an owner.

“Maharani Draupadi’s instructions,” was the reply. Well, it had been her idea and she had the right to withdraw the idea anytime she wanted. Nobody takes that much effort for indifference. This was anger. Anger was welcome, anger was reassuring. If vexing me gave her vicarious satisfaction; then it was the only way we could stay bonded in the muddle that was our lives.

I had started off my married life with a lofty promise to myself. I did not know I would end up like this. Four wives, two sons and not a single companion. I had sampled almost all varieties of marriages – the contest swayamwar, the lust nuptial, the political alliance and the bride abduction.

Men do not stop marrying because they find the right person; they do it because they are tired of being disillusioned.

Maybe marriages are meant to be instrumental in allowing men to focus on their work. In that way, Subhadra would be the ideal wife. She would colorlessly blend into the background. She would never become more important or interfere with archery. I guessed that was marriage; but somehow, I felt cheated out on something more intimate, intense and substantial.

I wondered how Govind ever managed to keep his wives happy and so insanely in love with him. Now I decided to concentrate and invest my time and efforts wisely on what I knew best – archery, the protection of Indraprastha’s borders and building up our army.

It felt such a relief to be back among the world of arrows and swords. They had a comforting sanity and confirmed clarity about them. I had wasted too much time already.

*** I remained a virgin. My focus, by now had shifted from the husbands to my sons. I had four sons! I never felt the travails of pregnancy. I tossed

out babies like I would wring out droplets off my washed hair.

I stared at them in disbelief. How wrinkled and helpless they looked! I could not believe they sprung from my womb. I wished I had a normal childhood, so I could have understood babies better.

I tried my best. Kunti Mata occasionally taught me the bare essentials. The elderly maids tried to train me too. Beyond that, everything was trials and errors for my babies and me. Trials on their part, errors on mine.

The sons were exactly like their fathers. It irritated me that they did not look like me. Prativindhya's father had an unsure look in his eyes, searching for someone else in his son's face. It is only when his son finally shed his baby looks and began resembling Maharaj, did he deign to give his son the attention he deserved.

Prativindhya was quiet, kept to himself, and remained immersed in books. Sutsom, just like his father, was easy to please and easy to displease. The twin's sons were like them – beautiful, chiseled, artistic and dreamy.

Arjun's son too was exactly like him; except that he was not my son.

Arjun's son had returned from Dwarka two years ago. He arrived at our palace like the enthralling sound of a conch shell. He came carried in Krishn's arms, his chubby little wrists wound tight around Krishn's neck, like a thunderbolt held within dark clouds. Subhadra was pale and listless. Her son seemed to have parasitized away all her luster.

Prativindhya stood silently next to me. Sutsom, a year younger, stood bouncing up and down on his toes, eager to hold this new toy. I had been pregnant with my third child. I stood a little behind the others, holding onto the clutching fingers of my sons.

Kunti Mata was the one who welcomed them. She stretched out her hands, but the tiny one turned and buried his face into Krishn's neck, his lustrous eyes peeping out at this bevy of strangers. Krishn laughed, carried

him over to his father, who stood on the step below me. The bonny baby smiled. I detected a deep dimple in his left cheek.

As Arjun stepped forward with open arms, the tiny one shifted his glance upward, towards me. He stretched out his plump fair arms and leapt into my slender brown ones.

I felt the shock, but he was already safely enclosed in my embrace. His tiny fingers were entwined in my hair. I leant back a little, suddenly breathless. He looked down at me with grave smiling eyes – velvety brown eyes with golden flecks and long eyelashes.

That is the first time in my life that I cried.

Abhimanyu – the one who will never sacrifice self-respect. The first time I actually held my own son. Briefly, guiltily, I thought of the other two that I never bothered to meet. I had made my conditions clear right in the beginning; so it was not betrayal and it was not abandonment.

If I had a son with *her*, he would have been her third, just like me amongst the Pandavs. Abhimanyu glided into that place effortlessly. His impish eyes were a constant reminder of Govind. I heartily wished I could take him to meet Yashoda *maiyya*. I wanted to know if any semblance of Gokul's miracle was growing in my house as well.

Prativindhya and Sutsom had been initially tentative with me, this stranger who had suddenly entered their world. They had floored me with their very first upfront question, "Who are you?"

Who *was* I? Dronacharya's sterling pupil, Govind's best friend, Indraprastha's prince? They would relate to none of these. I needed to evolve a new identity. "I am your mother's relative," I said.

"You know our mother? She said she does not know you," Sutsom said guilelessly, before Prativindhya silenced him with a fierce nudge.

I just lost my heart to them. They reminded me so much of my childhood. They gave me a weird sensation of floating in the past and present simultaneously. They were far too much like their fathers. I searched for *her* in them, but in vain. It was almost as if they were born directly from the womb of Yudhisthir and Bheem – untouched by her.

Abhimanyu's arrival made me a more acceptable relative. Abhi tagged along with them to their lessons, learning skills well in advance for his age. "More!" was his usual request. He never had to be retold verses or instructions. I tried to be impartial, but I could not escape the pride I felt in him.

One day he landed on my lap like an errant missile and put his arms around my neck with an exaggerated sigh. "Everyone wants me. How do I please everybody all the time?"

"Don't try to please everyone. It is not worth it. Somebody always gets hurt in the process. Just ask yourself what your father would have done. Then do its exact opposite," I said, half-serious, half-mocking.

"Did you make a lot of mistakes?" he asked with concern.

"A few. But childhood is the time to say and do exactly as your heart desires. There is the rest of life for rules, ethics and codes."

"Am I a mistake?" Genuine worry tinged his woeful voice.

"Of course not! You are the most precious thing in my life." I nuzzled his curls, but I could not quell the lingering doubt in his eyes.

"Why isn't Draupadi Mata my mother?" His questions were like my quiver of arrows – interminable, unquenchable and precise.

"Darling, you have your own mother."

"I did not say I love Subhadra Mata any less. Besides, I am still a baby. You said I can say and do anything I want." Unassailable logic. *His defense*

was as good as his attack.

“Sutsom *bhaiyya* said their mother belongs only to them and that I am an outsider. I went and complained to Draupadi Mata.”

“I don’t think she would entertain cribbers.”

“She said to me, ‘Abhi, learn to fight your own battles. Poor little baby. No benefit of being the eldest, nor any of being the youngest. Who asked you to be born right in the middle of nowhere?’. he narrated.

“Tell her, some incidents in life are beyond my control.” The message was not lost on me.

“But she was not talking about you.”

“Of course not. Does she ever mention me?” I asked lightly.

“We only talk of interesting things,” he answered glibly.

Sometimes, I really could not decide whether he was being precocious or innocent. His tongue came straight from Dwarka.

He looked at me doubtfully, gauging if I was worthy enough for her, “Can’t you marry Draupadi Mata? Then she will be my mother as well,” he persisted. He was too young to grasp the complicated matters at Indraprastha’s inner palaces.

I bent and whispered in his ears at last, “She *is* my wife.”

His eyes unclouded, as if that one sentence lifted a colossal burden off him. “How?” he persisted suspiciously. So I told him about the contest arranged by her Father.

“Did you win? Say you did!” He jumped up and down, his eyes sparkling. He looked at me as if he would like to pat me on the back. Oh, to be a child again!

Then his smile widened, “Wait till I throw this in Sutsom *bhaiyya*’s face.”

“Hold on.” I caught him mid-air as he tried to scamper off, “Little fellow, you are not shoving anything in anybody’s face. She already knows what you just know. If her sons don’t know it, perhaps she does not wish them to.”

He huffed and puffed in vain, turning a deep crimson.

“Sweetheart, knowledge and words are like weapons. You should know when to use them, and have the self-control *not* to use them without provocation.”

“But he should not have bullied me.”

“Just ignore him. Nobody can take the facts away from you. It takes more efforts to not rub them in.”

I sometimes could not discern if I was consoling him or myself. I hoped I was doing the right thing. Little children were a big responsibility. Why did nobody train us to become parents? Parents should come with a warning sign that they are not perfect; *elders are just flawed people who happen to be born earlier.*

I lived her life through Abhi’s eyes. She was studying the texts, her fingers were fragrant (as if I could forget!), she always had time for him, she was Goddess, Mother and Inspiration all rolled into one.

She was the dazzling star that held the world of Indraprastha together. Her children orbited her in the closest circle. Her husbands were pushed into the outer planetary circle.

I was the only outsider – *the comet who had fallen out of her orbit.*

*** I could not visualize Kunti Mata indulging her son’s pranks. I could imagine their childhood – all duty, discipline and dedication. Maharaj would have got his dues as eldest, Bheem would have demanded his share and the youngest two would have been mollycoddled. Arjun was the type who wandered off for intimate conversations with his bow and arrows.

Abhimanyu was the little Arjun whom I would never meet. He had impish eyes and devilish dimples – both of which he used to devastating effect. He was the living reminder of what I detested. Yet, as hard as I tried, I could not hate him.

I reveled in the power I wielded over Abhi. I tantalized him away on many an occasion, right before Subhadra's eyes. Once she wanted to take him to a temple visit; I lured him into my company with a visit to the royal stables, where a new batch of stallions was being paraded. I saw him wistfully pleading with Subhadra. I saw her eyes fill with fatigued tears. Only after she conceded defeat, did I relent. I promised to take him to the stables after the temple visit.

Then I fled to my palace, partly glowing with victory and partly sick of myself.

I wish Arjun had snubbed and cold-shouldered my sons – it could not have been easy to accept his wife's sons as nephews. At least I would have hated him with full conviction. I could not even recollect eight full sentences we exchanged in eight years. I wished I could fling aside the rules and flee to him right now. I wish I could be consoled with long, soothing fingers running through my hair and be assured I am not a wicked witch.

Subhadra was a peaceful creature, content within herself. I had plucked her away from Hastinapur. I was infinitely grateful to her for Abhimanyu.

She had been permitted entry into Draupadi's Indraprastha, the sole exception. She was welcome to stay on at Indraprastha, but she would have to abide by Indraprastha's strict codes as well. She would spend only one out of five years with me. The exact same period as I would get with my first wife. Her lips trembled as she heard my decision, yet she accepted gracefully. I expected no less from Dwarka's princess.

She turned pale and fretful as my year with Draupadi neared. I saw the sudden sure knowledge in her young eyes, the realization that first victory did not mean lasting victory. She had never really triumphed over the image she had dreaded all her life.

Chapter 8: The Silken Bond

*** I sat on the low bough, dangling my legs, feeling carefree like a little girl. I leant back dangerously and smiled at the skies. I drank in the sight of leaves; so many shades of green, every leaf distinctive in its beauty. So many shades of blue in the sky too; why had I not noticed that before? Nature was an incredible artist.

I felt the stretch in my throat that was thrown back, in my arms that held on precariously to the bough. Does my sister feel this stretch too, before she snaps back at his will and propels the arrow where he wishes it to leap?

I felt the tautness turn into pain. I smiled at the pain that I shared with the bowstring. The pain was worth the touch of his fingers. Oh, the glory of being alive!

I sat up straight. Listened to the birds, felt the cool breeze whistling through my hair, felt the insistent caress of my clothes against my skin. I was ready to love this world and everything that existed here right now.

He was somewhere farther down the path. Close to the lake. As always, he was with my sister. I no longer envied her. I was now included into their sacred private world. I thought of this place, many years ago when he had stared bitterly into the lake, his concentration in shreds.

He did not mind me now. My presence was welcome, not an intrusion. He allowed me to be around as long as I stayed silent.

My ears registered that the arrows had stopped at last. Anticipation lanced through me. I closed my eyes and waited for his footsteps to approach me. I felt his fingers trace the outline of my earlobe, then slide beneath the canopy of my tresses, felt their rough welts caress the nape of my neck.

And the years in between dissolved away.

*** I remembered the first day of my eighth year. I was still undecided whether to be cool or outright dismissive. But the time was ripe and he was already there. At the dressing mirror, I ran my hands idly through my hair.

I frowned at his reflection, “What are you doing here? Do you want to be caught again and sent on exile once more?”

I smiled sweetly as he halted in his tracks, “Oh! I forgot. You enjoy exile, don’t you? Wild nature, no ties and plenty of variety to savor.”

He looked steadily at me, “You seem to have forgotten. I am not trespassing anymore.”

“Is it your turn already? I always forget the schedule and sequence. I just accept whoever turns up at my door. I trust you brothers keep an eagle eye on each other’s turns.” I had the satisfaction of seeing his fingers curl up and continued, “Welcome. Please make yourself comfortable.”

“I was waiting for this year, as I hoped you were.”

“Waiting ... why? Oh, the contest. You won it. Congratulations, it served its purpose well for you. You got your widespread reputation. Your brothers got a wife. My father got his prized warrior son-in-law. Your family got the power and wealth it needed.”

“It gave you nothing?” his voice held a faint plea, but I ignored it.

“A golden crown and a golden prison. How remiss of me not to thank you.”

“I was as much a puppet as you. Don’t you think I suffered?”

“Suffered? You were free to escape this prison. No shackles, no rules, no monotony. I can never forgive your marriages in exile.” Trembling with unrequited anger, I blurted out exactly what I did not want to.

“And who sent me on exile?” he asked coolly.

“You!” I said fuming, pointing an accusing finger at him. “You knew quite well that you did not need that specific bow for a mere cow-thief. You used it as an excuse to escape me.”

“That is true. I should have taken you along, you culprit,” he agreed frankly, immediately, deflating my air of righteous fury.

“I just came to speak to you, that day by the lake. You didn’t have to react so abnormally. It is a pity an archer needs to be told that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line!”

“Did you know what it cost me to turn you away? However, the exile taught me patience. It allowed me to survive these last four years, in spite of the constant allure of your presence and the decree of not approaching you. But the more rules, the more the loopholes. The mind knows how to exploit loopholes. I thought of you so much.”

“You were not allowed to think of me. The code of ...”

“I was not allowed to *express* it. Didn’t you think of me at all?”

“No.”

“Not even to hate me?” I kept silent, simmering.

“What were you doing with my bow back then?” he changed tack.

“Practicing archery,” I snapped.

“Without arrows?” he was back to being amused at my words. This was not at all going as I planned. I had already lost my temper, and he hadn’t as yet.

“I guess her anemic charms have faded.” I brought the conversation back on track.

He sighed, “No. I am here only because I am compelled to spend a year with you and prove to the world that we co-habited. What kind of answer would satisfy you?”

“Why did you bring her here?”

“Because she is Dwarka’s princess.”

“I don’t care a whit for Dwarka.”

“But you care for Indraprastha. You want Dwarka to be an enemy of Indraprastha?”

“You took the trouble of abducting her against the wishes of Balram tau, only because she is nothing else?”

“I would have abducted Balram tau if Govind wished it.”

I waited out a pause, “Is this your idea of humor?” I fumed.

“Draupadi, I would have married her even if she was the ugliest woman on Earth.”

“And it helped that she was not the ugliest woman on Earth?”

“Yes, it helped. Satisfied?”

“No. She sails in here and stays in the palace that I created. I had to tolerate her smirking face every morning ...while I ... do you have *any* idea what torture it is to share ...?”

He said calmly, “No, I would not be expected to know that torture. Does everything need to be explained in words to you? I did send Govind to seek permission before the marriage. He came to tell you that you had a choice.”

“He came to tell me that I had no choice.”

“The abduction ...” he explained patiently, “did not take place until Govind returned from Indraprastha with your permission. You think you are the only one burdened with duties and obligations? If you knew what it was to return to an empty look in your eyes, to yearn for a glimpse of you in my nephews every single day ...

“Don’t sermonize me on patience, Lady. You could have waited, all of you. You could have put your foot down, refused to start the fourth year.”

I stared at him unbelievably, “My fourth year did not begin until *you* returned with your new bride.” We stared across the room at each other.

“You were the one who withdrew your fingers from mine. I could not guess why you gave up,” He said.

I thought back through my cold fury. He was right, I had taken the first step towards the decision. But he was supposed to read my mind.

“It is so obvious. If I had refused, I would have been forced to marry the eldest,” I said in incredulous anger.

“Your decisions are crystal clear in your mind as mine are to me. Neither of us is wrong. We are just two different persons.” He said.

He need not have stayed back here to be hurled with insults and queries. He had no need to explain himself so patiently. He was allowed to have as many wives as he wanted, or didn’t want.

With his looks, his fame, his valor and martial expertise, he would never be short of female adoration. All those idiotic women must have fawned over him. He now knew he was irresistible to women. I regretted the loss of his innocence. I wish he had been ugly, just a tiny bit ugly.

He sighed, almost like he could read my mind, “Silly child, let me give you a piece of advice. The interest in the chase wanes when the chase ends. Don’t reduce yourself to a mere chase. You are for a lifetime — that requires more than games of hide and seek. I cannot offer you more than the truth. You may choose to believe it or not.”

He came nearer and knelt beside me. His arms held me captive in their taut cordon, “Don’t be so flippant and so heartless. Don’t speak with such finality and don’t keep using the past tense. Don’t ask me to give up. I will not, but it is meaningless without your help.”

He gingerly pushed back a stray wavelet from my forehead. When I did not recoil, his finger tentatively traced my jaw line.

“I will be waiting,” he said before he left.

I tried my best. I fought on for a good week, until I realized that our year mattered to only two people. Us. Everybody else had already taken what they wanted.

One fine day, I made the maids decorate my palms with *mehndi*, I brought out my bridal dress and covered it with a cloak. I then went to conquer my husband and earn my wedding night by the same lake that had witnessed him turning me away.

*** “Traitor!” I tried to admonish the glowing person in the mirror. She had shamelessly capitulated, not me. I had tried valiantly to stick to my plans of revenge and torture. I tried to pin her down with a glare. But it is impossible to glare and frown when you are already grinning ... just you try it!

I half hoped that he didn’t realize how desperately besotted I was, and half hoped that he knew. It was a near-impossible tightrope. But he guessed and understood. We managed just perfectly fine.

I saw the grim flint in Kunti’s eyes as she caught me dreamily gazing into space. I wondered why she should grudge my bliss. She had been a wife too, she had been allowed to choose King Pandu in her swayamwar.

I felt far purer than the temples she made me visit mandatorily. God could have made us hermaphrodites, who needed nobody else to reproduce. Instead, God gave us this sacred pathway, this pure fusion of man and wife.

If motherhood transformed a woman into a Goddess, then why should the act responsible for this transformation be a sin?

I wondered if all of Kunti Mata’s life had been duty before pleasure, duty without pleasure. I felt a sudden wave of pity for her. In all genuine

sincerity, in all the innocence of the happy and in all the sinless clarity of the joyous, I hoped that she had tasted passion, had drunk on bliss and derived pleasure out of her nights.

Chapter 9: A Friend Regained

*** “Well?” Krishn asked, peering into my eyes.

Today I made him wait like a guest outside my chambers, stressing that he was an interloper here. He had too much to explain and justify. He had waited obediently.

“The usual irony. She has forgiven her husband but decided that I am the enemy. After all that I did for her! I kept saying that you two belong.”

“Apart from saying it, everything else you did was designed for just the opposite. You had made every provision to estrange us for life.”

“Now she is being really cruel,” – injured innocence from him.

“Those sages — the story of my previous birth. They were your envoys,” I said accusatorily.

“Of course,” he admitted lightly. “There was no better woman to test the limits of restraint. But I am not heartless, you know. At least my intervention kept you married to Arjun. I could count on you to follow my subtle orders. Besides, I knew you were strong enough to bear the subsequent turmoil.”

I fumed, but stayed silent. After all, my vocabulary was limited in the knowledge of certain words.

“You are not angry, are you?” he asked casually. “I gifted you an unparalleled arena, an unusual situation to combat.”

“What infernal audacity made you think I would want five husbands strung around my neck?”

“Wrong mentality. Not around your neck, but *under your thumb*. Under your *toes*, if you wish. You don’t mind the power that comes with it, do you?”

“What power?”

“Don’t tell me I overestimated you. Men always had the facility of multiple wives. Wives had to wait for the husband to realize their existence. Not you. You are the one *they* wait for. I know for a fact that many women envy your varied palette.”

“Men are not strangled by one-year rules. Now if I had the freedom to choose my year ...”

“I don’t think the male ego is ready for that yet. Maybe a few hundred centuries later, and perhaps not even then.”

“Do your wives envy me too? Of course, Krishn’s wives never do anything shocking or impure. Krishn’s sister never has to bear the extraordinary pleasure of a varied palette. How come all your experiments are at the expense of someone not related to you?”

He ignored me and continued glibly, “Honor is what you make of it. Your absence makes a stronger bond than your constant presence would have. It makes them yearn for their year and makes them obsessed with you for the four years in between.”

I bristled with the barb at my ego, “I don’t need assistance there. I am perfectly capable of lassoing their hearts and hauling them after me on a leash.”

“I positively love your self-confidence. Just don’t forget that a leash has a noose at both ends.” He smiled dreamily, “You got him finally, didn’t you? So stubborn, the pair of you. I accept total failure this time. It is not often that I am defeated by my own disciples.”

I refused to cast my gaze down demurely. I knew I looked radiant. Besides, he was a graceful loser too. Yet...

“Why did you hurt him? I thought you liked him.”

“I thought he would be an indispensable warrior to suit my future plans. Once I met him ... well, it was cathartic to know someone so uncorrupted. He is more guileless and innocent than a child. The world is far too cynical and murky as it is. I almost wished I could spare him. But then, there was no better way to get him disillusioned with his family.”

“I thought the whole purpose was unity.”

“Really? They fooled you with that one? This is a unit of five resting on the shoulders of two. Bheem and Arjun will always need to over-achieve for the rest.

“In exile, Arjun tasted freedom, solitude and the confidence to survive alone. He does not need a crown to get admirers and allies. He could have stayed on at Dwarka where he is cherished, with his best friend and an adoring wife who worships him. He could have built an independent province with his martial excellence, my counsel and Dwarka’s army rallying behind him. He need not have come back here at all if he was ruthless, ambitious and insensitive.”

“But I ...”

He interrupted me, “Yet he returned to a place where he will never be King — to a family that prioritizes their desires over his emotions — where his skills will be used but not necessarily acknowledged. Ask yourself what hauled him back here.”

I stayed silent in pleasurable anticipation.

“You were the silken thread that tethered him and yet made him strain for escape. He needs to learn to distrust. Some things need to be learnt the hard way. I believe in practical demonstrations.”

“You are the most guilt-free cold-blooded manipulator ...”

“I know. It doesn’t pay to be sensitive in this world. Take for instance, your husband. He will always be hurt if he expects the best from human beings. You and I never get disillusioned, we always believe the worst

possible of human beings. He thinks like a gazelle grazing in the wilderness, pseudo-secure that no predator will harm it just because it harms nobody.”

“You are applying rules of the jungle to human beings?”

“Deep down, human beings are still about food, shelter, mating and ultimately survival. Unity? It was a very poor message Kunti-*bua* sent out. A unity that gets ruffled by a woman ... even by *you* ... cannot be a strong bond to start with. It cannot be the backbone of the formation of an Empire. She sent out a message that their unity is fragile and *can* be broken — not the contrary.”

He rested his elbows on the parapet, “Be glad you did not have to deal with childhood, Draupadi. The influences of childhood are long-reaching, permanent — too firmly entrenched in the instincts of a person.

“Once, there was a cub whose foot was tied to the tree trunk to prevent him from wandering off. Years passed, the cub grew up, the tree withered and the chain was chopped off. But the cub refused to believe it was free! Sometimes, the idea of bondage is stronger than the chains.

“Arjun’s father died when he was barely two years old. They had a turbulent childhood, unsure of their roots, unsure of their future. Kunti Mata drilled it into their minds that Yudhishthir was proxy father — the caretaker who should be protected at all cost and whose orders were to be obeyed without question. Any hesitancy, any objection would amount to treason in their minds.

“I am obedient to Balram tau, too. But I am aware of his short temperament, the impracticality of some of his ideas. He allows me to point out mistakes and suggest better ideas. Can you imagine that scenario between Yudhishthir and Arjun?”

I pursed my lips and kept silent. He was articulating what I had always felt. But admitting it would be treason to my marital vows. For better or worse, Maharaj Yudhishthir was my husband. Krishn was still the outsider and I still did not trust him fully.

“A person like that is dangerous, Panchali.”

This was too much! I burst out laughing, “I cannot imagine Maharaj Yudhisthir as dangerous. Not even to his enemy.”

“That is because he is not dangerous to the enemy.”

“I don’t understand what you mean to convey.”

“Maharaj Yudhisthir is righteous, fair and kind ... as long as it suits him. He already tasted the heady sample of power. He didn’t play a hand in achieving either you or Indraprastha. But he still managed to get both. A person who gets something precious with no cost to himself can never know its value.”

“Why, what is he going to do?” I asked, still amused.

“I don’t know Panchali. If I knew specifically, I would have taken necessary steps. In a world full of enemies, at least family should be above suspicion. You will be beside him, won’t you?” he asked suddenly. He had not changed his tone, but I knew which husband he was referring to now.

“Always.” I said.

“The problem with danger is that you can anticipate its occurrence, but not its nature, nor the time it decides to strike. Now you know why I placed my bravest soldier by his side.”

“Soldier? Me?” I asked, flattered, incredulous.

“Of course.”

“Does he mean so much to you?”

“I cannot imagine a world without him. I wish I die before him. I would not survive in a world that does not have him.” he spoke evenly.

“I was an outsider, but you are a blood relative, Krishn. You are expected to love *all* five cousins equally,” I mock-scolded him, but he did not smile.

“I am never bound by rules, Panchali. Humor Yudhisthir, don’t cross his plans, and don’t argue with him. And for Heaven’s sake, don’t alienate him.”

“I have followed my marital vows completely. I have never given any of them cause for complaint.”

“So why did Arjun have to go on exile? No, I need no answer. Just keep your eyes open and stay alert. Not you and not Abhimanyu – Arjun’s first duty and first concern will remain Yudhisthir. He cannot help it, it is too deeply ingrained into him. Remember that.”

*** There should be a law against men being good-looking. Men should only possess valor, intelligence, culture, humility, integrity, humor ... but he wasn’t lacking any of that either. Lord Shiva had obviously never met Arjun; otherwise he would never feel the need to spawn five husbands.

“You don’t seem to take much care of your husband,” Krishn chided me as his friend scooped a bite from Krishn’s half-eaten plate. “Duryodhan and Dusshasan too eat sometimes from the same plate.”

“Don’t utter inauspicious names while eating,” I said absently, and then to Arjun, “Can you wait till I get you a separate plate?” How could long eyelashes look good on men? They looked sharp as swords, but they merely tickled my fingertips, curled pliantly against my lips when I whispered into them. Tonight, I would ...

“I feel like I don’t exist in this room. Are you listening, Queen Draupadi? You are the impetuous, arrogant princess who shunned Karn for being a *sutaputra* and snatched away his chance to hit the fish-eye target.”

I was yanked out of my reverie. “*When* did I call whom *what*?”

“Karn. Charioteer’s son. The one who tried your contest just before Arjun.”

“A charioteer’s son? But he was seated with your Hastinapur cousins in the Kshatriya arena. Unless I am mistaken, didn’t the court announcer introduce him as ruler of some region?”

“We had an exhibition during the course of our education with Dronacharya. Karn barged in uninvited to demonstrate his own skills. In fact, he got plenty of crowd appreciation too. He then insisted on having a duel-to-the-death with me. When Kripacharya enquired about his lineage, Duryodhan jumped to his defense and crowned him ruler of Angadesh,” Arjun explained patiently.

“Well, well! Generosity from the murderous Duryodhan? Quite a revelation, though I wonder if he would have done the same if *he* was challenged.”

“Hmmm. More likely Karn would be marched down to a dungeon.”

“Was Duryodhan the crown prince? Is a prince permitted to gift away provinces without the King’s permission?” I asked.

“Hastinapur’s King will deny him nothing.” Arjun said.

“Reputation, once established, is hard to change in its nature,” Krishn reminded me.

“You are still on that track? Trust me, I would have loved to reject them all, if I could.” I turned to my husband,

“Arjun, Father could have just sent you a proclamation to come collect your bride. Yet he insisted that winning a contest would be an honor for you, for me and for Panchal.

“Father was not sure if you were alive. If you were in hiding, you obviously would not arrive garbed as Kshatriyas. He did not want to lose you simply based on a camouflage. Hence he took a huge risk and kept the contest open to all.”

“I know.”

“However, his own rules trapped him. He could not ask you to identify yourself or your lineage. Neither before nor after you won the contest. He had to stay true to his words — even when those losers threatened him. Remember how furious the other kings were because the contest was not limited to Kshatriyas? And they have the gall to accuse me!

“They were ready to throw me back into fire, just because my father made too tough a contest and deprived them an opportunity to fluff their egos. Why should he not make it as challenging as he wants? His standards cannot stoop down to the level of their skills. Father will *not* take the flak for their incompetence. I will *not* shoulder the failures of insecure kings.”

“I am merely conveying the echoes of whispers. People believe things when they hear multiple voices speak the same sentence over and over,” Krishn said.

“If only people used logic as much as they use their imagination. Charioteers disguised as Kshatriyas, Kshatriyas disguised as Brahmins! Was my marriage ceremony an arena in which to parade disguises?” I fumed.

Arjun started laughing, “Your father started the trend. He presented us a volcano disguised as a bride. By the way, I am not essentially Kshatriya. The authentic Bharat dynasty ended with Bhishm pitamah. We, the later generations have originated from Queen Satyawati’s pre-marital son Vyas, and *his* union with Kshatriya queens. So we are part Kshatriya, part Brahmin, part fisherwoman, but not truly Kuru blood.”

“Let the past stay in the past. The future begins at Indraprastha.”

“Well then don’t get ruffled. Rumors are like the heads of Raavan — cut off one and ten more will sprout. How many people will hear out your logic? How many will be convinced by your arguments? How many of the convinced actually matter to you?

“The ones who matter — your sons idolize you, your citizens worship you, Govind holds you in the highest esteem, your father and brothers dote on

you and I am enslaved. Outside of this sphere, how many and their opinions mean anything to you?" Arjun asked me.

"Arjun, I am not their main target. *You* are. They are trying to belittle your triumph. Since they cannot outright deny your victory, they try to blight, smirch and stain it. They want your victory clouded over by some nondescript person with unproved potential in a non-existent event. How can you stay so calm when ...?"

Arjun reached out restraining fingers to me, "Hush. Quiet. Relax. You know Govind likes to provoke you into outbursts. You let him succeed so easily. It does not hurt me, so don't get so upset. All our childhood, we had words like 'paupers, parasites, millstones, illegitimate and teacher's pet' thrown at us in Hastinapur. If we had wallowed in that negativity, we would have been nervous wrecks by now.

"Learn to ignore the unimportant. Forget it. It doesn't matter in the end. Their tongues cannot reverse facts. I won and I have you here. You struck my life like a wayward arrow - the most beautiful accident of my life. So what can they take away from me?"

That made sense to me. He always did that – made me feel like I had taken a refreshing dip into a cool lake on a sweltering, irritable day.

Krishn sighed, "There he goes wasting all my good work. Hmm ... by the way Karn hates you, serene warrior."

"That is hardly news. He has always hated me, ever since Acharya's ashram. Now what have I done to him, apart from winning the bride?"

"He was abandoned as a child and feels victimized for being a *suta*."

"I am sure his abandonment was totally my fault."

"Who is his tutor?" I asked Arjun.

"Dronacharya. As well as Parshuram, Dronacharya's tutor."

"Both?"

“His foster father Adiratha was King Dhritarashtra’s charioteer. So Bhishm pitamah permitted Karn learn at Dronacharya’s ashram.”

“But you said he gatecrashed Dronacharya’s martial exhibition.”

“The exhibition was limited to Hastinapur’s princes, but Dronacharya’s training was not. In fact, some of Dwarka’s *Vrishnis* too trained with Dronacharya, but were not invited to the exhibition.”

“I see. Why didn’t you learn from Parshuram?”

“Parshuram does not accept Kshatriya students. Some life-long grudge.”

“Please clarify for me, Arjun. You get one tutor being Hastinapur’s prince. He gets your tutor *and* your tutor’s tutor being Hastinapur charioteer’s son, and *yet* he is the one being victimized?”

“As per him.”

“You are poisoned and then almost burnt alive for being Hastinapur’s princes, while he gets a Kingdom being Hastinapur charioteer’s son. And he is *still* the one being victimized?”

“Correct.”

“What happened to the duel in Dronacharya’s arena?”

“The coronation ceremony began. Then Kunti Mata fainted, and then sunset occurred. The duel got postponed. They still haven’t found a suitably auspicious ‘next day’ for it.”

“What an anti-climax! I guess she could not bear the sun’s heat.” I ruminated upon the fact that Kunti Mata was hardly the *fainting* type. “But Arjun, he got that awaited duel with you after our swayamwar. He did not last long.”

“He backed out because he did not want to battle a Brahmin.”

“Arjun, I was present at the swayamwar, remember? He initiated the attack on you, not vice versa.

“Why did he attack a Brahmin if it was a sin? Then he got an epiphany on the sin of attacking a Brahmin *after* he realized that his martial skills were being overpowered by you? This is not ethics, it is escapism.”

Arjun started laughing, “I am going to take you along for wars. You will crush the enemy before the first conch shell is blown. How was your Father so sure we would attend the contest?”

“The bards were specifically dispatched to all corners for the purpose of praising my innumerable virtues.”

“It worked! They sang such glorious things about you. They forgot to mention the short temper and the long tongue, though.”

“If they revealed everything, what would be left for you to discover? Your friend misguided me too. He called you ugly.”

Krishn threw up his hands, “This is called innocent bystander injury. How did the missile get deflected to me? But children, get serious. Learn to sniff danger. Sore losers are like simmering wounds — they can turn gangrenous any time.”

Arjun turned to him, “Govind, what am I expected to do? Apologize for the opulence of Indraprastha? Apologize for the matchless beauty of my wife? Apologize for your precious friendship? Apologize for my expertise?

“My archery is independent of someone else’s perception of it. A million men proclaiming me unskilled will not waver my aim, nor will a million men proclaiming my perfection rectify any defect.

“An arrow embedded in the bird-eye does not ensure an arrow embedded in the fish-eye. Archery needs validation every single time I aim at a target. Every single time! I demand perfection of myself and *that* cannot come from any external source.

“Everyone wants to be the best and I don’t mind toiling to ensure my superiority. But the best is always a state of flux, it is a constant endeavor, not a one-time title. I will encounter so many warriors in my lifetime. Each will have his own specialty, finesse and his tutor’s nuances. I have to de-learn, relearn and reinvent myself constantly.

“I am not being self-effacing. I am doing it with a definite purpose. If I get smug, I will stagnate. Why would I do something so cruel to myself?”

I leaned forward, “Let us switch to better topics. The mere mention of Hastinapur makes me gloomy. Duryodhan tried to kill you all so as not to lose Hastinapur. That conflict died without any skirmish and in his favor. Now what is his grief?”

“His grief is that we are still alive.”

“I disagree, Arjun. The feud ended with the division of land. They are in their Hastinapur, we are in our Indraprastha. They are of no consequence anymore.” I gazed from one to another.

“You are not merely alive. You are flourishing. Indraprastha does not merely exist. Indraprastha is blindingly prosperous. Inconsequential things have a way of snowballing into vicious problems.”

Krishn, as always, liked to have the last word.

Chapter 10: Savyasachi and his Fragrant Flame

I had my mouthful of sky and my fragrant flame back.

She may be my wife, but she was Queen of Indraprastha too. I got a glimpse of her at our morning meal before we left for the court. She would stand attendance, trying her best not to cast a surreptitious glance at me. I wished no code of conduct could convert such a simple joy into an illicit, clandestine act.

She handled the complicated household and the intricate pattern of maids and guards; she also held daily consultations with Indraprastha's treasurer. She knew the taxes collected on a weekly basis, the payment system for each person in the palace services, the ongoing projects in Indraprastha, the amount and time invested in each project.

"Do you know the exact wealth in our treasury?" she asked once.

"More than I need and less than I desire," I answered casually.

"Correct, but imprecise," she admonished me curtly, following it smoothly by "... and do you know how many maids we have?"

"Highness, my simple rule for survival, never answer trick questions."

The court did not mean completion of day for me either. I had to proceed with Bheem on the rounds through Indraprastha to oversee the security on its borders. Then we would inspect the weaponry room. The sons had begun their training. Nakul and Sahdev taught them horse riding and swordplay while Bheem taught them how to wield the mace and how to wrestle. We divided our times into early dawns and dusks to instill into them whatever Dronacharya had drilled into us.

She would arrive every day to check on their progress. She sat enthralled as they trained and dueled, getting better and better every day.

After we packed the sons off, it was time to practice archery on my own. I loved the place by the lake, my favorite haunt. It was secluded, lush with greenery and serene in its setting.

Sometimes she would follow me to the lake. She did not make it a habit, she kept me coveting her visits. I would sense her presence through her unique fragrance, from the tinkle of her anklets. She would make herself comfortable on the parapet of the lake watching me, or wander off in the greenery around us, or perch on her favorite bough of the ancient tree that she used as a swing. It was just out of my line of vision, but not out of my mind.

She had three touchy topics – Govind, Dronacharya and Subhadra. I used them to maximum advantage to get her worked up, because she had a very bewitching tic at the base of her throat when riled and an explosive temper when provoked.

In the misty maze of sleep, I sometimes heard her drowsy voice murmuring a name — my name. Did she ever murmur my name when she was curled up beside ... stop it!

I tried my best to wake up before her, to see her face in repose. But she was always gone before dawn. Just before she left the bed, I would feel the light touch of her lips on my upturned fingers, on the old ridged scars and the fresh new blisters. I reveled in the bone-deep relaxation and the sharp throbbing pain that her fingernails left down my back. And I felt no traces of any urge to escape, none at all. I was finally home.

She loved to hear stories. Anything would do, any anecdote from my life. “Didn’t they tell you tales in your childhood?” I asked.

“I didn’t have a childhood. Your fault,” she would remind me.

She especially loved hearing of the judicial cases that faced the royal court. “What would you have done instead?” was our favorite starting point. She had an instinctive wisdom, the ability to grasp the crux of the situation

and narrow down on the root of the problem. Sometimes, her decisions seemed more practical than the one already given in court. She would have made a very able administrator indeed.

Sometimes, during the discussion, I would fetch my silver crown and place it on her head. She would kneel on our bed, the crown gleaming in the lamplight, her turbulent tresses gleaming sinuously as she animatedly argued her point. I would lie back, savoring the picture she made and the effect it had on me.

*** He found me by the tree trunk, cross-checking the accountant's tally. "Don't you trust anyone at all?" he laughed.

"You trust too many. I am just trying to stabilize the balance."

"Govind says exactly the same thing."

"Do you have to drag him into every conversation?"

"Jealous." He concluded confidently.

"You are on my payroll – you ought to be more polite with me."

"What did you say?"

"My payroll. You are merely the army chief. I am the Queen."

In the distance, I saw a serpent slithering away into the brushwood, but Arjun insisted there were no snakes in Indraprastha! He did this sometimes – closed his eyes to unpleasant truths and went into denial.

Speaking of serpents ... "I think Dronacharya owes his fame to you." Dronacharya was one sore tooth that I just could not help probing.

"Don't be silly. Dronacharya's greatness is not dependent on his fame, and definitely not dependent on me." A warning tone of resentment crept into his voice now.

“Why does he not leave Hastinapur’s services? He could be here teaching his star pupil’s sons.”

“He cannot be on the payroll of his enemy’s daughter, nor depend on his former students for livelihood. In Hastinapur, he is serving King Dhritarashtra, not Duryodhan.”

“Why could he not produce another archer like you? Krishn said there is nobody yet to parallel you.”

“Now who dragged Govind into the conversation? Lovely one, this is warrior land. I cannot wallow in past reputations. Competition is always welcome. It gets lonely at the top.”

“Lonely at the top, is it? All that perfection and modesty as well! You just wait till Abhimanyu grows up, you will get all the competition you want.” I waited for a rejoinder, but he was silent.

“There was one better than me.” He said quietly.

“Who? Why did you use the past tense? ” I anticipated a good story. He had such an interesting childhood; he was never short of stories.

“Eklavya. Just a tribal boy I met long ago, when I was about nine years old. Dronacharya used to take us for practice sessions in the forest close to his ashram. Midway through the session, Ashwatthama realized ...”

“Who is Ashwatthama?” I interrupted. I liked to have all characters in the story well classified. *I did not know it then but that name would be forever imprinted in my memory many years later.*

“Dronacharya’s only son, the one who wanted to taste milk. You know that story, when your father refused ...” I hastily prodded him to continue.

“Ashwatthama realized that his pet dog had disappeared. He was worried about the wild animals. Just as we began searching for it, the pet returned. He was alive, except that he could not bark. Guess why?”

“He found a spouse that kept shutting him up,” I guessed obediently and was rewarded with a long-suffering look.

“His mouth was sewn up with arrows. They were holding the jaws open, placed so perfectly that the dog could neither bark nor shut its mouth. Imagine that perfection!”

“He must have had an expert tutor.”

“That is the whole point. Eklavya was a tribal prince of the Nishadh tribe. When Dronacharya refused to accept him as student, he went ahead with his own training besides a statue of Dronacharya.”

“Good for him. Where is he now? I haven’t heard his name before.”

Arjun hesitated. He looked edgy as he sat up. “I don’t know where he is now. But I know he hates me wherever he is. I don’t even think he practiced his art again because ... Dronacharya demanded a Gurudakshina from him. He demanded Eklavya’s right thumb.” He stared down at his own as he said this.

A wave of nausea swept over me, “Why?”

“Nishadh tribes were allies with Magadha and not Hastinapur’s ally. It would be treachery to Hastinapur if Acharya trained its enemies.”

“Oh! But even so, tell me Eklavya refused, please,” I pleaded.

“He did not refuse. I can never forget the accusation in his eyes.”

“Where do you come in? Dronacharya did it for Hastinapur, while technically Eklavya could have refused as he was not a student...”

“It is not so easy to say ‘No’. I should know. There is nothing as seductive as sacrifice ...”

“...and nothing as redundant either. Did you resent Eklavya’s expertise?” I asked dubiously.

He sighed, “For that moment, maybe ... it was good to be shaken out of my lofty idyll. But I was a child, I would have caught up soon. I wanted to surpass him, but not by purging him. How many thumbs can one cut?”

“Exactly. What did your family say about it?”

“We never discussed it.”

I stared incredulously at him. What was the point of family if it still left you lonely? He did not have to carry guilt for someone else’s fault. I felt a spurt of tender exasperation.

I sighed deliberately, “Poor Eklavya, what a pity to die of hunger.”

“Why would he die of hunger?” he frowned.

“You mean to say Dronacharya spared his other four fingers? *And* the entire left hand? How very remiss of him.

“Arjun, remember the incident when Dronacharya’s ashram was plunged in darkness as you were having meals; you realized that you could still eat because hands have a memory and reflex of their own? Never mind how I know the incident, I have divine sources. You subsequently trained yourself to pierce a target based solely on sound and echo, independent of vision.

“These birds building their nests — their beak serves as their mouth as well as their fingers. Our five senses work in tandem, but are also complementary. The blind have very keen tactile senses, the deaf and dumb rely on visual signals. One sense always sharpens if the other falters. Why should five fingers not compensate each other? Why should the left hand not compensate the right?”

He moved his left fingers experimentally. “In exile, I thought along parallel lines. I trained my right hand fingers to function without the right thumb. But of course, I ought to have thought of this too! I don’t know how to shoot a target with my left hand. Not ...” then he smiled, “yet.”

He sprang upright with barely suppressed excitement, as if he could barely wait to gain that skill. His eyes caressed me with a look usually reserved for my sister, the Gandiva bow. “You are absolutely the most unique woman on Earth. I hope Eklavya found someone as inspiring as you.”

To be honest, it was so easy to inspire; he was the one who had to actually *do* it. But if he was so generous with giving credit, I was more than happy to take it.

“I am sure he did. Nature always places the right person at the right time in the right context. What happened to him was horrific, unfair and eminently avoidable. But he could have lost his thumb chopping trees or in an animal attack or in a battle. Would he have given up living? He would not have wasted his inborn genius in blaming Nature’s cruelty. So quit carrying the burden.”

My first victory over Dronacharya, I thought, without bloodshed.

Arjun’s practice sessions now extended beyond dusk into early moonlight. The fresh new raw blisters on his left fingers competed with the old ridged welts on his right fingers. When he would be called *Savyasachi* - the ambidextrous archer, only I would know who inspired him to do it.

Once, I casually asked Subhadra about Eklavya. Her blank gaze confessed her ignorance. Oh, well! If *that* was a sample of her four years with him ... I felt mildly irritated at Krishn. Could he not find a better rival for me? This poor little thing had suffered for no reason. She needed to put on weight and she needed to regain color. She looked far too pale and listless.

I flicked her off my horizon. Her main asset was her brother.

My main asset was me.

*** Krishn declared on his visit, “Indraprastha is a kingdom. Let us make it an Empire! Maharaj Yudhisthir will be Emperor Yudhisthir if he performs the *Rajsuya yagna*.

“However, there is a major hurdle that needs to be crossed first. Jarasandha of Magadh. His prowess is only exceeded by his ambitions. He is seriously considering performing the Rajsuya yagna. There cannot be two Emperors in the same era and area.

“His army is a thousand-fold larger than yours. Head-on battle would just mean immeasurable losses both of property and lives. His Magadh is too well protected. This is my plan. Let us kill him,” Krishn said.

“Easier and simpler than a battle, I suppose?” Arjun asked.

“Simplest plans succeed the best because they are so unexpected. Every man and animal has its weak spot. Hit an elephant on its forehead, the tiger in its eyes, and the humble frog by breaking its spine. Once that bridge is breached, skinning it does not require much effort.”

“He will not let us come anywhere close to him for the skinning. The presence of our army will alert him ...”

“... hence we don’t take an army. Just the three of us. You, Bheem and I. That is how we will get into Magadh and finish him off.”

“His guards will never allow three armed warriors to get close enough to their king.”

“No weapons either. We travel incognito.”

“No weapons. Ah! Wrestling match, just like your uncle Kamsa?”

“Precisely. The best part of a strategy, Parth, is to know your opponent’s weaknesses. Jarasandha is extremely proud of his strength and skills in wrestling. Challenge him to a duel and he will never back out.”

“Good. We all better polish up our wrestling skills before we leave. Don’t look so astonished, Draupadi, I was always Bheem’s sparring partner.”

“Perfect. The challenge will include the option to duel with any of us, but I know his mentality. He will choose Bheem for the fight.” Krishn said.

“I heard Jarasandha is safe-guarded by Lord Shiva’s boon. If that is true, then we cannot subject Bheem to fruitless danger,” Arjun said.

“Parth, there is a foolproof way of finishing it the way we want. Listen, he ...” Krishn glanced at me and hesitated.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said. “Go ahead. I can stand brutality.”

“Fine, don’t complain later on. Listen...” he continued expanding upon his plans. It seemed the secret to Jarasandh’s mortality lay in his birth. He could only be killed if he was split into two pieces and the halves thrown in opposite directions! How Krishn ever knew everything, I don’t know. His spy network was enviable and precise. The plan sounded far-fetched to me. But Krishn knew what he was talking of. His success lay in the meticulous details, in his accurate predictions, his knowledge of his opponent’s mental makeup and the shock value. And he was right. Anything less atrocious and less daring might have gone awry.

I sincerely hoped Krishn never got the idea of attacking Indraprastha!

*** As expected, they returned triumphant. The audacious entry into Magadha unaided by weapons or army and Jarasandh’s death at Bheem’s bare hands had the desired effect. It sent shock waves into the neighboring kingdoms. They realized that Indraprastha was seriously poised for the final strike.

“Perfect timing! The morale of the neighboring kings is shaken. This is when every Kingdom will scramble for supremacy. They are looking at Indraprastha as the new danger. Capitalize on their fear. Announce the Rajsuya yagna campaign now,” Krishn urged Maharaj.

The four brothers would strike out in four directions from Indraprastha. Bheem to the East, since Jarasandh’s recent killing was fresh in the memory of Magadh’s neighbors; Arjun to the North; Nakul and Sahdev to the South

and West respectively. That way, the four pronged military campaign would spare no region in our vicinity. Indraprastha would finally stamp its authority over this land.

*** The news kept filtering in at regular intervals. All four were managing their individual campaigns with precise competence. Krishn kept part of his army with Satyaki at Indraprastha to protect it in their absence.

I recounted to my sons the glorious tales of their fathers' victories. Maharaj Yudhisthir, of course had to stay back at Indraprastha, seeing to his royal administrative duties. There weren't many tales I could recite to Prativindhya about *his* father.

However, I remembered how Maharaj had decoded Uncle Vidura's message at Varanavat. Uncle Vidur anticipated Hastinapur's plan to burn the Pandavas within the mansion made of lacquer, wood, ghee and other inflammable materials. He had sent a message stating that the only survivors of forest fires are mice, who take shelter within their holes. The Pandavas had dug a tunnel in anticipation of this fire conspiracy. Thus, Maharaj paved the way for his family to escape death from fire. My first-born son visibly brightened up with pride at his Father's wisdom and foresight.

Maharaj was skilled in handling the spear. In the absence of his brothers, he took over the training of his sons. He would excitedly recount to us the latest news, the newest frontiers breached. His pride in his brothers was palpable and genuine. He regretted that he could not venture out on expeditions like the others. I guess wearing a king's crown extracted its own price.

*** The triumphant warriors returned at last! They carried back hoards of wealth, brought as surrender gifts from the vanquished kings. They also brought back three new co-wives. Kaali, Shishupal's sister from Chedi came with Bheem; Nakul brought back Karenumati, Shishupal's daughter and Bhanumati came with Sahdev from Dwarka. I allowed them to permeate Indraprastha.

There are some moments every wife should experience personally, not vicariously. The pride of having a warrior husband return victorious from battle is one of them. Happiness is so contagious. I had even asked Bheem to invite Hidimba here. He gave me a most peculiar look and Hidimba never came to Indraprastha.

But obviously, I did not extend the invitation to the two ladies that Arjun had left behind in exile. I had trouble even pronouncing their names to myself.

The fourth warrior returned the last. He carried innumerable treasures, coupled with an enviable reputation as a peerless warrior and a new name '*Vijay*' for his unbroken chain of victories. He did not miss my darting, apprehensive peek for any feminine presence in his returning horde.

"One-track mind," he murmured as I stepped forward with a *puja thali* to welcome him.

The treasure he carried home was an unending stream of elephants loaded with rare jewels, gems, silk, artistic gifts, gold and an entire fleet of the best stallions. Maharaj Yudhishthir coined another affectionate name for him, '*Dhananjay*'. It meant 'scourer of wealth'.

Later, after he had met his mother, brothers and sons, we were able to snatch a few moments of privacy.

"Wait. I am sweaty and dusty," Arjun murmured against my forehead.

I stood on tiptoe to lift a sweat drop on my tongue tip. His lips seared mine, then trailed fire down my throat. Thirstily he retraced his path. 'Spice, musk and honey'. he used to say.

The ace archer. His precise arrows. His interminable quiver. Ambidextrous too. A blissful teardrop escaped my eyelashes. He paused to taste the salty pearl.

I smiled at the crystal roof, feeling smug and wholly aware of my power. Krishn always described Arjun as ‘controlled, restrained and patient.’ I wondered why the memory of Krishn and his words did not seem like an interloper, not even here and not even now.

The treasurer had claimed all the treasure Arjun brought with him.

I claimed the victor.

Chapter 11: I Like Winning

*** The bath was steaming, perfumed with medicinal herbs and strewn with rose petals. I perched on the edge and feasted my eyes. He was a sculpted fantasy in burnished copper.

I curiously rimmed a wound with my finger, “Do you like killing?”

“I like winning.” he said calmly.

“Don’t you have to kill to win?”

“Not necessarily and preferably not.”

“I thought Kshatriyas enjoyed bloodbaths.”

“We are conditioned to deal with death, but we don’t have to relish it. There is nothing poetic about death.” He looked at me steadily.

“But soldiers exist so that citizens remain safe.”

“Innocent one, the soldiers are not born in isolation, they take birth from citizens. Victory, however does not give them what it gives their King. Neither in terms of wealth nor recognition, never to the same extent.”

I fidgeted. I liked the aura of victory, but so far war only meant glory, triumphs and an overflowing treasury. I was far away from the reality of war, the strife and grief. There must be brides like me whose nights and dreams were interrupted by this campaign – wives who would not be lucky enough to welcome the husband home, never feel his warm skin next to them, their wombs forever parched and barren ... all because we wanted to extend our borders.

“Arjun, is my crown dipped in blood? Indraprastha was content and safe. What was the need of this campaign?”

He placed his palm against my cheek, “There is a thin line between ambition and greed. Jarasandh’s death left an imbalance, a vacuum. In the clamor for supremacy, if we didn’t challenge other Kingdoms, *they* would have attacked us. Attack really is the best defense.”

“You are arguing both the sides.”

“Because both sides of this argument are true. The Rajsuya campaign also put a safety net over Indraprastha. No one will dare attack a land guarded by victors. Only secure Kingdoms can pander to trade, education and creative talent. Trade leads to prosperity and prosperity leads to content citizens.”

“Well, then ...”

“Yet, war remains a double-edged sword for both invader and the invaded. The raids, the ravages, the direct onslaught of troops and horses, the trampling of fields, loss of crops, the depleted treasury ...

“Destruction is far easier than construction. You should know, it takes nine months to give birth to a child but just a moment to snuff out life! It took just a day to clear Khandav – but so long to rebuild Indraprastha.”

“But then, what was the purpose behind killing Jarasandha?”

“Victory is prize enough, there is no further point in humiliating the vanquished. Jarasandha was trying to reverse that rule by imprisoning and killing Kings. Ambition is not a crime but Jarasandha was lawless ambition.

“Balram has tutored Bheem in wrestling. As a mere teenager Govind had defeated the mighty Kamsa at a wrestling duel. Balram and Govind could have easily undertaken the Rajsuya for Dwarka. Balram tau could have been Emperor instead of Yudhisthir.”

“So why did Krishn not kill Jarasandha himself?”

“He defeated Jarasandha seventeen times. But Jarasandha had the persuasive powers and the conviction to gather around him like-minded

kings. He could do it time after time, seventeen times. Govind believes in intelligent work, not mere hard labor. Why bother to kill Jarasandha when he could round up equally evil kings and bring them to Govind for slaughter seventeen times?"

"Devious!"

"Dwarka is protected by its watery borders on three sides. Indraprastha has land and Kingdoms on all sides. It needs to conquer before it becomes the conquered. Dwarka's trade routes are safe when Indraprastha is safe and vice versa. It is symbiotic.

"We are re-establishing the old, ethical tradition. Bheem won the duel, but he did not usurp the throne of Magadh. He established Jarasandh's son there."

"Oh! We are not rulers of Magadh?"

"No, your Highness. Our forays into kingdoms are a challenge thrown to its ruler. If he does not accept our supremacy, he either faces defeat or death in battle. If he accepts our supremacy, he pays us certain amounts of wealth per annum. He still continues to rule his own kingdom, but subjugate to our power. All his political decisions depend on us. Not annexation, but amalgamation."

"Attack or be attacked. Win or be won. Subjugation or death. It never ends. I wish we were not Kshatriyas," I said tentatively.

He laughed, "I would have always been a warrior. I could have been a foot soldier or an army chief, but the battlefield would always be my destiny."

"You could have been the Brahmin I garlanded."

"Even worse! I would have been at the mercy of Kshatriyas. The Varna system used to have method and structure. There has been a slow deterioration, a rot that has set in somewhere.

“Brahmins used to be superior to Kshatriyas, empowered with mystical powers and vast knowledge. There used to be dignity in their austere lifestyle, now there is just resentment and greed. Remember how they flocked to Panchal in the hope of alms?

“They did not even have confidence in me when I walked up for your contest. They ought to have been assured of a Brahmin’s supreme skills. Instead, they tried to dissuade me so that I would not embarrass them. Look at how Dronacharya ...” he broke off abruptly then continued firmly, “... is tied to Hastinapur.”

Even after he had wrenched half of Panchal from my Father, Drona remained subservient to Hastinapur. But, if he was such an integral part of Arjun’s life ...

“Is it easy to forgive an enemy?” I whispered.

“On a battlefield? It is easy to forgive if you are not strong enough to kill. It is easy not to forgive if you are strong enough to win. It is very difficult to forgive when you are strong enough to kill and win.”

I took some time to assimilate that one.

I leaned across, my finger followed the trail of a glistening water droplet down his chest, “How does a defeated King’s wife welcome him back? I cannot imagine either of them bearing the embarrassment.”

“Wouldn’t you welcome us if we came to you defeated?”

“Absolutely not! Every time you go in for battle, you carry our expectations with you. You carry the prestige of Indraprastha and the responsibility of our safety and pride. I cannot tolerate defeat. If I ever have to tolerate it, I will never forgive you defeat. You will have to win back respect all over again.”

“You do put a heavy price on your attentions.”

“But I am worth it, am I not?”

“You certainly are. I guess I will keep surrender as an option only when I duel with you.” He winced as I twisted my fingers into his silky hair.

*** Just as I thought I won one war, on came another. This was a war I just could not afford to lose. I juggled my daily duties with an intensified study of the scriptures, of religious intonations and then I added military knowledge to it. I made sure Krishn visited us frequently.

He complained that Dwarka scolded him for absconding to Indraprastha so often. He and his best friend would discuss varied topics for hours. Their conversation was always vivid, instructive and fascinating. They were never impatient with my queries, nor condescending. They seemed to enjoy having me around with my ‘stimulating questions’ as they termed it.

And yet they did not gauge the motive behind my sudden interest in military tactics and strategies. Even the most intelligent men can be like that – acute but obtuse!

“You don’t mind him, do you?” Arjun would ask occasionally, aware that Krishn’s presence was a direct encroachment on my limited precious time with him. I did not mind.

I was not wasting time; I was investing it.

*** “Don’t touch anything,” he warned me, just as I was about to check the tip of a sharp arrow with a forked head.

I looped my fingers around his arm possessively, “Did archery choose you or did you choose it?”

“Acharya taught us all styles of warfare and then we focused on specialties. Archery and me – that was a mutual love saga. Arrows can cover a wider circumference, have a longer range and are apt for both distant and close duels on the battlefield. Wrestling, swords or mace require an opponent for practicing, whereas with archery, I am independent. Besides, archery has a wider scope of finesse. Look ...” He pointed out the

arrows to me with their lovely names. Some ordinary, some specialized. *Agnipankh, Nagadansh, Vayavya, Anjalika, Narach, Chandrika ...*

“How do you know when to use which one?”

“I just do,” He said lightly.

“Do they all need chants? Do they all have different chants? How do you remember which chant is meant for which?”

“No. Yes. I just do,” he smiled.

“Do you rehearse the chants everyday along with your practice? But what if the arrow gets activated as soon as you recite the chant?”

“The chants have a specific code. When I revise them daily, I lock the code with an antidote chant. When I actually need to unleash the weapon on the battlefield, I recite an unlocking code. Besides, there is a third code to reverse a released missile ...”

I blinked, feeling dizzy. This was way too complicated, even worse than cooking! It was so much easier to bask in his reflected glory. All I had to do was be his wife and love him – easiest thing in the world.

“They all have different shapes, different weights. Do you need to apply variation of force and speed when you release them? They don’t seem to be made of the same metal or wood or whatever. Do you need to adjust the balance with every different type of arrow?” I persisted.

“Obviously. Even your sons don’t ask so many questions.” He rewarded me with an indulgent kiss on the forehead. Before he could prolong it, the entrance to the artillery room was flung open to admit the ruler of Indraprastha. All three of us stared across the room in silence.

I unwrapped my fingers reluctantly. But Maharaj had seen the besotted expression on my face, the one he never got from me. His forehead broke out into a fine row of perspiration. He turned sharply and left the room. Neither of us mentioned the incident next day or ever after.

“The exile rule was only meant for the privacy of a palace room. He came upon us in the arsenal room.” Arjun explained needlessly to me. I did not answer or object. My life at the moment was too joyously serene to bother pursuing anything else. Besides, I knew Maharaj would never be able to survive three years in exile alone.

In Indraprastha, invasion of privacy meant facing exile or facing the truth. *Sometimes, the latter is worse than the former.*

*** Indraprastha sprang awake for the coronation ceremony. Invitations encrusted in gold and gems were dispatched far and wide. The first invitation of course was offered to the chief architect of the whole idea. As if Krishn wouldn't attend his own child's thread ceremony!

The streets got cleaner, shinier, sparkling like water, almost reminding me of that room in the mystical Maya Sabha where nothing was as it looked. Builders, architects and artists got busier. They had to erect special mansions to accommodate the guests. I saw the scroll unfurling and unfurling along its never ending length. The scroll enlisted the guests. The royal chefs put their heads together and came to me with platefuls of dishes that I had never heard of before and could not resist – in spite of my nausea.

I had swooned at mid-day yesterday and the royal physician had finally coaxed it out of me. “When did you plan to tell me?” Arjun asked, “Indraprastha has too many sons. Give me a daughter this time. If they thought your contest was tough, just wait till I design a contest for her.”

There he went on a tangent again! After all my preparations.

“Someone just like you ... beauteous, intelligent ...” he coaxed me, “obstinate ... mercurial ...” he saw the warning flash of my eyes, “... and unique.”

I had not even considered a daughter. But now that he put the idea into my mind, I did not mind the idea at all.

“A warrior princess! Satyabhama was charioteer to Govind once, as was Queen Kaikeyi to King Dashrath. We can train our princess the same way. Empress Draupadi’s warrior princess.”

Chapter 12: A Crown of Thorns

*** The coronation day dawned. Krishn had arrived a week ago. The crowds jostled, rising on tiptoe to see him.

“Have they not seen me enough times on my previous visits?” he asked, acknowledging the surging love of the onlookers.

“It is never enough. I wish I could imprison you here,” Arjun said.

“Even Yashoda *maiyya* could not imprison me.” Krishn’s smile held pain.

I met all his other wives for the first time. Satyabhama was extremely possessive, delightfully frank about it and dead sure she was the love of his life. Rukmini controlled the frisky and irrepressible Satyabhama with ease. Satyabhama was far more deliciously lush, but Rukmini was more elegant.

I could not imagine this serene, fragile Rukmini had actually summoned Krishn to carry her off before her impending marriage to another person ... Shishupal of Chedi, I believe.

Hastinapur had to be invited too. Maharaj Yudhisthir insisted that their mansions be the most spacious, their food the best and their maids the choicest.

I met Dronacharya. He looked surprisingly serene in his pristine white robes; his voice was courteous and low, the corded muscles of his arms the only indicator of his skills. I saw him discussing the Gandiva bow excitedly with his star pupil as a grandfather would dote over a grandchild.

I tried to mentally cast Ashwatthama as the enemy’s son but all I saw was a child cheated out of a cup of milk. Something unyielding and hard within me melted and evaporated.

I watched with curiosity the meeting between Dronacharya and my father. They greeted each other civilly, especially since their common favorite son-

in-law and luminary pupil stood there listening to their conversation. Dronacharya even blessed my brothers. I wondered if he knew the special purpose for which my twin brother had been born.

It was entertaining to see Arjun trying to balance his attentions equally between Dronacharya and my Father, as also between Krishn and my brothers.

“How do you manage this tightrope every day?” he asked.

Two incidents stand out in my memory of the coronation day.

Krishn-Shishupal shared a long history of animosity, as Satyabhama later explained to me. Shishupal, King of Chedi was Krishn’s cousin, but cursed to die at Krishn’s hand. Shishupal’s terrified mother extracted a promise that Krishn would forgive him a hundred follies. Shishupal was safe in the knowledge that Krishn’s vow was his shield.

The animosity took another turn for the worse when Shishupal’s intended bride Rukmini chose Krishn as her husband. Furthermore, Krishn defeated both Rukmi and Shishupal in the subsequent Rukmini abduction.

The animosity grew in strength and proportion when Jarasandha was killed. Jarasandha was Kamsa’s father-in-law and Shishupal was staunch allies of both.

On the eve of our coronation ceremony, Krishn was chosen to preside over the ceremony. It was an honor for him but many Kings disagreed over his choice, foremost being Shishupal. There were muttered grumbles and audible arguments in favor of Bhishm pitamah. When Shishupal started getting vociferous support, his arguments turned more crass and crude. Pitamah himself tried to pacify the restless crowd by agreeing with the choice of Krishn. However, Shishupal did not take criticism well. He gave vent to his anger at Bhishm pitamah before letting a torrent of abuse on Krishn’s Yadava race. It was the first time I saw Krishn capable of uncontrolled anger. I did not see the golden discus, I only saw Krishn’s large livid eyes behead Shishupal.

“There is nothing poetic about death,” Arjun had said. And there really wasn’t. Death was messy in more ways than one. Indraprastha was home to Shishupal’s sister and daughter, the wives of Bheem and Nakul respectively. My coronation ceremony became their occasion of bereavement.

However death was also persuasive. Shishupal’s severed head quieted the crowd into submission. There were no more interruptions or objections. It did not seem like an auspicious beginning to a coronation ceremony. Yudhisthir squirmed uncomfortably and for once, I agreed.

The next memory was of the golden crown sitting on my head. I may belong to Arjun that year, but I was still Yudhisthir’s chief wife and Indraprastha’s Empress. The crown was the hard-earned result of my husbands’ military campaigns. What of me? What had I done to deserve it? Perched upon the throne, I made a solemn promise to myself, *If ever Indraprastha’s honor and safety depended on me, I would defend it to my utmost.*

The golden crown squeezed like a vise around my forehead. I recollected Arjun’s feathery light silver crown resting on my loose tresses. He stood beside Krishn’s throne, looking at me with a gaze that dwelt on the same memory ... and another inscrutable expression.

The coronation ceremony was never-ending. I was dazed by the constant smoke, the deathly grip of the crown on my head, its unbearable weight and the waves of nausea invading me. I escaped to my room in the interim interval, exhausted.

My husband followed on my heels. He came nearer and lifted away the oppressive crown. His nimble fingers released my braid and then he gathered me closer, “When is this ceremony ending? I want my wife back.”

I leaned into him and smiled through my exhaustion. I relished his unguarded moments.

“I am all yours ...” I said, and then added cruelly, “... for this year.” Sometimes I wondered if I had sadistic tendencies.

His peaceful fingers smoothened my turbulent waves, “You are always my wife.”

*** We were on the wide terraces, watching the golden sun dive headlong into the horizon. “What did Dronacharya say to you?” I asked my twin brother with curiosity.

“He blessed me, Draupadi. He is my Guru too, you know.”

I certainly did not know that! I could not believe my father sent my brother to learn under the tutelage of the one he was to kill.

“How long did you study with him?” Arjun asked.

“Three years. He showed me the lake where you saved him from the crocodile. He even showed me that tree, you know, the one of the bird’s eye.”

“Do you still hate him?”

Dhrishtadyumn hesitated, then his lips tightened, “My father does.”

“Do *you* hate him?” Arjun repeated.

Dhrishtadyumn looked away, “He did not hold back his knowledge, even when he knew I am destined to kill ...”

Arjun put an arm around my brother, “It must be painful to inherit revenge.”

“I wish I was not born out of hatred. I wish there was a constructive purpose to my birth,” Dhrishtadyumn said. Shikhandi smiled.

“Don’t be so fatalistic. You can’t control your birth, but your life belongs to you. The future is so much malleable, so much within your grasp,” Arjun said.

“Don’t be too sure of that either,” Krishn warned in an even tone, “Indraprastha’s throne would never know that today it seats its destroyer and savior at the same time.”

“I am *not* the demolishing disaster – don’t keep quoting that prophesy. Can I help it if I too was born out of hatred?” I flared up. I would recollect his last sentence much later, in quite a different context.

“You are the bravest woman I know, Kalyani,” Krishn said. He coined this new name for me, which meant ‘the benevolent and prosperous one’. “Also the most intelligent, the most unusual and the loveliest.”

Yes, he could really say such things outright in front of my husband and brothers!

“I will have to mention that last sentence to Rukmini,” I chided, warily watching his fingers. I still couldn’t forget that this person had killed a living being right before my eyes this morning.

“Rukmini-devi would never react. If you want disastrous reactions, mention them to Satyabhama,” Arjun teased his friend.

Krishn put up his hands in mock horror and acceded defeat, “The price of honesty! See how I suffer at the hands of my close friends?”

“Stop pretending. What about all those milkmaids you seduced?” I ignored Arjun’s glance warning against the mention of a certain Radha.

“I confess to be a connoisseur of women. But seducer? I was merely eleven years when I left Vrindavan. Where is your great logic now, Empress?”

For once, even Shikhandi laughed. My favorite people – my husband, his best friend and my brothers. Between the four of them, there was nothing about me unknown, unaccepted or unloved. How I wished life was always like this.

“The soil here has some magical quality. I feel so safe here, so sheltered. I feel like I am in an impregnable fortress within the gates of Indraprastha,” I confessed.

“Don’t be so enamored by this land, Kalyani,” Krishn said, “This kingdom is born of half grudge, half hatred. And the Maya Sabha is more magic than architecture. Don’t set your heart on magic. Magic takes away illusions faster than it creates them.”

I felt like he was speaking more to my husband than me, for I felt Arjun go tense beside me. As usual, Krishn’s words made perfect sense only much later than the ears heard them.

*** I wonder if unwanted guests overstay or whether the long stay makes them unwanted.

Duryodhan lingered on at Indraprastha after the coronation ceremony. He couldn’t have enough of the palaces, the tasty food, and the artistic displays. His entourage of close friends stayed behind with him to ignite his jealousies.

“Don’t allow him too much time at the Maya Sabha,” Krishn had warned before he departed, “It is not a place for those who cannot laugh at themselves.”

It’s illusory and blinding loveliness was too well known. When Duryodhan expressed a wish to visit Maya Sabha, Emperor Yudhisthir appointed Bheem to accompany him. I could anticipate disaster - Bheem and Duryodhan could never see eye to eye. Bheem would enjoy Duryodhan’s plight in that hall and not make any attempt to conceal his glee.

Subhadra’s abduction had already left Duryodhan embittered. She had restricted herself to her private quarters for fear of encountering the rejected and disgruntled Duryodhan. As for me, there was no question of a pregnant Empress accompanying male guests.

Later in the day, I heard the news from the Maya Sabha visit. The inevitable had happened. Duryodhan had gone on wide eyed, lured and mesmerized by the wonders of Maya Sabha. He had banged his head on the windowpane that looked like an open doorway and he had splashed headlong into the pond that could stand still like a carpet. The maids who had pleaded vigilance from him, now had burst into peals of laughter. The lovely, nubile, virginal maids deployed in his services had ended up making merry at his expense.

Duryodhan had gotten away with much crueller deeds, right from poisoning to burning alive my husbands to snatching Hastinapur. He deserved every bit of the mockery.

The Emperor however was tense and worried. He commanded me to publicly admonish the maids and make them apologize to Duryodhan. However, Duryodhan did not seem mollified at all. The anecdote soon became a huge joke, an embarrassing episode blown into a public insult. Duryodhan fumed and erupted in anger. He left for Hastinapur soon after.

*** A month past the Rajsuya ceremony, Indraprastha was once again peaceful within its high walls.

Tonight, Arjun was discussing an interesting case from the royal court – the case of the Brahmin who had killed a colleague. Usually, I would have participated. But tonight I felt restless and listless. I felt the sob caught in my throat and the tension in my fingers.

“A Brahmin committing a murder would be automatic grounds for his execution. A Kshatriya would be judged differently, whereas a Brahmin ... this case is going to tax his judgment. Yudhisthir has postponed the case till next week. Can you guess the outcome?” he asked.

“I think a week will be too late.” I spoke into the bleak night. I waited in silence and let him decipher.

Next week, he and I would not discuss any interesting cases. At least not in solitude. Next week, I would no longer be his official wife. Not for

another four years.

I felt his arms tighten around me possessively. “Don’t give me silence again for four years. I cannot go through that stifling loneliness once more. I cannot keep discovering your life through Abhimanyu.”

This was the first time my child would be born in between two years. However, the end of a year could not end memories ... or desires.

A fortnight later, I could not resist meeting him by the lake once. Just once more. I perched tentatively on my favorite bough, unsure of welcome, not daring to venture forth. This was once more his private domain and I, the trespasser.

He paused when he saw me, then hurried towards me. He knelt by my side and listened to the heartbeats within my womb. I cradled his head closer. Was it only ten days ago? *Four years* was an unbearable span of time.

“What if your brothers ambled by this pathway right now?” I mused.

He remained silent for a long time. Then he said evenly, “If I have to go on exile again, I am taking you with me.”

Be careful of what you wish for, you may get it.

Exile did crash down on us. We had to go for a period that was not forever, but certainly seemed like it. And there was nothing remotely romantic about this exile.

Chapter 13: A Slave in a Vacuum

*** I am in the Hastinapur palace allotted to me; the room is semi-dark. I am utterly exhausted. I feel my veil flutter and slink away to the floor. I don't have the power to lift a finger. My body and mind is wrung of all emotions. I feel empty. Not angry, not insulted, just empty. Like a negation of life, a total vacuum. Nature isn't supposed to have a vacuum. Wrong! This room is a total vacuum.

I feel the veil trembling uncontrollably. I wish it would stay quiet. I recognize a sudden jolt of terror – and realize that it belongs not here, but in the past few moments. I realize that I ought to have been terrified. *Past tense*. But not right now. Now has no time for terror. Now has no emotion. Just a vacuum.

Kunti Mata bursts into the room. I can feel her guilty tears, her remorseful shock. She sinks to the floor in front of me, holds both my arms tenderly and looks up anxiously at me.

“Panchali, don't cry,” she implores.

I lift my eyes to her face. I see her flinch and jerk back in fear.

“I am not crying,” says a calm voice. I realize dimly it belongs to me.

*** I recollected the events which occurred just a short time ago – although it seemed like a lifetime. We were in Hastinapur as their guests.

Today, when Hastinapur's humble elderly manservant came to my door, I was resting within my private chambers. It was my time of the month. I always bled heavily. I felt my entire body tender to touch. I felt itchy and irritable. I missed Indraprastha and it was not even two days since I had left it.

My husbands were at the royal court. As per mandate, a Kshatriya could not decline a game of dice. What the manservant informed me about the disastrous results of the game had me on my feet, incredulous and gasping. My Indraprastha was no longer mine!

My citizens were enslaved! My plants! The tender green saplings struggling to erupt out of the soil – I felt like I had betrayed them all – The sturdy bough that was my swing and the lush green enclave beyond where I had lost an earring when we had made love in the twilight. Indifferent soles would trample upon that earring and never know what ecstasy it had witnessed. My pet birds craning their necks for my familiar hand ... my Indraprastha – *My* Indraprastha.

It was Yudhisthir's Empire, but Indraprastha was my home! What gave him authority over my home?

Land could still be won back, but human beings?

The twins with their shy implicit trust in their elder brothers; they were enslaved. Maharaj sold a lifetime of trust in one careless moment.

Arjun! The fresh blisters and the ridged scars on his fingers, all those interminable rivulets of sweat and practice . sold! Duryodhan already had two slaves; he offered this one to his smirking sidekick.

Bheem! Indraprastha's Emperor had pledged the jovial giant too. I could imagine Duryodhan gloating as he nailed down his most hated opponent at last, not in a glorious duel but at the whim of a dice-addict.

And then the Emperor grandly bet himself.

And now ... the manservant standing here. Still not finished with his narration. I felt a sudden rush of calmness. This is the moment Krishn had hinted about. But nobody had warned his brave soldier that she would be pushed into battlefield without weapons of attack or defense. His brave soldier was a ...

“...a slave, Maharani.” Hastinapur’s pale manservant mumbled. His word coiled around themselves in turmoil. I saw tears roll down to the ground. His tears.

“I have been instructed ...” and then he gulped for air and choked.

“Say it!” I snapped.

“Maharani has been ordered to come to the court right away,” he gasped out.

“By whom?” I asked

“Prince Duryodhan.”

“I will obey only the elders of Hastinapur. If they deem it fit for me to appear, clad as I am, I will.” I knew the elders were an assured safety net.

He left. He did not return. But someone else did. Someone with more authority, less guilt and lesser conscience.

I felt the pain shoot up my head, to my eyes. Dusshasan had dared to touch me! No, not touch, he was hauling me like a lasso put on a runaway stallion. What gave him the audacity? My body was tied to my head, my head was tied to my hair and my hair was wrenched tight in his grip. I resisted with all my strength, but realized how fragile I was against evil intent.

I still had my words. I realized that I was speaking, debating, abusing and beseeching him in turns.

I tried to hold onto the smooth walls, the slippery pillars of Hastinapur. They offered me no hold, no support, but slid away from my begging fingers, averting their faces in shame.

I felt the skin on my thighs peeled off. I saw with a shock that I was on the ground, being dragged like a dead gazelle after a hunt. I looked back – saw a trail of my own blood faithfully following me on the ground.

I heard the buzz of raised voices and then utter silence. The royal court of Hastinapur was witnessing its most chilling moment.

I had seen a similar assembly of royal faces earlier. Long ago, when I stood with a garland of flowers in Father's court – there had been stunned wonder in their eyes then. There was stunned wonder in their eyes now. At my unattainable beauty back then, at their unbelievable stroke of luck now. The thunderbolt of King Drupad's palace was now a dismissive non-entity, a vacuum.

I heard my voice, demanding to know who had been wagered first – the Emperor or the Empress of Indraprastha.

The sagely snow-white head of hair shook itself in regret, "A husband's right to his wife is unquestionable," spoke the wise, trembling lips of Bhishm pitamah. He, who had no wife, he who had renounced marriage spoke of a husband's rights!

"A wife is her husbands' property. No one can argue against that," spoke the serene thumb-slayer. He deliberately forgot that I was his students' wife, but deliberately remembered that I was Drupad's daughter. Time had healed nothing. My father was Eklavya and I was his thumb.

What a learned assembly. So much education, so little wisdom!

The most wise man in the court, Vidur Kaka offered me nothing except the sight of his hapless bowed head. The second most learned man there ...

I whirled to face him. He sat erect and calm. '*Dangerous...*' Krishn had called him. I felt the wet flicker of a serpent's tongue all over my body, '*... but not to your enemies.*'

"She will need the protection of the five of you." Kunti Mata had prophesied in her hut long ago. I wanted to laugh hysterically. She had not specified protection from whom. I moved my eyes along the faces of my warrior husbands. Bheem sat clenching his hands, his face glowering, but

he finally cast his eyes down. My youngest two were studying their fingernails.

The one I loved? He sat staring dreamily, moodily at his silver crown. The crown was lying on its side at Duryodhan's feet. He stared at the crown, as if in stupor, in denial, as if he was somewhere else, anyplace but here.

I saw Duryodhan's malicious lusty gaze going from one husband to another and back again. He looked at me. There was no lust in the gaze now. Just plain astonishment. He had not anticipated such total surrender from his cousins. He needed their resistance in order to enjoy his power and victory.

I was the vestigial symbol of Indraprastha's pride and honor. If this much insult to Indraprastha's honor was tolerable, then he would make it intolerable. I saw the brief flicker of apology in his eyes, before he deliberately lifted his hand and patted his thigh. "A slave has no rights. She has to obey her master. Come!" he gestured with calculated lewdness.

I felt a streak of relief. He had gone too far this time. This was a direct sexual challenge – a direct attack on my husbands' rights. This would ignite my husbands into action, I thought confidently.

Bheem leapt up, "Duryodhan!" he roared "One day I shall shatter this very thigh into splinters!"

I waited for him to pounce upon Duryodhan. Then I felt the eerie silence echo his words. I heard the words carefully again. "*One day*," he had said. Not today. Not right now, but some God-forsaken later day of his own choosing and convenience.

And till that day dawned, Panchali would kindly take care of her own protection. I felt a stab of disappointment. Just words! Empty words.

Duryodhan's eyes hardened. He needed to invent something worse. He was itching for a confrontation with his cousins. A confrontation to death. I just happened to be available conveniently for defiling Indraprastha's honor.

He went on talking. I heard the word 'slave' many times. I could not concentrate completely. I had a buzz in my ears. He spoke something insulting again and again, encouraging my husbands to turn against their Emperor and offer me protection. I felt the taunt in his voice, his unbridled attempts to instigate his cousins.

They, for whose unity I was sacrificed, now sat united against me. Men who did not hesitate to put their desire ahead of their own brother's dreams, what value would they place on my emotions?

A mother who did not hesitate to treat me like an object of barter, why should I be surprised that her son carried forward the legacy and pledged me? This day was pre-destined the day she coldly cut my life into pieces.

I moved my eyes back to the Emperor. He was bereft of his crown, but he was drunk on a high of his own.

"Of what use are those precise arrows and the mighty mace? I am the one who controls it all. Do you think I did not recognize the scorn in your eyes when my brothers left to conquer all four directions, while I stayed behind? This is how battles are fought by the likes of me. You are so naïve!

"You thought I could not achieve Indraprastha without my four brothers — you were right. But I can destroy Indraprastha single handedly. I am doing it before your very eyes and I will sacrifice you too. Let me see which one of your husbands helps you. Remember, they are not new to slavery. They have been my slaves for a lifetime. Behold my power, Panchali!"

Krishn had cut off Shishupal's head for a hundred insults. Every insult hurled at me here was worth a million such insults. Could he not spare a

moment to help his soldier? I gazed out of the wide, open windows. The sky was a clear blue. No golden discus came flying through the window.

I felt calmer now. I knew I was on my own.

It is easier to fight when you know it is the only choice.

Dusshasan stood beside me, carefully careless. But then spoke another voice. Duryodhan's sidekick, the one who loved to blame his failures on everybody but himself, "She is a slut, Duryodhan. A woman that bears children to five different men? She is not royalty. She is a prostitute!"

Trust you to be an authority on prostitutes, I thought.

"Choose another husband from this assembly. You are a slave now. Serve the royal women by day and the royal men by night. Why just blood soaked clothes? Even if she was dragged here naked, it would be completely appropriate. Dusshasan, unwrap this slave for Duryodhan."

Ugly words, frustrated words.

'You,' I thought, 'the one who has never won any competition with my husband, who survives on empty boasts, who mistakes Duryodhan's bribe as an achievement, who lords over a Kingdom thrown as crumbs, whose frustrated dreams are trying to weave a nightmare for me.

'You were abandoned at birth. Whoever your mother is, this is the moment she will wish she had strangled you at birth. Your existence is a blight on her existence.'

I heard groans of disbelief from the learned wise old men. Or maybe they leaned ahead gleefully in anticipation. I saw the shocked hesitation in Duryodhan's eyes. I felt Dusshasan go tense beside me.

I felt no fear. Just regret. I recollected that, at my birth, the sages had called me a weapon of destruction. I had wanted to protest that word.

Whenever I gave birth to a son, whenever my babies threw themselves confidently into my arms, whenever I tended to my tender saplings, whenever I saw the safe silhouette of Indraprastha's walls, I thought of myself as a life-giving force born to nurture life. *Construction is always so much more difficult than destruction.* Who had said that?

This was my battlefield. I concentrated on my breath. I felt the flames leap within me. I saw the sky darkening. The wind had been sauntering along till now. Now it stood still, locked, imprisoned within my willpower into turbulent silence.

Then the wind rose. I felt its circular gusts. The dust was up in arms with the wind. I felt the rumble of the wind, disgruntled, threatening, rising steadily in volume. I saw the trees trembling, felt the royal court trembling.

I felt the strength of Goddess Kali within me. I could easily cut off all these heads and lift them up high in the air, dripping blood. I could place my foot carelessly over their lifeless carcasses. I could burn them to ashes in a moment. I felt an unquenchable thirst for blood. I felt unassailable, impregnable and unconquerable. The indestructible weapon of destruction.

Just a moment before I let loose havoc, I felt a cold dagger streak down my heart. I had grinned when I heard of Duryodhan's clumsiness at Maya Sabha. If he could keep that slight in mind, what about Subhadra? She had eloped with the man of her dreams and that was an even more direct snub to Hastinapur and Duryodhan. If wives have no rights beyond a husband then she became slave too! As did my other co-wives.

But I was Empress of Indraprastha and she was under my protection. "Do not worry, little one. I will fight for both of us," I whispered to the memory of Subhadra's fragile, rosy beauty.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Duryodhan nod at his younger brother. 'One last chance to redeem yourselves,' I prayed silently to five men. And still they stayed immobile, frozen into obedience, paralyzed by a misplaced sense of dharma.

It was the loneliest moment of my life, like all deaths. Can a golden birth end with a grey death?

For one brief searing moment, I yearned for Father's tender palm over my head and the safety of Shikhandi and Dhrishtadyumn's embrace.

The wind merged with the black sky, reared its head like a gigantic serpent's hood, ready to strike at my command. I resolutely pushed out Panchal's memory. I stood straight and relaxed. Hastinapur stood tense, one moment away from annihilation. I raised my arm slowly...

I heard the firm patter of resolute steps – bejeweled, feminine, and stumbling.

“No Draupadi!” commanded the voice of Queen Gandhari. “Don't let my foolish son's wicked ambitions destroy Hastinapur. Spare us, spare the innocent ones here who aren't responsible for this, who haven't participated in this. Your curse cannot spare your husbands. Think of your five sons,” she reminded me.

Six! I wanted to correct her. How dare she forget Abhimanyu?

“You are the honor of Indraprastha, Panchali,” the tremulous voice of the blind King came forth at last, “I am almost like your father. I pray to you, spare my thoughtless sons. Spare Hastinapur. The citizens are not your criminals. I declare this dice game null and void. Ask for a boon, ask anything you wish.”

I hesitated. I felt the reluctance to let go of my sons. I needed to be with them, to uncloud their minds, to make them unlearn everything they had learnt. I could not leave behind orphans with half-baked ideas of glory and honor.

My sons deserved life. I needed to survive for them. Death should never conquer Life. Destruction should never overpower Hope.

“Release the Emperor from slavery. Prativindhya should not ever be called the son of a slave.” I said evenly.

The wind sighed, stopped outside in its track, grunting and groaning – disappointed.

“Granted!” said a relieved Dhritarashtra, “ask for another boon.”

“Release my other four husbands from slavery too,” I said.

“Granted! Ask another boon.”

Indraprastha! My Indraprastha whom I had promised to protect. It was within reach, that idyll that had been paradise lost. I grit my teeth and shook my head, “No more boons. Everything else will have to be won back by my husbands. With their own efforts and prowess.”

“I give back all of Indraprastha. Its treasury, its citizens. I give it all back to you. Go back to Indraprastha. It shall remain an independent kingdom. Forgive us our folly. Reign happily and peacefully at Indraprastha,” he blubbered hastily.

Gandhari came closer, clasped my burning hands into her ice cold ones. “Come child,” she said gently, eager to escort me away before I changed my mind.

I did not look around me as I walked out of the court. My blood drops followed me on the way back as well. They were the only things still faithful to me.

I felt calm. I had won back Indraprastha. I had fulfilled my vow. Right now, nothing else mattered. One victory at a time.

The wind howled in protest. I had deprived it of its kill.

“Later,” I promised it silently, “patience is not my strongest virtue either. But I am ready to learn, ready to wait.”

Chapter 14: The Cacophony of the Dead

I never knew anybody so passionate about her home. Draupadi hated stepping out of Indraprastha, even for a moment. It was only two months since she gave birth to Shrutkirti, my son. But she was the Empress and denying the invitation would be an insult to Hastinapur's hospitality. She reluctantly agreed to accompany us to Hastinapur.

- Draupadi could not lug a tiny baby on the journey to Hastinapur. She politely declined the invitation. She sent us off with a smile. She stayed on at safe Indraprastha.

- Maharaj Yudhisthir realized that Shakuni had a different game plan up his sleeve. He agreed to the game of dice, he could never resist it. But he was a conscientious ruler. He put an advance condition that the game of dice would not involve any serious bets or pledges.

- Maharaj Yudhisthir accepted his defeat when he lost a crateful of jewels. He realized his folly in continuing with the game. He sportingly accepted that he had been bested and that is where the game ended

- Govind was away on a battle. He called me away to Dwarka to accompany him. Since I was not around, we postponed the visit to Hastinapur. We conveyed that we would be guests there after two months, after his campaign ended. That way, Govind too could accompany us to Hastinapur.

- When Indraprastha was to be wagered, we all spoke to Yudhisthir, deferentially and politely. We told him to come to his senses. We debated with him and succeeded in making him realize his blunder. He apologized profusely to us and declined to wager further.

- When he staked our crowns and us, we reminded him that we were human beings and not material goods. Emperor Yudhisthir, overcome with guilt, hugged us in remorse and the game ended.

Any of the above scenarios could have happened. But none of them did!

I hated the game of dice. It made a pawn of players and kept both winner and loser addicted to it. Yudhisthir was particularly fond of it. It was his *only* vice, so no one grudged him the pleasure.

We followed him to the court dutifully. My mind was half occupied with Govind's battle with Shalva. I was crestfallen because he had not allowed me to go with him this time. I knew he was capable of winning his own wars, but I felt honored to accompany him.

Govind said the current battle was to restore his honor, "I will fight my battle this time and you fight your battle." I did not know which battle of mine he was referring to. I wondered what battle formations he had planned. Would he fight it out or resort to the Sudarshanchakra? I fidgeted restlessly, eager to get out of this court and the dice game.

Wait, wait why were Duryodhan and his companions so full of glee? They had won a crater full of jewels from Indraprastha. The treasury was overflowing with riches anyways. But still, I wish our Emperor would be more careful. The treasury was not ours to waste. Everything in there was partly shared by the citizens. We were answerable to them.

I became a little more alert, more worried when he started wagering larger amounts from the treasury. Did he realize he was depleting it faster than we had filled it up? All those new projects half completed, how could we fund those now?

Bheem and I exchanged a troubled glance. Would he know the long journeys we had undertaken, the ceaseless hours spent under the scorching sun, the arduous terrains we crossed, the campaigns held on hostile lands with hostile opponents, the soldiers who had perished for filling the treasury?

And still he went on betting. "All of Indraprastha's wealth!" he declared grandly, brooking no interruptions from us.

We brothers had amassed all that wealth. Could we remind him that it was our efforts – but were we going to embarrass him by reminding him of our

share in the wealth? Right in front of Duryodhan's smug eyes? I did not know the exact amount of wealth in the treasury – blessed ignorance! But *she* would know! How was Yudhishtir going to justify his action to the disquieting frown of her wrath? Enough, I pleaded silently, end it here.

“I stake the citizens of Indraprastha and all their wealth as well!” he was enthused with his own losses. Bheem tried to interrupt, but our eldest impatiently waved him into silence. He made an utterance that did not become an Emperor. We were not rulers of Indraprastha. We were its servants. And we owed every citizen our protection and benevolence. Every single citizen had the right to his own life. Nobody could lay claim to a single coin of their sweat money, leave alone a moment of their lives!

Was this our venerable eldest brother? Why did he behave like he had forgotten all the King's duties? Which scripture taught him that a King owned his citizen's life? Did he realize that his decision had yoked every hardworking, sincere and trusting citizen to Hastinapur's whims and fancies?

I felt the throb in my head. Indraprastha was no longer ours! The fragrant soil that I worshipped, the borders that we strived to keep expanding and safe from outside invasion. The land we created out of sweat and blood – the place we were going to hand over in inheritance to our sons one day. What would be our abode now? Which forest would I have to burn next to create another Indraprastha? Why did this game not end?

“I stake my crown!” I heard his words – and did not believe them. Was it for this end that the *Rajsuya yagna* was held?

All the years since our birth when we struggled for survival, struggled for our identity, struggled for our social standing, for being able to take our place on Earth with pride and self-respect. One moment had wiped out all our achievements. Did he realize that his blunder slotted Prativindhya as a slave too? That little boy with the prematurely serious expression in his sad eyes- had he anticipated that he would never rule Indraprastha?

I breathed relief that royal ladies were not allowed to attend court. She would not have to witness the annihilation of her beloved Indraprastha. She would have to bear the news later on, in her own chambers. I did not know which one of us would have to perform the unholy task of telling her. I saw the unrelenting fury in her eyes already, and the tightly clenched lips.

I will win it all over for you, I promised Prativindhya. I will win back your land and prosperity. It is not impossible so long as I have my...

...weapons! He wagered and lost our weapons! My precious Gandiva. Her sister. My soul mate.

Was my Gandiva his to pledge away? It was not a plaything; it was my limb, my friend and companion in the path to victory. The one thing in the whole world that belonged solely to me ... or so I had thought. But I did not even own my triumphs and trophies. Kunti Mata had asserted that the day I returned with my bride.

As a child, I had squirmed at Hastinapur's grudging benevolence, felt the obvious reluctance at our existence. Archery was my means out of that muck. "My father owns Dronacharya," Duryodhan used to boast in childhood.

I used to retort, "Don't buy a tutor with wealth. He will never be known by your name. A tutor's wealth is his students. Acharya's prestige is my responsibility. All mine."

Archery and my Gandiva were my roadways to freedom, and the means to achieving my place on this Earth. Out of Hastinapur's slavery, but when did I ever escape slavery? I had just changed masters.

My Gandiva ... gone! I felt its pleading glance as it joined its place amongst the things I lost. It was a tangible thing, it would not vanish into thin air, it was lifeless without my touch, and it would lie helplessly to be mauled by a new master.

I recollected Agni's premonition, "I trust you will not give *this* gift away too." Gifted to me in Khandav ... that wretched forest. It was never going to forgive me its destruction.

Yudhisthir had become monstrous today. Sahdev? Kunti Mata's favorite pledged as a bet in the dice game? The throb in my head was now insistent, unrelenting. I heard my name, felt unseen fingers scornfully toss off my crown. The silver crown gifted to me by Indra himself – the silver diadem that had earned me the name of *Kiriti*. Gifted to me in memory of Khandav forest —

I felt my breath strangle. That name again! I had recognized that name. The dense forest that we had turned to ashes, Govind and I together. A kingdom built on curses and screams ...

I recollected vividly, distinctly, the wild haphazard flurry of animals as they strove to escape that day – the equally chaotic and desperate hordes of tribes.

We gave them only three choices: the arrows, the inferno or the flooded rivers – stumbling even as death stared them in the face, their terrified shrieks straight from Hell.

And I saw Draupadi, heavy with an unborn Shrutkirti within her. I saw her standing here in court, in front of us. Beseeching, pleading, and arguing. I saw her eyes go through the entire gamut of expressions – from disbelief, to pain, to scornful disgust, to blazing fury to serene calm.

Was it her or the tribals in Khandav forest? I would pay for every scream of terror, every shed and unshed tear. The shrieks were deafening me. They rose in a reverberating crescendo. I wished Bheem would stop shouting. I reached for his wrist to quiet him.

I could not understand why my wife should pay the price. She had not devised the idea of burning Khandav, she had not shot a single arrow. Why was she here in Hastinapur court? But of course she was not here! She would be safely ensconced in her chambers – away from this mayhem and

madness. I would have to gift her another Indraprastha somehow, no matter what the price.

And now Queen Gandhari ventured into Khandav forest too. What was it with women today? Had they all decided to storm in here? Eklavya was smiling sadly, holding up his shorn bleeding stump. The tribal woman and her five companions who roasted in the lacquer house meant for us were doubled over with laughter. And Maya was grinning. He had been spared because he was not a native of Khandav, just a visitor. But he had been visiting ... whom? Didn't he realize his magical Maya Sabha was on fire? Or was it the house of lacquer on fire? Why didn't we seem able to escape fire anywhere?

I kept staring at my crown, hoping it would answer some of my questions. The uproar in my ears would not quiet down.

The three sages had been wrong; I had been right. Rebirths do not happen. Sins have to be atoned for in this very birth. They had chosen this day to claim their reward. I waited for the final blow to fall.

*** The past few moments – yes, it was only that short a time – they had sapped all my energy. I was beyond exhaustion. But I dared not sleep here, not for a moment. This was enemy territory.

And then, after what seemed like a lifetime, I heard my husbands entering my room. I was still bleeding in painful gushes. The headache still persisted.

I vaguely felt them kneel in a cordon around me. I wished I could stop breathing. I felt nauseated and desperate for a bath – to cleanse every pore of my body.

“Panchali, please say something. You know quite well that we will not rest until they have been punished.” one of them said.

“For the sake of our five sons, Draupadi ...” another said.

“Six! I have six sons,” I said, irritated. Why did everyone need reminders? I saw Kunti Mata flinch nervously.

“I want Hastinapur widowed. I want all those from the court dead. Every single one,” I said, my head still felt like it was being crushed by two gigantic hands.

“All? What did Karn do?” tremulous query from Kunti Mata.

“The loyal mongrel barked out a very respectable title! Would you like to hear it?” I snapped, my voice brittle.

“Why, what did he call you?” this from the voice I had loved – once upon a time.

I lifted my fingers away from where they were held against my temples. He looked puzzled, still dazed. Where had he been in those fatal moments, lost in what trance? I pressed my lips tight together. I was not going to give him benefit of doubt.

“Ask them. They were mute today, but certainly not deaf.” I curtly nodded at his brothers. They did not answer, just hung their heads low.

“Ask your chaste Dronacharya. Or your revered pitamah. Surely they heard every word in court today and kept their eyes peeled open for further sordid entertainment. Their very refined sense of Dharma permits the occasional detour into sleaze and still preserves the facade of holy celibacy.”

“Draupadi!” gasped Kunti Mata in agony.

The air was stifling. It was sulking against me. I had worked it up for no reason – a force that powerful cannot be built up and then wasted. I did not know if it would come back to my assistance the next time. If it did not, then I needed these five as weapons. My sons were far too young right now.

Indraprastha! I desperately needed to touch the warm healing powers of its soil. I needed to breathe its clean, biting cool air. Only Indraprastha

could allow me to think clearly.

I could die for Indraprastha. I could kill for Indraprastha. But first things first.

“I want to go home,” I said, my voice plaintive.

But one shadow still lurked in the darkness. One shadow had not joined in with the protective cordon. I wished suddenly I had not made my weakness obvious. He now knew I needed Indraprastha.

That made Indraprastha open to damage. I felt the desperate urge to fly away to Indraprastha and fling myself over its walls protectively. I knew instinctively that, if not now, Indraprastha was forever lost to me.

‘Indraprastha’s throne would never know it seats both its destroyer and savior at the same time,’ I recollected Krishn’s statement and felt another jolt of terror.

“Let us leave right now,” I said and stood up, “I cannot breathe.”

“Tomorrow, Panchali,” came the reply in the decisive calm voice of the Emperor. “We shall leave tomorrow.”

It was close to nightfall. But tomorrow was a long time, stretched between dawn to twilight. What more would be allowed to happen in those hours?

Chapter 15: The Lonely Soldier Amongst Wounded Warriors

The cycle was repeating itself. Exile-Hastinapur-Exile-Panchal-Khandav-Exile-Indraprastha-Exile.

But this one came rushing into our lives like a tornado. It was much harder to accept than the earlier ones. This time the exile held no honor, no home to come back to at its conclusion and no wife to come home to from exile, because our wife was here with us on exile. That hurt the most. It hurt more than anything else.

Our Emperor had been shockingly thoughtless in his dealings with Indraprastha's crown. The rest of us were guilty of obeying him. But she was not guilty, and yet here she was with us. Or rather, we were here with her.

She could have done what Subhadra and the others did – stay with their sons. She was not compelled to choose her husbands over her sons ... or was she? She would not explain, would not listen to objections. "I am coming with you," was a statement not to be interfered with in this matter.

We had been through forest life before. I had been through it longer than the others. In spite of the time gap, I could easily adjust to the new – or old life. But she had never known this life. Except for the few days when she slept in our hut, she had always been royalty.

She did not cry, she did not berate us, she did not complain. Not once. I wish she did. It would have made things tolerable, more human.

I was used to the agile mobility of her expressions, the radiance of joy, the sensuousness of her pleasure; her face had always been the mirror of her emotions. This person with us was vaguely familiar and frighteningly alien.

Our temporary huts were extremely simple and primitive. She was the only one with a private room. We built her room centrally. When we told

her it was for protection, she stood still for a moment. Then she threw back her head and laughed, soundless and cruel. It chilled me to the bone.

And yet the nights were far scarier. No matter how exhausted we were after a day's hard labor, we could not sleep. I could make out the fidgety torment of my brothers, as we yearned for the merciful arms of sleep. But we continued to stay awake, each roasting in his private hell.

She slept the peaceful sleep of the guiltless. Except when she awoke, startled and shaking with terror. She did not call for help. She did not sob out a name. She just bent over, hugging herself for comfort until her shivers resided. And yet no tears.

In the daytime, she kept herself busy with cooking and cleaning the hut. Once I saw her in the backyard, sitting listlessly, staring vacantly, the cloth over her breasts soaked with milk. She left behind my newborn son with the detachment of an ascetic. Did she have to punish him for my sins?

She would not accept any apology, any explanation or any justification. She did not interrupt or argue. She listened, but we knew the words did not dent the inviolable halo around her. She treated us with the polite formality offered to strangers and the wary alertness reserved for latent enemies.

When nightmares woke her up, she looked so lonely, like a frightened child. I wanted to kneel by her side and tell her that we would survive this together. I tried it once, but the ferocious warning in her eyes withered away my words.

Distraught, I waited for Govind. He was my last resort. He was the only one who could help her. Yudhisthir had not allowed us to meet Govind before leaving on exile. He had resolutely overthrown any suggestions of retaliation aside. Almost as if ... I thought hesitantly, leading me to the brink of suspicion. But no! He had lost the most. He had been Emperor, not us. It was his throne and crown lost.

I missed my sons – all of them. I missed my palace rooms. I missed my favorite haunt by the lake. We who handled weapons, now once again found our muscles shackled to building huts, chopping forest wood and hunting for food. We were back to snatching time to hone our martial skills – back to surviving like animals.

I found newer places for my daily archery practice. Unfamiliar places, unwelcoming strange places. But no anklets to keep me company, no lips to caress my blisters, no dancing eyebrows to throw me challenges.

“I will never forgive you defeat,” she had said once. “You will have to prove your worth all over again.” Despite her words, I knew she would have encouraged us back to power, *if* the Empire was all we lost. But we had done that other unpardonable sin. The worst betrayal of all.

There was no other choice. If it took thirteen years to gain her trust and respect, so be it. I had waited seven years last time to see love in her eyes.

The crime this time was deeper, darker and beyond redemption. This time I was not hoping for love – just to be pardoned.

*** I never did get back to the comforting arms of Indraprastha. Maharaj Yudhisthir won by losing. He played the game of dice once again, and not even Kunti Mata had been able to deviate his course of action. This time he wagered for a twelve-year exile with another year of incognito state.

Was winning over me so important? He was blinder than Dhritarashtra in self-destruction.

Subhadra took her Abhimanyu to Dwarka. My brother took his nephews to Panchal. They were so young, I was not sure if my sons would remember us or their half-brother after thirteen years.

Dhrishtadyumn's wife had agreed to be surrogate mother to my sons, even breastfeed the youngest one along with her own child. But I saw the odd expression in her eyes, a mixture of sympathy and indifference. I saw

the concealed accusation; she could not understand why I was being a martyr and going into exile instead of taking on the mantle of motherhood.

Why was I doing it? Because I could not let my husbands forget a single moment of that court. I need not be wife, but I could be mother and inspiration. I could keep their anger alive and smoldering – keep igniting them and goading them towards revenge.

But I did not count on the extent of my own fury. With no visible outlet for it, I felt it curl up and bite viciously into me, gripping me in a vice of paralysis. I could not find the strength yet to give them inspiration.

The discomforts of this new life were of secondary importance. Given a good enough reason, I could even grow to appreciate the serenity and beauty of forest life. But I was not here to enjoy an outing.

Some more time ... I needed time before I could break out of this transfixing immobility.

I did not want sympathy or excuses. I needed a presence beside me who would understand and who would give directions to my fury. I needed a mind that would plan with clear foresight and cold acumen and absolutely no mercy.

I waited for the magical green blue luminance to filter into our huts.

*** And at last he arrived! I heard the rhythmic sounds of Krishn's chariot, saw the flag unfurled on its roof and then the dancing peacock feathers. I heard the brothers gathering around him.

I did not have the strength to stir out as yet. I sat in my hut unable to move. I could imagine his eyes flickering to the hut, exasperated and disappointed. He had warned me well in advance. Repeatedly.

It was more than the loss of Kingdom. It was the crumbling of his dream. Magadh-Panchal-Indraprastha-Dwarka was his uninterrupted chain of

power – his idea of righteous rule. *Was!* Now we left a gaping hole.

I had failed in the task he had entrusted to me. I sat there, expecting to be given a verbal whiplash.

But that was not to be. What I felt next was Krishn's palm, consoling and reassuring, move over the top of my head. The expression in his eyes was neither pity nor disappointment. His eyes looked exhausted, his face looked haggard, as if he had gone through what I had gone through.

"I am sorry," was all I could say, holding on to his hand.

"Sorry?" he had been expecting anything but that.

"I did not handle things well. I did not save the Empire you built for us. Nor did I save your friend."

"He will survive. He had better survive," he said shortly, dismissively. It was the first time I had seen him angry at his precious friend. Since when did a mere soldier become more important than his invaluable warrior?

"Unfortunately, Indraprastha will survive too," he said with a sigh. "Don't you wish Indraprastha would melt and vaporize, rather than be enjoyed by your enemies?"

I stayed silent. I had long given up trying to understand how he knew the deepest, darkest thoughts that came into my mind.

"All that wealth amassed, all those efforts you made into maintaining it — all that prosperity will remain intact. It will be taken on a platter by your enemies.

"Don't look so surprised, Kalyani. I have known this emotion. I had to abandon Mathura and migrate to Dwarka. I know how it feels. Do you know the name-calling and accusations I faced from my own citizens and relatives? 'Coward' was probably the mildest term used for me. A pity that it rhymes so well with cowherd." He smiled unexpectedly.

Then he looked closely at me, speaking clearly and with intent, “I learnt that no matter what names they give you, nothing applies until you wish it to. No insult, no barb is yours to bear unless you want it to. Use it, if you want. Make it into a weapon and let it boomerang back to those who uttered it. Just don’t let it overpower your life.”

He stayed lost in memories for a moment. “The fool, the incredible fool!” he murmured to himself, “I never realized how deep the danger lay. I left you unarmed. I did not foresee the direct danger to you. I never thought he would go so far as to give away Indraprastha’s crown.”

“His own son too, what father does that to his own son? Can Prativindhya hope for a kingdom again?” I asked anxiously.

“I do believe he would have gone ahead and staked Kunti Mata as well. Anyways, he is not important anymore,” he continued as if he had not heard me at all.

“I am not scared. There is nothing more left to lose. But how self-destructive can anyone be? Surely he could remember that he was losing his own crown,” I persisted.

“Has he ever struck you as comfortable wearing that crown, *Yagnaseni*?” He brushed aside the topic, “Things could have been worse for you than they are now. You almost won it all back on your own, my brave soldier.” He remained looking at me tenderly, protectively.

“The court of Hastinapur and its jibes are in the past. Don’t relive those scenes. The past cannot be rewritten. Look ahead, not in the murky past. The past is a breeding ground for regret. All those who dared to insult you will meet their due on battlefield. Their extermination is a given. It is only a question of time.”

I stared into the gathering darkness outside my hut. “I want my children,” I whispered.

“You were not part of the exile clause. I can take you back to Panchal right now. Nobody will grudge you the decision to stay back with your sons.”

I shook my head mutely and resolutely.

“Tell me, why did you not stay at Panchal with your sons?”

“You know why.”

“Yes, but you will have to mould your anger much better than this. Your behavior right now is not helping matters. Berate them. They deserve it. But your anger should be like the fire of which you were born. If you control it, it is a deadly weapon. If it controls you, it can raze you.

“Your anger should be enough to keep their embers alive. Untamed and unbridled, it will just erode their confidence. Their morale is at an all-time low already.”

“I know. I understand perfectly what you are saying. Give me some time.”

“Take your time. But hurry it up, will you? I need my soldier back,” he said briskly.

“All you care about is your prized friend!” I flared up.

“That is better!” he said encouragingly, “a little flash of spirit once in a while is fine. Handle this correctly and you will have four warriors ready to carry out your intentions. No matter how livid you are right now, the fact remains that they are still the best warriors on Earth.”

“Warriors? Really?” I asked and got a reproving glance. “I will try. But I cannot bear to be ... I will not tolerate ...” I wished he had got Rukmini along with him. I could have confided against her comforting bosom. There are things one can only tell a woman. But he understood immediately.

“Don’t worry about that at all. Exile is no place to bear and rear children. They know they have committed the worst sin of their lives. Don’t be so

harsh on my cousins, Kalyani. They have done the unpardonable. I am not asking you to pardon them. Just make them think pardon is a possibility. Could you do that?"

I remained mute.

"I am not making excuses for them, but remember that they were pledged too. Wealth, kingdom, weapons, sons, self ... they saw all of it being lost before your freedom was staked. It was a shameful act and can never be condoned; but don't forget that they underwent hell twice — before you *and* with you. Your honor is not separate from theirs and neither is your dishonor.

"Subhadra does not understand that you saved her and Dwarka from enslavement too. You bore the entire brunt of it — because you happened to be there at the wrong time. It could as easily have been her ..." I saw the faint shudder that racked his entire body.

"I came back from my war too late. Your sons were already settled at Panchal. But I will see to it that they visit Abhimanyu frequently. They won't forget each other, and they won't forget you. I have never seen a mother do what you have done. I will make sure they respect your decision and understand the motive behind it."

"I am neither wife nor mother," I choked.

His hand reached out, then pulled back. Instead his finger lightly traced the outline of my untied hair in the shadows on the ground. "You are much more, Draupadi. Indraprastha, Panchal, and Dwarka will forever be proud that they are related to you."

He got up from where he had been kneeling beside me. He stretched out his arms leisurely, "I am in the mood for adventure. How about offering me some food? I have been through many battles. Let us see if I am brave enough to face your cooking," he smiled.

I could not help smiling back through tears, "I am not that bad a cook. Why do you remember me only when I am in trouble, Krishn?"

“You are always in trouble,” he said.

The days merged into months, into years. I knew the maps, the safest forests, the cleanest lakes, the easiest pathways. I recollected the dialect of the tribes, all the survival tactics I had learnt from them. It was amazing how easily it came back to me and how little I had forgotten.

Years ago, Varanavat’s lacquer mansion fire had clearly spelt out Hastinapur’s intentions for us. In the last exile, we had acquired new skills – the skills of impersonation, skills of begging for daily alms, the Guerilla warfare, skills of building safe and livable tents on safe grounds, skills of combating lions ... and mosquitoes. Yes, we learnt very early in life that no enemy can be underestimated.

In the forests, everyone was enemy. Each moment was a battle for life. The jungle had no mercy, no concept of relations. Everyone was either food or eater. Victorious or dead. Prey or predator.

Every two weeks, we migrated to a new place. We guessed Duryodhan already had his spies on our scent. When we traveled, either I or Bheem led the way, the twins trailing behind her, Yudhisthir ahead of her.

I recollected how she would walk through the palaces of Indraprastha, her steps brisk, light and purposeful – with a bevy of sons trailing at her sweeping long skirts. Her steps now were much the same.

Occasionally, I looked back at her. I remembered our first walk through the charming woods, from the halls of Panchal to the hidden chariot. I had confidently asked her, “Any regrets, Princess?” I dared not repeat the question.

Her feet were reddened, calloused, and caked with dirt. She still held herself erect, but I knew her strength was long gone. She was surviving on sheer will power.

The tribes were rulers here and probably a source of threat to travelers. But we had nothing left for them to rob. Not even self-respect.

The tribes and wandering sages turned instead into a huge support system. Bheem and I understood most of their dialects, could converse with them. The women offered her their simple robes, woven out of plantain leaves, tree bark or deerskin. No matter what she wore, she never lost the bearing of an Empress.

In spite of all the tribes we met, I never met Eklavya. This was the right time to meet. We were on equal footing now – no crown, no Kingdom, no false prestige to force imbalance between us. But he seemed to have vanished forever.

One day, as I was shearing the firewood, Bheem came barging into the room, fuming and ready to explode. I guessed the reason. I had seen the tents – their exorbitance proclaiming their richness, their richness proclaiming their owners.

Duryodhan wasn't done with us yet. He had set up camp close to our hut, with his entourage of friends, wives, maids and soldiers. His wealth could give him no pleasure unless it served to cause us distress. He was here to mock our downfall, to stress the contrast between his life and ours.

Cattle were a symbol of the Kingdom's prosperity. *Ghosh-yatra* was their excuse – the ritual of branding the kingdom's cattle with the King's emblem. They chose the same forest we were staying in for the purpose of the ritual.

“Saw them?” I enquired of Bheem.

“Those unspeakable scoundrels! I wish I could smash ...”

We both fell silent as we sensed Draupadi come into the room. She set down her pitcher of water. She seemed calm enough, except for a telltale slash of her eyebrows. Their lavish tents need not have been so close to our

hut. There was plenty of space in the forest. Near nightfall we heard the faint singing voices of their courtesans, the chimes of their ankle bells, the wild cries of the entourage as they made merry.

But it did not last long.

The next afternoon, we heard the hurried rattle of a chariot. An armed soldier barged into our clearing, disheveled and trembling.

“Maharaj, help us!” he said and fell at Yudhisthir’s feet. Yudhisthir offered him water and allowed him to regain breath. His tale was simple. Duryodhan and his entourage had gone to the lake for sporting in the waters. There they had encountered the water nymphs. Duryodhan had considered them helpless, unprotected. He did not know that their men folk, the Gandharvas, were on guard in the groves. There had been a fierce scuffle and the crown prince of Hastinapur was imprisoned, trussed up and taken captive to their chief.

Draupadi stood at the doorway, her eyes alert. The angles of her lips were sharply etched, upturned, curled in contempt.

“Where was his entire army and his bodyguards?” Bheem demanded gruffly.

“They could not survive long in the battle,” he admitted. “The Gandharvas hauled away Hastinapur’s princes and women too. Queens, maids ...” he said, trailing off.

“Didn’t Angaraj Karn protect his beloved friend?” I asked deliberately.

“He tried. But ... he ... they defeated him. He escaped ... I mean, he has gone towards Hastinapur for help.”

Yudhisthir looked at Bheem and me. It was an unspoken order.

Bheem shook his head vehemently, “Let Duryodhan roast in hell. We are not duty bound to protect him.”

“Family pride is at stake here,” Yudhisthir said sternly, “whatever our internal problems, we cannot allow outsiders to exploit our rift.”

It was a direct order now. But we stood our ground, unconvinced.

Then we heard the delicate tinkle of jewelry. Queen Bhanumati entered. She looked tired, tearful, on the verge of collapse. She headed straight for our wife and knelt at her feet.

“Spare my husband, Draupadi. I am begging you for protection. My co-wives, my sons, my maids are held captive. Don’t allow them to be defiled. Hastinapur’s honor lies at your mercy. Don’t refuse me now.”

Draupadi’s eyes darkened for a moment and then they softened. “Always the women. Why do the women have to bear the brunt always? Queen Bhanumati is not guilty of her husband’s crimes.

“Besides, we cannot avenge ourselves if the Gandharvas kill him. She will not escape the agony of being a widow after thirteen years. But we cannot allow the Queen of Hastinapur to grovel in the mud right now. Arise, Queen.”

Our Empress moved her gaze to the two of us. This time we obeyed. Gentle and ruthless at the same time – who did that remind me of?

The Gandharvas were fiercely protective, extremely skilled at their guerilla tactics, at illusory tactics and celestial weapons. They would never spare Duryodhan. It would not be an easy task to free him, especially as were not whole-heartedly into it.

I knew the Gandharva prince. He was an unfriendly person, distrustful – and rightly so. We had met his fellow tribesmen when we were setting up our huts here. They were suspicious, wary, not responding to our attempts at friendship. They left us alone when they saw that we meant no direct harm to them.

This was their territory; gaining the element of surprise was the only way out. We knew the route to their abode and we had no trouble reaching there. They had left a wide open trail, almost in contempt, almost daring anyone to search them out. Dead soldiers littered the track and burnt trees led us along the right way. Bheem and I circled around their abode from opposite directions. We deliberately fired misleading arrows. Their answering instant feedback gave away their locations. We let loose an array of *Narach*, *Tomar* and *Vatsadant* arrows, not to kill them but only to render them unconscious or immobilize them. They were not really our enemies.

We penetrated their first ring of protection. The second ring was fiercer and closer knit. They attacked with a barrage of spears, axes and arrows. We fought through the ferocious hordes and reached into the deadly inner ring. Ripples in the lake, I recollected. Our arrows this time flew thick and fierce, in ripples upon ripples; cutting down their spears, javelins and arrows. Suddenly, their attack ceased and then we were face to face with the chief Gandharva. He was glowering. His daughter stood nearby, stern and just as furious. Duryodhan lay trussed up hand and foot.

“Wait, Chief,” Bheem said advancing upon them after a baleful look at Duryodhan, “we have been sent for Duryodhan’s protection by Maharaj Yudhisthir.”

“Be prepared to fight for his freedom,” bellowed the chief.

“We don’t wish to fight with you, brave chief,” I said, “We are merely obeying our elder brother’s order. Release Duryodhan and there need not be bloodshed.”

“Bheem and Arjun!” he recognized us and looked speculative. “What a pity we meet as enemies. I have heard many tales about you two.”

“We need not be enemies,” I continued in his dialect, “we are ready to apologize on his behalf. Prince Duryodhan is an arrogant fool. Pardon him.”

“No,” the chief answered curtly, “He dared to insult our daughters. He shall die.”

“We cannot allow that,” I said reluctantly, itching to join him in his resolve, “If you insist, be ready to fight us once more.”

“We know that we cannot match your skills, nor overpower your missiles. Even though we know we shall be cut and ripped open at your hands. But we will fight you to the end.”

“I respect the bravery of your warriors,” I said, “Don’t insist on bloodshed. It would be a pity to kill your men. Ultimately we have a common enemy. You and I belong on the same side.”

The chief held up an imperial hand, “Hold on. Don’t you dare compare us with yourself, Kshatriya!” he roared. “We may not be as skilled as you, we may not wear jeweled crowns, but we don’t wager wives in games of dice. So don’t you dare stand there and say we belong on the same side.”

I winced and took it. He had lashed us where it hurt the most.

Then his gruff voice softened slightly, “Do you not know the malicious intent of this bunch? We overheard their plans – they came here solely to jeer and taunt you all dressed in your deerskins. How can you fight on behalf of such evil persons?” he asked incredulously.

The young daughter stepped forward, “I am the wronged, Father. I will decide the punishment.”

“Devi, I have made a vow to kill Duryodhan in battle. How will I complete my vow if you execute him?” Bheem asked, guessing her purpose.

Her eyes were merciless, but she still said, “Take him away. Tell Queen Draupadi that my insult is merged with hers. He is her kill. I am not giving back his life. I am just prolonging it long enough for you to take it. Promise me now!” she insisted.

I looked at her with awe. She somehow reminded me of my wife. Not her looks, just her authority. She stood fearless, assured that her fellow tribesmen would kill to save her honor, would value her existence beyond

the petty rules of proper behavior. We had not given that to our wife – no protection, no readiness to value her person beyond being obedient to Yudhisthir.

I became aware of a new emotion. Envy.

“I envy you,” I confessed to her brother, “I envy you your austere rules. Your honest evaluation of human life and what makes life worth living. I wish we had protected our wife like this.” I bowed to the young princess, “Devi, you are far luckier than our wife.”

She understood as only a woman would. Her eyes mellowed, so did her tone, “May I meet Queen Draupadi? Tell her that the women of this tribe love her and revere her. Tell her she can call on our friendship and assistance anytime she wants.”

In her excitement, she looked now like the young girl that she was. I recognized the look in her eyes. The hero-worship Satyaki held for me, and I for Govind. She reserved the same look for our Empress.

The chief gestured to the captive royal women of Hastinapur, “Do with them what you wish. Take them as slaves for Queen Draupadi.”

Bheem and I knew our Empress well. Whatever rage she held against the men of Hastinapur, the women would be always under her protection.

“Release them with full honor,” we said, “Our battle is against their men and we will resolve it on the battlefield.”

The Gandharva prince came forward. He asked hesitantly, eyeing my divine bow and Bheem’s mace. “Will you two teach us?” he asked. Bheem and I looked at each other and smiled. We had managed to win the battle, yet end up making allies. We could always do with more friends.

We watched ruefully as they freed Duryodhan and his brothers. His shoulders sagged and his eyes looked haunted at being saved by his worst

enemies. Chained and enslaved in the very sight of his queens and rescued by his much hated cousins – it must be his idea of veritable living hell.

“We will meet soon.” We promised the Gandharva prince.

We left with the princess’s eager question ringing after us, “Is she really as beautiful as I have heard?”

“There is only one way to find out,” I threw back at the child, laughing.

*** It was five years since we began our exile. Still eight years to go. Life became easier when Krishn visited us. He got Rukmini along, sometimes Satyabhama. I cherished their company. I needed Rukmini’s tranquility as much as Satyabhama’s cheerful banter. They would carry news of my sons.

One night we sat around the fire. Krishn was speaking about the recent developments. He told us how Duryodhan had renewed his training under Balram, using both mace and friendship to get Dwarka’s ruler under his influence. He narrated to us how Karn had approached Parshuram to get the dreaded *Brahmastra*.

I remembered Arjun had told me a story about how he achieved the Brahmastra — “Long ago, all Hastinapur princes stayed in Dronacharya’s ashram. We had to clean the ashram, tend to the plants and perform all menial tasks there. Every day we went to the lake. Ashwatthama carried a wide-mouth container and he always returned earlier than us. Ultimately, I decided to use the *Varunastra* to fill my pitchers, returned early and caught Dronacharya imparting Brahmastra to Ashwatthama. It dawned on me that moment; whatever my significance to Acharya, I would never be as special as a son.

When I fulfilled his *Gurudakshina*, Acharya approached me and said, “Brahmastra is amongst the deadliest of weapons. It can wreak unimaginable havoc upon Life and Nature when it explodes. It can only rest within hands that possess both expertise and restraint. You have earned it today. Tomorrow at dawn, we begin your training for Brahmastra.”

Krishn then narrated to us how Karn had beguiled Parshuram into thinking he was a Brahmin. The truth was discovered when an *Alarka* borer beetle burrowed through his flesh while his Guru was resting his head on his lap. The rivulet of blood woke up his Guru and made him realize he had been tricked, since no Brahmin could bear such physical pain.

“He was rumored to have an inbuilt protection all over his body. How did the beetle cut through that?” Arjun’s mind was intent on details.

Krishn pondered silently, “Nature is amazing. A tiny little insect- just like the squirrel that helped Rama to build the bridge to Lanka. Maybe it is telling us that this armor has its limits and can be breached. Maybe we can build arrow-tips made of beetle pincers.”

I wondered how anyone could build arrows made of beetle pincers. Trust him to have such ideas!

“The armor is not impenetrable. I wounded and defeated him during the Rajsuya campaign. The Gandharva prince also said they were able to mangle Karn with arrows,” Bheem observed.

“Hmm, that is good news. Duryodhan isn’t sitting idle either. He is learning more intricate ways of wielding the mace from Balram tau. He is practicing his skills daily upon an iron statue of Bheem. His brothers are utilizing their thirteen years to upgrade their skills. Shakuni is securing political connections up North. I don’t think they have any intention of giving back Indraprastha. They are gearing up for war. You need to obtain divine weapons too.” He encompassed all five of them in his sentence.

“Let them play with toys. I want to win this war with my bare hands.” Bheem growled.

Krishn smiled, “You can decide at leisure whether to use celestial weapons or not, but you should have them in your possession. You need to build up your repertoire. Eight years can throw up many warriors in many lands, and not all of them will support you. You cannot take your

supremacy for granted. Eight years is too long a period to idle away, awaiting the end of your exile.”

“My arms and my mace are more than adequate,” Bheem spat out.

“Do you propose to stop the divine *astras* with your mighty arms? There are at least four warriors in Hastinapur army who possess Brahmastra. We have only one. Why allow them to be better fortified than you?” Krishn reasoned.

When nobody volunteered, a glance of understanding passed between Krishn and his friend. He did not ask, ‘Why me?’ He just asked, “When do I leave?”

Krishn answered, “As early as you can. I cannot promise how long it will take you, I cannot even promise sure success for you. In fact —” and this with a glance at me and the others, “I cannot even assure you that you will survive this journey. It is going to be an arduous task. But at least ...”

“...I will not regret not having tried at all,” his friend completed the sentence.

Whatever the task, divide it equally amongst yourselves, I thought. The eldest should have got first honor and led from the front in this quest for celestial weapons. Where was the hierarchy now?

“Tomorrow,” Krishn said calmly, sensing my turmoil.

I stayed awake in my room for a long time, listening to their plans. They drew maps. The routes led northward and higher up.

Arjun was leaving me behind again. This time, there was no fixed period when I would meet him again. The rest of us could derive safety and company from each other. He would have to be his own encouragement and support system.

“Indraprastha’s hopes lie with you. May the Heavens grant you success. You will do it,” I told him on the eve of his departure early next morning.

He waited for words that could make his journey bearable, the words that I did not utter ... simple words, “Come back to me.” Would it have killed me to say them?

He lingered on for a moment, then inclined his head in acceptance, understood that my anger still smoldered and pardon would not come easy.

“Take care of him,” I whispered to my sister.

Chapter 16: A Quest ... and a Curse

No brothers, no wife, no shelter, no food, no Govind. He had advised me to take the northward route, higher up the mountains. The air got rarer and colder. It seemed to seep into my bones, made every breath a struggle. And still I had to climb higher. I gradually saw less and less of human beings. I traversed mountains and crevices carpeted with snow.

Pure white, invigorating snow.

Cold, slimy, treacherous snow.

“Govind ... Krishn ...” I whispered, stopping often, feeling the chilly air streak like a dagger into my chest. I kept the last syllable unclear, soft, not admitting to myself whether I said Krishn or Krishnaa.

I began my penance in the bitter cold. I had spied a few animals and trees. If they could survive, so could I. I would sustain on fruits and water initially, then gradually I would learn to survive only on water. Then only on air, then survive without air. Just four simple steps, I assured myself.

It was more difficult than I imagined. The hunger for food would rear its head, furrowing into the hollowed pits of the stomach, until I learnt to quell it. Abandoning water was even tougher. I felt the unbearable yearn for water, held my eyes shut tight, so tight that I distinctly saw red spots against my eyelid. Even the red spots seemed to dissolve into crystal clear droplets of water – until eventually I trained my eyelids to abolish the thought.

Learn and bear it, I told myself. It was a lesson in endurance. I pushed my body to the limits of tolerance and back. My toes would turn numb, which felt like a blessing after weathering the fierce chill. When my fingertips turned blue, I decided it was time to notch up the endurance further – the body as fuel, the body as tool. I could not depend on external environment, so I had to generate my own body heat.

I don't know how long it must have taken. Perhaps creepers crawled onto me. Perhaps serpents writhed around me. Perhaps wild animals sniffed and eyed me suspiciously. I felt light, weightless and totally unaware of my body. I felt the body go dead. I felt the mind awake, alert with all of its energy bent on the task at hand.

I ceased to feel the brunt of the sun, the relentless whiplashes of rains and the icy daggers of the cold. I knew my body generated its own heat, adequate to overcome the chill around me. I felt nothing but the reverberations of the universe, in tune with the 'Om' I chanted.

*** I knew Krishn would keep track of his pathway. Once in a while, he sent short messages via human or bird messengers. Messages that contained nothing except the place where Arjun existed for the moment. And then abruptly, the messages stopped. He might be buried in the snow, there must be slippery crevices, strange wild animals, unseen enemies lurking ... I dared not infer anything from the silence.

Bheem fumed and ranted at his elder brother, reminding him of his blunders. Yudhisthir shrugged off Bheem's frequent outbursts with a calm rejoinder, "Lord Ram knew there was no such thing as a golden deer. Yet he could not resist going in pursuit of the disguised Mareech." I wanted to remind him that Lord Ram took the trouble of winning his own swayamwar.

Bheem insisted we should attack Hastinapur instead of waiting out thirteen years. I agreed completely with Bheem. But Krishn had disapproved. He argued that we would garner no support if we broke the rules of exile.

I wondered why the Pandavas always had to be duty bound and why only the Pandavas were expected to uphold every rule every single time.

*** "Draupadi, do not be so ominously silent. Ask for anything, and I will get it for you," Bheem promised, catching me in a pensive mood.

I pointed out moodily to a bunch of *Saugandhika* lotuses floating far off in a lake. He actually dived off in their pursuit! I felt an exasperated fondness. He was always so earnest to fulfill my whims. I was mollified to an extent.

After the Ghosh-yatra fiasco, Hastinapur could have been subjected to the horrendous dishonor it had meted out to us. As winners of that conflict, my husbands had the might and the right. Yet they had generously chosen to release Hastinapur's princes and royal women from slavery. Yes, my husbands had blundered at the game of dice, but their hearts did not mirror even a sliver of the malice and perversion that Hastinapur had shown us.

I knew I would have to grasp at every opportunity to forgive and redeem my men; yet I had to keep re-igniting and fanning my vengeance against Hastinapur. I learnt that even anger needs ramifications and regulation.

I could not take my eyes off the coiling serpents wound around his neck. I tried to ignore their flickering tongues and their insistent hiss. I concentrated on the verses Shiva was teaching me – the secret of the devastating *Pashupatastra*. It was a long, convoluted verse, which he would teach me only once. I listened, absorbed and stored it away carefully in my memory.

Shiva had approached me disguised as a hunter and then challenged me to a duel. He matched me arrow for arrow, blow for blow and then fist for fist, until I finally realized that the mighty hunter could be none other than Shiva. Finally, pleased by my combat, he revealed his true identity.

After he left, another one arrived. My father – the one who had tried to stop us from Khandav-dahan. I had battled and defeated Indra, Kubera, Varuna and Yama on that eventful day in Khandav. Indra's eyes flickered to my head. The silver crown he had gifted me no longer adorned my head. The land named after him now lay under enemy feet.

Indra did not mention either Indraprastha or the crown. His eyes were gentle. He opened his arms and welcomed me warmly.

His abode was at even higher heights than I presently was, but I need not walk there anymore. He had his own method of transport. I had never seen anything like it before, but I had heard of it. King Ram had returned to Ayodhya in it and Raavan had used it to abduct Queen Sita. I had not quite believed something like this could exist. But here it was!

If one could fire arrows from this magical thing, how swift the duels and how tiny the battlefields! The entire core of battle-plans would alter. We were trained for land duels. At Dwarka, Govind taught me naval warfare, which was essential for his Dwarka's protection. Now this aerial route ... what a powerful missile-launcher!

We were traveling fast, faster than the wind. I felt the whiplashes of the air as it whizzed through my hair. I asked eagerly, "Where does it derive its energy from? How long can its flight last? How does it alter speed? How does it know directions?" A million questions burning in my mind and all he said was, "Later."

The bird nosedived. I gasped, braced myself against certain death as we fell from the sky. But the bird knew what it was doing. I felt nauseating dizziness and realized that we had stopped smoothly. No jerks, no imbalance.

"Welcome Home," he said proudly.

The contrast was beyond my capacity to bear it. After the serenity of ice carpets and the total absence of human companions, his abode seemed vulgarly dazzling, too populated and too rich. Dwarka had been affluent and so had Indraprastha. But this was almost obscene in prosperity.

He grasped my state of mind. He propelled me away from his welcoming citizens, towards the quieter inner recesses of his palace. He understood that I needed time to wean off from solitude. My room echoed all the richness of his palace. What redundant decadence! Had we really lived in similar palaces, once upon a time?

I thought wistfully of my room at Indraprastha – that had not been opulent, not showy. Just vast, sparse and clean. A livable space, decorated with care, attention and love.

I reached out and touched the ornate bed. The feel was too soft, too silky. The thick carpets swallowed my feet. I rolled them off the floor from one corner of the room. I spread my fingers wide and touched the marble floor beneath. It felt cold, hard, smooth and familiarly comfortable. I made that corner my bed.

*** “He got one missile. More to be acquired yet,” came the message from Krishn after a long time. The gap had been too long, the silence between this message and the last one had been too eerie.

I read the precious message again and again, hoping it would give me more information if I read it once more. If one weapon had taken so long, how much time would others take? And how many weapons exactly are adequate enough?

Krishn had not visited us for a long time – just as in Indraprastha, ignoring us whenever his dearest comrade was not there.

My father and brothers visited occasionally. It was encouraging to hear them talk of the impending war. I felt the barely controlled fury in my father’s eyes as he took in the hut, my roughened palms and calloused soles.

They had been strictly instructed not to bring my sons along. I did not want them left with an impression of poverty and defeat. But I listened with rapt attention to the stories of their progress, of how tall they had grown and how much they had learnt in their martial training. I realized that I would never be able to thank my sister-in-law enough. No amount of gratitude could be adequate for what she was managing.

“Any more news about Arjun?” asked Dhrishtadyumn.

During the *Rajsuya yagna* coronation ceremony, I had seen Dhrishtadyumn, Pradyumn - Krishn's son and Satyaki - Krishn's Commander forever clustered around Arjun, learning from him whatever they could. He was always patient with their queries, spending hours correcting their stance and grips.

"Why do you teach everyone your special techniques?" I used to ask Arjun, resentful even of the men who were allowed to engage his time and attention. Fully aware of my unreasonable jealousy, he would reassure me, "Your fragrance does not diminish just because I inhale it. It still remains yours."

"What about the thirteenth year? Have you thought of a plan?" Shikhandi asked.

"Definitely not in Dwarka or Panchal. Those would be the first places that Hastinapur would anticipate," I realized that we would have to formulate a plan soon. The end of five years suddenly did not seem too far away.

Life gradually became easier. In the early days, I had not been able to tolerate food. I would gag and throw up on my second bite. The last three years of penance had taken its toll. My body would automatically reject food as unnecessary luxury. It would have to de-learn a lot, in order to live normally.

I still slept on the cold marble floor. I still felt claustrophobic in company. Indra had been very considerate. He allowed only one trainer at a time to accompany me. The training began early at dawn and continued till dusk. No matter how lengthy and arduous the session, Indra would be invariably present to watch my training. Varuna taught me *Pasha*, Kubera taught *Antardhana*, Yama taught me his *Danda* mace while Indra taught me the infallible *Vajra*, *Aindrastra* and *Vishoshana*. It was a delight to utilize my hard-learned endurance in training.

"Why am I allowed access to Heaven's weapons?" I asked Varuna.

“Because you will not misuse them.” Varuna stated confidently.

I felt Indra’s fond fatherly gaze enfolding me, his attentions hovering over me, yearning for me to express a desire just so he could fulfill it. For the first time, I realized how Duryodhan must feel in Hastinapur, in the care of Dhritarashtra. Cocooned and pampered, granted tantrums before throwing them. Nobody here would have dared disobey my slightest fancy and nobody would have dared complain if I took undue advantage of my privileges. Except that I was not Duryodhan. I would take from Heaven only what I needed for its intended purpose down there – where my heart lay. Nothing more, nothing less. Anything else would be abuse of power and trust.

But then that answered my other suspicion. I was not King Pandu’s son, not a Pandav, not a descendant of the Kuru dynasty. So then what was I? What is the product of a demi-God and a Kshatriya union called?

It was done! I had achieved expertise in all the divine weapons here. However, I would not be able to share the secret mantras. Neither my brothers nor my sons could have access to my knowledge. My trainers strictly warned me not to use these devastating weapons until all my lesser missiles were used up. They also warned me against sharing these *astras* or their secrets. They could not be passed on as legacy. They would die with me.

It made no point to stay on any longer. I had learnt everything there was to learn. Even what I had not deemed necessary to learn.

Indra had insisted that Chitrasen be one of my instructors. Chitrasen – the legendary dancer and musician. Indra had not explained why my warrior body should learn the delicate steps and postures of a dancer.

“No knowledge is ever wasted. No form of art is less respectful than a form of warfare,” he said. Fair enough. Hadn’t he tried to stop Khandav-

dahan and all its sequelae? I could not doubt his intentions again. As usual, one step at a time, I told myself, nothing is difficult.

Curious courtesans clustered at the far end of the hall where Chitrasen taught me. I heard amused giggles. Indra's courtesans, the chief source of divine entertainment, had at last found a source of entertainment in King Indra's son! Ironic.

I felt awkward at first, but then I saw how devotedly Chitrasen approached his art. His passion reminded me of Dronacharya in his ashram. If he was worthy of worship for courtesans, why should I mind being his student?

I realized how intricate and difficult a skill dancing was. Learning the weapons had been relatively easy, but this was completely new territory for me. I would never regard dancers with disdain, I now knew what efforts and grueling hours went into excelling in it. Both required an equal amount of dedication and dexterity, timing and tempo, elegance and concentration; both required rhythm and restraint. War-dance had its rhythm too.

Lord Shiva was a skilled dancer. Govind had no qualms dancing with his *gopis*. Neither of them ever hinted that being an artist clashed with their masculinity. I was merely a drop of their artistry. Art could never be an embarrassment, only an inept student could be an embarrassment. My reluctance had been my biggest hurdle. As my reluctance faded, dance flowed fluently into my body.

One day, I learnt why I was being groomed for aerial warfare. Kubera revealed to me the motive behind Heaven's benevolence, "Indra's persistent tormentors Niwatkavacha and Kalakeya have made life difficult for us at Amrawati. You have been groomed for a battle with them. Heaven demands its Guru-dakshina from you."

I felt enormous relief. Repayment to heaven would leave me in no debt. Besides, it gave me an opportunity to try out my newly acquired skills, a kind of practice session before the battle that loomed ahead in life.

The ensuing battle was fierce and swift. Matali was my navigator as I engaged in aerial battle with the colossal armies of Niwatkavach and Kalakeya. Amrawati rejoiced as their enemies were totally routed. Showers of gold flakes, celestial music and a frenzy of festivities were held in the palaces and streets. Indra insistently seated me beside him on his bejeweled throne. I found out it was the highest honor for any guest and the only time this honor was offered to a live mortal. Sachi Mata was seated to Indra's left. I thought how apt my Queen would look on my right. Heaven would never see a more perfect warrior Queen.

Indra and I shared encounters with two persons – Govind and Mata.

Indra had constant tussles with Govind, ever since little Govind had objected to Indra's worship by Gokul's villagers and convinced them to worship Govardhan Mountain instead. Indra, in retaliation, had showered rains and thunder incessantly. Govind had countered by sheltering Gokul's populace under Govardhan. Then they clashed once again at Khandav-dahan. Now here I was, Govind's best friend in Indra's palace! Yet, Indra listened indulgently to my elaborate, glowing accounts of Govind's genius.

Kunti Mata was a subject on which we faltered. Neither of us was comfortable discussing her. Sachi Mata did not seem to resent my presence at all. I wondered why I had no other step-brother. But Indra never mentioned any.

He listened about our life post-Khandav. He was very flattered that we named our kingdom Indraprastha, but not very pleased at the way it was lost without a battle. He seemed quite nonchalant about the upcoming war, equipped as I was with all his weapons and, "your best friend," as he put it wryly.

Finally, I talked to Indra about going back home, "I have completed my training. I need to return to my family. I have stayed far too many years away from them."

“And I? Am I not your family?” he enquired, “Why do you yearn to go back to that wretched hut? Don’t leave so soon, I still have not had my fill of you.” He tried cajoling me more than once. Then his gaze would travel to the cold marble floor that was my bed and the reply to his query. “These weird Earthlings!” spoke his eyes.

Today he had planned a grand feast in his court, a farewell gift for me. The royal feast was a special performance by Chitrasen’s disciples. He wanted to show off his best disciples, just like Dronacharya used to show me off. Urvashi was supposed to be his best disciple – our ancestor’s wife, the legendary beauty. I could not imagine how the famous beauty that had tempted sages and gods would have aged.

Chitrasen’s disciples had perfect postures, fluid movements and melodious voices. Chitrasen touched my arm lightly and whispered conspiratorially, pointing to the central figure amongst the dancers, “Urvashi.”

I gaped in wonder. No wonder my ancestor had been floored by her charms. She was exquisite, like a painting. An unreal beauty, too porcelain perfect. I thought she would smear and dissolve if touched, like the surface of a pond ripples when one throws pebbles at it.

She was very much alive! And not even old – in fact, not at *all* old. What was this magical place? People never seemed to age here. I glanced at the youthful Chitrasen. In fact all my instructors had looked young and glowing with health. I looked at Indra, he was gazing at me with expectant eyes. He looked far too youthful to be my father. This place seemed to be inhabited by the forever young.

Chitrasen was beaming with pride. I had to admit defeat in this arena. I would never be able to emulate his best student’s danseuse expressions and postures. The performance ended. I saw Urvashi’s ivory skin transformed into a winsome color. She lifted her head. The look in her eyes – it felt vaguely familiar. She turned to go, looked back at me again – and once more, that hauntingly familiar expression in her eyes.

Bharat – one of our foremost ancestors, was the son of King Dushyant and Shakuntala. Shakuntala herself was the result of a union between Sage Vishwamitra and Menaka, another celestial nymph. Our dynasty was a hybrid of hybrids.

I was still mulling over our baffling and labyrinthine family tree when a radiant visage hovered at my room entrance. Urvashi poised near the entrance for a moment and then flowed into the room, smooth and fluid. Poetry in motion. I wished I knew how to draw portraits. Draupadi could never be captured in portraits. Vivacious eyes and mercurial expressions could be still painted, but where was an artist who could encapsulate her wit, her warmth and her willpower? Agni had been an exquisite artist when he created her. Besides, she would not sit still for a portrait.

Urvashi drew close, closer still. She stood looking up at me, a confident smile on her lips and a visible blush on her iridescent cheeks and yet again – that familiar expression. She raised one perfect arm and I felt her fluid fingers lightly caress my eyebrows, cheekbones and then trace the outline of my lips.

This was not the motherly touch of an ancestor. This was – at last I placed the expression! It had been years since I had seen it in a woman's eyes. The years in between had no room for it. I had overcome the need for food, water and air. How could this survive?

My reaction was instinctive and instantaneous; the same way my body had reacted to food here – with a wish to throw up, to rebuff. Her smile remained frozen on her face as her eyes slowly darkened. Urvashi was not used to refusals, but she recovered her composure quickly.

“Shy warrior,” she purred, “Take your time. We have all night.”

“I am sorry, lady, no amount of nights will allow me this.”

“You seemed to drink me up with your eyes today. Why the sudden reluctance?”

“You are exquisite and the finest artist I have seen. Accept my curiosity and my admiration for your talent. But don’t misinterpret what I offer you. You are the wife of Pururavas, our ancestor. You can be nothing more than a revered mother to me.” Even if I did not belong to King Pandu’s lineage, she was Indra’s constant companion, almost his wife.

She threw back her head and laughed. “I am an artist possessing more than one talent,” her luminous blue eyes sparkled, “How quaint! So shy, so handsome and such a merry sense of humor. Didn’t they tell you it is a fascinating combination?”

I searched back into my words. Where did she find *humor* in it?

“I am the chief courtesan of Indra’s court — his unerring weapon of seduction. And you call me a docile cow.” Then her eyes turned dreamy, “Pururavas!” she sighed softly, “Oh, he was one in a million.”

That was much better, she was on the right track. I hoped she stayed lost in his memories. But awareness returned back into her eyes. “You remind me of him,” she said unexpectedly. That did not make sense at all, considering I did not belong to the Kuru dynasty. Her eyes refocused on my face, her fingers floated along my forearm. I hated attacks that could not be defended or welcomed. Besides, I liked to make my own moves. I did love counter-aggression, but only from one particular woman.

I bowed, “Devi, in the memory of our ancestor. You are the originator of many men of our race.”

“I know them all,” she rose on tiptoe to whisper confidentially, “I have spent many a nights with the men of your race, shy warrior.”

I searched her sparkling blue eyes for jest. But she was not joking, she was just being frank. I wondered if she was even allowed a choice – poor thing!

I said before I could stop myself, “This place is unbelievable.”

“Stranger than your Earth? More peculiar than five brothers sharing one wife? ” her blue eyes taunted frostily. Then she laughed again, “You fret too much. Shed your inhibitions. Your wife down there need not learn of tonight.”

“Keep her out of this.” I felt the first stirrings of irritation.

What a pity Urvashi thought it insulting to be called a mother. Down on Earth, that was the title most cherished and respected – the closest one to being God. Women yearned for that status and here was Urvashi stubbornly denying herself the honor.

This was not Earth. I was not bound by rules here. No one up here would deny or deride me the act; no one down below would know or condone anything I did here. Only one person would know – *I* would know.

Besides, I was done with empty desire. Desire could hold meaning only if it appeared in a specific pair of eyes. But the pair of eyes facing me was now furious. There was anything but desire there now.

“What is it?” she hissed, “Do you suffer from the same affliction your Father has? No, not that one,” she read my mind and relished saying what she was saying, “The *other* one! You know why Indra had to travel down there to create you, don’t you?”

This was beyond cruelty. We had heard the malicious whispers right since our childhood, about his inability to procreate. King Pandu had been the most feared opponent on the battlefield, a highly acclaimed warrior and ruler. Father or not father, I felt a wave of fierce protective pride towards him. I could not stand him being ridiculed by this unreal beauty with her vicious eyes.

“Devi, King Pandu was doomed by a curse. He was forewarned that a woman’s touch could be fatal for him.” I explained to Urvashi.

Her reply was a spurt of laughter. I wondered how long her fragile beauty would last in the forests below. She would not survive an hour of what my

wife underwent daily. I tried to visualize Urvashi in deerskin, with bruised feet and her ivory skin peeling off. I grinned involuntarily, but I forgot that she could read my mind.

“She is not in the same league as me,” Urvashi said trembling with anger.

Quite right, she is way out of your league. But all I said was, “Lady, the only way we can stop insulting each other is if you leave.”

“Unmanly! Impotent!” she spat out, “That is how you will remain all your life.” She whirled and left the room. I observed that she did not move like poetry when she flounced out.

I shrugged, relieved to be alone again. I wondered how Govind would have dealt with her. Probably said something charming and gracious, enough to make her think the rejection was an honor.

I did not pay any further attention to her parting words. I did not even realize that her spoken words had the ... well, *the potency* to be a curse.

I would leave tomorrow, I thought with relief and joy. This place was too shallow, too addicted to meaningless pleasures. Nobody here seemed to work, to strive, to achieve. Nobody failed but nobody succeeded either. I had gleaned Heaven’s worst secret – *Heaven is boring*.

Human beings were so lucky. I could not believe those on Earth yearned to attain Heaven.

*** The last two years before our incognito thirteenth year began and still no sign of Arjun. And then out of the blue, Krishn’s abrupt message, “Travel to Gandhmadan Mountains. He will be arriving there in due course.”

An Eagle ... no matter how high it flies, always keeps a watchful eye on its young one. Why did I ever doubt that Krishn would not keep a watch over his beloved friend?

We all brightened up visibly. At last we had a definite destination to travel towards, a novelty from the drudgery of routine exile life. A wandering group of sages led by sage Lomash became our navigator. He guided us towards the lofty peaks of Gandhmadan.

It was an exhausting journey. Yudhisthir tried to convince me to stay back at the foothills of the mountain, where the sages had their ashram. I wondered at the change in Yudhisthir. His concern seemed genuine. His attitude in the recent years was contrite and caring. “They all love you, Panchali, in their own way,” Krishn had once told me.

Bheem had taken over most of the dreaded job of cooking. Nakul and Sahdev were always around for help, as solicitous and deferential as they must have been with Kunti Mata years ago. This is the exact way I would have liked them all to behave as brothers-in-law. What made them twist fate and tempt them into turning into my husbands?

I could have almost forgiven them. But then I would remember the jeering faces in the court of Hastinapur and the blood streaked floor, which was a memento that I had been dragged along. I would feel a fresh wave of fury and disgust resurface. I could not forgive that yet.

We reached the peak of Gandhmadan mountain range and set up camp there. Then we waited. And waited. And waited.

I turned anxious. It had been more than two months since that message arrived. ‘In due course,’ was what it said, but that covered quite an extensive duration of time. The wait was becoming intolerable.

Twenty years! It was twenty years since I first saw him and fell in love. And yet a paltry one year was the only time we had been together. The years before that, we had been forced to be strangers; the years after that, he had made himself a stranger. All I knew was that I needed to see Arjun again.

Today, Sahdev and I were returning with the water pitchers towards our camp. Suddenly, I felt the ground beneath my feet shudder. The sky was clouding over, the wind was strengthening, easily flattening the willowy trees around me like a monstrous slap. Earthquake!

Sahdev's fingers dug into my arms. I winced, but he was busy scanning the horizon with shielded eyes. His eyes shone as he whirled to me, too excited to articulate. I needed no further explanations. We propelled our bodies against the gusts of wind and ran for our camp.

The flying bird was bringing us back. My mind was too preoccupied with myriad thoughts, all of them pulling me in different directions. I did not know how my wife would react on our reunion. She seemed so unflinching and unforgiving when I took leave of her. I could not contain my skepticism and excitement – and yet, lurking at the back of my mind, Urvashi's infernal curse!

Once again, an abrupt nosedive, a nauseating giddiness and I was back on Earth. I took a deep lungful of its air. I knelt down, burrowed my hand into the soil, letting it claim ownership over me again. Never again would I take a single moment with my family on Earth for granted.

I introduced my father to my brothers. If he was my father, then they were my half-brothers. But it did not matter now. Indra's eyes were searching. He nudged me, interrupting Nakul's excited questions.

“Where is your *mohini-astra*, your weapon of hypnosis?” he asked.

Just as he said it, they stumbled into the camp. I saw a streak of golden brown and then my wife was in my arms. I held her close, imbibing her warmth. How fragile she felt! Her stern eyebrows and her erect posture always belied her fragility. I noticed anew how very tiny and delicate she was. No strength would have been needed to tow her through the halls of Hastinapur – none at all. It must have been so easy to drag her along the floor ... *stop it!*

We, who were so smug about physical strength ... and yet she had won on that terrible day. There must be something stronger than physical strength that sustained her.

Her mind. A mind that refused to be enslaved, a mind that refused to be a mere pawn, a mind that could argue with clarity and confidence – it had made all the difference. Where did her clarity stem from? What haze had clouded our minds? If only we had the simple strength to say ‘No!’ in that dice game.

Her nails were sunk like talons into me, drawing blood. She was trembling. I realized with a shock that she was crying. She had gone through much worse without shedding a single tear. I had never ever seen her cry before, except when she first met Abhimanyu.

“Let me see you once,” I coaxed her, but she shook her head and stayed where she was.

“Your father-in-law is here to meet you,” I whispered and waited. She surfaced at last, her face streaked with shed tears, her tawny eyes bright with unshed tears. I had never seen anything more beautiful in my whole life!

“My wife,” I said proudly.

“I kind of guessed,” Indra smiled down fondly at her. He had been watching us with curiosity. Then he murmured in dazed wonder, “At Amrawati, when we go on expeditions or military campaigns, we are welcomed home with flowers and showers of gold flakes. But never with tears.”

“That is the price you pay for immortality. Tears are the magic elixir of this planet, unique to mortals. Stay here on Earth sometime. It is a beautiful place,” I replied to the wistfulness in his voice.

“You have some nerve, Earthling! Saying that to the King of Gods and Lord of Heaven,” he laughed. Then he glanced at my wife again, “You were

right. There is absolutely no comparison at all.”

Chapter 17: The Eleventh Name

*** I was sure Krishn would arrive the next day. He had not visited us more than twice in the last five years. But as usual, he proved me wrong. He did not arrive the next day; he arrived the very *same day*, late in the evening.

“My spies kept me informed. As long as you all were safe, there was no need to come down here personally,” he explained.

“We are safe right now too,” I said, but he did not take the bait.

We all stayed awake late into the night, listening to Arjun’s tales, about the rich variety of weapons he had now mastered. As the night wore on, the others gradually went off to sleep around the fireplace. Arjun leaned against my feet, his fingers enclosing my wrists.

“I have been looking around at probable places. Viratnagar is what I have zeroed in on,” Krishn said.

“But that is practically next-door to Hastinapur,” Arjun observed.

“Exactly! Duryodhan would expect you to venture as far away from Hastinapur as possible. The nearest is sometimes the least obvious.”

“Which of us has to hide there?”

“All of you. Together,” Krishn said confidently, “Any specific talents you possess?” This was for me.

“Not cooking. Bheem is a much better cook,” I confessed.

He nodded, “Yes, it is a viable option. Nakul and Sahdev are good at handling horses and cattle respectively. Yudhisthir can be the legal advisor. You...” he looked at me dubiously, “any place where the men cannot see

you. The Queen's service! You can be her personal maid. Can you manage to do a maid's duties?"

A maid? The Empress of Indraprastha?

"Sure," I said lightly, "I can do her personal makeup, her hair, her accessories. But not anything more demeaning than that. I will not eat any food half eaten by someone else, or wash anyone's feet."

"The Queen will decide whether to agree or not agree. Beggars cannot be choosers."

Beggars? I thought of Indraprastha's treasury. The roomfuls of rare gems, the mountain of gold ... I tore my mind from that memory.

"I will do it," I said resolutely. Arjun leaned back, his eyes searching my face for a sulk, a frown. I smiled down at him instead. "What will you be?"

"Train the soldiers?" he asked turning back to Krishn. But he got an emphatic shake of the head in response, "Too obvious."

"Does he have to be at Viratnagar? He could mix with the tribes in this forest. He is quite adept at their language and lifestyle."

"Kalyani," Krishn said patiently, "does he look like a tribal to you?"

Of course not, he was too tall and too regal. He would never blend in with the wiry little tribals. "Can't Indra take you back there?" I asked speculatively.

"No," he said shortly, "Oh, and you forgot to touch his feet."

"I know," I admitted shamefully, "but he looked so young. Younger than you and I."

"They never grow old there."

"Not even when their children grow up?"

“Funny that you mention that. You know, I did not see a single child there. No wonder she did not understand ...” he trailed off, then said, “Indra made me learn the fine arts. Dance and music.”

What a weird thing to learn! What was my father-in-law planning?

“The Virat king is not going to allow you into the women’s quarters. The only ones allowed entry there are ... well, you know who...” I trailed off.

Why wasn’t Krishn objecting to this tangential conversation? This option was unthinkable. Krishn stretched his arms lazily, “Indra is wiser than I gave him credit for. Tomorrow,” he got up, “we will discuss this tomorrow. Tired minds need to sleep over novel ideas.”

I was exhausted too. The day had been far too exciting, too eventful. I slid down from my perch to sit beside my husband. I wrapped his arm around my shoulders and nestled my head on his knees. I was asleep before he could say anything more. I had a vague recollection of being lifted and carried back to my room.

The next day, he and Krishn wandered off on their own. When they returned, Krishn looked amused and relaxed; Arjun looked stoic. “We are still thinking about it,” Krishn said in response to our enquiry about Arjun’s disguise.

We discussed the roles the other four would play. It wasn’t exactly a disguise, since we were almost brazenly in the open. The induction of six menial personnel into Viratnagar would not be difficult. However, Krishn would also divert many unsuspecting craftsmen and laborers to Viratnagar, so that the presence of six new servants would not attract attention or suspicion.

Arjun came with me today to the lake. We sat dipping our feet in the cool waters. He gazed silently into the water.

When he laid me on the bed last night, I had not been completely asleep. I had felt him kneeling by the bed, looking down at me. I could not see his

eyes, but I could read his fingers and the desire in them when he carried me.

I had resolutely managed to make the others stay away all these years. There had been understanding and mutual consent, because it applied to all of them. The equation changed as soon as Arjun returned. Would they grudge me one night? Or would it change their entire attitude, the entire behavior pattern we had so painfully established?

“Listen ...” his fingers encircled my wrist.

I had missed him and I was willing to let him know that, but it still did not earn him pardon. I could not deny the others if I gave in to him. I felt a faint shiver of protest at the thought of rekindling the cycle.

I raised my eyelashes to confirm the desire in his eyes. Then I looked down and shook my head, “No. We have two more years of exile. We have the thirteenth year to spend incognito. I cannot afford to ...”

I could not face him with lying eyes. There was no way I would bear a child ever again. The tough forest life had taken its toll. I had stopped bleeding years ago. In the constant wandering lifestyle, I had thought it a boon that my cycles ceased. But he would not know it. Neither did the others. I was using their ignorance as a safety shield.

“I know, I know...” he whispered, contrite that he had even asked, his fingers still wound tight around mine.

Govind’s eyes were highly amused and vibrantly alive.

“You said *that* to Urvashi? You said that to *Urvashi*? How do you always manage to get into these situations with ladies? ” he asked.

“Not ‘always’. How would you have avoided the curse?”

He grinned and spread out his arms wide, “But Urvashi is not my ancestor at all,” he started laughing at the expression on my face.

“I did not even know they are invested with so much power. I had not taken her words seriously at all. It is only when Indra confronted me in the morning that I realized what had happened. Women ...” I took a deep breath, “are dangerous.”

“He finds out after four marriages! I really envy your colorful love life. I danced with the milkmaids just one moonlit night, I got one love letter in my entire life ... and they defame me for eternity. You get women imploring you to carry them off, enthralled women kidnapping you, the most beautiful woman on Earth is envious of your bow and now the loveliest woman in Heaven tries to seduce you.”

“They must be impressed by the company I keep.”

“Ah, modesty. I am surprised you got away with only a curse from Urvashi. She was always considered as the flawless, irresistible weapon of Indra. Now all her conquests stand nullified by one rebuff. She may be furious at rejection, but she will be a multifold livid at what you did to her immaculate reputation. How did you manage to resist her?”

“She had cold fingers and colder eyes.” I said shortly, which sent him chuckling again, “Besides, don’t the men have any rights over their body?”

“Alright, don’t get so serious. I can’t tell you how glad I am. This solves our problem. Nobody, but nobody will imagine you in that guise.”

“I don’t even know what Urvashi meant by the curse. Did she mean impotence or emasculation – that too for an entire year?”

“If Indra promised you a year, then it will be a year. Actually, it will keep you from getting into trouble with the women. I don’t want you getting any more curses.”

“I don’t seduce ...” I started heatedly.

“Yes, yes,” he said soothingly, “you don’t seduce them. Now that your innocence is established, can we speak of more important matters? But please, no more curses after the thirteenth year.”

It was all very well for him to be so offhand about it. He was treating the curse as some golden blessing ... which it probably was.

*** We still had eighteen months to go before the thirteenth year began. We were to go into Viratnagar at periodic intervals – the eldest first, followed by the youngest twins. Then Bheem and myself and then when Urvashi's curse materialized, Arjun. We were to call ourselves by different names. I was Sairandhri/Malini, Yudhishthir was Kank, Bheem was Ballav, Nakul and Sahdev were Granthik and Tantipal. At Viratnagar I would be free to move through the palaces so I would be the conduit to pass messages across each other.

Arjun would be Brihannada. He already had ten names. Arjun, Parth (Pritha's son), Vijay (the victorious), Savyasachi (ambidextrous), Kiriti (bearer of the silver diadem gifted by Indra), Dhananjay (the scourer of wealth), Gudakesh (one who has conquered sleep), Bibhatsu (one who never does an ignoble act on the battlefield), Svetvahan (the one whose chariot has white horses) and Phalguni (born in the Phalgun lunar phase). This would be his eleventh name.

We sat around the charts as Krishn explained the rules and then the exact calculations that decided when the year ended. "Every day is precious. Duryodhan would be scouring heaven and hell to find you. Once you cross this period, he cannot claim any other calculation."

"I will know exactly when the year ends. I will know the year has ended when I start feeling normal again," Arjun said.

One incident marred the rehearsals that we undertook daily for our disguise.

Jayadratha barged into our serene lives. Dusshala's husband, Duryodhan's brother-in-law. Enroute to a wedding, he happened to see me alone in my hut. He flicked aside the conversation when I enquired of Dusshala's well-being. I saw the repulsive lust in eyes that had no right to express it.

“Accompany me. Be my Queen,” he smirked shamelessly, right in front of his entire army.

I was alone in our hut today. I felt my wrath flare up. But anger was not enough; I was too fragile to counter brute strength. He dragged me into his chariot, intent on carrying me away to a place of his safety. I fought as fiercely as I could. I lashed out at him, felt my nails gnash through his flesh and blood, left him scratched and bleeding.

I saw a blur of white as the chariot fled across Dhaumya rishi’s ashram. I hoped someone there saw me or someone heard. Someone evidently did. A short distance later, I heard the reassuring reverberations of arrows. I saw them leap ahead of the chariot and sink in a commanding arc around us.

“*Agnipankh*,” I laughed as I recognized my old friends. I pointed to the crackling flames now erupting from the curve of arrows. “Don’t you know who these belong to, Jayadratha?” I felt much more secure now. I saw lust wiped off his face. He hopped down the chariot and started fleeing in blind terror.

Bheem and Arjun reached us. Bheem lifted Jayadratha off bodily and flung him to the ground at my feet. They stood guard, waiting for him to scramble to his knees.

“He is your criminal, Panchali. You decide his punishment.”

I was tempted, sorely tempted, to see him ripped apart in front of me. To do it myself, if possible.

And then, a crashing wave of disappointment as I remembered this was a family member. His death would leave Dushshala a widow. As usual, a woman would have to bear the brunt of her man’s crime. I had allowed Duryodhan to escape death because his wife begged on his behalf. Even Krishna had forgiven Shishupal’s hundred sins for his mother’s sake! I felt the bitter taste of unquenched fury. I knew what I would not be doing next.

“Are you sure?” I saw the query in my husbands’ eyes. They had seen the blood dripping from under my nails. They could not comprehend the discrepancy between my bloody fingernails and my abrupt mercy.

But it had been said, those magnanimous words that would prove too costly in the end. We left Jayadratha shorn of his hair, eyebrows and moustache. Tarnished and humiliated – but unfortunately alive.

*** Queen Sudeshna had long straight silky hair. I stood behind her, braiding it into a new pattern. I took care not to permit my image to reflect beside hers in the mirror. She had not been particularly pleased to see me, had been reluctant to keep me on as her maid. But she must have felt a strange fascination too, for she called me back just as I was leaving. She kept me on, with a veiled threat of, “Don’t ever venture in when the King is here.” I could not welcome the suggestion more if I tried.

I had not looked into a proper mirror in the last twelve years. The still waters of ponds and lakes had been my only mirrors. The Queen’s chamber had so many mirrors that I could not escape my reflections. I detected a few stray grey hair. I looked long and deep for ravages of the years and hardships. I saw none. I had not mellowed nor jaded. Sometimes I wished I could alter my looks, shield them from everyone. I wish Urvashi had cursed me with ugliness for a year.

When Bheem and I had left for Viratnagar, I realized that this was the first time *I* was leaving Arjun behind. I used to think leaving behind is easy. I understood now what agony it is to leave behind someone so infinitely precious.

I remembered how he had held up my hairclip in two fingers, away from his body as if it was a wriggling serpent, “Will you teach me how to weave this into my hair?” He had still looked perfectly normal when we left, except for his long hair which he tied back neatly. Krishn had planted aliases in various towns and forests. He would make sure that rumors spread – ditto the confusion. There would be periodic news of the sighting of five men and a woman, in various places and at various times.

Kank was already established in the king’s court. Both shared the love for the game of dice. The twins were deeply entrenched in the stables and cowsheds respectively. Ballav was enjoying his guise as the royal chef. He

got to cook his favorite dishes, to invent newer ones and also to eat all he wanted. He was frequently invited to wrestling matches with Virat's best wrestlers – and occasionally with elephants. While I reflected that it was good practice for his wrestling skills, it sickened me to see Indraprastha's mighty warrior used for frivolous royal entertainment.

As for myself, I was fairly comfortable as a maid. After the initial reluctance, the Queen was affectionate. She had agreed readily to my conditions. My work was not demeaning. The palace offered me peace, safety, shelter.

The only minor irritant was that she couldn't get enough of the stories of Indraprastha and Hastinapur. She knew Draupadi's tale and Bheem's vow to tie up her hair with Hastinapur blood. She knew me as Draupadi's personal maid. I explained my untied hair as a way of expressing empathy with my former Queen. She wasn't interested in the politics or economics. She wanted to know about the private lives of Pandavs and Draupadi. I skimmed over the merest details, invented events, gave her watered down versions of events. I hoped my imagination would bear up with her constant perseverance.

I met prince Uttar and princess Uttara.

Uttara was delicate and feminine. So was the prince.

Uttara was more spirited than her brother, achingly nubile and vibrant. She had informed me excitedly that her dance lessons would begin tomorrow. That was today! Brihannada was in Viratnagar.

The Queen dragged me along with her to meet Brihannada. I was torn between curiosity and dread. I could not bear to go, could not bear not to go. I stayed firmly in the shadows as the royal couple discussed terms with Brihannada.

I kept my eyes resolutely averted, my ears wide open. I waited for his familiar deep voice. The voice I heard was low, musical, husky. It could belong to man or woman or both. I risked raising my eyelashes slightly. I

took in the flowing skirts, the broad waistband, the huge bracelets and amulets covering the arms from shoulders to wrists - evidently to conceal the muscles and scars. The feminine silk attire could not mask his tall, lean body. He towered above the royal couple, his long hair knotted and draped over one shoulder. The contrast was ludicrous, absurd and unbearable.

I turned and left the room abruptly, felt the sinking pit in my stomach. I had believed the curse was a jest. It finally struck me that the curse was a reality. Neither was this a game of hide and seek. It was hide or re-enter exile.

Just a year, I told myself, bear it only for one year. The unfamiliar femininity within me, the strange melody in my voice, the way my hands gestured.

I heard the sniggers and lewd comments, saw the amused glances as I walked through the town till Virat's royal court. No road had ever seemed more interminable. Learn to live with it, I sternly told myself.

I saw Kank seated beside the king. There were other contenders for my job, but Chitrasen's disciple won, just as Dronacharya's disciple had won long ago. The king accepted me, but not before he tested the truth of my masculinity, or rather the lack of it. His methods of testing! I could not even afford the recollection of what I went through.

My body successfully passed his tests. I cannot describe what the mind endured. I kept reminding myself that I should be grateful to be safe here, grateful that my family was alive and safe. This too would pass ... perhaps.

I was glad I had music for company. The percussion instruments kept my muscles working. Dance kept me active, flexible, kept up my stamina. The exercise was woefully inadequate. It was not even a sliver of what I was used to. I felt the slight slacking of my muscles, felt their helpless weakness. But better something than nothing.

I remembered what a delight it had been to educate our sons in the art of warfare. I was allowed to scold them, to take them to the edge of endurance, to be severe and exacting with them.

But my current student was someone else's child, a royal disciple and a feminine one. Uttara was pert, pampered and very talkative. The slightest recrimination would bring a flush to her cheeks along with a pout. She needed to be cajoled out of her sulking before the lessons proceeded.

I had wanted a daughter, hadn't I? Well, here was my proxy role play at it. It was tougher than I imagined and more fun than I envisaged.

I did not meet my other brothers as yet. Brihannada belonged to the women's chambers. I had seen my wife in the shadows, quietly following the Queen. I know she avoided the passages at the times when I would be traveling from my chambers to the dance hall.

I was glad she did not have to move much beyond the Queen's chambers. She attracted the attention of even eunuchs - speaking strictly from personal experience. There was still unmistakable authority in her steps, still an aura of touch-me-not about her posture. We really ought to have given her a better disguise. No matter how simple she tried to remain, her burnished looks dazzled. Even the women paused to stare when she passed by.

"How could Queen Draupadi afford to have a maid so sensuous?" one maid asked.

"Empress Draupadi's husbands were very devoted to her," I said earnestly.

This made them roll their eyes, "That must be why she had so many co-wives. As for the third one, he was the worst. Three marriages in three years - and then he gets a wife home to flaunt and taunt Queen Draupadi."

That sounded familiar. I counted from eldest to youngest and back again. I realized that I could not escape being 'the third'. Nothing like a disguise to

know what people really think of you.

“Only four? I know for a fact that he had more than a thousand wives,” piped in another maid with utmost confidence, to my amazement.

“Did you see Queen Draupadi? Was she really so irresistible?” another continued.

“Ummm ... She was not really to my taste. I found her husbands more attractive,” I said with a straight face. I was duly greeted with scandalized giggles and knowing nudges. My innuendo gave them enough fodder for renewed gossip. At least it deflected a little attention away from her.

Govind said I was the embodiment of masculinity. Yet, I was perhaps the only one to experience the feminine side of life so closely. Women were taught to tolerate co-wives. Who was ever taught to tolerate co-husbands? Women could reject advances from men with righteous anger. When I did it, I ended up cursed.

Rains had descended on Virat nagar. Uttara frolicked in the deluge. There had been nights like these spent with my wife, drenched on the wide terraces, drunk on the intoxicating raindrops on her smoldering skin, her turbulent tresses wrapped like a cloak around me.

“Why such sadness in your eyes, Brihannada? Don’t you like the rains?” Uttara enquired.

“Nights like these should make us feel glad that we are human beings. Animals don’t enjoy this security, nor the trees. They are so vulnerable to rains and thunderstorms,” I answered. She did not understand at all.

Bundled in somber white cloth to appear like a corpse, our weapons lay high up in the dense branches of the Shami tree in the cemetery. Just before entering Viratnagar, we had deposited her along with the others’ weapons in her hiding place. The Gandiva bow was lonely and desolate, up in the branches, open and vulnerable to all onslaughts of rain, wind and sun.

I felt a protective wrench in my heart. I might as well have left Abhimanyu and Shrutkirti tied to the trees and slept peacefully myself.

Chapter 18: The Pointed Finger

*** Uttara was sixteen years old. She, like her mother, had developed a fond fascination for me. She too, like her mother asked a lot of questions. Uttara's questions were more pinpoint, more specific; they revolved around Draupadi and Arjun. When had she heard of him? She must have been a tot when we disappeared off the royal radar. Maybe her mother fuelled her imagination. The child had heard stories about his valor, had woven her own imagination around his persona and placed him on a pedestal. *I just hoped the pedestal was not housed in her heart.*

But she was such a child – or was she? The queen had mentioned her marriage the other day. Uttara had blushed as she lingered on beside me. I had not been mistaken, I had not misinterpreted the dreamy look in her bright eyes. Hero worship had transgressed into something else. What was it with these women? Why did they always yearn after what was mine?

I could never give him a daughter now. Uttara could. This fresh young thing would be ready to bloom and blossom. I felt the reality of grey hair at last. Ah fickle youth, had it bypassed us already? I felt the disquieting stab of jealousy. I had enough of allotment. I would not share him with anyone else anymore.

I knew I could not trick her, could not take advantage of her trust and yet ... yet I would not give her what she wanted. I was walking a tightrope again. The plan completed its pattern in my mind as I walked towards the dance hall. I knew exactly how to needle him.

I waited till they finished their lessons, aware that he was aware that I was waiting in the shadows. I conveyed the Queen's message to get his student out of the way. Then I moved into his line of vision.

“How are you?” I asked, keeping my eyes on the clunky anklets.

“I will survive. How are the others? And you?”

“We will survive too,” I paused, “I cannot say the same about Virat King. I think we are extremely ungrateful guests.”

“What do you mean?”

“What will happen to your student at the end of the year?”

“It is a pity. She was a good learner. But I will be busy fighting a war. She will have to find another dance teacher.” He waited for me to smile.

“Arjun, try to think like a daughter’s father. The King is not going to be amused. Unwittingly and innocently but his nubile daughter will have spent a large part of her day with a man ... for one entire year. We will have sullied her reputation by then.”

“A student is like a child. She is like the daughter that we did not have. Just how low do people think I can fall?”

“Public imagination can sink to levels you cannot fathom. It is *her* character that is at stake, not yours. The King and Queen may be willing to believe the story about the curse, but there are mischief-mongers in every Kingdom. I am afraid we have damaged her prospects of a suitable marriage.”

“Not if we accept her into our family, as our daughter-in-law. That will put a seal of approval over this one year. My acceptance will consolidate her innocence,” then after a pause, “Seems just like yesterday, I was vying for your hand. When did we become old enough to have daughters-in-law?” he asked in a wondering voice

“Did you think youth would last forever?” he finally succeeded in making me laugh.

“No, but you are still so young. You still look like the bride waiting for me to hit the fish-eye target in your court.” Then he continued with a smiling voice, “First Urvashi and then Uttara! Another one that Arjun did *not* seduce. My reputation too will be in tatters.”

“Could you be a little serious? How can you joke about yourself?”

“Better than whining about it. And I wanted to see you smile.” He continued, “I had already decided to include her into our family as a token of bond between us and Virat nagar. Not for the reason you suggested, that never occurred to me. Only a woman could have realized the disastrous side-effects of this role play.

“We will repay Virat’s hospitality in abundance. I will give her a reverse Guru-dakshina, my student will be the future queen of Indraprastha. Prativindhya must be almost twenty-one years old. He is so introverted, she is so chirpy. They will make a sweet pair.”

There he went on one of his tangents.

I stopped short, aware of what he said. It was tempting, extremely tempting to agree with him and let things follow the natural flow of events. Except that, I could not repeat the mistakes of history. I couldn’t do to Uttara what Mata Kunti had done to me. I was still not being completely fair with Uttara, but it was the closest thing I could do.

Was I being cruel to my own son? No, Uttara was not won in any contest, she would be probably offered by a King to protect his daughter’s reputation. If he made the offer to Yudhisthir, well maybe ... but if he made it to Arjun ...

I would not have gifted her to Abhimanyu if Prativindhya won her and vice versa. *That* would be cruelty. I wanted Kunti Mata to know that options always exist, unless you close your mind to them.

Krishn would famously say one future day, “*Karma eva adhikar aste; maa faleshu kadhachan*” – Action is the only possible option; the consequences, fruits and reactions of that action are not. I did not know his words then, but I was living his words. Perhaps I would not have done it if I knew the results my act would reap, if I knew it would leave my blood-line cold and barren.

Who knows? Some answers don't come even in hindsight.

Maybe I could pretend to be grandiose. But I was never dishonest with myself. I was a mother, but that did not stop me from being a woman.

"No," I said quietly.

I was not giving her my husband, but she did not have to be yoked to someone she did not desire. If she could not have Arjun, she could at least be given his younger counter part. His own son, Shrutkirti, was much too young for her but there was the other one.

"Abhimanyu," I said, "We will have to marry her to him."

"Abhi? But Prativindhya is the eldest son, Krishnaa," he said.

"Don't repeat that cycle all over again. We don't have to follow the old rules. Besides, everyone knows Prativindhya is Yudhisthir's son. They will say you forced my son to accept her, but spared your own son from nasty gossip." I cast my trap.

"How can you even think - ?"

"Prativindhya has already lost his adolescence dependent on his uncles. Now you will make him face scandal in his youth as well? Trust me, the malicious tongues will quiet down only if it is your own son. Uttara's acceptance into our family will not be completely devoid of suspicion unless it is your own blood. It has to be Abhimanyu."

"Indraprastha's heir cannot marry after Abhimanyu. Don't mess up the hierarchy."

"Nobody is taking away Prati's rights. I am not condemning him to a lifetime of loneliness. Uttara is not the last princess on Earth, is she? There will be brides left for my sons. I will not have Prativindhya getting everything on a platter. Let him learn to earn it."

"What has Abhimanyu done to earn it? He has yet to win a war too." A reasonable query from him.

“My sons are bereft of a kingdom, bereft of their parents, living off their maternal uncles ...” I trailed off, feeling a strange sense of *dejavu*.

“Abhimanyu has the same set of misfortunes around his name. How is he different? ”

“Abhimanyu may not be crown prince, but he is Krishn’s nephew. He has the allure and prosperity of Dwarka to back him up.” *And a mother who has not been dragged by her hair into court.*

I felt his gaze on me, “Are you sure there is no other reason?” I kept silent, “Well, since we cannot decide between Prativindhya and Abhi, I may as well marry her myself. That would certainly stop all gossip.” This was not a tangent, it was a boomerang. My head snapped back in hot denial and I saw him smiling. “Scheming manipulator! Couldn’t you give me a direct order instead of going around in circles? My student is talkative, indiscreet and thinks a eunuch is a safe haven for feminine secrets. She has silly ideas fogging her mind and they will evaporate soon.”

“Abhi is perfect. Neither her father nor Uttara can resist him.”

“All mothers think their sons are irresistible.”

“He is perfectly age matched for her ... seventeen years old now?”

“...seventeen years and fifty-two days,” he answered.

In the wistful silence that followed I felt his palm over my head, “Whatever else you forgive, we cannot compensate our kids their childhood.”

We were living the last few days of exile. After the war, there would be plenty of time to compensate my sons for all these years.

But life was never so easy. On the way back, disaster struck.

*** Yet again a royal court, yet again a sea of faces, yet again the intent to molest me, yet again the indifferent eyes of Indraprastha’s Emperor and

yet again a hapless King at the mercy of his subordinate.

Keechak, Queen Sudeshna's brother, had been on a long war campaign this year. On his return, he saw me. The result was immediate and disastrous. He cornered me to make passionate declarations of everlasting devotion. When I refused, he made the aftereffects of a refusal even clearer. I tried to enlist the queen but she pleaded helplessness. I had to obey her, had to venture into Keechak's private palace all alone, armed with a goblet of heady wine and my cursed heady beauty. The result was a foregone conclusion. When his repeated pleas got rebuffed, he lost control over his temper.

We had sorted out the calculations in our individual rooms. Ten days were still left over before this year ended.

"I cannot manage ten days more," I said flatly to Brihannada in her dance hall, "Keechak is drunk on power. He does not know restraint and he cannot comprehend patience. He does not even consider a maid to exert a choice once he decides on her. I will swallow poison if need be ..."

"You have handled the toughest years of this exile. We will get through this. Don't give up now, in the last stages.

"Maybe it is your resistance that makes him desperate to snatch what he cannot ever hope ..." he stopped, "Could you make him hope for acceptance? Refusal will only make him brandish his brutality. But if he believes that he stands a chance after ten days ... he would not go so berserk. There is nothing as tempting as hope."

"I will not," I said firmly.

"The only other option is to kill him. Any rash action now will attract Hastinapur's attention towards Viratnagar. If Duryodhan succeeds in finding us, we are looking at thirteen years exile again."

"Is that all that matters? Does my honor mean nothing?"

“Your honor is not different from ours. The war and your revenge cannot begin until exile ends. Do you really think you can afford thirteen years more in exile? Thirteen more years away from our sons? Thirteen more years for Hastinapur to enjoy our Indraprastha? Thirteen more years of inaction and lethargy while they jeer at us? Thirteen more years of our sons dependent on their uncles?

“Can’t you see Bheem wasting away his muscles in the kitchen, eagerly snatching at the odd wrestling duels? That incomparable warrior paraded like a freak at wrestling matches for their leisure time! You think he can last thirteen more years without killing Duryodhan?

“We are a unit here, the six of us. Whatever we do, the consequences will apply to all.” I stayed silent, he continued, “All you have to do is make Keechak believe he has hope in the future. You know you are capable of fooling him. He won’t realize the importance of those ten days. For him it will be just ten days of patience with a reward waiting at its end. Later, when we reveal our true identity, he will have no choice but to fall at your feet for pardon. The exile will be complete and you will still be safe.”

I squirmed and fidgeted. It was too huge a risk to take – but we could not afford not to take the risk either. “I will tell him I am observing a severe penance that requires total piety of soul and body from me. He should not approach or touch me, but after two weeks I will be free of my oath and available to entertain his advances — what?”

“Nothing. Just to hear the words from you —”

“Well, it *is* your plan. But what if he does not care about my penance? He does not even respect the sanctity of a marriage. I already told him I am married to five Gandharvas, but he did not pause to consider. I also told Queen Sudeshna — what happened?”

He had frozen, listening intently to me. Then abruptly, “Forget it. Change of plans. We have to kill him. Tonight.”

“What happened? Why the sudden ...”

“Five? You said *husbands*? He may be blinded by passion right now but not deaf. How many irresistible women with five husbands exist?”

I gasped, “I was just so furious ...”

“We are past accusations. We survive together or sink together. In these ten long days, if he recollects your mention of five husbands, especially as he is going to relish winning you from them...

“The woman he wants and whom he will never get, just imagine how his hatred would explode. Enemy of an enemy is a friend. The first thing, his spies will be dispatched to inform Hastinapur of our hideout.”

“Here.” he said grimly, his fingers softly drumming on the *mridangam*, “There is no better place for the rendezvous. The dance hall is deserted during the night. I have been here sometimes, practicing in the night. No guards are posted here in the night. It is situated well away from the main residential rooms to keep away the din and chimes through the day. Nobody will notice Keechak’s death until it happens.”

“They will notice it the next day.”

“We have no choice. At least there won’t be interruptions before his death. Our original plan is now condensed to tonight. Any other points we could have overlooked?”

I thought for a moment, “His bodyguards ...”

“Convince him that they will be an unnecessary hindrance. A maid willing to be seduced is hardly expected to be a threat to his life. Tell him ...”

“... that I am feeling shy and guilty. I will convince him I want no witnesses since I am cheating my husbands ... husband.”

“Are you sure he is not playing a cat and mouse game with us? If he had seen you at your swayamwar, he won’t forget you.”

“He could not have been present at the contest. He is hardly a few years older than Prativindhya.”

He saw the appeal in my eyes, “Don’t look at me like that. I cannot even protect myself in this wretched state. Can you manage to contact Bheem alone?”

“I will manage,” I said firmly.

*** I was armed with all the right weapons in my repertoire. Words, tears or seduction, I would resort to whatever was needed.

The gentle giant was asleep in the servant’s quarters. I roused Bheem awake. He blinked blankly, then he jumped upright. “Draupadi — here? Am I dreaming? I have you within my vision, all alone, after so many years. In Indraprastha, you were never completely mine. Always, always the next year hanging over my head! You have stayed away from us for so long. Stay here with me tonight, my beloved.”

Words, tears or seduction, is what I had resolved. As I allowed him to enfold me, I felt rebellion rise up my throat like bile. I came for help, not to compensate for it. I was furious at Keechak for interrupting my dreams of meeting my sons, furious with the Virat king for being a puppet in Keechak’s hands. I was furious, most of all with myself for being dependent on my men. Something snapped in me. My inspiring words smothered down my throat. My plans tumbled out pell-mell.

“You are mistaken,” I shook myself free and said as sweetly as possible in my current state of mind, “I don’t like unfair bargains. I just came to inform you that I have decided to accept Keechak tomorrow. He is powerful and he loves me. Besides, why risk our thirteenth year in hiding? I would rather submit voluntarily than be forced into the indignity of it, or be forced into gratitude to another for saving my honor.”

He went crimson and then purple. “What are you saying? You are the Queen of Indraprastha. How dare you utter such blasphemy?” he thundered.

“I am not Queen of Indraprastha anymore. What is blasphemy about it? He made an offer, I rejected it once. He made the offer again and I accept it now. There is no need for anyone’s ego to be hurt. Besides, my virginity will be restored back in the morning, as promised to my husbands.”

“He is not your husband!”

“If a marriage ceremony justifies the act, then I will go through it. I believe Keechak mentioned both marriage and love. My life is a series of firsts. I will be the first to have a ... what is the delightful term you Kshatriyas use ... *political alliance* with this marriage. After all, women should be accommodating to such requests. And I am a veteran.”

“How dare he make such an obscene offer to a married woman? I will crush his skull with bare hands.”

“You are very prompt to accuse others, but very prompt to forgive yourself the same crime.”

“What crime?” He was understandably bewildered.

“You committed the same sin, twenty two years ago. Did you not covet someone else’s wife?”

He stopped in his tracks. “You were not yet married to him, not yet his wife. The marriage ceremony had not yet ...”

“I was his wife. The target was pierced, the contest was won, and the garland was around his neck. The rest was mere formality awaiting completion.”

“We had to obey mother’s orders. We have never disobeyed ...”

“Oh, stop seeking shelter behind your mother’s words.”

“He should not have given you up so easily. If you were my bride, I would have never shared you.”

“Bravo! Gallant words, but I heard neither a vehement protest from you that day nor a vociferous vow *not* to touch a younger brother’s wife.”

“My mother wished it ... and her wish cannot be a sin.”

“Besides being convenient. Is this how elders should behave with those who cannot hit back?”

“Your devotion didn’t serve much purpose. Why did he abandon his first wife if he loved her?”

“You tell me. You abandoned your first wife. Unless Hidimba was another exemplary evidence of convenient obedience.”

“That was for Mata Kunti. I couldn’t disobey her ...” he stopped short, “Three wives in three years! Not quite the sign of a broken heart.”

I shrugged, “I gave four sons to four husbands in spite of a broken heart. In case you still feel indignant, let me remind you of the existence of Kaali and Baladhara. What was your excuse?”

“Those were my political marriages.”

“Correct. Arjun is the only one who makes marriages of passion. Have you never heard of a rebound? At least he took the women who wanted him, not stooped down to covet a sister-in-law. As for Urvashi –”

He snapped, “You don’t believe that yarn, do you? He may have refused Urvashi, but I am sure he did not turn away the other courtesans in Indra’s harem. Hardships indeed! He was enjoying all the pleasures of Heaven, while we labored in the forest.”

“Feeling cheated out on heavenly pleasures? Perhaps you wanted equal share in that as well. If that trip promised to be such fun, how come none of you volunteered to accompany him?”

“How do you know he did not seduce the damsels? Blind faith!” he mocked.

“Yes. Faith is a handy tool. How else could you be sure your son is yours? My word is all you have.”

For their entire pretense at unity, they had stumbled at the first temptation that came their way. Nobody could accuse me of breaking their unity. One cannot destroy the non-existent.

“Rest assured, blind faith will not protect your honor today. You had to come to me,” he frowned.

I reminded him, “I have *not* come for protection, just to inform you of my decision. I don’t want to be later accused of cheating. Do you realize, mighty Bheem that your strength has no purpose and meaning if I decide not to depend on it? If it comes at a price, it is a transaction — no matter what glorious word one attaches to it.”

“You told the others? You told Arjun?”

I shook my head “Hierarchy. Who am I to fiddle with hierarchy so late in my life? Eldest to youngest. Yudhisthir first, then you, then ...

“Don’t look so incredulous. Where was your sense of honor when you desired your brother’s wife? Gandhari Mata intervened and foiled further sin from her sons in her court. Your mother encouraged and aided you at her hut. Do you really think you can afford to be smug?

“I learnt long ago that my honor cannot stem from anyone else. My honor is not someone’s perception of it, nor is it an illusion. My honor originates from and ends in me. If I decide to accept Keechak and not feel soiled, then I will not be. If you feel soiled, that is your problem.

“My honor does not depend on you. Why does your honor stem from me? Find your own.” I continued with a weary sigh, “I came on exile to be a source of inspiration, not a source of trouble. I cannot make deals even within the sanctity of marriage. I cannot pay with my body for every act of chivalry. I would rather swallow poison.”

He stood listening, breathing heavily. I realized dimly that I ought not to say a lot of what I already said. Krishn would not have approved of his soldier's insubordination. He would have advocated discretion and diplomacy. But I was exhausted of pretending. It was a relief to speak the truth. I was born of fire and syrupy sweetness was alien to me.

"How can you accuse me? I defended you in court. Does that not matter at all?" his fury had melted into a plea.

"You defended me? You proceeded to kill them?"

"No, but I made my vows. I proclaimed loud and clear ..."

"Yes, I heard your proclamation loud and clear. If you had killed them on the spot, I would have believed it. I would have cut out my heart for you."

"I tried to ... I think Arjun held me back ..."

"Mighty Bheem claims he can wrestle bare-handed with drunken elephants yet admits being reined in single-handedly."

"But we could not disobey our elder brother ... Arjun did not protect you that day either, did he?"

"Unity! The famed Pandav unity. Your honorable mother reasoned long ago that Panchali can be sacrificed for it. Why complain now, Bheem?"

"This war was a disaster waiting to happen ever since you arrived as children at Hastinapur. Duryodhan would have forced this war to happen by hook or crook. The dice game may have still happened, the exile may have still happened. But I could not have been gambled away and nobody would have hurled indecent abuses at me."

I continued in a softer tone, "As for your question. No, he did not protect me either, and I have not forgiven him either. He had his own explanations, you have your own. There is no easy way out for him either. He will have to prove himself once more."

“But I loved you. More than my other wives ...” he persisted. I doubt if he heard anything of what I just said.

“Not allowed. You have to be impartial and love all your wives equally.” I said emphatically.

“That is imposs—” I waited for him to complete his own sentence in his own mind. He whispered, “I ought to have known. The expression in your eyes when Subhadra arrived. I never saw it when we remarried. But Subhadra ... that hurt, didn’t it?”

My voice softened, “If Balram tau had chosen you to forge ties with Dwarka, you would not have refused the honor either. Hidimba loved you without knowing who you were. She could have claimed seniority, forced her way into Indraprastha and insisted on Ghatotkach being the crown prince. She has not done so, but the credit is all hers. You are made for each other.”

He stood still, thinking, “Do you think Hidimba will ever forgive me? Perhaps she has remarried ...”

“Don’t hold it against her if so. Women too get married for reasons beyond love, but they never forget their first love.” I held onto his calloused palm for a moment. He really could have been my most beloved brother-in-law. He could be *such* a child sometimes. Oh, how I would have teased, spoiled and pampered them as their sister-in-law. That world was never given to me.

I then narrated to Bheem the plan for Keechak’s death. Then as I made to leave, “Did you ever ... cheat?” came the tremulous query behind me.

I was tempted to say nothing at all, but I felt empathy for him. Besides, I had endangered our incognito mission enough already.

I faced him with steady eyes, “No, I never cheated. But you are free to disbelieve it, if you choose to do so.”

Keechak mutilated, gagged and pulverized to pulp was ‘discovered’ the next day in the dance hall. Virat King and Queen may have felt a flicker of suspicion, but they could find no definite evidence to implicate Sairandhri or Ballav. In any case, the King’s political worry far overruled Sudeshna’s mourning.

Keechak, irrespective of his dubious morals, had been invaluable to the safety of Viratnagar. His presence had been the protective fence around Viratnagar. His killing sent shock waves amongst Viratnagar’s citizens. I could not be certain whether they were relieved or worried by his death. But the King had been entirely dependent on Keechak for security. He now foresaw a cloud of doom hanging over his kingdom. The shield of Viratnagar was ripped open.

Like vultures circling over a dying traveler, Viratnagar felt the ominous rumblings of eminent attack from the neighboring kingdoms.

Barely a week after Keechak’s death, the attack actualized. King Susharma attacked from the eastern borders of Viratnagar. Bereft of Keechak’s might, the King readily accepted all possible assistance. Kank, Ballav, Granthik and Tantipal accompanied him on this battle.

Quite a many new opponents seemed to have gained prominence in these thirteen years while we battled fatigue, forests and nature. I had never heard of Keechak during our times. He was supposed to be the current ace in wrestling. But there still seemed to be no opponent to best Bheem in hand to hand combat. It was a reassuring thought.

I wistfully watched my brothers leave for the battlefield. They, at least could repay the benevolence Viratnagar had shown us. Prince Uttar had been confident he could protect Virat in the absence of his uncle and the King.

The calculations indicated that tomorrow was our last day of exile. I had prayed Hastinapur would not attack till then. But ever since I woke up today, I felt the transformation.

I flexed my fingers slowly, experimentally. I walked to the mirror, barely able to check my excitement. I had avoided the mirror all this year, dreading my image. I scanned my face anxiously. I saw the slight stubble on my chin. It was happening! I cleared my throat and spoke to myself tentatively. My voice. My familiar voice was back! Urvashi's curse was reversing, bless her. But wasn't it a day short? Surely celestial calculations ought to match earthly calculations.

I would still have to carry the disguise through this day though. Whatever Urvashi decided, her calculations may not count in technical terms. Duryodhan still could hold this day over our heads and decide that we were on the verge of the thirteenth year.

I dressed calmly and proceeded to the dance chamber. But I never reached there. The whispers and huddled discussions led me to the anteroom where prince Uttar stood amongst his mother, his sister and the maids.

I had seen tigresses with their cubs in various forests. The tigress would often paw them, prod them and instigate them. The weakest and the most helpless ones weren't given extra protection; they were eaten up. Nature did not like the whiners and the weaklings. Kshatriyas were no different. Viratnagar was a weakling now, vulnerable from all sides. It was unprotected from the North-west, where lay Hastinapur. The main army with my brothers and the king had been away for two days, when Hastinapur decided to strike. Their colossal army loomed large and ominous on the horizons of Viratnagar.

Prince Uttar stood tall and confident. "Fear not Mother, I am sure I can vanquish their army. Father always said I am good enough for battle. I am more than ready for it."

I eyed him dubiously. I had not been out on the practice grounds, so I could not decide whether he was serious or exaggerating. Maybe he was as good as he said. But I knew his opponents thoroughly well. I could accompany him, boost his morale and tell him the secret weaknesses of each opponent he faced. That would keep me in the background, safe from being recognized and yet keep our thirteen-year pact intact and irrevocable.

“Prince,” I began and then stopped short. I had forgotten my voice had altered for the better. An alert pair of tawny eyes did not miss the transformation. I reduced my voice to a near whisper. I made my offer. As expected, I was duly rejected – with guffaws and chortles of laughter.

I saw the frown between her winged eyebrows, realized she was going to speak. “Brihannada has been charioteer to the Pandav princes. I am sure her assistance will be invaluable, prince Uttar,” she said.

Ultimately Prince Uttar agreed to have me as a charioteer. Princess Uttara beseeched us to get the colorful silk upper garments of our opponents to decorate her dolls.

King Virat had not heeded the golden rule of guarding the rear while attacking from the front. His Kingdom had only a handful of soldiers left behind. We arranged them in the double-whorl pattern at Viratnagar’s borders. Prince Uttar and I sailed forth on our own.

Chapter 19: Hastinapur Disrobed

I was left with no choice at all. Prince Uttar had been bluffing. The only wars he had fought had been in his lofty imagination and in the fond dreams of his father. He panicked at the sight of Hastinapur's colossal army.

I had transformed; so the thirteen years were complete. I flung prince Uttar over my shoulder, dumped him in the charioteer's seat and directed him to the *Shami* tree where we had left our weapons tied up a year ago.

I stood looking down upon the silent battlefield. The unconscious warriors lay motionless, as were their steeds. The only vital thing there was the wind. It circled in gusts above me, around me, around everything. It had force and intent. I felt its strength. I had to push back against it, resist it with all my might, had to plant my feet down firmly in order not to be shoved by it. My hair was defenseless against it. I felt it loosen, uncoil, felt it bite like a whiplash into my face. I raised my hands, gathered my long hair and coiled it patiently with the ease that came with a year's practice.

I had shot two arrows at the feet of Pitamah and Acharya, seeking their blessings. Then I shot two arrows past their ears, signaling that I would not attack them until they initiated an attack on me. It was impossible to curb the twang of the Gandiva bow. Hastinapur had known it was facing Arjun. They had attacked in glee.

I stood waiting for Uttar, watched him as he weaved through the maze of unconscious soldiers to reach the warriors. I saw him collect the upper garments, hesitate, turn back to look at me. "All of it," my eyes ordered him. I saw him carry back their colorful apparel as trophies for the day.

Amongst the unconscious, I spared Dronacharya the indignity. Bhishm pitamah's eyes were alert and very much awake. The Sammohan astra had no effect on him. His eyes twinkled at me. Somehow, I did not feel like answering with a smile.

So close, I thought with regret, so close and yet so far. This was not my battle. This was proxy battle. I could not avenge our humiliation under someone else's cover. It would have been so easy to seize the nearest sword and cut off all their throats. Why just the apparel, I could have carried back their heads as trophies for today.

But not today. Today's punishment was in sync with their crime for the day. Yesterday's crime still needed time to culminate in its proper punishment.

The wheels of fortune and the baton of power had almost passed out of our hands. Newer kingdoms and newer warriors had laid claim to our supremacy. They had thirteen years to supersede me, to practice, to excel, to hone their skills, to acquire new weapons and upgrade their techniques. Thirteen years! I had twelve years of exile and one year of percussing the musical drums. And it was still enough. Still more than enough to defeat all of them single handedly.

Well, not exactly single handedly. I took her off my shoulder, flexed my aching muscles. She seemed heavy for the first time since I had her. I really needed to regain all the power and energy I had sapped in the last year. I held her tenderly, casting my eyes along her curvaceous lines. She had clung instantly to me in recognition, snug and purring into my palms. *The team was back! We are still the best*, I reassured the Gandiva.

There was another reason I did not kill Hastinapur's crown prince and his brother. Bheem had made a vow, his promise to *her*. I could not take away his chance of redemption.

I could have cut off that golden head. That was mine for the cutting, inborn armor or no armor. But not right now, when he lay unconscious. The dual patronage of Dronacharya and Parshuram could not save him from being defeated twice at my hands today. What possible new excuse could he unearth now? Next time we dueled under the Sun, he would taste death.

I saw the young prince return, grinning sheepishly, and his arms full of colorful silk clothes. "After you, Prince," I said, taking back the reins dutifully in my hands.

The welcome was effusive. Virat's cattle were restored back. Virat's citizens had found their savior in their young prince. The exuberant King hugged Uttar and waxed eloquent on Uttar's martial exploits. The prince squirmed in embarrassment. I silently warned him to stick to his promise of secrecy.

Princess Uttara was delighted with the silk apparels. But I had brought more than what she had asked for. The upper garments were a gift for her. The rest of the garments were for someone else.

It was not enough compensation for the long, bloody, agonizing travel along Hastinapur's passageways. It was not enough for anything else that happened that day.

This was just a token of Hastinapur's shameful disrobing.

*** I could picture the battlefield. The arrogant bunch of warriors lying vanquished by a single warrior, Hastinapur routed and stripped bare before his unleashed fury, Hastinapur pulverized into submission by his superlative skills.

I eyed the ripped-off apparels that were not a gift for princess Uttara. Mine had been blood-stained. Unfortunately these weren't. But someday they would be. I felt reassured of that day.

I noted to my consternation that the pure white robes of Bhishm pitamah and Dronacharya were missing. *Oh, those two were going to be a difficult temptation for Arjun to break through.*

Daylight was fading. Viratnagar had successfully stemmed both attacks at both borders. It could sleep safely tonight.

I heard stealthy footsteps following me. Prince Uttar cornered me and then he fell at my feet for blessings. He was bubbling with the excitement of a secret divulged only to him. He had been enroute to the room of his personal idol. He whispered, “Maharani Draupadi, I know everything. I know you will be appearing in your real forms tomorrow. I am carrying garments worthy enough for Him.” Infatuation and hero-worship was writ all over his face.

I convinced him that Sairandhri visiting Brihannada’s chambers would make far less gossip than the crown prince doing so, laughing at his shocked expression. Innocence lost! I waited for the palace to get sedated with sleep. Then I tiptoed to Brihannada’s room with the clothes. I knew his room a long time ago and had memorized its location – well enough to avoid it all that year.

The door was half ajar. I walked into the darkness, blinked till the shafts of moonlight allowed me to see. Arjun had been kneeling by the window, a short sharp dagger held in his right hand, held over his neck. He raised his head, watched as I crossed the room to approach him.

Then he offered me the dagger and bent his head before me again. I gripped the dagger and in a single blow I cut off his long loose hair.

I threw aside both the dagger and the redundant rope of hair. I reached down, grazed my fingers against the silhouette of his face, felt the rough stubble on his chin. He held onto my hand and kissed the fingers. Then he bent lower and kissed my toes.

*** “Why did you not kill them?” I asked

“They were under the hypnotic influence of *Sammohan-astra*. I cannot kill the unconscious.”

“Even if the opponent follows no rule? They attacked you together. That breaks the basic rule of warfare. Even the veterans did that?”

Why follow noble rules for ignoble opponents - did he have to be so chivalrous? I could feel him smiling in the darkness, amused at my indignation.

“Desperate men go in for desperate measures. They were routed after they attacked me one-to-one. Then Duryodhan tried to escape with the cattle of Viratnagar, so I hunted him down. His defense was blown to pieces. We were herding the cattle back home when Hastinapur’s warriors re-doubled their attack. When I smote them individually, they attacked me together. Ultimately I quelled them with the *Sammohan-astra*.” He explained.

“Why Sammohan-astra?”

“The battle seemed poised to escalate. If Acharya began using destructive celestial missiles, I would have to retort with mightier missiles. This battle was not a stage to showcase my higher weapons. I had already defeated them with basic archery. My immediate concern were Virat’s cattle, all of the holy cows. If I persisted, I would have incurred the sin of their death.”

I mulled over it. I was glad Virat was safe once more, but I wished the war had not happened to Arjun. I hoped he would have enough rage left for that future battle.

But I too had pardoned Jayadratha for Dusshala. I had felt empathy for Bhanumati and thus allowed Duryodhan to escape death from Gandharvas. How could I judge Arjun when I too had allowed the enemy a lease of life?

His beautiful voice, resonant with his own convictions, felt strangely hypnotic. His words made sense in that darkness. It made me cease worrying, lulled me into security. It was difficult to doubt a person who practiced what others only preached. And if he managed to win in spite of sticking to his own ideals, why bother dissuading him?

The interminable exile and the scary incognito period were behind us. I had found my husband back after an exhausting ordeal of time. The immediate future held promises of joy, of meeting my sons, of freedom from exile, of my beloved Indraprastha. I felt content and safe.

For me, it was time to refocus attention on the innocent lives I had abandoned to foster care. My sons! I thought with impatient joy. I would meet them soon. There would be enough time to devote to them now. I had to get to know them all over again. I could not wait to shower them with all my pent up affection and love.

Cocooned by the darkness, neither of us could anticipate that my magnanimous acts and his noble gesture would cost us all our sons.

Chapter 20: An Unholy Bargain

*** “Why me?” Abhimanyu asked, kneeling beside me.

He entangled his fingers in my veil, absently playing with it, just the way he had as a toddler. “I do not like to be gifted things. Even if it is a wife, I want her to choose me for myself. Or I should win her, like Father earned you.”

He twisted and untwisted the cool silk around his finger, “I spent hours practicing that feat of shooting at the reflection. It is tougher than he made it seem. Did he really face Hastinapur all alone?”

“Of course not. Your brother-in-law held the reins,” I said lightly.

“But is it not against the rules for multiple warriors to attack one warrior?”

I shrugged disdainfully, “You expect *them* to follow rules?”

“What was Father’s age when he won his first war?”

“I was not born yet. He must have been about your age. It was *my* Father against yours, for your information.”

He smiled, “Taking on an entire army alone – he carries it very lightly. I wish someday – it is about time I won some war.”

There it was again, a curious mix of wistful worship and taut reserve. He seemed impatient to substantiate himself, to soar beyond the shadows of his illustrious father and prodigious uncle.

“Is Dwarka lovely?” I asked, aware that I had not visited it yet.

“Very, but Dwarka is not home. I yearn so much for *our* home. Sometimes, I dread I will never ever breathe its fresh air again.”

“Did you visit Indraprastha in these years?”

“Once, but only up to its borders. I could not bear the stench of unholy feet. When we reclaim Indraprastha, we will purify it with your footsteps first. Beloved Indraprastha! Prativindhya’s kingdom.” He flung up his head and looked at me, “I am my father’s son — I would never snatch away anyone else’s right.” Then his eyes twinkled, “but I am also my uncle’s nephew — I will never allow anyone to snatch away my rights.”

I blinked. For a seventeen year old ... and fifty-two days plus, he was pretty intimidating.

I leaned forward. “You are so perfect,” I teased. Krishn’s personalized wish.

“I know,” he acknowledged it as matter of fact, “I am so glad I am not the heir. I want my glory achieved on my own terms and powers. ”

He nestled his head in my lap. “Are you not a little old for this?” I ribbed him.

He stayed exactly where he was. “I can never be too old for this. I missed you so much.”

“Did you meet your bride? Is she not charming?”

“Don’t keep sending me away. Once your sons arrive tomorrow, you won’t pay any attention to me.”

“Abhi! Say ‘*your* sons’ once more, and I will honestly flay you alive.” I rapped him on his head.

“Just jesting, anything to make you smile. I missed your scolding so much. Nobody at Dwarka scolds me.” He had his father’s voice too. And he was still using his dimples to devastating effect. How was innocent little Uttara ever going to handle him? Now if only my daughter existed, she would have made him toe the line perfectly.

I had not been able to sleep all night, visualizing the reunion with my sons. My sons arrived at last!

*** Who are these young men? I thought incredulously, wondering where my little boys had disappeared to. In spite of meeting Abhimanyu, I somehow hoped that I had not missed my sons' journey into adulthood. Some part of me wanted to freeze them at the age I had left them, so that I could restart the scene after we rejoined each other. But of course, time had not frozen, it had taken wings and converted my babies into youths.

We all stood, a little awed, a little awkward. They resembled their father so much. Why did none of them look like me? Perhaps if I had that daughter, she would have looked like me. That, of course, would never happen now. *Never!* Some words are so final.

They bowed at my feet. The eldest two had memories lurking at the back of their eyes. The middle two were shyer than the former. The youngest was the one who lingered behind the rest, withdrawing from my hug far too soon. He had such beautiful eyes – and no recognition in them at all. My littlest baby; for whose sake I had tried to create the most perfect atmosphere within my womb, the one I had left behind before he was weaned off my breast. Would he know the former, or would he only judge me for the latter?

They clustered around, smiling watchfully, initially a little unsure of me. They were all much taller than me, fine and upright youths. I could not believe I had swung them up effortlessly in my arms or hugged them on my knees. Now I felt tiny beside them. Truly, I would never regain the years of my sons' childhood. Those were lost forever.

It would have been inhuman to expect queen Sudeshna not to bear hostility towards her brother's nemesis. I saw palpable relief in her face, when she learnt Subhadra would be her in-law instead of me. The relief multiplied when she met Subhadra.

Here, at last was a *normal* woman - amiable, pleasant and sweet ... basically everything that I was not. She had not been dragged before a flock of wolves. She would not lead to any Keechaks getting killed. She had no scandals attached to her name and person. She was Krishn's bonafide sister and Dwarka's sole princess. She had only one husband and only one son. She was normal, ordinary and perfect.

I was the only royal woman to be married to five husbands. I had been dragged menstruating into full court. I had been on exile for thirteen years. I would be held responsible for the hideous war to follow. I had not invited any of these events in my life. Yet, I would be answerable for them. I did not care how much they maligned my name. I only hoped my reputation would not be a hindrance to my sons' marriages.

*** Uttara had been in seventh heaven when she learnt who had taught her dance. Her mind automatically hopped to the next step of her dreams. But when the maids came with the decision and news from the royal court, she had given me a shocked look of recognition, then embarrassment, then resentment.

Of course, she had recuperated with the brevity of youth and blushed with delight when she saw Abhimanyu. That still did not stop her from pointedly ignoring me throughout the marriage ceremony. Ungrateful child. But apart from Uttara, there were others who seemed upset with my interventions.

"Why Abhimanyu?" That question again. I was the only one who should have objected. I had not. I did not know why so many other people had wounded hearts and ruffled feathers.

This time, it was my twin brother.

"Is he the eldest? Is he the crown prince? Please explain to me why the bridegroom belongs to the fourth wife of the third Pandav."

"I did not know Uttara was such a prize catch." I said lightly.

"She is not important, the bride never is. But Viratnagar is."

I raised my eyebrows, “The bride never is, is she?”

“Now don’t take everything personally,” he said, “This proves after all that he has always been partial to Subhadra.”

“Who has?” I asked patiently.

“Her brother and, forgive me for being blunt, your husband too.”

“I assure you Krishn knew nothing and did nothing in this matter.”

“Oh, he never does anything. He just *gets* things done.”

I looked at him in mild astonishment. I knew he got sidelined by the other, more charismatic brother-in-law. Truth is that Arjun never saw beyond Krishn. Still, that did not give my twin the rights to hurl baseless accusations.

“You know nothing about my personal life. Don’t comment about it,” I said coolly.

“I will. This concerns my nephews. I am the one who reared them. I have every right and responsibility towards them.

“Together, your husband and his friend always manipulate you, always bend you around to their wishes. He can twist you around his little finger anytime he wants. When it comes to Arjun, you just don’t seem able to think clearly at all.”

“What has he done so wrong?” I demanded, peeved.

“Abhimanyu is the first to get married. He will stake a claim over my nephews.”

“He will do nothing of the sort. Shikhandi is elder to us, yet I do not remember him objecting your ascent to the throne. If Yudhisthir’s first child was a daughter, what would happen to hierarchy? I am so curious to know the consequences.”

“Stop being a love-sick wife and behave like a responsible Mother.”

I sighed. My life was always jumbling up into each other. I would have liked to have a leisured, phased life. But my childhood had entangled with my youth; when I wanted to be a child, they wanted me to be a wife; when I wanted to be a wife, they wanted me to be a mother; when I wanted to be a mother, I was sent on exile.

“Whether you like it or not, history will repeat itself. Your darling Abhimanyu will bear the eldest Pandav grandson. Prativindhya will get the subsequent heir. If these grandsons start fighting over who inherits Indraprastha ... it will be Duryodhan and Yudhisthir all over again.”

“Prativindhya is not the eldest son. Ghatotkach is,” I told him.

“Who ...” he took a deep controlled breath, “is Ghatotkach?” I explained to him patiently.

“But at Panchal, they told us that all five brothers were bachelors. Kunti Mata and Yudhisthir *lied* to us? You mean to seriously tell me that your eldest son is not even the eldest heir?” He looked aghast.

Indraprastha was not yet in our hands and already everybody was worried about its inheritance. But my twin was not arguing for his own benefit. He was just trying to secure his nephew’s futures. After all, he was the one who had taken care of them for thirteen long years. He had the right to feel concerned.

“Don’t worry, I know Abhimanyu far too well. This wedding happened after consultation with me and with my full knowledge and approval,” I tried to reassure him.

“Then more fool you,” he said abruptly. “Look,” he indicated with his head to where Subhadra stood beside the bridegroom, “She gets the main stage. You are sidelined here. This is the indicator of your future.”

I stayed silent. There was no point in arguing with him in this mood. I stole a look towards Prativindhya. He sensed my glance, turned and smiled

his serious smile. I felt a sudden clutch of affection for my first born.

Why could Uttara not desire any of the other husbands? She just *had* to go after the one I would not give up.

I moved my eyes to the root cause of all trouble. Today, he was immersed in performing the matrimonial rites for his son. Amidst the chants and the smoke of the nuptial fire, I caught his eye.

As night fell, I walked towards his room, intending to talk with him.

“Queen Subhadra is within,” the doorkeeper informed me.

I turned on my chastised heels, and walked back to my lonely chambers. I sat in the darkness, a little less sure than I had been in the morning.

“Elusive creature, I have been trying to catch you alone all day.” Said a shadow as it detached itself from the wall.

I started and gave him a guilty smile in the moonlight.

“Why was your brother scolding you? He looked very upset.”

“He says you manipulate me all the time,” I admitted glumly. He was struck speechless for a long time. Then we both broke into laughter.

“I manipulate *you*? I wish I could, shameless woman. The things I have to hear because of you. So did you tell him the real reason?”

“No, he was already in quite a rage. I did not want to face it and besides, it is your fault, so I allowed him to direct it at you.”

“So innocent,” he murmured fondly, followed by an intuitive, “Prativindhya will always be the crown prince and his sons will be the heirs of Indraprastha. You mean the world to Abhimanyu.”

“I know. If you had not gone on exile, Shrutkirti could have been up there today with Uttara.”

“He is so very shy, he did not even speak much to me. They seem far more comfortable with their uncles than us.”

“Do you think he resents my absence all these years?”

“He has no memories to fall back on. Give him time. Abhi will take him under his wing. You trust him, don’t you? ”

“I trust him completely. I don’t know why everyone is behaving like Uttara is the last bride on Earth. Arjun, tell me the truth. Have you never wanted your sons to wear the crown?”

He leaned against the window, “Not in this way. Nothing is worth the loss of you and the total loss of self-respect.”

“I had Shrutkirti within me at the coronation ceremony.”

“I guess that is the closest my son will ever get to the throne.”

I waited in the darkness. When he remained standing by the window, I asked, “Why are you not in your room?”

“A palace so big and not a single room to myself. How come I am always in exile?”

“Well, she is the bridegroom’s mother.” When he remained silent, I said tentatively, “She is still young. That daughter you wanted ...”

“You gifted me a daughter today. Besides, nobody else’s daughter will resemble you. Don’t fidget so much. I have no intentions of encroaching on your space. May I stay and watch till you fall asleep?”

“Where are you going after that?”

“There is one person who has no illusions about you. I am going to complain to him how *you* manipulate me.”

“Arjun, don’t misunderstand my brother. He loves my sons so much and he loves you too and probably also loves Abhimanyu. It is just that ...”

“I know your brother well. Relax and stop fretting. When you marry off Prati and Som, I will stand in the shadows and get jealous, like on the coronation day. You will enjoy that. Yes, I even know what you are going to say next. When Shrutkirti gets ...”

“... married, I will not allow Subhad...”

“... I will not leave your side all day,” he promised me solemnly.

Govind had trained one nephew, Dhrishtadyumn and Shikhandi had trained five nephews. All three had done a wonderful job. Sutsom had been a bold, upfront child and he was a bold, upfront young man now. He seemed to be in his own world, taking neither praise nor criticism too seriously. The younger two were willing, obedient and sincere. My youngest son was still teetering on the brink of adulthood. He had potential, but he needed time. Time was what we were short of.

Prativindhya did just fine when he practiced alone, but he faltered whenever Draupadi arrived on the scene. Her presence made him nervous, forced him into making errors. I could feel the impatient tap of her fingers as she stood at a distance, arms folded.

Yudhisthir had been oddly withdrawn after the Uttara-Abhimanyu wedding. King Virat had made his offer for the sake of his daughter’s reputation, just as my wife anticipated and I accepted Uttara as my daughter-in-law.

“You could have consulted me before taking the decision,” he said.

“Do you object to anything I agreed to?” I asked politely.

“You won’t understand. Everything just falls into your lap. You have always led such an enchanted easy life,” he shrugged impatiently.

Easy life? I wondered which part of my life seemed easy to him. Expertise did not come to me because I was a demi-God’s son. To practice

past moonlights, to wake before dawn in Acharya's ashram, to strive to be Acharya's constant badge of honor, to sacrifice my dream woman for him, to roam in exile after exile, to be warged like a non-entity, to see my wife and sons enslaved, to bear the jeers of emasculation. The lonely sojourns through forests, deserts, rocky terrains and icy crevices ... enchanted life?

A retort hovered over my tongue, then it dissipated. If I made my life look effortless, it was definitely to my credit. I would rather evoke envy than pity.

And besides, I had loved every moment I spent with archery – it was passion, love, worship. Yes, he was right, I was fortunate enough to love what I excelled in. Skill without passion would have been drudgery. Passion without skill would have been torture. He was right, I *did* live an enchanted life, blessed with both.

I felt years of baggage lifted off me. I felt free. Light and liberated! It did not matter, *he* did not matter anymore. I would win back Indraprastha for him, then I would be free to reclaim my fragrant flame. All mine.

The very next moment, reality struck me like a blow to the midriff. My wife was mother to Indraprastha's heir. No force on Earth could tear her away from her sons anymore, and her son was Yudhisthir's son. Awareness of Yudhisthir's existence settled down heavily around my shoulders once more. I could never shrug him off.

My wife and his wife were two different people, I comforted myself.

*** Peace? Krishn as a peace messenger? I could not believe it when Krishn insisted on going to Hastinapur as our envoy.

He faced me calmly before his departure, aware that I was seething, "Draupadi, I know you wish me to explain why peace interrupted your plans. My reply is that war should always be the last resort. You do not know the devastation a war can cause. No one can pinpoint where destruction erupts or in what magnitude. Both sides lose in a war. Always.

Even the winners. Think of the Greater Good. If you relent just a tiny bit, you will bring peace and harmony to an entire family.”

My words tumbled out through clenched teeth, “Precious family. Family formed of fathers and sons. What about the woman who makes the blood-bond possible between father and son? Why does a woman have to be an outsider till death? Vasudev Krishn, son of two mothers, husband of eight wives and patron of sixteen thousand women; I expected you to understand a woman’s worth much better.”

“I never suggested you are expendable. Human beings are souls clothed in a mortal body. Can the soul not forgive what the physical form suffers?”

“A woman’s soul is never at cross-purpose with her body. If those sinners are mere souls, then I want their souls stripped stark. What is wrong, Krishn? Where is the person who promised me revenge for thirteen long years?”

“He is looking at the entire scenario. Only you can save an entire clan.”

“Which clan? The Bharat dynasty? The Kauravs and Pandavs are not even blood relation. They share neither mother nor father, nor grandparent on either side. They are two separate wayward branches of a struggling, rotten root. I am a mere excuse. Their hatred existed before me and will exist inspite of me. Are you so naive as to expect a happy family reunion? Is that the impossible dream that is clouding your judgment?”

“Draupadi, my judgment is never clouded.”

“Then what is the purpose of this journey? Don’t treat me like a hurdle in the path of a united clan. I refuse to shoulder the burden of upholding their family unity over and over.

“How can the wielder of the Sudarshanchakra offer me nothing beyond compromise with those despicable vermin? You were supposed to be my friend. Was everything a charade?”

“You judge too harshly. No person is completely wicked, just as no person is perfect. We are all grey.”

“Black with the tiniest touch of white is grey; so is white with the tiniest touch of black. I thought you could appreciate the difference.”

“What they did in that court was just one aspect of their life, just an hour of inconsiderate viciousness ...”

“That one hour and one day happened in *my* life.”

“Time heals wounds.”

“Time festers wounds too.”

“Draupadi, every saint has a past, just as every sinner has a future.”

“Does the justice-seeker deserve no future?”

“Even she deserves a choice to forgive. I know you will never agree, but my plans are already laid. I don’t expect Duryodhan to give up Indraprastha. His father has never denied him and Pitamah has never denied the King. That leaves us with only two options; war or withdrawal. Wait ... do not interrupt. In that case, I plan to make an offer for five villages instead of Indraprastha,” he finished in a single breath.

I stared at him aghast. He watched warily as I struggled to control my wrath, “My Indraprastha? You will gift my Indraprastha to those vipers? I cannot believe my honor will be bargained over five villages. Ah, what travesty! These thirteen years were an illusion. I am still in Hastinapur court, am I not? The gambling game is still on, the dice are still rolling.

“I cannot believe this is your idea of justice. Don’t give me platitudes and lofty ideals. Give me the truth. Your effort will only garner scorn. What do you hope to achieve there?

“Unless you care only about ... you will be the Saint who stopped the carnage, the Peacemaker who saved an entire generation, the master orator

who achieved the impossible. If you stop this war, millions will survive, millions will bless you and millions will fall at your feet in gratitude. Carry out this war and you are still the upholder of justice. History will never malign you either way. How do you manage it, Krishn, this dual victory every time?”

“Draupadi, war equals destruction and destruction knows no discrimination.”

“My sons? My husbands? My brothers and father? Are you hinting that they may perish? I am fully aware that war is not mockery. I am fully aware that I may lose one or all of them. My very life breath is entangled in them. I will die every moment they are out of my sight. I shall pray for them every moment, yet I will not hesitate to send them into the battlefield. Krishn, they are warriors. They have no right to come out of war sighing in relief at being alive.

“I swear by everything sacred to me. If your mission culminates in this unholy compromise, I will not remain alive to laud your triumph. I will never bow down to Hastinapur. My sons will not grovel at unholy feet. Krishn, I will poison my sons with these very hands ...”

“Draupadi!”

“Don’t worry, I will spare your Abhimanyu – he is not my blood.”

“Those are the cruelest words you have ever uttered.”

“My clan and my blood will fight for me. My father, my brothers and my sons. This is my battle all the way.

“Give me one honest answer; would you embark on this harmony-quest if Subhadra was dragged into court by her hair, if she was molested and showered with expletives? Convince me that Panchal’s honor is no less valuable to you than Dwarka’s honor.”

He took a deep breath and then he smiled, “Ask yourself if you believe any of these accusations. Ask yourself if I am capable of contradictions. Ask yourself if I mean this mission to succeed.

“Some missions succeed only by their spectacular failure. You do yourself a great disservice. You have no idea what you mean to your husbands or to me.

“Wars are not fought merely on a battlefield. They are won or lost much before they begin. Hastinapur will think exactly on the lines you did. The Pandavs cowering, insecure, uncertain of victory. A group of cowards sending another coward to plead for leniency. Have you heard of Mohini? It is a fascinating tale.”

“Krishn, don’t try my patience. I do not want to hear yarns.”

“You never did cultivate patience, did you? Yet, Sairandhri was Mohini incarnate when she killed Keechak.

“Mohini is a temptress who kills self-destructive monsters. A demon named Bhasmasur once received a boon from Lord Shiva. Death would befall all those that he touched on their head. So consumed was he by power and greed, he even tried to kill Lord Shiva! Ultimately Vishnu had to assume the irresistible form of Mohini. She lured him, seduced him to imitate a dance step that compelled him to place his palm over his own head. He burnt to ashes in a moment.

“Hastinapur is full of such self-destructive monsters. Ego, arrogance, pseudo-sacrifice, and megalomania need to be fed to death. Ambition and greed need to be starved to death.

“How did you ever imagine I would sacrifice my Indraprastha? Yes, *my* Indraprastha. I have visualized it from its inception, have been there at every step of its growth. It may have been Kingdom to Yudhisthir but to me it was home – just as it was to you. A home away from Dwarka. A home where I was always welcome. Do you really think I would give it up to evil?”

“Then why ...”

“Hastinapur has political, financial and military support. They have forged powerful allies. Most other Kingdoms do not even remember the basis of your thirteen years of exile. We need visibility. We have been out of public sight and memory for a vast period.

“Why speak of other Kingdoms? My own Dwarka is ripped apart. Balram tau loves Duryodhan. His daughter is Duryodhan’s daughter-in-law. Duryodhan’s daughter is my daughter-in-law. Yes, my son Samba is tied in matrimony to Hastinapur. Pandavs’ anguish is not personal for anyone in Dwarka, except for Satyaki who worships Arjun and Abhimanyu who worships you.”

He suddenly sounded exhausted. I felt a wave of shame wash over me and then felt a frisson of alarm. I grasped his wrist, “Don’t go there. You have no idea how low Hastinapur can fall. They will betray you and harm you.”

He smiled, “I know Hastinapur perfectly. I am ready for betrayal, for insults, for danger. I am hoping for any or all of the above. An attack on my person is my only hope to convert this war into a personal quest for Dwarka.”

“Do not go alone. Take Arjun with you.”

He shook his head, “I go on behalf of Pandavs, I cannot take a Pandav along. I have Satyaki and my trusted guards with me.”

“Just return back safely to us. Nothing is worth the loss of you.”

“If tears can be shed for blood, then blood will be shed for tears. This earth will quench its thirst on Kaurava blood, I promise you. Do not ask what else I may need to do there. You can question my methods, but don’t ever question my intent. I will never let you down.”

There was another person who would never let me down – Duryodhan. I knew I could count on the adamant and doomed prince of Hastinapur to make war inevitable. I willed him not to budge. As expected, he rejected Krishn's offer. As expected, he and his wicked team tried to hold Krishn captive.

By convention, a peace envoy is immune to all physical harm. But Hastinapur had long ago left behind fair conduct and rules. Krishn, ever alert to betrayal, had returned to our camp safe and sound.

Once war was inevitable, Hastinapur amassed eleven Akshouhinis to our eight. The presence of Bhishm pitamah and Dronacharya lent Hastinapur an aura of grave righteousness.

Arjun opined that Dhrishtadyumn be appointed the General Commander of our army, while Shikhandi would be heading one akshouhini. The other six Akshouhinis were led by my father Drupad, Virat, Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumn, Dhrishtaketu of Chedi and Sahadeva of Magadha.

Krishn declared that he would be merely a humble charioteer for Arjun. He would not take up weapons at all.

Then loomed over us the toughest hurdle – the one I had long feared and anticipated but tried to wish away. Could our deadliest missile be tempted to become Hastinapur's shield? I knew I should never underestimate the emotional stranglehold of Hastinapur's two ancient white-robed blackhearts.

I sought out Krishn for counsel. He was not to be found in his chambers, nor in the conference halls, nor in the practice grounds where the men sweated out in preparation for battle. Finally, I found my way to the humble stable.

Prosperous Dwarka's founder, our army's mastermind, Wisdom personified and owner of the deadly Sudarshanchakra, was kneeling beside

a magnificent horse. Krishn was humming to himself as he pored studiously over the white stallion's hoof.

“Readying my weapons for the war. One team, one heart,” Krishn smiled up at the majestic stallion, then turned to me, “How may I serve you, Empress?”

I told him. What else is a charioteer for but to give focus, aims, directions and target?

Chapter 21: The Edge of Innocence

The night air was piercingly cold. Govind stood beside me in the warm embrace of the bonfire.

He shrugged, “The crudest reason: Indraprastha and your honor back. The loftiest reason: Indraprastha and your honor back. Take your pick.”

“Do I need to kill Guru Drona and Bhishm pitamah for it?” I asked.

“You did not falter to battle these same two revered elders in the Virat war. Why now?”

“The Virat war re-emphasized the fact that I am capable of defeating them. Kurukshetra demands death, not mere defeat. Ah! If only they emulated Balram tau, who decided to go on a religious expedition rather than put you in a dilemma. But ... I cannot kill two elders I worship.”

“What makes you so sure their death lies at your hands?”

“They are the greatest living legends of our times. Who else will shoulder that responsibility?”

“An ancient tree gnawed hollow by termites does not require a streak of lightening to make it collapse.”

“I could have slain the others in the Virat war ...”

“That war was for a different purpose, to save Virat’s cattle. You were justified in sparing their lives then but you are not justified now.”

“Govind, in our childhood Duryodhan and his co-conspirators poisoned Bheem and threw him into the river to die. Later, they tried to burn us to ashes in the gruesome lacquer house at Varanavat. They reached their foulest nadir that day in the dice game. Which of these sins are we actually punishing?”

“Their sins should have been punished long ago. This is the culmination. I guess we permitted their sins to pile up too long ...”

“Like Shishupal. Yet your cousin was allowed to survive a hundred sins.”

“What happened last night, Arjun? What has changed since last night?”

“Things are never so sudden. I received constant feedbacks from Indraprastha. Govind, they don’t want us back.”

“Who?”

“The citizens of Indraprastha. They lost trust in us the day we put their wealth, lives and freedom at peril. The day we took their liberty for granted – the worst offence any ruler can impose on his citizens.

“They would have supported us if Duryodhan’s rule left them longing for Yudhisthir’s rule. But Duryodhan has not created mayhem or unleashed injustice. Indraprastha continues to flourish as we made it flourish. He has not levied unfair taxes, not imposed unfair laws.

“Citizens don’t care who wears the crown. All they want is peace, prosperity and confidence in their ruler. If our own citizens don’t trust us, will we still force the after-effects of a war on them?”

Govind shrugged, “What is Duryodhan’s achievement, Parth? He is merely ruling over the prosperity that you brothers created. If he was so competent, why could he not bring glory to Hastinapur on his own prowess? Why, indeed, did Hastinapur stagnate while Indraprastha was leaping from glory to glory? Why could Hastinapur not achieve with a hundred brothers, which Indraprastha achieved with five?”

“I am not denying our victories, Govind. On behalf of our former citizens, I wish to clarify who rightfully owns Hastinapur.”

“Dhritarashtra’s sons are not the rightful claimants,” he asserted.

“Govind, *nobody* from our present generation is the rightful claimant. Bhishm pitamah is the last, living Kuru blood. If Pitamah himself chooses to defend Duryodhan, if the only true Kuru heir himself stands against us, on what basis do we insist on our rights?”

“Rights? Pitamah gave up his rights to Hastinapur long ago, when he agreed to defend whoever sat on Hastinapur’s throne.

“Pandu was officially crowned king, while Dhritarashtra was merely appointed as care-taker in his absence. It was King Pandu who conquered multiple lands in military campaigns and thus expanded Hastinapur’s rule. He brought prosperity to Hastinapur.

“Dhritarashtra and his sons cannot claim ownership over Pandu’s expanded kingdom. They had no right to deny Pandu’s heirs *his* expanded land.”

“Are we? Are we King Pandu’s sons?”

“Parth, I said *heirs*. By virtue of Pandu’s official crown and his military conquests, the entire Hastinapur rightfully belonged to Yudhisthir. The division into a readymade, prosperous Hastinapur versus an arid, barren Khandav itself was gross injustice to you five brothers.”

“I know it was injustice, yet Pitamah spoke not a word against it. We dutifully accepted Khandav and relished the uphill task of building Indraprastha.”

Govind said, “Pitamah’s servile support to Hastinapur permitted many wrong deeds there – and it certainly does not blemish your rightful claims over Hastinapur.

“Arjun, Indraprastha used to be a desolate Khandav. You and your brothers transformed it into Indraprastha. It is your hard-earned kingdom.”

“And we wagered it. And lost.”

“And paid for it fully with thirteen years of your life. Now you are just reclaiming it back. What possible confusion can exist there?”

“Govind, that day I had to participate in the Virat war ... was the year complete?”

“You felt the transformation.”

“Yes, I did. We had no choice but to kill Keechak and to face Hastinapur in Virat. But, then, why did we waste thirteen years living without our sons? We ought to have started a war right away after that day in the dice hall. We cannot agree to a condition and then bypass the rules.”

He laughed, “So now you are God, are you? You will control the Sun, the Moon, the stars, the planets? Who told you an hour has only so many moments, a year has only so many days, or the movement of stars depends on your calculations? Tell me, how many days are there in a year?”

“The lunar year has 354 days. The solar year has 365 days.”

“Exactly! If a calculation is based on variables, why expect the answer to be absolute? Are you the same Arjun who saw nothing but the eye of the bird? Since when does that Arjun get bothered by everything else *but* the target?”

“Govind, it is time now to notice the bird’s eye in perspective of the entire scenario. My arrows will obey my fingers and my fingers will obey my mind. But if my mind questions and rebels ...

“Govind, I know I need to fight this battle. I want to avenge insults. You know it is not courage I lack, only clarity.”

“What clarifications do you need, Parth?”

“Bhishm pitamah said he was the chief protector of Hastinapur, and I of Indraprastha. He said we both did our jobs perfectly when it came to protection from external enemies, but both of us failed when it came to protection from internal enemies.”

“He and Dronacharya are misguided and bewildered. They are mistaking protection of Dhritarashtra as protection of Hastinapur.” Govind said.

“No, Govind. I was thinking of his other sentence. The internal enemy ... you know who he meant, don’t you? *The one I cannot harm.*”

Govind did not answer, just flicked his *uttariya* once, impatiently.

“Could you tell me, who should I fight Govind? Where do I begin? When I fought the frustrated suitors at her *swayamwar*, I experienced the reality that Kshatriyas can fight unscrupulously. They can attack without a righteous reason and can attack in hordes. I had no problem accepting that fact and over-riding it.

“Somehow when the Kaurav warriors did it at Virat war, it still took me by surprise for a flicker of a moment. Why? I ought to have known that my relatives, even the venerable elders are human with human frailties. Even they can disregard rules when they are desperate enough.

“But if they are as vulnerable to frailties as non-relatives, then *do I use different standards to judge them?*”

“Don’t judge. Stop thinking so much.”

“When the Kings attacked at the *swayamwar*, I had not the slightest hesitation in retaliating. I knew we were justified in fighting, because it was for the protection of her honor, her privilege to choose, my rights to my victory and my wife. I fought without doubts and I would have killed without the tiniest remorse.

“But when my brothers made the same demand just a short time later, what stopped me from reacting in the same way as I had in court?”

His eyes were steady and attentive, “I am listening. Keep speaking.”

“The situation was still the same. It still involved her privilege to choose and my right to her. Would I have been justified to react ... like I did in her

contest battle-ground?”

“Why is that weighing down on you now? Is this the time and situation to mull over that, Arjun?”

“But Govind, everything is the consequence of that act! Yudhisthir betted on Sahdev first, then Nakul, then me, then Bheem ... He did not wager Nakul’s wives or Sahdev’s wife or your sister. What made Draupadi easy prey? Her sacrifice – and mine – only paved the way to her humiliation and torture.”

“Please explain yourself.”

“Don’t you think our nearest ones make impossible demands precisely because we are forced to modify our response to them, forced to use a different set of criteria to judge them? You spoke of this war in terms of birthright and morality. It has escalated beyond a skirmish for land and power. This war is a statement and a judgment. But if it is that evil day in Hastinapur’s court – well, then who should pass judgment? Who is the judge?”

He did not interrupt me, his gaze was alert and watchful.

I continued “There is far too much wrong with the world, Govind. All her anguish could have been prevented if I had been *selfish* enough not to share her, if I had been *disobedient* enough to disregard my mother’s command and *rebelled* against our elder brother’s deeds in Hastinapur’s court.

“Since when did sacrifice, obedience and tolerance lead to heinous sins? Why do crimes become acceptable if they are packaged in those seductive, glittering words — Virtue, Discipline, and Duty — and delivered by revered elders?

“We did not put a halt to whatever Yudhisthir did in the dice hall. We kept quiet because we had been taught to obey him, no matter what. Resistance was unthinkable. We never realized when blind obedience transformed into slavery.”

Still silence from him.

“Govind, when he wagered us in that court, we did not rebel. None of my brothers rebelled when their liberty was pledged without their consent. No consent was sought because no protest was expected at all! It was not a sudden shock, I did not feel violated. All I felt was a sense of the inevitable. All I felt was, *here it comes finally...*”

“Calm down.”

“No, let me speak. When as children, we were pelted with taunts and elbowed aside roughly by our cousins, I told myself, ‘Forget inheritance and forget favors. Forget the nasty comments. Just concentrate on making the most of the knowledge offered to you.’

“I thought I would build my own identity and become my own reference point. Archery was my sole means of freedom from Hastinapur’s slavery. When I gifted Acharya his Guru-dakshina, it was my first victory and my first step towards independence from Hastinapur.

“Years later, I thought it such a lovely irony that the means of self-esteem would become the means to get a soul-mate. I felt pride that I had paved the way for my family to get out of oblivion, back to our rightful place on Earth. *Not inherited but earned*. When I returned home with Draupadi, all that I expected were a few words of encouragement and appreciation from my family. Was it too much to expect?

“Yet, when I returned triumphant to my circle of trust – I realized that I may have escaped Hastinapur, but I was still not free. My life was not mine nor was my triumph, my desires or my rewards. I was just a highly accomplished, well-trained slave yoked in service to Yudhisthir. I was expected not to covet or resent, and most definitely not *display* either.

“When Kunti Mata said Draupadi’s marriages were for preserving unity amongst us brothers, I thought she was just testing us ... and maybe she was! Maybe she hoped my brothers would laugh off her fears and prove her wrong.

“I thought if I put a small step forward, they would meet me mid-way. The one simple thing I expected them to say was that our unity is far too strong, that we don't *need* an excuse to stick together.”

He made to interrupt, but I continued, “Kunti Mata is my mother, she must have read my mind. Yet she chose to snuff out my sentiments in favor of Yudhishtir’s insistence. She knew as did Yudhishtir, that his seniority was our only defense against Hastinapur’s ambitions. If he was younger than Duryodhan, the feud would have ended in Duryodhan’s favor without any argument.

“When Mata indulged his sacrilegious whim, did she not lay down the foundation for Hastinapur’s court? That decision in our hut made Yudhishtir feel he owns our life. He need never fear censure because mother had already endorsed his ownership.”

Govind took a deep sighing breath, “Welcome to Hell.”

“You don’t look shocked.”

He said softly, “I was hoping you would stay in the make-believe world. What made you leave your innocent world of archery?”

“You agree with me that they were wrong?”

“Repeat it without the question mark. Then repeat it without guilt.” He leaned forward, “Arjun, I don’t disagree with a single word. But what does this have to do with tomorrow’s war?”

“You said this war is for victory of the righteous.”

“Human beings make errors. Yudhishtir won’t repeat the blunder.”

“But he did precisely that! I can understand one act of folly, one moment of dazed madness in an addictive game of dice. But when he *repeated* the act the next day, how am I to understand that? He knew quite well he was

incapable of winning, yet he rolled the dice yet again and cast us into exile. That could not have been a baffled mind at work again.”

“Arjun, he had been forewarned by Sage Vyasa after Rajsuya ceremony. He was told that his acts could bring destruction upon his dynasty. Hence, he vowed to obey every command of his elders, as a means to escape Destiny.”

“Twice? An Emperor who sold his subjects, his throne, his crown, his children, his brothers and his wife – twice. What if he does it again? I will kill millions to reinstate *him* back to power. My act of duty ... towards whom? By killing ... whom?”

“Arjun, he is the King of your army. You are a warrior of his army. You have no choice but to battle on his side. If you show reluctance ...”

“It would be disloyalty and treason. But, then ... isn’t that exactly the dilemma torturing Bhishm pitamah and Dronacharya? Loyalty to Hastinapur is loyalty to Duryodhan for them. Their unflinching support gives Duryodhan the audacity to wage war. Without their support, he would crumble.

“Am I expected to kill my beloved two elders for facing the same non-choice? For being helpless pawns, for being grateful to Hastinapur for their livelihood, for not having the liberty to deny Duryodhan at Kurukshetra?”

“Arjun, theirs was a crime of omission. Duryodhan’s entire gang is guilty of a crime of commission. We cannot shield the latter for the sake of the former.

“They are lending their experience, stature and guidance to Duryodhan. Yet, they have already openly declared to him that they would not kill any Pandava.”

“I know their declaration. Ah! How fortunate they are to be permitted to make such a declaration! If only I was allowed the same! Their oath liberates them from the sin of killing us – yet it burdens us with the unholy task of killing them!”

“Arjun, you already spared their lives at Virat war. They are not worthy of a second mercy. These wise veterans were supposed to intervene when ghastly events were happening before their eyes at Hastinapur. If they could not use seniority as a sword, they cannot use seniority as a shield.” He said sternly.

“Seniority? Nobody in that court was deferring to age except us. I have heard of numerous incidents at Hastinapur when Duryodhan and his wicked gang have insulted Pitamah and Acharya. What impurity has seeped in, that our dynasty has begun trampling upon elders and tutors?”

“Well, Yudhishtir is your elder too. Your deference ...”

“What if Duryodhan was my elder brother? I get ghastly nightmares, then I wake up ... and reality is even worse! It actually happened, it happened to our wife in our presence and I did nothing!” I shuddered, “Govind, I can never be sure Yudhishtir won’t repeat his act. My wife and our sons will live forever in a state of impending doom. Tell me, if he repeats the dice hall act, will his brothers, his wife or his sons even have the choice to protest?”

He sighed, “I wish I was present! I would have never permitted that evil and destructive game of dice.”

“Govind, Draupadi’s insult in that court ... I know it deserves death. It is the most shameful and searing moment of my life. But her safety and her protection was our duty, our onus. She was not Duryodhan’s responsibility. If we faltered in it ...” I felt cold sweat dotting my forehead.

He stood very still now, weighing my words carefully. Then he shrugged, “I was wrong. You are right. End this war before it begins.”

“What are you saying?” I did not want him to agree. I wanted him to slash through my arguments.

His voice was austere, “Forget the moral and ethical merit of what you said. You may even be correct logically. However, your errors are not an automatic sanction to the enemy. Let me clarify –

“At Ghosh yatra, Hastinapur’s crown prince was imprisoned by the Gandharvas. When you rescued Duryodhan from certain death, his life became permanently indebted to you. He became your prisoner.

“Hastinapur’s wives were yours to be insulted or enslaved, except that you would never misuse that power. Nor your brothers.

“Duryodhan’s queen came to your hut with the complete confidence that she would be denied neither honor nor protection. Can you imagine your wife approaching the enemy camp with that kind of faith?

“Draupadi could have retained all royal women as her personal slaves. Heaven knows, you all had enough provocation, enough motive and enough opportunity – everything except the depraved mentality that Hastinapur demonstrated at the game of dice.”

“Govind, you know quite well that we could have never faced our conscience if we took advantage of their helpless state.”

“Exactly! Hastinapur had the same option too, at the dice game. They chose not to. Now, they have to pay for their choice.

“Your generosity of spirit is *yours* – it does not come from boons, celestial weapons and miracles. Don’t belittle it and don’t ever permit anyone to take it for granted. Goodness is an asset – but if you allow it to be exploited, it is a liability.

“After Ghosh-yatra, Hastinapur should have come to you on bent knees and with bowed heads. They did not. They should have approached you with open arms. Instead they chose to face you armed.

“Yes, Yudhisthir blundered by handing over the honor of his kith and kin to the enemy as wager. But the enemy still had the choice of not misusing

undeserved power. Power does not justify sin. Power is not virtue. Virtue is that which lasts *inspite* of power.”

I envied him his clarity of thought. He was never caught unawares by emotions. He continued, “Let us focus on the more practical issue. When I say dharma is on your side, it is not Dharmaraj Yudhisthir I am speaking of. Yet, he cannot be touched, because ...”

“... because hurting him is hurting her. If he is Emperor, she is Empress. His son is her son. She is his safety shield. I will protect him even at the cost of my life specifically for that shield.”

“Precisely.”

“Govind, Indraprastha did and does mean a lot to me, but I can win and build a new Empire anytime I want. I have been living like a monk in exile and forests for the major part of my life. I can live without an Empire and its luxuries too.

“If all I wanted was an easy life, Indra was ready to bestow it all. Everything a man dreams of was laid at my feet. Yet, all I yearned for was my family here and my incomplete task. She is the one sane justification for being here at all. The sole reason. And yet ...”

“Parth, this war is, as you said, a statement and judgment — a message and warning too. The upholders of justice cannot allow sinners to get away with sins. Nobody can be spared punishment under the pretext of blood relations.”

“Govind, I know sins have been committed and that they demand payment. You and Draupadi have chosen me to judge Hastinapur. Who will judge our Emperor ... or me?”

“You will be relieved if you paid a price for your guilt, won’t you?”

“If I pay with my life, I would consider it redemption.”

“You may have to pay a price higher than your life.”

“Who is going to die?” I whispered.

“Ethics, rules and morals to begin with. They are always the first casualty in war.”

“... Our sons will survive, won’t they?” intuition gnawed at me.

“Indraprastha will have its heir.”

“That is not the same ...”

“Arjun, I am not a fortune teller. I am a charioteer.”

“Govind, your visit to Hastinapur as a peace messenger. If Duryodhan had agreed to five villages, would it have been adequate compensation for that day of Hastinapur’s court?”

His smile was gentle and mysterious, “Forgotten Jarasandha and the seventeen attempts? Duryodhan has the same hypnotic persona and the same persuasive power. He will surpass Jarasandha in the numbers of like-minded devils he gifts us for annihilation.

“There is another offer I made at Hastinapur, but not to Duryodhan. I will reveal it to you someday. But hear what I say right now, and remember it forever – neither that offer nor the one to Duryodhan was meant to actualize. They were decoys meant to flatter and deceive. They were *designed* to be failures. I would never let our Indraprastha or anything precious in your life belong to the devils.”

“Govind, this is a war between good and the lesser good. Or a war between evil and lesser evil. Only, I am not sure which of us is which. ”

“Parth, there is no man braver than one who can judge himself. Most men would give excuses and continue to commit worse offenses rather than admit their own faults. Now redeem yourself by action – perform your duty as a warrior.”

He passed affectionate fingers over my forehead, “If you mean conventional bravery, men with a tenth of your achievements boast of ten times more. The Guru-dakshina, Draupadi swayamwar, the Rajsuya campaign, the Gandharva battle, the demons at Amrawati, the Virat war — don’t underestimate your triumphs. Leave something for the enemy to do.” The smile that followed his statements was unexpected and mischievous.

“I cannot rest easy on past achievements. Every war is new, every opponent is a fresh challenge, Govind.

“Your Yadava army was forced to join Duryodhan, but my arrows don’t know how to discriminate. When they pierce Dwarka’s soldiers, how will I face the accusing eyes of Dwarka?

“The Indraprastha army that we so rigorously raised, and which is now compelled to fight for Hastinapur — every single soldier we personally trained will die at our hands.

“Yet most of the dying and dead won’t even know whether it was a war for inheritance, for land, for revenge or for justice and honor. How many should die for the sins of a handful, Govind?”

He stood in thought for a moment. “I can allay all your misgivings right now. The kings who have joined the opposing camps need to be enlightened too. They have joined hoping to turn the axle of power in their favor. Some to flex their muscles, some to be a part of this Great War. They need to be given a chance to decide, to take sides, to exert their choice while there still *is* a choice.”

“But it is too late to address everyone together,” I said, bewildered by his sudden flight of ideas and plan of action.

“It is never too late. Tomorrow is the perfect time.”

“But Govind, the war begins tomorrow!”

“Kurukshetra cannot begin without you. Tomorrow, I will take you to the centre of the battlefield, between the two oceans of armies.

“Let the warriors and soldiers on both sides stand witness. Let them know the basis, the cause and the final outcome of this battle. Besides,” his eyes gleamed, “this is going to be broadcast beyond the battlefield. Courtesy Sanjay, the all-envisioning. Let him be a medium.”

Medium to whom? *I wondered if anyone in the world would be interested in a dialogue between two warrior friends.* I told him so.

He tousled my hair, “Arjun, I am going to immortalize you.”

“Immortalize me as indecisive?”

He spread out his palms, “You want admirers or answers?”

“Answers. Govind, the war cannot stop once the conch shells are blown. Let this happen after the blow of our conch-shells. Cut off that last branch for me.”

“Arjun, war doesn’t decide who is right — it just decides who is left.” His eyes sparkled mysteriously, “The outcome of a war is not decided by bulk. It is decided by a few select heroes. And a Hero cannot be in two minds.”

He held my hands warmly, protectively, “Sinless one, there is nothing as exhausting as regret. There is nothing as hopeful as tomorrow. You have a long day coming up ahead of you. I will wake you up tomorrow.”

Chapter 22: Wasted Blood

One death puts a dark cloud over so many lives. The very first day Viratnagar lost its son, Uttar. I lost my innocent charioteer of the Virat war. Abhimanyu lost his brother-in-law and Uttara lost her brother.

The Bharat dynasty was not the only one slashed into two halves. Dwarka too was already cleaved into camps. Krishn, Abhi and Satyaki were on our side; while Kritavarman lead the Yadava army on enemy side. The Naga tribes were split into camps. Uloopi, our son Iravan and their clan supported us while Takshak sided with Duryodhan.

Eklavya had joined the war – on our opponents’ side. Against me! He had not forgotten or forgiven me. I don’t know if he had any personal belief in Duryodhan’s cause beyond his hatred for me. His sole aim was to kill me – the person he held responsible for the tortures and tribulations of his life.

He was willing to enter the battle under the leadership of Dronacharya. He seemed to have forgiven Dronacharya, but not me! But the fact that he dared to challenge me meant he had found someone to encourage and instigate him. He had persevered inspite of that horrendous incident. I was glad I would be meeting him again, but not glad about the way we would be meeting.

We met on day four of war. He was still the same: wiry, lithe and precise. He held his bow proudly in his handicapped right hand. His eyes were bitter in memory. I deliberately shifted the Gandiva to my right hand. Both of us were fully aware of the futility and consequence of this duel. Yet, we fought on. It was an irony that I killed him, shooting my arrows with the left hand.

At the end of every horrific ochre day, the rules allowed each enemy camp to search out survivors and non-survivors. The wounded were given attention and medications; the non-survivors were given mass funerals.

Eklavya belonged to no one. He was not an important enough warrior, he brought no wealth into the army, no powerful allies, got no divine astras

into Hastinapur's arsenal. He was an outsider fighting his own lone battle against his past. He was not my enemy; far from it. But I was his enemy. Being my enemy however, did not make Hastinapur his friend. Hastinapur did not deign to light the pyre reserved for special warriors.

Govind and I scoured the battlefield littered with blood and limbs until we found him in the ghastly flicker of the flaming torches. We performed the last rites on him. Some part of my childhood wished to die with him, hoping that he forgot and forgave. But Eklavya's pyre rejected my appeal, refused to placate me. I felt the acute loss of something precious. He would never know he had been inspiration to me. He could have been my best opponent, could have been one of my closest friends. Maybe in some other life. This life did not seem to have enough room for the two of us to co-exist.

Inspite of everything, I did not have the heart to mortally wound pitamah. We retorted with arrows, more mock than intent. Pitamah's armor of immortality and my reluctance to slay him kept the battle raging around us. He was their army's supreme shield – the one I was not willing to pierce. The net result was that the war which could have ended in one day, kept escalating. Around us, soldiers perished in huge numbers. Govind reminded me that death smiled every moment we mock-dueled.

On the ninth day, Govind flung back the reins, jumped down from his chariot, and heaved up a chariot wheel from a nearby fallen warrior's cart. He had a glitter in his eyes and an austere smile. He stood poised to attack Bhishm pitamah with that paltry weapon. Bhishm pitamah stood straight, his arms open, awaiting liberation at Govind's hands.

Govind's eyes sparkled and seemed to say, *'This is how vows ought to be broken.* Whenever vows hinder the righteous path, are hindrances to the sensible and sane, whenever they threaten to become a foundation to the unnatural. Vows cannot become the core of a clan's destruction.'

They exchanged a knowing glance, then Govind lowered the wheel calmly.

On the tenth day, Bhishm pitamah finally lay wounded on the bed of arrows I created for him, forced to watch the destruction of his clan. With him, fell the vestigial fragments of morals. Rules and regulations lay on a death bed. War now became a scrabble for survival at all and any cost.

*** Bhishm pitamah lifted his heavy eyelids, his eyes dull with pain. He gazed unblinking as I approached him. The patriarch who accepted every genuflection to his old age, but refused to accept responsibility.

No, I did not go for his blessings. I went because I wanted to see his bed of arrows. I went to admire the superlative skills that made his bed almost as interesting as the legend that lay on it and the artist who made it.

Every arrow was exactly evenly spaced from each other. Every corresponding paired arrow was equidistant from the centre of his body, from his spine. Every tip exactly perpendicular to the ground and exactly parallel to each other. It was mathematical precision and a work of genius.

Pitamah's lips moved as I approached, "Forgive me, child," he murmured, "for that which is unforgivable."

But it was not just that one day at Hastinapur's dice hall. Pitamah had relinquished authority long ago. My husbands had arrived at Hastinapur as fatherless toddlers. Pitamah was expected to be a shield to those helpless children. Yet they had been tormented, taunted, bullied, poisoned – and the patriarch chose to turn a blind eye, deaf ear and cold shoulder.

My husbands were almost burnt alive. They were pilfered off from Hastinapur. They were handed over a barren Khandav and yet Pitamah chose silence. His silence had hibernated too many crimes. His silence had fuelled and festered crimes.

"I have atoned for my sins. These arrows that are drinking my vitals belong to Arjun. None except him can slay me," he insisted.

"Pitamah, I was born because of Arjun's arrows. I was won by Arjun's arrows. I need no assistance to recognize Arjun's arrows," I said evenly.

I also saw the arrows he was hoping nobody would notice. I knew how to read wounds and weapons. I distinguished Arjun and Shikhandi's arrows clearly. They were of the same metal and the same size. Arjun's arrows went always clean through the body – intended to kill swiftly and almost mercifully. The entry and exit points had the tiniest speck of blood, as if the body was impaled by magic. It was not an act meant for vicarious pleasure. It was a job well-executed, to be disposed of with minimal pain and maximum impact.

The other arrows belonged to Shikhandi. Their path was wobbly, purposely wobbly. They were meant to leave a yawning gash in the skin, meant to tear through muscle haphazardly, to draw blood, meant to cause agony.

Merciful death and merciless wounds. Death without pain and pain without death. I saw both embedded in the sole remnant of the Kuru dynasty. The patriarch slain by three pairs of hands; my husband's precision, Shikhandi's spirit and my whole-hearted willpower.

Pitamah had staunchly refused to battle Shikhandi. My brother had borne sons with his wife, he was in charge of an entire Akshouhini since the first day of Kurukshetra and he survived fierce duels with other warriors on this very battlefield. He shed blood and he drew blood. What audacious facade of masculinity rendered pitamah so contemptuous of my brother? Why this terrified abstinence – as if Shikhandi's arrows would penetrate his fragile virginity?

I saw pitamah's blood, congealed and stained an unusual brown. It drooped in the shape of a question mark, forming a pool at the tip of each arrow. The last of Kuru blood seeped into the soil, a question mark forever.

I did not wish to respect anyone who did not understand the accountability required of seniority. I could still hear the echo of his words from the court of Hastinapur. The senior-most member of the clan who did not lift a finger for his clan's daughter-in-law.

Shikhandi clasped my shoulder protectively and inclined his head, signaling for us to leave. I looked back once, for the last time at the multiple pools of wasted royal blood.

Most of the Kaurav brothers were already smeared into the dust. Only Yuyutsu had dared to break convention, to leave his brother Duryodhan's camp and join us. The rest remained with Duryodhan, which meant they sided with his plans and thoughts ... and his fate as well.

I counted on my fingers, the ones still surviving. It would not be long before this war ended. My patience was being rewarded at last.

With the fall of Bhishm pitamah, the thumb-slayer became commander of their army. I wondered if my father would be able to withstand the ferocity of the vicious Brahmin. Or would my twin have to fulfill his prophesy?

Perhaps, in that case, my prophesy would come true as well. But death knew no discrimination. We had already lost Uttar and Iravan. Who next?

Chapter 23: Broken Rules, Broken Trust, Broken Smiles

*** He said he would not let anyone snatch his rights, and that he would follow in Krishn's footsteps. But when the crucial moment came, he invariably behaved like his father. He automatically assumed responsibility in the absence of his father and uncle. He probably yearned to earn the admiration that was already bestowed upon him.

But he was a child fighting his first battle. There were senior war veterans on the battlefield who should have talked him out of it, especially two people – the General and the Emperor of our army. Why did they not dissuade him?

I had my own demons haunting me. I recalled my bitter words to Krishn before his departure to Hastinapur, "I will spare your Abhimanyu. He is not my blood." Why did my tongue not shrivel up before I uttered them? Oh, if only I had the power to retract them now! Were there any weapons as searing as words? Abhi, did they pierce you so quick to the heart that you decided to forsake me forever? Come back, my child, I would gladly give up the rest of my life if it allowed you revival.

He would never again set foot upon Indraprastha soil.

Too many people had misjudged Abhimanyu, too many had lost sleep over him, over his ambitions and abilities. Perhaps this was his way of protesting that he had no aspirations to the throne. He renounced his rights over Indraprastha, he renounced his rights over his own life.

Everyone concerned could breathe easy now, because Abhimanyu would never breathe again.

Acharya had been attempting Yudhisthir's capture since the last two days. I succeeded in demolishing his attack time and again. But we could not cluster around Yudhisthir forever. Today, Govind and I had been lured far

away into the battlefield battling the never ending hordes and hardened battalions of *Shamshaptakas*, away and away till I lost sight of Yudhisthir's chariot. I left behind my trusted disciple Satyaki to defend Yudhisthir from Dronacharya.

We returned back in the gloomy ochre of dusk. I cast an anxious glance at the flag unfurled on our camp – it was still ours. What then, was the Earth and Air mourning?

The air around us was pregnant with anger, desolate at the loss of something cherished and treasured. The guard refused to look us in the eye, would not answer my queries. All he said was that Dronacharya had arranged the dreaded *Chakra-vyuh* in our absence.

I looked with foreboding at Govind. We were the only two in our camp who knew the art of penetrating and unfurling that labyrinthine maze. But there was another one who knew it halfway, knew only part of it!

He would not have ... he could not have been allowed into it. That way lay only... an ominous word I could not utter in my mind.

Govind gently took hold of my arm as we approached Yudhisthir's tent. I resisted, something within me revolted against gaining factual knowledge of it, tried to deny the glaring obvious truth, like a tortoise withdrawing within its protective shell. Govind's eyes were already consoling, already confirming my worst fears. I wanted his eyes to deny and to assure me that my son was safe and alive. But his eyes did not lie.

I saw the still figure shrouded in white. We knelt by its side. "Don't!" Govind urged, as I made to uncover the face. I flung off his hand and flicked off the cover. I looked down in disbelief, relief flooding me.

This was not Abhimanyu!

There were no dimples, no laughing eyes. This was not anyone. This could be anyone. There was no way to be certain because there was no face

left to recognize. There was congealed blood, pulp and splinters of bone. This was not a human face. It was a nightmare.

But the hair – lustrous blue-black and curly like Govind!

I looked further. I knew the silhouette of this form so well; I had envisioned it so often in the loneliness of thirteen years. I knew every mark on it, he was imprinted forever in my mind. I could have sculpted him out of memory even now.

I could not be mistaken in the birthmark, although it was brutally slashed and carved over with newer wounds. How could one body accommodate so many wounds? I recognized the emerald ring on rigid fingers, still unwilling to relinquish his desperate grasp on his weapon.

Govind was wrong. Shell of the soul! That is what he had called the body. This was no mere apparel. This had been the impossible combination of Govind and me – the unrepeatable miracle.

I could hear Yudhisthir's voice somewhere hazily, halting, explaining. My ears heard only Abhi's prophetic query made a long, long time ago when he had been a mere child ... and alive. "What does one do if the enemy attacks together?" he had asked. I had been so sure of war rules and warriors who obey rules.

"That never happens. Besides, I will be there for you," I had said emphatically, dismissing his irrelevant suspicion.

Why did I allow him to trust people? Of all the inheritable qualities, I allowed him to inherit explicit trust. He had blindly relied on my reply, not persisted with his question. I ought to have wisened up after the Virat war, ought to have realized that his query held potential truth.

What was the point of my learning that chakra-vyuh, when the only time in my life I needed the knowledge ...?

“I failed him,” I whispered to Govind. I saw him frown, felt his fingers tighten on my shoulders. Why was he not torn with grief? He had looked after this child much longer than I had. How could he remain so detached?

Seven of them ... together... I heard the voice in the background.

Seven years! I had needed seven years to learn the Chakravyuh completely. I never lived seven consecutive years with Abhimanyu in order to teach him the Chakravyuh. But Govind had been with him for thirteen years – surely it was adequate time to teach my child.

“You could have at least taught him not to trust people,” I whispered accusingly.

I heard a familiar name in Yudhisthir’s narration. Jayadratha.

Empowered by Shiva’s boon, he had held back my brothers, not allowed them to follow Abhi into the vortex of the quicksand. My lonely lion cub had been sucked into the sea of vultures.

Someone had pardoned Jayadratha once upon a time. I looked around. That one. Her jaw set, and her silhouette sagging against the wall. She had cried when she first met Abhimanyu. Her eyes were dry now and frozen wide in shock.

The voice continued narrating the tale. Abhi had fought against the Kaurav army all alone. He demolished each of them in one-on-one combat. Fearless and indomitable, he had whipped them into a frenzy of doubt and terror. He fought with his arrows, shield, sword, spear and mace. Then he fought without his weapons. Ultimately, bereft of all weapons, he uprooted his chariot wheel and launched a new attack. The chariot wheel! *Someone would have to die because of the chariot wheel soon*, I promised.

He had forced them into desperate despair, so much that they attacked him flinging aside all rules of war, all rules of decency and all rules of

humanity. Dusshasan's son challenged him to a duel. My son had already combated himself to exhaustion. Both of them had fallen unconscious during the duel. Dusshasan's son regained consciousness first, but his conscience still lay in stupor. He struck my fatigued child a fatal blow and crushed his head into the soil.

And then someone kicked Abhimanyu's shoulders. The body turned over with the impact of the kick. The head, smashed to splinters, did not. It lay there on its lonely own, ashamed to be in the company of cowards. And then seven heroic warriors did a ghoulish victory dance around the precious head.

The Virat war. I could have beheaded every single one of these seven warriors. But I had reprimanded myself; a noble warrior does not attack an unconscious and unarmed warrior. Where were the noble rules now?

Broken rules, broken trust, broken smiles.

Abhimanyu would trust no more, would smile no more.

** Arjun held Subhadra and Uttara close, all three knit together in wordless torment. Then Arjun and Krishn carried their son to the cremation pyre. They stood in the unbearable glare of the pyre, united even in grief.

Krishn gave me a terse nod towards Subhadra and Uttara. The soldier was assigned to her duty. However, the two heartbroken women had not welcomed my condolences. Their sorrow was bitter, devastating and absolute. It left no room for outsiders. I was the intruder who could not possibly understand their grief, the vengeance-obsessed witch who had lured away their most precious possession.

I left their tent. I made my lonely way back to the blazing pyre. Little Abhimanyu, his chubby hands entwined around Krishn's neck. The lustrous brown eyes looking into the depths of my soul. His incessant chatter and pattering feet as he followed me around. Why was nobody consoling me?

No victory could restore this loss. Indraprastha without Abhimanyu, Dwarka without Abhimanyu. Alas, which piece of land was worth a life so precious? Never again would he jest with me, never would he proudly present me Uttara's child for blessings. Dwarka's pride and Indraprastha's beacon. Subhadra's darling and my very own was lost forever.

I was not allowed to approach his pyre, but there was one person who was permitted. The designer of the Chakravyuh. Dronacharya managed to wade through the Chakravyuh of our mourning camp warriors. I had to admire his guts. He set the stage for today's ghastly act. And yet he calmly entered enemy camp, walked all the way till the duo standing close to the pyre. What was it he wanted to express?

At the coronation ceremony, I had served him and his son as Indraprastha's guests. Why had he been unable to cleanse the poison from his soul? I could understand his hostility towards Drupad's children. But I could not condone his brutality to Arjun's child.

Arjun – who gratified Acharya's Gurudakshina, made him owner of half of Panchal, saved his life from a crocodile, and upheld his reputation at my contest. Life, revenge, honor, prestige, unconditional love and respect. Over and over. What more can a protégé give a tutor?

In return, Acharya gifted Arjun with his son's funeral pyre. Even a serpent displays more gratitude!

Tied to Hastinapur ... was how Arjun had described Acharya. Tied? Wretched slave! In the face of his repeated failure to wrench Yudhisthir from Arjun's constant protection, Abhimanyu's pyre was Dronacharya's offering to Duryodhan, the grand proof of his loyalty.

The sight of Acharya somehow brought me closure. Here at last was a person on whom I could pinpoint my wrath. Dhrishtadyumn would have the honor of slaying this person, I thought jealously. *Make the first blow on my behalf*, I silently implored my twin brother.

I could not understand the unearthly restraint that prevented Arjun from killing the barbaric Acharya who stood beside him in mock sympathy. The three stayed there till the end. Then the crowd of mourners parted. Dronacharya was left behind. I saw Krishn and Arjun walk towards their tent. I stumbled after them.

Krishn sat by his bedside, cajoling him into sleep, murmuring something gently, running his hands into his hair. I heard Arjun say something again and again. Jayadratha? Why Jayadratha? Why not the seven unheroic assassins? Was it because they included Dronacharya, Dronacharya's son and Dronacharya's brother-in-law? Even through his personal agony, was his beloved Guru to be spared?

Krishn sensed my presence and silenced me with a frown. He checked once more to confirm that Arjun had escaped mercifully into oblivion. Then he pried away his fingers and joined me in the outer room.

"Why are you not letting me help?" I demanded.

"Help?" He stood thinking "Do you know how to read the constellations?" I shook my head, bewildered. What did the stars have to do with revenge? "Then don't complicate matters. Go to your tent. Indraprastha's Empress is not supposed to wander into other tents."

"I am not Indraprastha's Empress!" I snapped at him "And it is too late to bother about decency. I already have a terrible reputation."

"Then sit quietly and listen. Don't interrupt," he said, welcoming in a group of astrologers into his tent. I huddled into a corner and listened. I gathered that they were talking of the possibility of solar eclipse tomorrow. How did eclipses matter in the middle of war? But Krishn seemed flooded with relief. He stood lost in his own calculations, speaking to himself.

He realized at last that I still stood where he had ordered. He sighed patiently, then he told me about Arjun's terrible oath; he would immolate

himself by fire if he did not kill Jayadratha by sunset tomorrow. It was Jayadratha who had kicked Abhimanyu's lifeless body.

"He will kill Jayadratha tomorrow," I asserted, "If not, there will be two people walking into that pyre."

"You forget, Empress, that you have five husbands. You cannot immolate yourself with four live husbands. Besides, I am not worried about the fire. I am worried about the Sun."

"Does the Sun bear a grudge against him?" I asked, confused.

He shrugged, "Don't worry about him. Remember what I told you once? No son, no relative, no wife is dearer to me than Arjun."

"What will you do if he cannot kill Jayadratha tomorrow?" I asked.

"He will. I cannot survive his ..." his eyes were narrowed as he stared into the night.

This is not the detachment he had told his friend on the eve of war. This was not detachment. If a person is nothing more than a soul, why was Krishn so attached to this particular body tossing and turning in unquenched nightmares?

"This war was a disaster waiting for an excuse, I knew it could be delayed, but never averted. I knew which side I would belong in this war. I would have never allowed Subhadra to be Hastinapur's daughter-in-law. Never! Not even at the cost of trampling all over your emotions. I..." Krishn began.

"I don't care if Subhadra makes me wait at her feet all her life. I don't care how many years I have to spend in exile, but bring back Abhimanyu. Please! Do anything." I pleaded.

He shook his head. "Kalyani, he cannot be brought back."

I had hoped for some miracle. Krishn would never let his dearest nephew get killed. Maybe the real Abhimanyu was safe somewhere else. But there would be no miracles happening.

It was a curse to be so strong, I thought, as I leaned against his chest. I felt tears on my face. I don't know whether they were his or mine.

“Was Arjun right then, when he paused on the eve of war? Did he have a premonition that Abhi would ... were we all wrong? Am I guilty of this destruction?” I asked.

“Don't ever take the blame for it and never let anybody accuse you. There is guilt involved, yes, but not you. Absolutely not you!” He paused, and then continued. “He was right about one thing, though. Nobody can remain neutral in this war, nobody can escape sorrow. Balram tau tried to escape, he thought he would be spared the ferocity of this war.”

I gave him a perplexed look, “There is another funeral pyre lit in the enemy camp tonight. My niece was widowed today. Duryodhan's son was Balram tau's son-in-law. He was killed today at Abhimanyu's hands. Dwarka has plenty to mourn tonight.”

The oath to kill Jayadratha was made and we raced to fulfill it. For the first time in my life, I was distracted from my target. My concentration bifurcated, partly watching the enemy on the field, partly watching the enemy in the sky. I felt a strange vibrancy in the Sun today, as if it was beaming in anticipation of dragging me behind it into darkness.

We shattered the elephant force of Dusshasan, then blew apart the defenses of Dronacharya. We raged through Kritavarman, Surasena, Sivi, Kaikeyas and Madrakas. I slayed Strutayudha and Sudakshina. When the sun was overhead, Duryodhan approached us, clad in Dronacharya's impenetrable armor. Except that, the armor was not impenetrable – I knew the weak point of that armor, the unguarded soft spot beneath the fingernails. I targeted the vulnerable points and Duryodhan was sent off howling, his defense breached.

Past noon, I beheaded Vinda and Anuvinda. Then, when we had blasted halfway past the length of their vyuh, I noticed our stallions frothing at the mouth. Govind shot me a questioning look and I nodded my assent. He unshackled them from the chariot right in the middle of the battlefield. I shot an arrow into the ground and ploughed out a cool water-pool for them, where Govind calmly proceeded to caress, refresh and feed them. I built a fence of arrows around them, aware of the disappearing tentacles of the Sun. Once, I caught him scanning the sky.

Standing on the ground, I continued the battle. The enemy did not stop attacking me and I did not expect them to. Bhurisravas, Sala, Karn, Vrishasena, Kripacharya and Ashwatthama then attacked together, stationed at every point of a circle. As we were splintering apart their attack, Satyaki appeared out of nowhere on my heels!

My heart lurched. I had clearly instructed him to guard Yudhisthir. Satyaki here by my side meant that Dronacharya was free to swoop down on our Emperor. How did Satyaki ever have the impertinence to ignore my order?

“Bheem is protecting him. I came at the Emperor’s behest,” he said apologetically just as his chariot got swamped by Kritavarman, Bhurisravas, Dusshasan and Mlecchas.

And then it suddenly plummeted into darkness. The birds rose in clamor, unfurled their wings in confusion. Our camp plunged into gloom. Their camp erupted in howls of joy. Govind smiled up at the sky.

Why did I escape the fire at the lacquer house if I was meant to burn to death? There was so much still incomplete. Jayadratha alive, Yudhisthir in danger, Abhimanyu unavenged ... this could not be the unheroic end of my life.

The vultures overhead hovered patiently. The vultures amongst the enemy shuffled impatiently.

Govind touched the Gandiva, “No other warrior can handle this in your absence.” Then he leaned closer and whispered, “Stay alert.”

Even as the Gandiva tensed in my grip, the darkness diminished. The birds rose, squawking again, bewildered. Reluctantly, scowling and sulking the Sun reappeared. There was perplexity in the enemy camp now.

Govind nodded and inclined his head, “Behold the Sun and there is Jayadratha!”

Jayadratha had clawed and elbowed his way to the front, right from way back where he had been well hidden behind layers of protective cordons, right before the hapless eyes of Duryodhan and his warriors. He was beheaded in a split second, his face contorted midway between relief and realization.

It was Jayadratha who finally lay on the pyre his side wished for me. I survived yesterday’s funeral. I relished today’s funeral. I could not decide if that meant a rung higher or lower in Hell.

As the crackling pyre died down, the emptiness of this victory descended on me. No matter how many warriors I killed, Abhi would never return. How can the young be allowed to die before the elders? There is no word, no title yet, that can describe a parent who loses a child.

Govind had told me to perform my duties and not worry over the consequences. It was the most difficult of all his tenets. I could not separate the deed from its effects. I still mourned for Abhi. I always would.

I looked at Govind in the heat and glow of the pyre. He looked tranquil. He did not merely say it; he actually lived his words. I wondered if he would have stood so composed if I was being burnt to ashes. Something told me he would not have been so indifferent if I lay on this pyre.

I hoped I died before he did.

I would never be able to stand by his funeral pyre.

Chapter 24: The Finality of Doom

*** I went searching for them in the fading light of dusk. Krishn bid me to enter, “Two Parshuram disciples, Bhishm pitamah and Dronacharya dead. Two wielders of celestial weapons dead. Time for the third one to die.”

“What kinds of celestial weapons exist?” I enquired.

“The holy Trinity comprises of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu. In vein of this hierarchy, *Brahmastra* and *Brahmashira* from Brahma, *Pashupatastra* and *Raudrastra* from Shiva and *Narayanastra* from Vishnu are the most lethal missiles.”

“Arjun wields the Brahmastra, Raudrastra and Pashupatastra, but I have not heard of the Narayanastra. Who possesses it?” I enquired.

“Possessed. Dronacharya shared its knowledge only with Ashwatthama. It was a very unique and lethal missile. Any resistance fuelled and doubled its destructive power. Only complete obeisance could nullify it, which I did. It cannot be ever used twice.”

“What about Brahmashira?”

“Arjun learnt the Brahmashira from Dronacharya, who in turn got it from Agnivesha. It is multi-fold more devastating than Brahmastra. Dronacharya most probably taught it to Ashwatthama. Nobody else in this universe has its knowledge.”

I pondered over this information. Arjun possessed the three most devastating weapons and thus had an edge over Ashwatthama. He had always spoken warmly to me about Ashwatthama, recalling moments of their camaraderie from ashram days. There had been healthy competition between them, but never enmity. Ashwatthama had never shown vehement animosity against Pandavas. Not until yesterday, when Acharya had been beheaded by my twin brother.

Krishn continued speaking, “My spies informed me that Ashwatthama knows only how to launch, but not how to withdraw the Brahmashira. Acharya taught him out of fatherly love, but he was always aware of Ashwatthama’s impatience. If he cannot withdraw the Brahmashira, he can never reutilize it. Arjun knows how to, and thus he can use it multiple times.”

“What about Indra’s weapons?” I asked.

“Indra is a demi-God, one level below the Trinity. His *Vajra* is the foremost amongst man to man missile, while the Trinity’s weapons are for mass destruction.”

“How many amongst their army has the Brahmastra?”

“Four of them. Fortunately, the two who had the restraint not to unleash it also happen to be the two Kaurava Generals already dead- Pitamah and Dronacharya. I cannot vouch for the other two, Ashwatthama and Karn.”

“How many in our army possess it, apart from Arjun?”

He shook his head in response.

“Oh! And does anyone in their camp possess Raudrastra or Pashupatastra?” I asked.

“No one in the Universe possesses them except for Arjun. No mortal or celestial can nullify, oppose or withstand them,” he pondered thoughtfully, “Dronacharya and Ashwatthama had the Brahmastra, which can be used against demonic forces. I wonder why they used the *Vasava Shakti* astra against Ghatotkach!”

Demonic? I remembered Hidimba’s gentle giant son who helped us in the arduous pathway up Gandhmadan. He had wreaked havoc on the enemy last night and ravaged their defenses. Ghatotkach could have been the crown prince of Indraprastha if his mother was a Kshatriya-born. Yet he joined our army without the least resentment or expectations of reward. *Demonic?*

“There is a rumor that Karn received the Shakti astra from Indra, in order to kill Arjun.” Krishn said.

I stared in disbelief, “Dronacharya whispers the secret of Narayan astra solely for his son. *That* is understandable. But Indra gifting a missile to his son’s enemy to kill his son! Is Indra Arjun’s enemy?”

Krishn shook his head, “I told you, Indra’s Vajra is already in Arjun’s possession. It is much superior to Shakti astra.”

“I see.”

“They say Karn traded the powerful Shakti-astra for his impenetrable armor.”

I shrugged, “You mean the impenetrable armor that was penetrated by the Gandharvas and the *Alarka* beetle? The armor that couldn’t save him from defeat at Dronacharya’s guru-dakshina, at post swayamwar duel, during Rajsuya campaign at Bheem’s hands, at Ghosh-yatra and Virat war?”

“The very same. I am just conveying the talk the enemy camp is teeming with.”

“They are in desperate need of rumors to keep up their morale. How do you manage to get the secrets out from their camp?”

“Duryodhan himself gave me the leeway. He asked for my Yadava Sena and opened the chink wide open for me. Now why should I be blamed if my army mingles with his and manages ...?”

“What about the rumors? You again?”

“Possible. Panchali, the enemy thinks that without me, Karn could have defeated Arjun.”

“Indeed? Is that why the braggart fled even when Uttar was charioteer to Arjun? I mean no offense to your expertise, but ...who is his charioteer?”

“His latest charioteer is Shalya. Nakul-Sahdev’s uncle.”

“Why Shalya? You mean the entire charioteer clan could not find a single competent charioteer for their own clan’s warrior?”

“Karn wanted a Kshatriya-charioteer to emulate me. He also asked for a fresh set of stallions. Silvery white stallions, just like mine. A war veteran ought to know that warrior, charioteer and horses are one soul, one body, one inseparable team. To play around with the team is to court disaster.”

The tent entrance was flung open and Arjun entered. He saw me, then moved to the half-open flap at the other end of the tent. He remained gazing at the blood red colors of the setting Sun. I stole a glance at him.

He had changed so much in the last few days. His profile held a new austerity. He had withdrawn back into the cocoon of silence. Iravan, Abhimanyu and Ghatotkach’s deaths had permanently changed something within him. All that was trusting and innocent seemed to have perished with his sons.

I gazed at his silhouette, hoping he would turn to me. I wished he would nestle his head in my lap and confess his thoughts. My gaze followed his fingers as they casually curled around the flap of the tent.

The long fingers that I kissed at drowsy dawns, those that my pet birds trustfully perched upon, the intimate fingers that knew every curve and crevice of my body. The person who said there was nothing poetic about death; I wanted that person back. I wished he had not changed so much. This person – icy, aloof and distant – scared me. He looked like he did not need me anymore.

His knees went deep into the soggy earth. He held onto the chariot wheel and heaved.

I lowered my bow and wondered what he was doing. There were empty chariots nearby. Just yesterday Bheem had cut down his steeds and charioteer not once, but multiple times. He had been rescued over and over

again by Duryodhan's backup chariots. Duryodhan and Ashwatthama were witnessing our battle avidly from a short distance away. What was so precious about *this* chariot?

We had been dueling since the Sun got overhead today. It had been overhead when we met years ago at Dronacharya's arena. I could never pinpoint why he hated me so viciously since my childhood. The hatred was too personal, too extreme for me to unravel. At Dronacharya's ashram, the hatred was bolstered by Duryodhan's explicit support and Dhritarashtra's implied support. Today, however, no coronation ceremony, no sunset would interrupt us. It was time to end this duel forever.

As war progressed over the last sixteen days, fallen limbs, rivers of blood and flesh piled up like mountains. Decaying carcasses obstructed the battlefield. Gradually, we were forced to move the battlefields to the southern ends of Kurukshetra, where the ground was uneven and tilted at odd angles. Govind had greased and insulated our chariot wheels over and over today morning to keep them from skidding and snagging.

Today I had used Agneyastra and Karn retaliated with Varunastra. When the sky darkened with clouds, I dispersed them with Vayavyastra. Finally he used his carefully preserved *Sarp-mukh* arrow.

I flung back the stray strands that escaped the bandanna and whipped over my eyes. His snake-headed forked arrow was wasted. It lay sizzling with poisonous fumes, embedded into my fallen crown and tainting it a queer blue-black tinge. Takshak's son Ashwasen had been waiting his chance to avenge Khandav. When we noticed Karn choose the poison-tipped forked missile, Govind raised his whip and slashed into our horses. They danced nimbly on the narrow strip of slippery land. Our steeds neighed as they rose on hind legs and then knelt in unison.

Our chariot sank awkwardly into the soggy ground just as the venomous dart flew past. Ashwasen peeled himself off the arrow and darted towards me. I quickly cut him into pieces. Then Govind swiftly jumped down onto the field to raise up our chariot. Bare-handed. Weaponless. Unprotected.

Karn fired arrows at my unarmed charioteer as he was engaged in heaving up the chariot. Aghast and furious at seeing Govind targeted, I battered Karn with arrows. His armor, his earrings and his diadem were shattered. I ripped apart his chest, forehead and limbs with arrows. Ultimately, bathed with blood, he slumped unconscious within his chariot. I waited till Shalya revived him and he restarted his attack. Destiny, however, has its own ways to balance *karma*.

Now, it was his turn. His chariot stuck just as mine was. He held up a hand, asking for reprieve, ranting about battle regulations. He who, a short time ago, had attacked my unarmed charioteer!

Disgusted by his double standards, I nevertheless lowered my bow and waited patiently. I still had Dronacharya's *Brahmastra*, Indra's *Vajra* and Shiva's *Raudra*. Plus, there was no weapon that could nullify the *Pashupatastra* or *Brahmashira*. But ordinary missiles first, deadlier ones later. The latter two could wreck unimaginable destruction in our vicinity – upon nature, warriors, soldiers, stallions and elephants. I would not use these latter two. I quickly decided the sequence of my darts. It was just a matter of time before –

I became aware of a pair of dazzling eyes fixed on me. “Waiting for an auspicious moment, Parth?” Govind interrupted my musing.

“I am waiting for him to finish his games.”

“He invokes the rules whenever they are convenient for him. He is done with all his missiles. He is just wasting time. Finish this duel now. Don’t give this battle more importance than it deserves.”

“But Govind —”

“This is no innocent angel. He spurred on Duryodhan for every evil conspiracy, right from Bheem’s poisoning to lacquer mansion fire to the dice game to Ghosh-yatra to Abhimanyu’s death.

“His was the foul idea of Ghosh-yatra, to jeer at you all. Warriors? They are maggots who thrive on sores. Defeat you? He could not even face the Gandharvas, forget facing Abhimanyu alone!”

I remembered the day I killed Jayadratha, when we were forced to rest our steeds, I fought from the ground when Govind unyoked our horses. I was attacked from all sides and I did not waste time reminding the opponents of the rules. This opponent was not even unarmed. Yet, I kept my bow lowered and spoke to Govind,

“I could have beheaded him as he lay unconscious at Virat war, but I didn't. I will wait now as well.”

“Chivalry for the undeserving? This is one of the seven great warriors,” Govind pointed a stern finger at the stooping figure, “... who cornered our Abhimanyu. This one cut his bow from behind. From behind! Ah, valiant Karn! He brags he can outdo you and cannot even overpower your cub without resorting to foul play. Show no mercy to this vile warrior.”

Abhimanyu! My precious child! How could I ever forget or forgive that?
The uprooted chariot wheel in my son's unarmed hands and this wheel stuck here.

My fingers tensed around the Anjalika arrow.

Karn raised his head, I saw the dismay in his eyes. I wished he would let go of that damned wheel and pick up his bow. His life hung by a thin thread of hope. Hope that I would adhere to the rules – in spite of Abhimanyu.

Pick up that bow! He heard me at last, let go of the wheel and joined his hands together to chant. I heard the reverberations around me, the growling, grumbling threat arising from the air around me – gathering from the tremors of the ground around me. Our steeds reared up in terrified animal instinct. The wind stilled and then it poised to whip towards us. I discerned the initial words of the holy chant ... *the Brahmastra!*

The Brahmastra could not harm me, I knew how to neutralize it. Yet the power of Brahmastra could devastate miles in our vicinity.

Govind and I were safe; but my sons, my brothers, my brothers-in-law, our army ... how far could they escape to security in so short a time? Duryodhan, who was watching from a distance, would not survive either. Did Duryodhan know he could die because of his own friend? I had only one option – to nullify his astra. I took a deep breath and unlocked the antidote code to my Brahmastra.

Our Brahmastras collided mid-air in a fantastic blaze, crackling like thunderstorm and showering sharp shards around our chariots. The storm reverberated for what seemed like eons and then it gradually ebbed. The wind slowly mellowed down, the ground grew steady beneath the restless legs of our steeds. Around us an entire spate of battlefield lay glowing ominously, like embers on charred grounds. An entire battalion of curious onlookers lay beheaded and burnt to cinders.

Govind took a deep breath and unleashed his last resort.

“He called your wife a certain name that day,” his voice taut as a bowstring and soft as a caress. “In full court, in the presence of her five husbands, in the vicinity and hearing of Hastinapur’s elders. Her parents and brothers in Panchal must have learnt of it someday. Her sons must be hearing it in every nightmare. Do you know how many moments exist in thirteen years? That word has echoed around her every moment of these last thirteen years.”

I saw the finality of doom in Karn’s eyes.

“Nobody was willing to repeat that word to you. Would you like to hear the word, Arjun?” his voice was ominously calm.

And then he told me ...

He had been allowed to breathe for years, but not another instant. Thirteen years of torture ... I could not stop shooting even after the crescent tipped Anjalika plucked away his head. I ripped into his eyes, into his sacrilegious tongue.

My untamed tigress; Abhimanyu's Goddess; Govind's dearest friend! I heard that unholy expletive pour down and scald my veins like hot lead.

"Enough," Govind said evenly, putting a restraining hand on my arm.

I threw off his hand and my bow. I jumped down from the chariot towards the slain person. I knew that nothing I did would ever be enough retaliation. I knelt in the mud, trying in vain to throttle his severed neck.

The sagging soil lapped up my tears and his blood with equal greed and equal indifference.

Chapter 25: An Exquisite Torture

*** They returned back to camp at dusk drenched in sweat, blood and mud. He stopped short as he saw me and then he walked past without a word, averting his eyes. Krishn did not greet me either. They had barely slumped in his tent a few moments before we disturbed them again.

Yudhisthir had sent word that Kunti Mata insisted on visiting the battlefield. It was dark and the hazy smoky glow of torches made the darkness more menacing. I could smell the stench of dead soldiers, could hear the moans of the live wounded ones. The air was chilly, biting cold.

Mata Kunti was walking rapidly ahead of us. She was running now, unaware of her veil fluttering undone after her, and running through the scattered limbs towards the body bereft of its head. The head lay a short distance away.

What I saw on the corpse was nowhere as orderly as Bhishm pitamah's bed of arrows. The neck pierced clean in the center was the signature work of the same artist who made the bed of arrows. The rest of the arrows were haphazardly embedded, overcrowding his chest in frenzied bunches. The eyes were ripped open by arrows.

I felt an uneasy twist within me. This was not Arjun's customary economical use of arrows. This was not the mere culmination of a rivalry. This was not the result of a trifle duel. This was something else. Some other raw emotion had been at play here today. Something feral and visceral.

Yudhisthir, Bheem and the twins stood incredulously around the head. The head was being cradled by an openly weeping Mata Kunti.

Why...? I whirled back, the question dying on the tip of my tongue. Krishn and Arjun were walking just behind me.

"My son!" wailed Kunti Mata. The stunned silence swallowed her words and regurgitated them back. "My son, my eldest son," she continued

lamenting, “your eldest brother was not an orphan, he was not a sutaputra, he was your very own. Come, pay your last respects to his lifeless body. Touch his feet and seek pardon.”

Arjun stood motionless. I scanned his face. He looked far too calm. Krishn looked composed and not at all shocked.

“I am sorry.” Arjun spoke evenly at last, “I am sorry I allowed him to live so long.”

“You performed the last rites for that tribal boy. Can you not do it for your own brother? I lost my son!” Mata moaned.

“So did I,” Arjun replied in the same even tone. He glanced at Bheem, “So did we.”

“He was indebted to Duryodhan, but he promised me he would spare your brothers, all of them except you.”

“He knew?”

“Yes,” she moaned, “at Hastinapur before war began. I tried to convince him to reconcile with all of you and to rule Indraprastha. Duryodhan would have lost heart and hope, he depended so much on Karn.”

“He *knew*?” Arjun stepped forward, his tone no more steady, “He knew who Ghatotkach was when he hurled the Shakti-astra? He knew who Abhimanyu was when he helped six others to slay his own nephew?”

She was startled into silence, then she pleaded, “Do not condemn him, Arjun. He was spurned since childhood. He was deprived of the royalty he deserved. Great injustice was done to him.”

“By whom?”

She had no answer for that one.

“Your son lived to rule his own kingdom, to see his children and grandsons grow up. My child had barely blossomed into youth. He did not even taste life long enough to – my son will never behold his child ...” he stopped, unable to speak further.

“You killed his son too,” she retorted bitterly.

“Yes, I killed Vrishasena in front of his eyes, in his very presence. But I did not kill a nephew knowingly. Am I that monstrous?” he said wearily.

“There were six others involved in Abhimanyu’s death. Why are you holding Karn alone responsible for it?”

“Abhimanyu was nephew to only one of the seven. Why should you single out only one for pardon? Abhimanyu ... unarmed, defenseless ... surely that means something to you!”

She turned and hid her face, “He was born out of the boon granted by Sage Durvasa. Alas! He came to my womb at my tender age, before my marriage. Kripacharya pointedly enquired about his bloodline at Dronacharya’s arena. If they only knew!”

“*You* knew. It was not our onus to uncover his identity.”

“All his life,” she moaned, “he had to face the insults, the jeers ...”

“Do you think Hastinapur spared us the taunts and the jeers? You speak as if personal insults are an adequate sanction to plot evil.”

“Can you imagine being *suryaputra* and derided as *sutaputra* all his life? When Draupadi rejected him ...”

Here it comes, I thought. *Transfer of guilt*. She was the one who rejected her son over and over – not me. Why the pretentious remorse now?

“You were not present in the Panchal court. You could have clarified with us instead of believing malicious rumors,” Arjun said calmly.

“This battle began at that swayamwar. The calamity your wife ...”

“This battle began much, much earlier, Mata. It began at Dronacharya’s ashram and you know it quite well.”

“Your very own brother ...” she began again.

“Special rules for blood relatives ... you remember our conversation?” he said to Krishn, then, “I saw Bhishm pitamah and Dronacharya executed on this battlefield. I have been battling and slaying relatives since war began. You wish me to mourn *now*?

“Why not mourn over Vikarna? He was the sole person to protest against the horror unfolding in Hastinapur’s court, yet he was slain at Bheem’s hands. What about Gandhari Mata’s other ninety-seven sons who did not participate on that shameful day, yet who lie mashed to pulp? Why no tears for them?”

Kunti would not grudge Bheem the death of Gandhari’s sons, I thought.

“Your son did not die because he lived as a charioteer’s son. He did not die because he was Parshuram’s disciple. He died because Govind told me ... No alleged misfortune of life can justify that word he used. I am glad your son knew exactly why he was being beheaded.” Arjun said.

“When did you get so ruthless? How do you hope to attain Heaven with so much hatred simmering within you? You used to be a different person. Ever since you had this corrupting influence in your life...” she said.

The person on this side or that side of Arjun? I wondered.

Arjun laughed softly, “I was told I would not go to Heaven *if* I do not battle with my relatives. Now I am told I will not go because I *did*! Do not dangle Heaven as bait. It holds no temptation I cannot resist. Heaven is a mirage. All we have is this life and this Earth.

“Govind told me to transfer all responsibility of deeds done in this war to his shoulders. But this is not his war. His wife was not insulted. His honor was not trampled upon. Whether he tried for peace or spurred us on for war, all he will get is blame and curses. Yet he is here with us, no matter what the cost to him, the cost to Dwarka, irrespective of credit or discredit.

“Do not thrust greatness on your sons. There was nothing glorious about what happened when I got my bride home, nothing dignified about what we did in Hastinapur’s court. Don’t justify it. It is time everyone took responsibility for their own actions.”

“I wanted all my sons on the winning side, not on warring sides. Was it too great a sacrifice demanded of you?” she asked.

“Rights of the eldest-born? We would never grudge him if you made your decision at Dronacharya’s arena, when he was still relatively sinless. But you offered it far too late and, inspite of Varanavat, inspite of the Ghosh-yatra, inspite of the dice game! Your eldest and Gandhari Mata’s eldest were equal partners in every conspiracy. Why reward one with Indraprastha and demand death for the other?” Arjun asked.

She remained still as a statue and just as silent.

“You sent a message from Hastinapur, urging us to avoid compromise, to restore Draupadi’s honor and to battle Gandhari’s eldest son. Did you pitch your offer to your eldest son *before* you sent us this message or after?”

“It does not matter. He refused the throne,” she persisted.

“Not matter? You offered your grandchildren to be ruled over by a person who abused their mother,” Arjun said incredulously, “I asked you, Govind, if I would be permitted to protest a repetition of the dice game. Here lies the answer, we never stopped being pawns.”

“He said he would offer Indraprastha back to Duryodhan ...” she said.

“I see. That, of course, would mean victory to Gandhari Mata.”

“How do you ever expect a mother to judge her son?”

“Gandhari Mata did.”

Her eyes flickered and then steeled, “Would you like to know who spurred me on, who first made that offer to Karn? Not just Indraprastha, he ___”

Arjun said calmly, “Govind gave me the idea for Khandav-dahan. If I executed it, I have to shoulder the responsibility for it. An idea still requires someone to carry it out.”

Her shoulders drooped, “You will not stay for his funeral? He spared your brothers.”

“Bheem spared his life over and over for the sake of my vow – inspite of being unaware about your secret and inspite of Ghatotkach’s death. When will you give Bheem due credit? As for the others, they are fully trained disciples of the greatest master of our era. They do not deserve survival based on pity.” Arjun said.

Yudhisthir stirred, “Arjun, mercy on a human life is the highest generosity. This noble warrior ...”

Arjun flicked a glance at Yudhisthir, “Of course. Except when it concerns mercy towards Pitamah and Acharya? Mercy to the enemy was un-Arya on first day of war. I guess ethics have capsized by day seventeen.”

Krishn spoke at last, “On the eve of war, I spoke for the benefit of everyone present, Kunti *bua*. If your eldest stood on the battlefield instead of preferring his tent for ten days of war, he would have access to my entire conversation with Arjun.”

Her eyes widened in realization, “You did not mean a single word of your offer to Karn?”

His eyebrows moved in a lazy arc, “Did you?”

Arjun turned back to Yudhishtir, “There *is* a regret I have about this whole thing. Only one. I wish you had lived the life of a younger brother and known what it demands. I am sorry I took away that experience from you.”

Yudhisthir bristled, “You think I cannot win a war without you?”

You cannot even win a wife without him, I thought.

Kunti Mata’s eyes swiveled back to pierce me. “She finally fulfilled her prophesy. Never have so many died for one woman. There would be no Kurukshetra without her.”

“True, there would be no Kurukshetra. Without her, we would be slaves and slaves cannot wage war.” Arjun replied.

“An entire clan destroyed ...”

Arjun frowned, “What *is* so sacred about this Kuru dynasty? Conquerors of the Earth, an illustrious lineage of warriors. We are merely a cauldron of lust, revenge, misplaced vows and confused hybrids.

“Filled with so many honorable men, I wonder why we end up committing so many crimes. No other clan could have invented so many ways of insulting the same woman ... and I am not excusing myself from the list of her offenders. I have a daughter-in-law too. Should I tell Uttara she committed the biggest blunder of her life by accepting our family?”

“Yes! Tell her exactly that!” she hissed, “This clan has always used women. Pitamah had no right to abduct three brides without their consent, force them into unwanted marriages and then push them into a stranger’s bed to produce heirs. What audacity made him sell Gandhari’s dreams by deceit and buy Madri’s dreams with wealth? I was handed over from father to father and then from man to man. I was used as nothing but a womb.

“What made you think your wife is so special that she would be spared? What Yudhisthir did in court was just an unveiled demonstration of what this clan has always done under the guise of tradition and male tyranny.

“Insulted? Wronged? She should count her blessings that she has husbands, sons and brothers ready to kill for her sake. Nobody ever avenged our exploitations. Nobody even gave us enough respect to acknowledge our insults. Who will return my youth and my desires? When I garlanded King Pandu at my swayamwar ... what happiness did I . what made you two think swayamwar would give you any more joy than mine did?”

Her voice choked. For a fleeting moment, I felt pity for her – then the pity evaporated. Her tirade against misuse of authority would have sounded genuine if she practiced what she preached. Like Gandhari.

Arjun’s voice had lost its vehemence, “I thought only Hastinapur resented our existence. We did not ask to be born. Why punish us for your lost dreams? If my wife followed the same principle, she could have extorted Abhimanyu to share his bride with her sons. Nobody, *absolutely nobody* would have been able to stop her.”

He continued softly, “I am not passing judgment on you. I cannot gauge your emotional trauma. I cannot evaluate your decisions. You have your priorities. I have mine. Maybe we are both right.

“Duryodhan is an elder brother too, even if he had his twisted, evil moments. What exactly should Bheem carry with him into tomorrow’s fight? Respect for a sinner? Guilt for killing a blood relative? Fear of being turned away from Heaven?”

He looked serene and very, very exhausted, “Please forgive me, revered Mother, if I raised my voice or used a harsh word. This was for my wife and my sons. You can decide whether those mean anything to you.

“I am taking complete responsibility for his death. If my brothers are grateful for mercy, then they are welcome to mourn over his funeral pyre.

Do not ask me to pretend a regret, remorse and respect that I do not feel. Spare me the farce.”

Krishn addressed Mata softly, “It does not befit you to mourn one when millions lie lifeless. He was ordained to die at Arjun’s hands with or without our offer. You have no cause to mourn. In death, I granted him far more fame than his life deserved.

“He chose war as a symbol of loyalty to Duryodhan. Ironically, he will gain fame as a loyal friend. Yet, there is more than one way to betray a friend. After Pitamah and Acharya openly declared their intentions of not slaying Pandavas, Duryodhan had pinned all his hopes on Karn. To spare Yudhisthir was to betray Duryodhan, was it not?

“As for me, there might be contradictions between my words and actions but never between my mind and my mission. I promised a friend I would never betray her.”

Arjun gripped his shoulders in understanding, “Thank you for your silence and your words; they are always best-suited to the moments you choose for them.”

Then he reached out for my wrist. We turned our back on the group and started the long walk back to our camp.

Chapter 26: The Eye of the Bird

*** His grip was crushing my fingers. He was walking with long strides, too fast for me. When we were halfway down the path he slowed, and swung me around to face him.

“What are men with four wives called?” he asked.

“Kshatriya, I believe,” I replied lightly.

“And those with eight and sixteen thousand wives?”

“God,” I smiled.

“How did you survive thirteen years, lonely fighter?”

“They deserve death and that is what they will get. Do not bear the pain for me anymore. Let go,” I whispered.

“All alone, you were all alone for thirteen years ...”

“If it helps you to heal, I will say ‘I forgive you’. I may even mean it. But you will have to learn to forgive yourself. I cannot help you with that.”

Yesterday, Dushasan’s blood had stained my hair. Bheem had proudly offered me his fulfilled vow, his eyes wild and his hands smeared with blood. I felt a strange peace when I washed out Hastinapur’s vicious clots from my tresses. I felt the same tranquility when Dhrishtadyumn’s sword dripped with Dronacharya’s blood.

One can fight live enemies. One cannot fight dead martyrs. Dushasan would enjoy Heaven for dying at mighty Bheem’s hands, irrespective of his misdeeds in life. Kunti’s sinful son and Subhadra’s sinless son would be spoken of in the same breath. Duryodhan would smugly sit in Heaven merely for dying on Kurukshetra. Ah irony! Finally, I began to understand the futility of war.

If the soul directed the physical body, the soul had to accept responsibility. If the soul remained immortal, what was the point of destroying the body? Krishn said we were erasing evil from Earth. I wished there was a weapon that could raze evil souls, or erase evil from souls.

Arjun asked, “Has Uttara eaten her meal? In her present condition ...”

“Don’t worry, I will take care of her. She is so young, Arjun. Too young to be widowed and orphaned.”

“If not for you, I would not even have this memoir of Abhi. None at all.” He stood looking at me, “You are ... there was something I felt when I first met you. Something I wanted to say to you in those woods. Only, I thought it was far too early to say it and I thought we had a whole lifetime to say it.

“Not all of us are lucky enough to get a preview of our death. The day Jayadratha was killed, it could have been me on that pyre. I tried my best to avoid you after that, because you were a reminder of everything that tempted me to be alive. It is easier to fight a war without that temptation.”

“I am within the eye of the bird now, am I?”

“You always were. This war will not last long now. You know, the first thing we should do after the war, is get Prativindhya married. He is the crown prince. Every Kingdom on this land would be willing to give him a daughter.

“You were worried about him, were you not? But your sons have fought alongside us; even now when there is a mere handful alive on both sides. Prativindhya has earned his right to his Kingdom. Do not be too exacting on him. Do not use the same standards for him that you use for ... used for Abhi. He is a nice guy, your Prativindhya. He ... what happened?”

Kunti concealed her truth when her reputation was at stake. She should have held her ugly truth till her end. In revelation, she chose the worst punishment for Arjun. She sentenced him to a lifetime of whispered venom, accusing fingers and the burden of killing his own brother and nephew.

He would face the most exquisite torture – for being her youngest son, for completing his oath, for fulfilling his duty, for being the better warrior and for being alive. *How could glory to the dead be justified at the cost of those alive?*

I reached up to move gentle fingers over his eyelids, over his cheekbones. He held my hands closer against his face. And then at last, at long last came his confession. His lips whispered to my palms the words I yearned to hear forever.

Of all the places we could have chosen to say it, we zeroed down on this place. Surrounded by the unnerving hordes of the perished soldiers, in the ghostly light of torches – more than half our relatives dead, more than half our life done with. We left the family a long way behind us. We left behind the battlefield that doubled as a graveyard. This time it was just the two of us. Two live, surviving soldiers amongst the dead and dying soldiers.

We had walked alone together like this at the dreamy beginning of our life as husband and wife. The woods had been lush, green and fragrant. The road now was slippery, strewn with corpses and suffocated with the stench of blood and death.

But we were still walking the road together.

Chapter 27: The Womb of a Butterfly

Everyone I loved always seemed to be in conflict with each other.

King Drupad and Dronacharya;

Dronacharya and Dhrishtadyumn;

Dhrishtadyumn and Govind; *maybe I was imagining that*

Govind and Indra;

Indra and Agni!

The second killed the first, then the third killed the second. The sixth would engulf all eventually.

King Drupad lived solely to avenge himself against Dronacharya. Yet he never lived long enough to savor that revenge. I had to stand witness to their horrific duel and not be allowed to interfere. But the victor today could be the vanquished tomorrow.

I remembered the thirteenth day, when Dronacharya stood next to me at Abhimanyu's funeral. I asked him only one thing, "Was he a good warrior?"

Acharya answered gravely, "I have yet to meet anyone braver. You will be honored to be known as his father," Then his eyes moistened, "Ah! Fie upon battles that devour the young and the promising."

I said, "I pray, Acharya, that you never face the agony of torching your son's funeral." That was all we exchanged, then we stood silently till the fire embraced my son – and his grandson.

It was not mere tutor-worship to me, I had loved Dronacharya. I must be an emotional fool to invest emotions where none were reciprocated. I did not know how else to love. It was too late to alter myself.

I thought it would be my sole burden to get Bhishm pitamah and Dronacharya out of our way. It had been, of all people, Yudhisthir who killed Dronacharya! Dhrishtadyumn had cut off the head, but it is Yudhisthir who had broken his spine and spirit.

Yudhisthir uttered the half truth about Ashwatthama's death. The mere flicker of that idea, the horror of losing a son seemed to shatter Acharya's heart. I saw his widened eyes, snapped awake to the facade his life had become and frozen into a plea for forgiveness. Forgiveness from Drupad, Draupadi or Abhimanyu? Maybe all three. Then Dhrishtadyumn's sword avenged all three by slicing through his neck. Another institution lost.

War does not only kill soldiers and warriors. It also kills rules and moral values. No! Those cannot be killed. War kills the *pretense* at rules and moral values. It also kills the pretense of being human beings, I thought, feeling an exhaustion that was not physical anymore.

Bhishm pitamah, the only rightful heir to Hastinapur – so many innocent soldiers died because he and I could not face the prospect of killing each other. On tenth day, Shikhandi finally approached me, "You want me to finish this charade?" he asked evenly, reining his chariot parallel to mine.

"No. He will not return your attack. You cannot continue attacking a warrior who does not retort," I said shortly.

Shikhandi shrugged impatiently, "He is too masculine to battle anyone with a feminine name, anyone not fully a male, or anyone who has been a woman before. Isn't that his vow? Yet, I believe he battled Brihannada. She did not interfere with this holy dictum."

When I did not reply, he pointed his blood-stained sword at the battlefield, "His reluctance is his problem. My sexual preferences are my choice. He can either die fighting Shikhandi or die at Shikhandi's hands sans a fight."

He spurred on his chariot towards Pitamah, discarding the sword for the bow. I saw pitamah, holding onto the standard of his chariot, stubbornly refusing to counter-attack Shikhandi. He dodged and veered, wincing as many of the arrows found their mark.

“Move into his line of vision,” I urged Govind. Pitamah turned to me with obvious relief. He deliberately turned away from Shikhandi, his grip tightened around his bow as he faced me. Now pitamah’s dilemma had another option – myself. I, however, had no other option now, but to carry this duel to its gory end.

We let fly a barrage of arrows, combating fiercely under the watchful eye of Shikhandi, who stood ready to resume his attack if I relented the tiniest bit. There was nothing mock about my final battle with Pitamah.

His bow was snapped multiple times, his armor shredded, his wounds spurting blood, his spears splintered into fragments and his sword snapped into two – finally Pitamah reeled and fell. He lay inert on the bed of arrows I had presented to him. My arrows shrouded his body like I was showering flower petals, my final obeisance to this peerless legend.

When we had arrived at Hastinapur as children, we were yearning to belong to a father figure. There had been nothing forced or calculated about pitamah’s love for us. If he were fortunate to have a friend like Govind, perhaps his life would have been radically altered. How many unfulfilled desires did he carry into Heaven with him? He must have yearned for a son to cuddle, a child he was never allowed to have.

Govind too had battled his own relatives, his uncle Kamsa and cousin Shishupal. But those men had not cushioned him on their lap, not fed him from their plates and not spent patient hours teaching him. Would he have battled with Nanda or his Sandipani Guru? Maybe, he would have, if there existed a valid reason. Once his mind decided, Govind was capable of anything for the sake of justice.

Birth and Death, the eternal cycle. I could understand a body going through childhood, youth, old age and then ending in death. But how does

one understand the futility of a young life getting snuffed out? Abhimanyu's body was not all that vanished into ash.

In my current birth as Arjun I would never meet Abhi again. How did it matter that I may meet his soul again in another birth, where he could be born my enemy or my Father? We may not even be born as humans, we could belong to different species or worse ... we may not be born in the same time span. Never again would I meet him as my son, and the nephew of my best friend.

It really was only this birth that mattered right now.

Performing one's duty and staying detached from the fruits of the duty; that tenet was wide open to misunderstanding. The vile and wily could shrug off responsibility for their misdeeds by stating that they merely performed actions as duty. Duty – to whom, still remained to be defined. Deeds – of what type, still remained to be clarified to prevent his tenet being misused.

Govind had told me that Duty was the sole reason we lived on earth. Duty without expectations. Duty to mankind, duty to land, duty to family – those had been lofty ideas, lofty ideals. My friendship with him and my love for her were not part of any duty, yet those had been the driving force of my life. There was not much left in my life if I subtracted them both.

He did not merely say 'Detachment' – he said 'Responsible detachment.' Every word crisp, relevant, and apt. I needed to hear him again, that lucid clarity of his wisdom.

Whatever Govind told me on the eve of war, hearing it was one thing, understanding and absorbing it was another thing; *living it* was quite altogether at another level.

Today war ended officially. Yudhisthir, in a burst of inspiration killed Shalya, Duryodhan's fourth army commander. Nakul-Sahdev's maternal uncle fought heart and soul from Duryodhan's side and against his own

nephews. I wondered why he needed no introspection before or during war. *Absence of questions is not proof of answers.*

Sahdev killed Shakuni. Only Kripacharya, Ashwatthama, Kritavarman and Duryodhan survived from their army. Duryodhan fled as we slew his remaining army. He took refuge in a lake, but we managed to hound him down. Yudhisthir challenged Duryodhan to a personal fight, once more wagering back the entire kingdom based on one final duel! I had never seen Govind more furious! He rebuked our Emperor in frank and harsh words. He finally made Bheem continue the duel.

Duryodhan had utilized his thirteen years of practice well. He used every nuance to aid his powerful blows. He fought with the desperation of a man left with no options. Yet Bheem killed him true to his word. Nobody had objected to the events unfolding at Hastinapur's court, nobody had the courage to oppose Bheem's oath in that dice hall. Nobody had the moral right *now* to object to Duryodhan's death.

Bheem had been strangely subdued ever since he returned with Ghatotkach from the forest. On the fifteenth night, when his son was killed, Bheem had collapsed into Draupadi's arms and she cradled his sobbing face into her lap as she would console a child. He must have felt the same guilt I felt for Iravan – too little time, too little attention, too little acknowledgement. I could not guess why we were alive when our sons were dying around us.

After that final bloody duel with Duryodhan, I saw her talk earnestly with Bheem for a long time, shaking her head gently, convincing him about something – her tiny hands strengthening his gigantic hands. When she returned back to me, her eyes were brimming with tears.

“Dhrishtadyumn's first blow was not his own. It was on my behalf. Do not hate him for Dronacharya,” she said later.

“He fulfilled what he was born for. Acharya killed his father, killed his sons. Who am I to judge your brother? Tell him there is nothing to reproach and nothing to forgive. Tell him ...”

“You tell him. He adores you so much.”

“Your brothers gave our sons the love and security that was our duty and that which every parent owes a child. It can never be repaid, not in words, not in deeds,” I admitted.

“Really?” her eyes shone, “Will you tell him that?”

“Right now? You want me to do it right now?” I asked readily.

“No, do it tomorrow. Stay with me.” She was right. The nightmare was over. There was plenty of time to sort out personal equations.

Subhadra had lost her son, as had the other Pandav wives. Uttara lost the most: her husband, her father and her brother. Our chattering butterfly was prematurely orphaned and widowed. Draupadi lost her father, but her husbands, sons and brothers were alive, still surviving to see tomorrow.

I did not know Govind had said it once – that Fate reserves its worst blows for those who are strong enough to bear it...

...that ethics and rules are always the first casualty in war....

...and that war never ends...

Tomorrow never came. Her brothers never survived the night. Neither did her sons. Extermination came in the garb of Ashwatthama – the chaotic result of a Brahmin birth coupled with a vindictive mindset.

*** How was I to avenge twenty two years of fruitless motherhood? I did not feel the pains of pregnancy when my sons were born. But I felt them now, as I stood staring in numb horror at their slashed blood soaked bodies.

Every exquisite pain, every gush of breast milk, the bittersweet smell of baby skin, their innocent sparkling eyes, and their trusting grip on my fingers – somehow, all the memories coalesced in a single bolt of searing pain.

Twenty two years of hope wiped out by a single vengeful night. I would never know the joy of having my sons married. I would never hold my grandchildren in my arms.

Never! Never! NEVER!

Never had 'never' felt so interminable, enormous and void.

Ashwatthama stalked our tents in the treacherous night and attacked my sleeping beloveds in vicious retribution for Dronacharya and Duryodhan's deaths. He had slashed and butchered in a frenzy that ensured no survivors. We made the gruesome discovery in the morning.

Maddened by grief and anger, Bheem and Arjun rushed after Ashwatthama to drag his cowering form from the darkest lows. Terrified of facing Bheem's wrath, he had released the lethal Brahmashira at vulnerable Bheem. Arjun was forced to retaliate with his Brahmashira. The clash of the two deathly weapons would have meant annihilation of the whole world. The whole world to us at that moment meant Uttara's unborn child.

Sage Vyas and Narada intervened and ordered them to withdraw the lethal missiles. Ashwatthama knew how to project his missile but not to withdraw it. Arjun did. He managed to neutralize both their missiles and avert total devastation.

Finally, Ashwatthama was thrown at my feet for judgment.

Maya was spared and he gave us Indraprastha's beauty. Jayadratha was spared and he wrenched away Abhimanyu. How could one decide if mercy was a virtue or a blunder? On day sixteen, Arjun had pleaded with Dhrishtadyumn to capture Dronacharya alive instead of beheading him. In return, he received bitter words and contemptuous taunts from my twin.

Perhaps if we had followed Arjun's request, Ashwatthama would not have been pushed beyond his limits of endurance. If Dronacharya was kept alive, perhaps my brother and my sons would be alive too. If, if, if ...why does some knowledge come only as hindsight, and some not even then?

I made my husband slice off the precious gem from Ashwatthama's forehead before I permitted his release. He would roam desolate, birth after miserable birth, with no solace or balm for his wounded forehead. His immortality would be his deathly prison forever.

Gandhari was the only person in Hastinapur who had the integrity to fight for me in the dice hall. Yet, she had to bear the funeral pyres of all her sons. I was weary of women having to bear the consequences again and again and yet again.

I did not forgive Ashwatthama. I forgave his mother.

*** Our lives were lived topsy-turvy all along. We wasted our youth in forests and exiles, now that we should have retired to the forests we were slowly building up a broken family and a broken Kingdom.

Speaking the truth is easier but hearing the truth requires far greater courage. Yudhisthir never quite recovered the war and its aftermath. He got lonelier and had a frightening blank look in his eyes. He wanted to renounce the Kingdom and retire as an ascetic. It took days of relentless counsel from his brothers, myself and Krishn before he gave up self-denouncement.

Bheem had lost his robust rages and voracious appetites. He frequently vanished to Hidimba's abode to recapture the past and future they had been denied. The twins got vaguer and paler. I needed the help of their wives to heal them. Maybe if they each had some survivor to continue their family ... every child is a sign of hope. But that was not to be their good fortune – nor mine.

We had lost all the sons of all wives. All my co-wives, all of them younger than me. Baldhara, Subhadra, Karenumati, Vijaya; none could conceive a child again. Maybe there was truth in the aftereffects of the Brahmashira and its noxious fumes. But two wives had not been at

Kurukshetra to inhale those toxins. I hoped, somehow, that Uloopi and Chitrangadha were still fertile and ... yes, I was *that* desperate.

Uloopi was living her entire life on the memory of one night. I never had the grace to invite her to Indraprastha, but I saw her lines and features come alive in her son Iravan. He did not survive the war, but there was another one still alive – Babhruvahan, Chitrangadha's son. He had not joined this war.

"He can stay in Indraprastha and bear the mantle of crown prince and chief heir," I suggested tentatively.

Arjun shook his head firmly, "Chitrangadha's father had made the precondition — his daughter and grandson would stay back as heirs of their *Putrika* clan. Not now, I cannot lay claims to him."

The mighty Pandavs and the Empress of the dual states of Indraprastha and Hastinapur were precariously on the brink of extinction. Our chattering butterfly was our last hope. She held the future of Abhimanyu's descendent in her womb.

My sons would not be remembered for their valor on the battlefield for eighteen days, no poems would be sung for them, no tales to wax eloquent upon their bravery. Nobody would even remember their individual names; they would forever be 'Draupadi's unfortunate sons'. Not great, not heroic, not illustrious, not glorious ... just unfortunate.

There were moments when the vicious injustice struck me like a hurricane. It made me unleash my ire on the one person who still had descendants. Two descendants when we had none!

In those incoherent moments, I raged at him and his good fortune in mindless fury. When my words emptied, I had no other recourse but to curl up exhausted in his arms. He endured both my extremes with his usual patience and he never reminded me that he too had lost three sons.

He never asked “Why me?” when it came to his responsibilities. There was no reason we should ask, “Why him?” when only his descendants survived. Maybe the Gods had a soft corner for him too. Maybe Krishn had bribed, threatened or sweet-talked Destiny; there was no saying how far his tentacles spread over three worlds!

Krishn said every soul gets rebirth so maybe my sons were already back on Earth. I was sure I would recognize them, no matter what form they now adopted. I clung onto his words as assurance and reassurance.

I was not going to allow Duryodhan’s prophesy to come true. “You will rule over corpses, orphans and widows,” he spat before he died. I liked proving people wrong. Life was not a penalty or dungeon. Life was hope.

We survived the loneliness and desolation. Hope smiled back at us. Our flighty butterfly transformed into another brave soldier. Little Parikshit was born, Arjun’s descendant. And in Dwarka little Vajra was born, Krishn’s descendant. The futures of two clans. I wished they would share a friendship as exemplary, as vibrant and as vital.

Arjun now had to share his grandson with us all. ‘*Sharing*’ was something he never seemed able to escape.

I thought her sons would tie her to Indraprastha. Now Parikshit tied me to Indraprastha.

I was terrified that she would never recover from the brutal slaughter of her sons. I quite forgot that she was a warrior Queen, stronger than any of us and a survivor to the core. She flung back her tears and losses. No matter how much History and Destiny tried to gag her opinions, smother her with traditions or devastate her with misfortunes, she still managed to break through the shackles.

She became the stuff of folklore and reverence, of ballads and odes. Yudhisthir may be King but she was always *The Empress*.

We unanimously handed over women's jurisdiction to her confident decisions. The women of our Kingdom flocked to her with the assurance of getting unbiased justice and unwavering truth. She calmly dealt with their disputes, miseries and skirmishes.

I would never have peace with a God who left her childless. She had a wistful longing in her eyes when she gazed at Parikshit.

"I want to snatch him away. Honestly, I do. But everything that happened in your clan was because someone or the other was trying to snatch what was not theirs. I am going to stop the vicious cycle. He belongs first and foremost to Uttara and Subhadra. Don't ever force them to share him with me."

"But this is sheer luck. They have no right to feel they deserve it more than you. Neither should I. If you had not manipulated events, it would have been your grandson and your lineage that continued. They do not know that you made things happen."

She smiled through her tears, "It is your entire fault. You and your infatuated ladies. If you had not stormed off into exile, Abhimanyu could have been born to me. Who told you to go on exile?"

"Who sent me on exile?" I asked, and we were back to our age old argument.

Chapter 28: Tears Reversed

*** I did not feel the numbness anymore. But I could feel the falling snowflakes on my eyelashes, on my lips. I caught one snowflake on my tongue and tasted it. It was chilly and delicious.

Lake water, river water, water in fountains, raindrops, and the son of Rain God – I loved water in all its forms all my life. Life-giving water now condensed into these delicate white crunchy morsels, my last meal on earth.

But the snowflakes were weighing down on my eyelashes, melting against my warm skin and making rivulets from my cheeks into my eyes. *Tears reversed*, I thought with a smile.

It had been an exciting life – too exciting, exhilarating and tough. But I would not exchange my life with anyone else. There had been so many peaks and nadirs in my life. However, a minus cannot nullify a plus. There remained the troughs to be endured and the crests to be ridden.

Keep your regrets to the end, Krishn said. Well, the end was here.

Regrets? I wished I had been born as a child; I wanted to experience a real, actual childhood – the one I was deprived by my divine birth. I spent too few years at Panchal. I wanted to experience that special feeling of home and childhood.

I wished I had a daughter. Vanity! I regretted that there was no successor to carry on the mantle of my beauty. They may wonder and postulate but they would never know Draupadi's beauty.

My daughter would have survived the holocaust. She would have been safe in my tent, secure from the murderous sword of Ashwatthama. Alive to marry, to duel with life – alive to carry forward my bloodline.

I wished more time and more years with my sons. I wish they did not have the kind of death they had. Vicious, unheroic, pointless.

All we had left behind now was Parikshit and Babhruvahan. Two descendants, both belonging to the same person. Does Nature select the ones it allows to survive? We had been wondering and debating and trying to twist fate. There must be some unknown law that chooses who is fit to survive and procreate a race.

My husband lay a short distance away, so did his brothers. They did not survive even a few footsteps after I fell. Only the elder one, he who hated me, continued on his detached path towards Heaven's gates.

I could hear someone breathe close by. The snowflakes would be entangled in his long eyelashes, I thought anxiously. I ought to keep him warm. The need was immediate, urgent and imperative. I tried to move, but my own fingers were numb. The snow fell steadily. Very soon, I would be buried completely. There would be no trace left of me, not even the remotest one.

Arjun's best friend had made good his promise. He did not live long enough to survive in a world without Arjun. He slipped off before us into the great unknown.

I teased Krishn once, whether a Kingdom named Indraprastha should not be ruled by Indra's son. Krishn scolded me for having impossible fantasies. Nothing is impossible. Heaven was not Kunti's hut. Heaven was Indra's domain. Who was going to stop me from perching on his throne beside his son? Impossible indeed!

I surrendered myself to the strength of the snow. 'I love you,' I whispered to the serene youth moving towards the bow in my Father's court. It made everything worth it.

Owned by Shiva, then Brahma, Prajapati, Indra, Soma, Varuna and finally she came to me. Varuna demanded and carried her back to her shrine when we started our last journey. She had been present when Govind spoke his spellbinding words but she seemed to put that wisdom into practice better than me. *Responsible detachment*, Govind had told me.

Living beings can die and take rebirth but Gandiva would never die or be reborn. Yet, she was always a living entity to me; my constant companion, witness to all my moments – joyous, furious, passionate, shameful and glorious.

I could not believe she would belong to anyone else. Heartless creature! Go along with Varuna, don't turn back to give me a second glance, don't cling to me. Preen all you want, be owned by Gods, and be part of celestial triumphs. But you will always be identified with Arjun.

When else in your life will you be so loved, where else will you find an owner to caress you so obsessively, where else in this entire Universe will someone call you '*My sister*' in a unique mixture of jealousy and obsession?

You are mine and will always be mine. Just like your sister.

We had endured the death of cousins, sons, friends, disciples, tutors, elders and Mother. Even Govind. But with Draupadi's fall, we reached the unendurable.

I sank down on my knees, and then crashed headlong into the ice. I had survived the snow many years ago, enroute to Indra's abode. But there had been a purpose to survival back then. Now there was none.

He was not alive and *she* was not either. They were luckier than me. They escaped life before me. Now I had no ties left behind at all.

Thirty-six years after the war, a drunken slur was exchanged between Satyaki and Kritavarman. In Kurukshetra, Satyaki had sided with us while Kritavarman headed Yadava army under Duryodhan. The slur rapidly exploded into a bloodthirsty altercation, with the Yadava men forced to split into supporters and opponents. Once again, Dwarka found itself in a battle that ended only when every last warrior was wiped out. My Satyaki, my Pradyumn, my Aniruddha did not survive.

King Vasudev sent us word about the blood-curdling massacre at Dwarka. Govind had retired to a secluded place in the woods for a final penance. Here, a hunter wounded him, mistaking his presence for a quarry. I reached far too late. My inspiration and the answer to all my questions had ebbed away.

“We have overstayed our welcome on this Earth. Let us leave it in future hands,” his tranquil smile seemed to say.

Draupadi had survived the death of her father, brothers and sons. But she crumpled to the floor in nameless pain when she heard about Dwarka and Govind. Which of us loved which one the most? Even the comparisons seemed futile now. I know I was loved by the two persons I loved – tenderly, desperately, protectively, possessively, insanely, and every which way. I lived the richest and luckiest life on Earth.

Whatever I am reborn as, meet me again, I pleaded to both of them. I am incomplete without you. I borrowed my fire from them many times. They were life-giving forces; but they had not been strong enough in Death. They left me behind, alone, to endure the agony of their deaths.

I could live without a kingdom and luxury. I learnt to control my senses a long time ago, when I had been trying to survive in snowcapped mountains. I had learnt to control my breath, learnt to survive without food, water or air. I would have to reverse the knowledge now.

I had survived without air. I would now learn not to survive even in the presence of air.

I discovered that there are things more important than air – the ones you can never survive without.

I felt peaceful. Stop breathing, I told myself. The sunrays were illuminating the snow, blinding me. We would be buried beneath this white

fleece. How fortunate that someone knew how much she loved water. This snow too was just another form of water.

Stop breathing. It is time to take the leap into wherever both of them are. Indra was forced into envy of us mortals – if only for a moment! I thought the Earth was far more beautiful. But my time on this lovely planet was done. This time I would have to take the leap myself. There would be no flying bird to carry me ...

... I snapped open my eyes. I had never learnt how it flew! It was still a mystery, an enigma. Well, at least there would be no dearth of new things to learn up there, I thought joyously.

Mysterious Flying Bird, here I come to unravel your enigma.

Chapter 29: Slippery Fingers of the Hopeless

After a long time, I felt a figure in pristine white go past me. I blinked through half closed eyes. He had waited till all of us fell before he came back. He had returned back breathless. He was still not permitting himself to admit it aloud. He did not even given his brothers a second look. But he clawed his way back to where her lifeless form lay. He was breathing harshly in shallow sobs.

The twins had loved her reverentially. Bheem had loved her hopefully. But the one who survived till the end? He had loved her hopelessly.

I had dimly known it when I saw Prativindhya tremble in her presence. His father must have gone through the same. Crushed within the narrow walls of his abilities and her sky-high aspirations, he must have been dazed, mortified and paralyzed for life.

He did not accompany us on the Rajsuya campaign. Perhaps, he tried to compensate by playing that doomed game of dice. Perhaps he hoped to win Hastinapur that way and hand it over to her as his grandest achievement.

Somewhere along the way, the reins slipped from his slippery fingers. Somehow, his love went twisted and awry. What he did with his love or what his love did to him was a mystery revealed only to him. Maybe not even to him.

He knelt beside her and scooped up her head tentatively. He laid it on his lap and kept staring at her, willing her to awaken. But she had gone beyond forgiveness or resentment. Then he cradled her face and wept like a child.

I closed my eyes. I had invaded their privacy once. This time, I did not interrupt their last moment.

He was crying over the shell of her soul. Her soul was already with me. It had always been mine.

Whys and Why Nots: Exploring Myths

Truth is a kaleidoscope – it alters with perspective.

Literature is rife with multiple perspectives of the Mahabharata; Krishn (Yugandhar), Bheem (Randamoozham), Yudhisthir (the book of Yudhisthir), Draupadi (Yagnaseni, Palace of Illusions), Karn (Mrityunjay, Radheya), Duryodhan (Duryodhan, Ajaya) and multiple characters (Parv, Yugant and Vyas Parv). The fictionalized narratives slowly seep and crystallize into public memory as factual events.

The current Mahabharata texts are versions of versions of versions of the version of Mahabharata narrated to Janamejaya. The original Jaya (Vyas) had 8800 verses, later Bharata (Vaisampayana) had 24,000 verses and the present Mahabharata (Sauti) has more than 1, 00,000 verses. A text expanded a hundred times over the original surely has ample scope for dilution and distortion.

Gurcharan Das said in his book, ‘The Difficulty of Being Good’ that “Mahabharata throws up more questions than answers.” I decided to venture into the mire of myths of the Mahabharata armed with a ‘*Why*’ and a ‘*Why not?*’

Sanjay:

Imagine an Indo-Pak match held on a faraway turf. You have no other visual or audio aids save the commentator’s voiceover. The radio commentator is Pakistani. The commentator cannot change the fact that India won, but he can allege that Pakistani players were victims of wrong umpiring decisions, underhand bowling, lack of crowd support and match fixing by their key players.

At Kurukshetra, Sanjay was that Pakistani commentator.

Sanjay’s divine vision: This is the reach of his mythical vision – “Sanjaya, O king, will describe the battle to thee. Nothing in the whole battle will be

beyond this one's eyes. Manifest or concealed, happening by day or night, even that which is thought of in the mind, Sanjay shall know everything.

“Weapons will not cut him and exertion will not fatigue him. This son of Gavalgani will come out of battle with life.”

Interpretation:

1] Since Sanjay was blessed with being ‘unhurt by weapons’, it is clear that he was *present at the Kurukshetra battlefield* and not at Hastinapur by Dhritarashtra’s side. Here is further proof in his own words –

In *Drona-Parv*, he says, “Myself, supported by four hundred bowmen resisted Chekitana.”

In *Karn-Parv*, he says, “O king, every night this formed the subject of deliberation with Duryodhana, Sakuni, Duhsasana, Karna and myself. Returning from battle every day, O monarch, all of us used to debate into the night.”

After Drona’s death, “Sanjaya, repairing to Hastinapura told Dhritarashtra all that had happened at Kurujangala.”

Shalya-Parv, on the eighteenth day, Sanjay says, “I myself, O king, having only two kinds of forces fought with the Panchala prince. The mighty-armed Satyaki, seized me while I lay down on the ground.”

He continues his narration, “As Satyaki prepared to slay me, Vyasa, coming there, said, ”By no means should Sanjaya be slain!“ Permitted by him and giving over my weapons, I set out on the road leading to the city, my limbs bathed in blood. After about two miles, O monarch, I beheld Duryodhana, mace in hand. I stood cheerlessly before him.”

2] Thus, Sanjay was not merely a passive observer of events. He daily discussed war strategies with the Kaurava generals and also actively battled against the Pandavas. If his divine vision could penetrate tents and minds, it would be the equivalent of multiple spy cameras. It gave Sanjay complete access to every Pandava war strategy and every *vyuh* a full night prior!

Sanjay was, thus, actively relaying every Pandava war secret to the Kaurava camp.

Clearly, Sanjay was not detached, impartial, objective, passive or neutral. He was deeply attached to Hastinapur's cause. He was not a man of vision, but a man on a mission. I am extremely skeptical of Sanjay's *unbiased* narration of Kurukshetra's war events.

Krishn:

His diplomatic maneuvers, his eloquence, innovative ideas, crystal clear foresight and his incisive mind are impressive enough. But in the endeavor to place a divine aura around Krishn, his human qualities get sidelined.

God Krishn overshadows strategist Krishn.

Krishn was far too complex and far too astute to be taken literally.

1] Krishn's pre-Kurukshetra peace attempt:

Krishn tried to prevent war by seeking any random five villages from Duryodhan when the latter refused to part with Indraprastha. He also offered the crown of Indraprastha to Karn. *What if either or both his ploys succeeded?*

The Pandavas would be forced to swallow their insults, forego Indraprastha even after suffering thirteen years of exile, and explain to their future generations that Draupadi's honor was priced at only five villages. Krishn's glorified peace-effort would result in loss of Kingdom, loss of honor, loss of face, loss of credibility and wasted thirteen years of their life!

Simultaneously, Draupadi's sinners would shrug off accountability for their actions since they 'compensated' with five villages. Duryodhan would continue to rule Hastinapur while Karn would get Indraprastha with a bonus of five slaves. Basically, the sinners of Draupadi would face neither trial nor judgment, penalty or death. Instead, they would be forgiven, rewarded, crowned and feted!

Why should pre-Kurukshetra's forgivable enemies become unforgivable sinners at Kurukshetra? Can the negotiator of such a lopsided deal chastise Arjun on duty and justice? Seriously, can this be Krishn's idea of '*Eradication of evil and establishment of righteousness*'?

It is not. It is the exact anti-thesis. It is a gross contradiction and violation of the spirit of Bhagwad Gita. Obviously, neither of his two offers were intended to materialize into reality. To take Krishn's actions at face value is to misunderstand Krishn and to misinterpret the moral values of his Bhagwad Gita.

2] Krishn's role in Bheem-Arjun's lives.

Priceless. Peerless. Inspiring. Reinforcing. Motivating.

However, is it fair to 'cut' their triumphs and 'paste' them to Krishn? It is blasphemy to dismiss them as mere bystanders basking in Krishn's glory.

Bheem's victories over Hidimba, Bakasura, Kirmira, Jeemut, Keechak and Jarasandha. Arjun's chain of triumphs: his battle against Drupad, against a multitude of Kings during the post swayamwar battle, the Rajsuya yagna and the Ashwamedha yagna, against Lord Shiva, against the Gandharvas at Ghosh yatra and against the demons terrorizing Indra's Amrawati. He did not have Krishn with him physically in *any* of these wars.

At the Virat war, he had no brothers for aide, no Krishn, no Bhagwad Gita. In addition he had a terrified and inexperienced Uttar as his charioteer. Yet, Arjun defeated every Kaurav warrior in straight one-to-one combat during the Virat war.

'I am the *ability* in all men,' Krishn said in Bhagwad Gita. The same Krishn laid stress upon action – *Karmayoga*. As creator of human beings, he would never hold contempt for his creations' endeavors. Triumph needs God-given ability coupled with human efforts. Why are Pandava efforts and achievements dismissed merely as Krishn's gifts?

Belittling Bheem-Arjun's triumphs belittles heroes. Negating their human efforts negates heroes. Giving Bheem-Arjun due credit does *not* devalue

Krishn. Denying them due credit *does* devalue Krishn. How?

When Krishn said, 'I am the ability in *all* men,' he obviously encompassed both Pandavas and Kauravas. Thus, every single Kaurav warrior too, derived his ability from Krishn. Krishn was the *Iksha-Mrityu* (the immortality) of Bhishm, the Narayanastra of Drona, the wisdom of Vidur, the archery of Karn and the mace expertise of Duryodhan.

In view of the above fact, why are Pandava achievements sneered upon as 'solely due to Krishn' and Kaurav achievements eulogized as 'in spite of Krishn'? The skirmish of 'heroes versus villains' gets distorted as 'God versus Villains'. Krishn gets unceremoniously pulled down to the level of the villains, and the villains get unnecessarily exalted to his level.

Deifying Krishn at the cost of heroes, ends up deifying the villains.

3] **Yadava/ Narayani army:**

Myth: Arjun and Duryodhan visited Dwarka to procure martial support. Arjun chose Krishn while Duryodhan chose the Narayani army.

Possible explanation: Balram always favored Duryodhan's cause. After Balram refused to participate in Kurukshetra, the Narayani/Yadava army was headed by Kritavarman. Perhaps Kritavarman's loyalty, like Balram's, lay with Duryodhan. Perhaps the entire Arjun-Duryodhan incident is actually an indicator of Dwarka's split loyalties.

Note that Kritavarman was not a token or reluctant leader. He nursed a deep hatred for the Pandavs. He (along with Ashwatthama and Kripacharya) ambushed the Pandav camp after Duryodhan's death. Thirty six years later, he initiated the drunken battle that led to the annihilation of Dwarka.

4] **Vishnu's reincarnations:**

Brahmin Parshuram and Kshatriya Krishn. Perhaps two reincarnations of the same deity can co-exist. Krishn's side defeated an army boasting three

Parshuram disciples. So was Vishnu – in two separate incarnations as Krishn and Parshuram – assisting both the opposing camps?

Rama, another incarnation, banished Sita to placate his citizens' doubts over her purity. Krishn married 16,000 abducted women to reaffirm their dubious purity. Was this Krishn's atonement for the folly of his previous incarnation?

Draupadi's swayamwar:

The infamous words, "I will not marry a sutaputra" lead many a reader to condemn Draupadi as though she invented racism!

There are only two possibilities: (a) She said the words; (b) She did not.

a] **If she said the words:** I am delighted that women in those times could freely voice their opinions, could weed out the suitors they considered unsuitable and were empowered to reject the unwanted.

It also means Draupadi *chose* to forego royalty, riches and palatial comfort. Instead she *chose* to wed a penniless Brahmin and to lead a lifetime of frugal and austere life in his hut. When she garlanded the ash-smeared Brahmin, she had no prior knowledge that he was Arjun, or that she would eventually become queen of Indraprastha. Why is there no applause for her exemplary sacrifice?

Rukmini rejected Shishupal and Subhadra rejected Duryodhan by eloping with their favored suitors. They are as entitled to a choice as Draupadi.

Yet, many writers and readers defend Karn's heinous deeds in Hastinapur's court as fair retaliation for Draupadi's snub. To me, his repugnant actions find echoes in Kaliyug, where jilted Romeos cannot handle "No" – who fling acid or stab a woman to death 'because she had the gall to reject me.'

The horrific practice of '*honor killing*' is a visceral attack on a woman's right to take decisions and make choices as an individual. Those who justify Karn's actions should not feign horror at honor killings.

Her right to refuse gives nobody the right to molest or abuse her.

b] **If she did not say the words:** Drupad wanted Arjun to wed Draupadi. However, he did not know if Arjun survived the Varanavat fire or who Arjun would emerge disguised as – a potter, a Kshatriya or a Brahmin. What would a father do in such a dilemma? Exactly what Drupad did – keep the contest open to everyone, irrespective of caste.

This is Drupad's lamentation to Dhrishtadyumn *after* Draupadi leaves with the victorious Brahmin, "Oh, who hath taken away Krishnaa? Hath any Sudra or hath a tribute-paying Vaisya by taking my daughter away, placed his dirty foot on my head? Hath any Kshatriya of high birth, or any one of the superior Brahmana order obtained my daughter? O son, I would not grieve but feel greatly happy if my daughter hath been united with Partha, that foremost of men! Tell me truly who hath won my daughter today?"

Drupad was clearly unsure that Draupadi's victor was a Brahmin. Why undergo such agony later, instead of asking the Brahmin to introduce himself?

All assembled Kings were duly introduced by Dhrishtadyumn. Yet, no enquiries were made about the unknown Brahmin's name, family or lineage! *Absolutely none*. Neither before he attempted nor after he won the fish-eye contest.

Clearly, Drupad had opened the contest to all and he *had* to live up to it. A Varna or caste-based denial to participate was an absolute impossibility.

Drupad's decision, however, did not find favor with the Kshatriya suitors. See their disgruntled fury at Arjun's triumph, "The swayamwar is not for Brahmins. If no Kshatriya could shoot the Matsya yantra, Draupadi should have killed herself. We must make an example of this wretched swayamwar. Let us throw back this princess into the fire from which she arose, so that nobody would dare repeat such a swayamwar."

Kshatriyas expressing outrage even when a ‘higher’ Varna was permitted to participate! The subsequent attack on Brahmin-Arjun by these Kshatriya kings was led by Karn.

Kshatriyas, led by a sutaputra, attacking a Brahmin! Reverse racism!

The obvious truth is that Draupadi rejected no suitor. Her father stayed true to his contest criteria. Arjun won a contest *nobody* else could win.

Pandav sons: *Adi-Parva* states that Draupadi had ten co-wives. Yudhisthir (Devaki/Pauravi), Bheem (Hidimba, Kali, Baldhara), Arjun (Uloopi, Chitrangadha, Subhadra), Nakul (Karenumati) and Sahdev (Vijaya, Bhanumati). Their relatively unsung sons include Yudhisthir (Devaka/Yaudheya), Bheem (Sarvagata), Nakul (Naramitra) and Sahdev (Suhotra).

None of these eleven wives conceived a child post-Kurukshetra.

There is mention of the *Brahmashira* rendering all wombs barren and killing every trace of Pandav progeny. Perhaps it was ‘bioterrorism’; a teratogenic gas that percolated and caused mayhem abortions and genetic defects just like the atomic bomb. Perhaps Parikshit survived because Uttara was beyond the teratogenic phase of her pregnancy.

The ages and **hierarchy** of Pandav sons is never clarified. Some authors herald Abhimanyu as the eldest Pandav son based on the sentence, ‘he led Draupadi’s sons in battle’. However, that is merely an indicator of his martial skills, not an allusion to his seniority. The claimants to the throne (Yudhisthir and heir Prativindhya) would not spearhead the attack, since their safety would be vital to their future Kingdom.

At the dice game, Draupadi sought freedom foremost for Yudhisthir, so that her “first born and crown prince should not be termed a slave” Thus, Prativindhya was the crown prince, and not Abhimanyu.

Draupadi’s sons as warriors: Vyas/Vaisampayana/Sauti kept the spotlight firmly on Abhimanyu but Draupadi’s sons were not mollicoddled in tents during Kurukshetra. They survived till the end of a war that claimed

millions of warriors. Their survival is proof of their competency on the battlefield.

Draupadi's sons lead a heroic life at Kurukshetra but got a non-heroic death off Kurukshetra. *They died a tragic death – but not a coward's death.*

The myths of Karn: Consider the following 'Ifs, Buts and Maybes'

If he was accepted by Kunti to be the eldest son; if he had Dronacharya as his Guru; if he did not have Parshuram's Brahmastra curse, if the Vasava Shakti astra was not wasted on Ghatotkach; if his armor was intact; if his chariot wheel had not been stuck in the soil.

These myths are too deeply entrenched in public memory. So, let us discuss them by reversing the '*Ifs*'.

1] The tussle arose because the younger Pandu was crowned over an elder Dhritarashtra. Duryodhan's grudge is based on two arguments - Dhritarashtra's rightful crown should return to his son and that Pandu's sons were not his *own* legitimate sons; these are points that hold a grain of truth and are not completely invalid.

Khandav/Indraprastha was offered to the Pandavas, though grudgingly, because Yudhishthir was elder to Duryodhan. If Duryodhan was elder, the crown of undivided Hastinapur would have probably gone to him. In that scenario (and *only* in that scenario) the sudden discovery of an elder Pandav son would have been a turning point.

If Duryodhan was not ready to accept the Pandavs as Pandu's descendants, why would he accept *another* Kunti son as legitimate heir of Hastinapur?

2] *Myth:* **Dronacharya refused Karn as a student.**

Fact: Karn was Dronacharya's student.

Adi-Parv, 132 (11) states, “Vrishnis, Karn the son of Suta Radha and Andhakas all became pupils of Dronacharya. Although the preceptor gave the same instructions, yet in skill and lightness, Arjun became the foremost of his pupils.”

Adi-Parv, 132 (47), “Radheya, aided by Duryodhan's, displayed jealous competition with Arjuna, from the days of Dronacharya's ashram.”

The Duryodhan-Karn partnership was, thus, active and existent much before the Rangbhoomi incident. Being a *suta* certainly did not deprive Karn of equal opportunity to learn nor wreak any unfair misfortune on him as a student.

3] *Myth: Parshuram cursed* Karn that he would forget the Brahmastra at a crucial moment.

Fact: Karn did use the Brahmastra, in addition to the Vijaya bow and Bhargavastra that Parshuram gave him. *Karn-Parv* states, “Karna, invoking the Brahmastra, showered his shafts upon Dhananjaya. Partha also, by the aid of his Brahmastra, poured arrowy downpours upon Karna, thus baffling the weapon of his foe.”

In case, “crucial moment” mentioned in Parshuram's curse means “at the time of death”, then kindly note that Arjun used the Anjalika arrow to behead Karn and *not* the Brahmastra. So what is the whole hyperventilation about Parshuram's curse, since it had absolutely no bearing on Karn's death?

4] *Myth: Karn's impenetrable armor* made him invincible and immortal.

Fact: The armor aided Kunti in recognizing Karn. Thereafter, it loses all relevance, until it surfaces in Indra-Shaktiastra yarn. There is not even a *single* battle in the interim period that highlights the armor as a deciding factor in victory versus defeat or life versus death.

Ideally, the owner of such an impenetrable piece of armor would never fear injury, pain or death at war. *A warrior with no fear of injury, pain or*

death. Why would such a lucky warrior need to surrender, retreat or suffer defeats?

Yet Karn *with armor* gets defeated by the Gandharvas (straight defeat) at Ghosh yatra, by Bheem (surrender) at Rajsuya yagna and by Arjun post Draupadi's swayamwar (defeat & retreat). Are we still expected to believe its exalted relevance just before Kurukshetra?

5a] **Vajra vs Vasava Shakti:** Both are Indra's weapons.

In Bhagwad Gita, Krishn says, "Amongst weapons, I am the *Vajra*." Indra says to Karn, "Ask me for any weapon *except* the Vajra."

Rest assured, *Vajra* was much deadlier than the Vasava Shakti.

This foremost weapon Vajra was already in Arjun's arsenal during his Amrawati excursion, which occurred much earlier than the Indra-Karn exchange deal. If Vasava Shakti was truly infallible and a better weapon, why wouldn't doting father Indra gift it to Arjun, instead of Arjun's enemy?

5b] *Myth:* Vasava Shakti was essential to killing Ghatotkach.

Fact: Ghatotkach was killed between day 14-15, when Dronacharya and Ashwatthama were both alive. On day 14, Ashwatthama battled, defeated and rendered Ghatotkach unconscious twice. He and Drona possessed the *Brahmastra*, *Brahmashira* and *Narayan astra*, which were missiles multifold superior to Shakti astra. Both could have justifiably used these missiles against Ghatotkach's non-human, demonic force.

Thus, Vasava was definitely not the *only* weapon in the Kaurav army capable of killing Ghatotkach. Rather, it was the only weapon available to Karn *while* Drona and Ashwatthama were engaged in skirmishes elsewhere. If he did not use it in self-defense, Ghatotkach would have killed him.

5c] *Myth:* Krishn did not allow an Arjun-Karn face-off until Ghatotkach's death, out of fear for the Shakti astra.

Fact: They confronted each other once on day 12 and twice on day 14, before Ghatotkach's death. Arjun vanquished Karn in all these encounters.

6] The sunken **chariot wheel**:

On previous skirmishes with Bheem and Satyaki, Karn was rendered chariot-less multiple times, but was rescued by a backup chariot. On day 17, almost the whole battlefield was glued to the Arjun-Karn duel. Duryodhan and Ashwatthama were also watching. It would have been very easy to procure another chariot from them, *if his chariot was stuck*.

After Ashwasena-astra incident, Arjun's chariot sank and Krishn had to extract it manually, "Krishna put forth his strength and thus pressed down with his feet that car into the earth, whereat the steeds, bending down their knees, laid themselves down upon the earth when the car itself sank into it". Later, "After that snake Ashwasena had been cut off by Arjuna, the lord Keshava himself, raised up with his massive arms that car from the earth. Whilst he was thus engaged, Karn glancing obliquely at Arjuna, pierced Krishna with nine arrows."

The sunken chariot, the unarmed hero engaged in uprooting the wheel and attacked by an opponent during this endeavor. A few verses later, an eerily similar incident is narrated by Sanjay, except for the reversal of involved parties. Destiny's revenge or Sanjay's 'copy-paste' interpolation?

Krishn succeeded in extricating his own chariot, but Karn failed, in accordance with the Brahmin's *supposed* curse. However, "After Karn's death, Shalya, mourning for his rider, drove away the chariot, deprived of its rider and standard," Karn-Parv, 67 (35). Again in *chapter 68 (7)*, "The ruler of the Madras, with stupefied heart, quickly proceeding on that car divested of standard, approached Duryodhana."

How could Shalya possibly ride away on a sunken and stuck chariot?

Did Arjun ever fight a chariot-less battle? Yes, on day 14 - Jayadrath's death. Krishn dismantled his chariot to refresh his exhausted horses, hence

Arjun had to dismount right in the midst of their blood quest for Jayadratha. The horses were tired, his chariot was immobile, his time was running out, the Sun (Karn's father, remember?) was in a hurry to pretend that it had set, his son's enemy was still alive, his vow was yet incomplete, his life was at stake. He had no rearguard, since his core warriors were left behind to protect Yudhishtir from Drona.

Arjun fought *standing upon the ground* during this entire episode.

Even in deepest danger, he did not stoop to use the Brahmashira or the Pashupatastra. He did not plead leniency. He did not mouth dialogues of dharma-adharma to fend away his enemies. His enemies *continued to attack him when he was down from his chariot*. He fought back. No excuses uttered.

This incident exists plum within the epic. What a pity this gem is never hauled under the spotlight, is never given the prominence it deserves – just because Arjun overcame setbacks instead of cribbing about them. He dealt efficiently (and silently) with unexpected dire straits. Arjun's confident competence has become his albatross, a convenient ply for detractors to say – what difficulties did he ever face?

Karn hated Arjun. The main question is *why did he hate Arjun?*

Did Arjun abandon him as an orphan? Did he shun him as a charioteer's son at the weapon exhibition? Did he plot to kill Karn and his family by dubious means? Did he abuse Karn's wife, call her a prostitute and instigate her public stripping? Did he slay Karn's son by deceit or gang massacre?

None of the above.

Who did the first? – Kunti

Who did the second? – Bheem

Who did the last three? – Karn. *To* Arjun.

Arjun was a mirror held up to Karn, giving him a clear insight of the image that he wanted to be ... and *could never become nor better*.

Shalya: Shalya was the maternal uncle to Nakul-Sahdev.

Myth: Yudhisthir met Shalya before Kurukshetra. He instructed him to become Karn's charioteer and demoralize him.

Facts: How could Yudhishtir predict the events of day 17 even before Kurukshetra began? Moreover, if Shalya was to do Yudhisthir's bidding, he would have *volunteered* to be Karn's charioteer. But in actuality, it was Karn himself who suggested Shalya's name as a charioteer.

Shalya, upon joining the Kaurav army with his one Akshouhini, fought whole heartedly for them. This is his pledge to Duryodhan, "Everything I have - my life breath, my Kingdom, my wealth is at thy service."

If Shalya had truly abandoned Karn with the sunken chariot, how would a devastated and betrayed Duryodhan (he was watching the duel) react? We expect him to condemn Shalya's desertion, berate him with bitter words or behead him for being a traitor.

What did Duryodhan do? He appointed Shalya as next commander-in-chief of Kaurav army at Ashwatthama's (another witness) advice.

Who killed Shalya at Kurukshetra? Yudhisthir.

Draw your own conclusions.

Dronacharya: Delete Arjun from Dronacharya's life.

Dronacharya's resume would now include 104 Hastinapur princes who could not hit the bird's-eye, could not fulfill his Guru-dakshina against Drupad, could not save his life from the crocodile, could not win Draupadi's contest, could not defeat him in battle, could not prevent

Yudhisthir's capture repeatedly and who had no answer to his Brahmashira or Chakravyuh!

Hardly an impressive resume for an exalted and renowned preceptor!

Yet, India bestows the national 'Dronacharya award' to the best sports tutor. Yes, Drona was a formidable Brahmin-warrior, but his honor as a 'tutor' stems from only one student. Arjun was his medal, his triumph, his emblem and his identity. Dronacharya was redeemed because Arjun was his protégé.

Kansa and Drona, both knew in advance about the identity of the person born to kill them. Yet, to Drona's credit, he did not refuse to teach martial science to Dhrishtadyumn, unlike Kansa who attempted to wipe out Krishn's existence.

Eklavya:

Drona had experienced abject poverty. Then Hastinapur offered him shelter and livelihood. His gratitude translated into unwavering loyalty. Eklavya was Magadha's ally and by default, Hastinapur's enemy. Imparting knowledge to Eklavya would be treason to Hastinapur, which is probably why Drona demanded Eklavya's thumb.

Drona's loyalty to Hastinapur continued till Kurukshetra. His loyalty made him fight against Arjun and plot the murder of Arjun's son. Eklavya's thumb was not for Arjun's sake, it was for Hastinapur.

Refer to chapter 10 for my take on Savyasachi, the ambidextrous archer. In the epic, Eklavya's death occurred at Krishn's hands, when he attacked Dwarka alongside Jarasandha. I admit to literary license, I could not resist the left-handed duel between Eklavya and Arjun.

Shikhandi: was supposed to be princess Amba reincarnated. He was born a woman and transformed into a man. He had a wife and bore sons. So what exactly was Shikhandi? The Universe's first organ transplant and first

gender transformation? Bisexual, transvestite, hermaphrodite or just feminine?

If one takes away the Amba angle, the fact remains that *Shikhandi was Draupadi's brother*. Duryodhan and Dusshasan were accounted for by Bheem, Karn by Arjun, Drona by Dhrishtadyumn, and Shakuni by Sahdev – all except Bhishm.

Bhishm was the eldest patron in the Hastinapur court. Even Krishn held him accountable for inaction, for his crime of omission. Imagine Shikhandi's wrath towards his sister's criminal! He really does not need baggage from his previous birth as an incentive to kill Bhishm.

Myth: Shikhandi was a one-day pawn summoned on day 10 to make Bhishm forsake weapons, so that Arjun could kill an unarmed Bhishm.

Fact: *Udyog-Parv* states that the Pandav army had seven Akshouhinis. The seven sub-commanders in charge of the seven Akshouhinis were Drupad, Virat, Dhrishtadyumn, Satyaki, Dhrishtaketu of Chedi, Sahadeva of Magadha, and hold your breath ... Shikhandi!

Akshouhini consisted of chariots, elephants, horses and exactly two million, four lakh, five thousand and seven hundred foot soldiers in a ratio of 1:1:3:5. Shikhandi was in charge of such a mammoth unit, right from day 1 to day 18. Bheem and Arjun felt no embarrassment fighting beside him, Krishn felt no hesitation being on the pious battlefield with him. The enemy assailed and got assailed by him (read Kripacharya, Karn, Ashwatthama, Shakuni and Kritavarman).

Although Bhishm was uncomfortable with Shikhandi's sexuality, he held respect for Shikhandi's martial skills. Here is his evaluation in *Udyog-Parv*, "Drupada gave his son, Sikhandin as a pupil to Drona, from whom prince Sikhandin obtained the whole science of arms with its four divisions. That subjugator of hostile cities, Sikhandin, in my judgment is one of the foremost of Yudhisthira's Rathas."

Contrary to a common misconception, Bhishm was not unarmed in his final duel with Arjun. Read the final encounter;

“The arrows which the mighty car-warrior Sikhandin shot in that battle, scarcely caused Bhishma any pain. Then Arjuna approached Bhishma and cut off his bow-string. In the twinkling of an eye, one by one, Partha thus cut off all the bows of Bhishma. Then Bhishma hurled a dart at Partha, who cut it into 3 fragments. Desirous of obtaining either death or victory, the son of Ganga then took up a sword and a shield. Before he could descend the chariot, Arjuna cut off that shield into a hundred fragments.” (*Bhishma-Parv*).

Yes, Bhishm refused to battle Shikhandi. However, there followed a fierce faceoff between Bhishm and Arjun. Bhishm did not forsake his weapons. He continued to attack Arjun with arrows, darts and sword. He was *not* resigned, hapless or unarmed when Arjun felled him.

The myth of Kunti’s slip of tongue: Bheem and Arjun were warriors and achievers who got their highs from battle victories. If fortunate enough to be elder than Yudhishtir, would they have ruled Indraprastha in a fair and righteous manner? Yes.

Would Yudhishtir approach Hastinapur to claim his share without the monetary, political and military support of Panchal? No.

Could he win Draupadi’s swayamwar contest? No.

Could he achieve Indraprastha and Draupadi without Arjun? No.

Could he win Kurukshetra battle without Bheem and Arjun? No.

Would he evoke doom in the dice-game if he was younger to Bheem or Arjun? No.

Did he evoke doom on the basis of being the eldest Pandav? Yes.

Was is it his achievement to be born the eldest? No.

Bheem and Arjun's greatest misfortune was that all their constructive competence was shackled to Yudhisthir's destructive incompetence.

Yudhisthir left Draupadi's swayamwar hall with the twins, immediately after Arjun won and before the subsequent battle with the kings. He returned to the hut much before Arjun, Draupadi and Bheem. Yet we are to believe that Kunti was unaware of the living treasure Arjun was bringing home!

Yudhisthir's seniority was Kunti's sole trump card over Gandhari. If he lusted for his younger brother's wife, he had to be indulged. So what if it was a sin; so what if it reversed the entire point of the fish-eye contest; so what if it crushed Arjun-Draupadi's dreams? Kunti was a ruthless and ambitious woman. She could not take back her words, because her words were *not* accidental.

Observe that Yudhisthir's "Naro vaa kunjaro vaa" untruth was not his first. He supported Kunti's 'slip-of-tongue.' He glibly lied to King Drupad that all five brothers were 'Brahmacharis' (bachelors), whereas Bheem already had a wife and a son. Kunti did not bother to correct *this* slip of tongue either.

Kunti sealed Draupadi's fate when she wed her to Yudhisthir. She indulged Yudhisthir at the expense of Arjun. She permitted him to believe that he owned his younger brothers – their achievements, their trophies, their lives and wives. Their entire life was yoked to his service, his fancies and whims.

This was the fatal mindset that made Yudhisthir casually stake the Kingdom he did not create, the wealth he did not earn, the wife he did not win, the younger brothers who could not protest and the sons who were not his. *Twice*.

Draupadi: She is never 'pawn, puppet, tragic figure or destructive disaster' to me. I see her as a constructive force, the wind beneath the Pandav wings,

the blazing flame that fanned their bravery and ambitions.

Draupadi bore five brave sons, she was reigning Empress and she saw Khandav being converted from a barren land to prosperous Indraprastha. She was CEO, Treasurer and Personnel Manager of Indraprastha. She was in charge of the entire economics of their treasury, the judicial decisions regarding women's problems and the administration of palace personnel. She had the unique honor of being Krishn's soul-friend.

Yet, if you Google images for Draupadi, all you get is damsel-in-distress being molested. Artists are supposed to have vision and imagination. Why is everyone in a tearing hurry to portray her life as a series of tragedies and misfortunes?

The court of Hastinapur was her strongest moment. She kept her wits in spite of the horrific events hitting her when she was least prepared for them. She came up with queries that no one has answered since 5000 years; she scoured dharma and logic; she questioned Yudhisthir's action and the elders' inaction. She did all of this while a mindless beast was trying to paw her, while she was menstruating, while she was semi-dressed, while all expected support systems were mute and while she was being constantly barraged with expletives and lewd comments.

How many women would have given up the fight in tears, shrieks and swoons? How many women would stay sane, logical and coherent in such dire straits? How many would resist that third boon to snatch back Indraprastha?

She battled brute force with cold logic. She was grace under duress and courage under trauma. It was the most resilient, brilliant and feisty moment of her life. Why does every author and artist paint it as her most helpless moment?

Draupadi was never a contender for Ms. Congeniality. She does not conform or simper, she cannot be tamed into conventionality. Hence, she is either deified as a pristine virgin. Or else she is demonized as egoistic and bloodthirsty.

If I could rewrite History, Draupadi would be my symbol of victory. She is the trait and lineage that deserves to flourish and propagate instead of the wholly insipid Subhadra. If Mahabharata was mere literature, I would find fault with Vyas. Since Mahabharata is History, perhaps Vyas was merely being a faithful chronicler and could not alter facts to what *should-have-been*.

Arjun: As children, our concept of ‘*Hero*’ is handsome, victorious, warrior extraordinaire, the propagator of a surviving lineage and the beloved of the Heroine. Is Arjun the Hero merely for satisfying these criteria?

Arjun is humble, curious, sensitive, innocent and idealistic in a non-ideal world. He has dilemmas and he voices them at the cost of his warrior’s reputation.

His dilemma stems from being compassionate, considerate and conscientious. His hesitancy on the eve of Kurukshetra does not arise from fear of death – but from fear of killing. His reluctance is not because he was powerless – but *because* he held the power to unleash destruction. His questions arose from his immense ability, the questions are not a question mark over his ability. Rest assured, if Arjun was ruthless and robotic, we would have never got the Bhagwad Gita.

He is Hero because he humanizes heroism, because he dares to frankly admit, “I am not sure. Guide me.” He did not really have to ask his questions right on the battlefield, on a public platform with two colossal armies as witnesses.

He is Hero because he is constructive, ever evolving, ever eager to imbibe newer knowledge (which other testosterone-driven male would condescend to learn dance while on a mission to gain weapons?) and malleable (he is equally at ease as Kshatriya, Casanova, eunuch, dancer, warrior and wandering ascetic.)

He kept the Drona-Drupad rivalry alive and ticking. Indirectly, he triggered the births of Draupadi and Dhrishtadyumn. His triumph at

Draupadi swayamwar gave the boost to claim Khandav.

He converted barren Khandav into prosperous Indraprastha. To win Draupadi and build Indraprastha – then give up both to roam in exile after exile; was he not actually living Krishn’s “Karmani eva adhikar aste...”?

His questions elevated the battle from a routine bloodbath to a quest for eternal truth. Krishn was the ‘driving’ force behind Pandav victory, but Arjun was still the executor of Krishn’s vision.

Yet, I was appalled and aghast to learn how many authors and readers casually dismiss his achievements and sneer at his triumphs. I tried to gauge the possible reasons behind this collective grudge and scorn.

Could it be because Arjun is never the under-dog? He is the dream student who delivers what he promises as a child prodigy. He does not display fluke flashes of martial brilliance; instead he holds a consistently brilliant martial record.

Bhishm, Dronacharya, Drupad, Krishn and Draupadi all adore him.

He never plays the sympathy card, never depends on pity. Even his wars seem to levitate on a vaster scale – escalating from wars with mortals to wars with Gandharvas, Demons and Gods – yet he remains undefeated.

He is self-sufficient in every battle. The only time he falters is when he battles his own conscience and it is the only time Krishn steps in to aide him.

Bewitching women pursue him with far more fervor than he exhibits. He is never impolite, never disobedient, never whines, never brags.

He seems to move around in eclectic and elite company. He is best friends with Vishnu’s incarnation, precious son of Heaven’s king and the enviable passion of the most unique Heroine of all time.

He does not allow anyone the sadistic satisfaction of ‘feeling sorry for poor Arjun’. Yes, Arjun is very difficult to ‘like’, in that sense.

In spite of these enviable ‘*privileges*’, his life was anything but roses and wine. He spent more years in exile than any other character in the epic. He was not spared brutal heartbreak and severe trials. He endured what no husband ever endured, he had to downplay the calculated ambitions of his mother, had to witness his triumphs frittered away, tolerate his elder brother pledge away his liberty, stoically bear it when his masculinity was cursed by Urvashi and witness his son butchered by the tutor he worshipped.

Mother, brother, tutor - three people whom he trusted implicitly, three people who betrayed him in the worst possible way. Betrayals which he could neither protest nor admit – probably not even to himself. And yet, no whimpers of “Why me?”

How many men could resist that opportunity of seduction (Urvashi) offered on a platter? How did he have enough restraint not to use his lethal celestial missiles even at the peaks of despair and personal danger? How did he feel mastering the Chakravyuh, yet being powerless to save his son? To have the Pashupatastra and Brahmashira in his power; yet see his sons and nephews butchered? How did he feel seeing his nightmare actualize at the end of war – and yet derive no pleasure in saying “I told you so.”

In spite of these innumerable physical and emotional tortures, Arjun’s life remains an icon of triumphs, achievements, focus and a positive outlook. He himself chose not to highlight his sorrows or crib about his misfortunes. As Ayn Rand says “Pain should never be the ruling force in life.”

This book is my homage to Arjun’s greatness.

Because I believe in Heroes.

Arjun, Achilles, Alexander!

Interesting similes in the lives of Alexander and Arjun:

1. Alexander was the first son of King Philip's third wife, Olympias. Arjun was the third son of Pandu's first wife.
2. Philip later married a much younger lady, as King Pandu married Madri.
3. The death of both fathers is shrouded by an aura of sexuality. King Philip was said to be assassinated by his former gay lover. King Pandu's curse killed him because he gave in to his passion with Madri.
4. Alexander recorded his first victory at age sixteen; this was approximately the same age at which Arjun won his first war against king Drupad.
5. Alexander considered himself the son of Zeus, the King of Gods; vis-a-vis Indra, King of Heaven is said to have fathered Arjun.
6. Zeus wielded the *thunderbolt*, exactly as Indra wielded the *Vajra*.
7. At Alexander's birth, there were oracles prophesying about this invincible son. Mahabharata mentions the exact similar shower of petals and prophecies by celestial beings at Arjun's birth.
8. Aristotle and Alexander shared a tutor-disciple relation, though predominantly in philosophical teachings. They later had a fall-out. This is mirrored in Dronacharya and Arjun's relationship.
9. Alexander had approximately four wives as did Arjun. When Alexander died, Roxanne was pregnant with the child who could carry his legacy on; just as Uttara carried on the Abhimanyu-Arjun legacy at Abhimanyu's death.
10. Cassander had Roxanne, her infant son and Olympias killed after Alexander died. Ashwatthama similarly wiped out all of Draupadi's sons and almost killed Uttara's unborn child.

11. Alexander made political marriages like Roxanne and Darius's daughter. Darius was his arch enemy whom he defeated before marrying his daughter. Drupad likewise was Dronacharya's friend-turned-enemy whom Arjun defeated and he later married Draupadi.
12. The Amazonian queen Thalestris of Crimea approached Alexander for a son. She promised to retain a daughter but to hand over any son to Alexander. Somewhat similar is tale of Chitrangadha, who retained Arjun's son as heir to her Kingdom. Rabindranath Tagore expanded on this theme by making Chitrangadha an Amazonian warrior princess who turns feminine to woo Arjun.
13. The deep and lasting bond shared by Alexander with Hepastion, said to be chief army general, best friend and soul mate to Alexander. Echoes of the Krishn-Arjun relation?

Arjun vs Achilles and other Greek myths.

1. Both were said to be invincible warriors and the superlative warriors amongst Pandav and Trojan armies respectively.
2. Achilles stayed away from the epic war in the initial phases just as Arjun hesitated to initiate war.
3. However, Achilles's act was a rebellious petulance against Agamemnon who took away Achilles's trophy wife Briseis. On the other hand, Arjun's emotional entanglement in Bhishm-Drona made him cringe at the thought of war.
4. Patroclus, Achilles' nephew joined battle wearing Achilles' head gear and was killed by Hector. This turned to be the turning point for Trojans as Achilles roared back into war to guarantee a Trojan victory. Similarly Abhimanyu's death is said to galvanize Arjun into full throttle battle, as opposed to his half-hearted battles with Bhishm and Dronacharya before day thirteen.
5. Achilles is said to have a Thetis (a nymph) mother and a Peleus (a mortal) father. The polar opposite of Arjun who had a mortal mother and a demi-God for father.

6. Achilles's mother wanted to make him immortal and impenetrable to all weapons. She held him by the ankle as she dipped him into river, thus leaving vulnerable the classic 'Achilles heel'. Similarly, Gandhari (as per folklore) tried to make Duryodhan impervious to all weapons by the accumulated power of her yogic vision. However, Duryodhan out of modesty covered his groin, which turned out to be his fatal area.
7. Odysseus had to defeat several suitors at an archery contest to win Penelope, similar to how Arjun won Draupadi.

Other famous Arjuns:

1. Arjun sounds similar to argentum. In Latin *argentum* means silver. In Sanskrit, Arjun means spotless and shining as silver.
2. *Terminalia arjuna* is a deciduous plant that grows in the Kanha national park (Kanha= Krishn!!). In Ayurved, Waghbhatt used the plant for its anticholesterol, anti-asthma, antioxidant and coronary heart disease problems. It is also used to control local bleeding in hemorrhages and injuries.
3. The Arjuna award is India's highest civilian award for national sportsmen. Started in 1961, it is represented by a bronze statuette of Arjun. It stands for excellence, consistent performance, leadership and discipline.
4. Dronacharya award was started in 1985 for honoring the tutors of excellent sportsmen.
5. Arjuna tank is India's missile-carrying battle tank.
6. Arjun Tendulkar is Sachin's son. Sachin means husband of Sachi. Sachi is Indra's wife. So Sachin = Indra. Indra's son was Arjun; and as a quick aside, Sachin Tendulkar's son is also named Arjun!

My favorite Mahabharata reads and references:

1. 'Yuganta' by Irawati Karve.

2. 'The Mahabharata of Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa' translated by Kisari M. Ganguli.

3. 'The Difficulty of Being Good' by Gurcharan Das.

Arjun's celestial weapons:

1. Brahmashira	12. Ashmavashastra
2. Pashupatastra	13. Antardhana
3. Vajra	14. Varunapasha
4. Raudrastra	15. Nagastra and Garudastra
5. Brahmastra	16. Sanmohini astra
6. Aindrastra	17. Prajapati astra
7. Vishosana	18. Vayavyastra
8. Sthunakarna	19. Agneyastra
9. Yamadanda	20. Parjanyastra
10. Shalabhastra	21. Varunastra
11. Parvatastra	22. Aditya