

CHRONICLES OF  
**KURU WOMAN**  
VOL. I



KRISHNA'S  
SISTER

PRIYANKA BHUYAN

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# **CHRONICLES OF KURU WOMAN**

**Volume I**

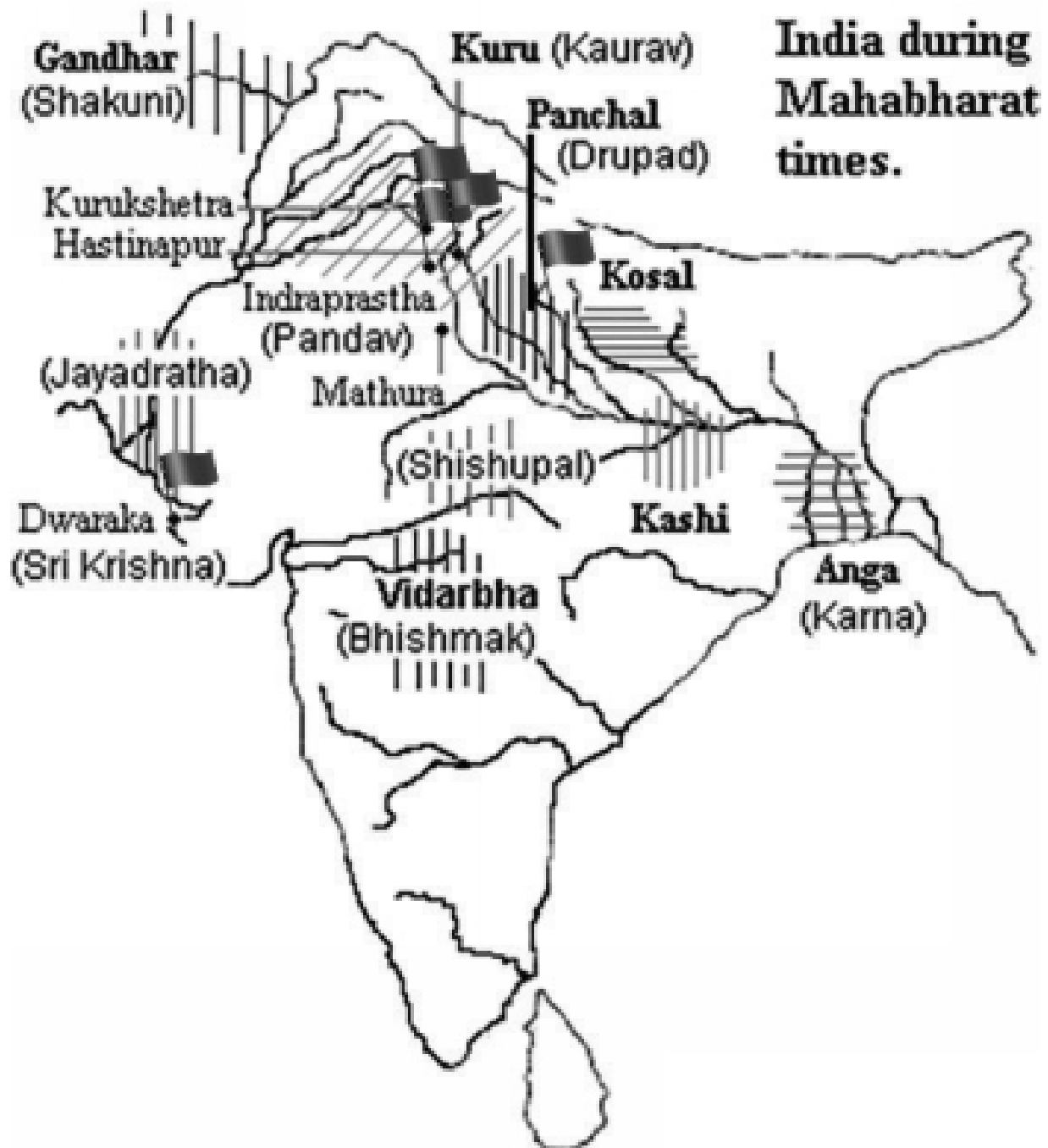
# **KRISHNA'S SISTER**

**- Priyanka Bhuyan**

*Invincible Publishers*

***“To my brother Dabbu and for his invincible fighting spirit”***

युधामन्युष्य विक्रान्त उत्तमौजाष्य वीर्यवान्।  
सौभद्रो द्रौपदेयाष्य सर्व एवं महारथा



*India During The Battle Of Kurukshetra*



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The story was always there in the back of my mind and I started penning it down even before my first book was published. I always believed that behind the great war of Mahabharata was the unspoken valour and sacrifice of several women whom were rarely spoken of, or given due importance in the Great Saga that swept the entire Bharatvarsha. This is a legend and the story of one such woman. I hope I was able to do justice to it.

Foremost I must thank the Divine Grace Krishna and it is my fondness for him that made me write about his beloved sister and to Goddess Kamakhya for her celestial presence in my life. My parents and my brother for standing besides me, supporting me and making me the woman that I am today. My dog Pluto whose selfless love brightens up my gloomy days. I must also thank all my readers who connected with me via social media and were more than welcoming and encouraging. You all are no less than family

And how can I forget the entire team of Invincible Publishers –Ajay Sir, Tamanna, Shubhangi and Ashish, you took away all my worries and brought my dream to reality. Also, my fellow co-authors who shared all the titbits and were always there to guide me.

I must also take the opportunity to thank my teachers who guided me in the spiritual realm. Thank you for showing me the path of life and helping me stand on my own feet.

Lastly, I believe every woman is a Warrior and Goddess as she carries all her roles with such grace. I have known and been inspired by a few and this goes out to all the women of India, irrespective of caste and creed, thanks for continuing to be my inspiration.

Now as I hand over the story to you and take you back to a different time zone, I lastly sign off by saying that I feel truly blessed.

Thank you and warm Regards

Yours truly

*Priyanka*

# PROLOGUE

“If we don’t do something even now, the tide may be upon us at any time. We all know that your crown is at stake and Shakuni will never sit silent for long. He is a serpent in disguise and his vengeance runs deeper than his blood.” Bheema, the muscular second Pandava spoke out. In a hidden chamber of Indraprastha the four brothers brooded. Newly crowned king of Indraprastha, Yudhisthira, knew that this was not his destiny. He was meant to rule the entire Kingdom of Hastinapur and maybe even Bharatvarsha. After all he was the scion of Bharat, the one who had built Bharatvarsha. And yet all he was given were crumbs. But Yudhisthira also knew that after the death of his father, Pandu, his Uncle Dhritarastra wanted his son Duryodhana to ascend the throne. And Duryodhana was no less a warrior himself and he along with his 100 brothers were alone an army. Not to mention he now had Karna too, the Suta born King, as an ally. Karna was a fit match to Arjuna who was his main rival in terms of strength. He had the answer to every arrow of Arjuna.

“What can we do?” Yudhisthira brooded. “We have Panchala to our side with Draupadi being our wife.” Nakula, the fourth Pandava added. “And they have Bhishma, Drona, Aswasthama who are all bound to the throne of Hastinapur. We need more allies on our side. It won’t be long before the power struggle begins. It is only a matter of time.” Yudhisthira said before he got up and slowly started pacing the room up and down. “Arjuna has gained us allies by marrying the snake Princess Ulupi and the Princess of Manipur, Chitrangada but even that’s not enough.” Bheema spoke. He slowly put his hand on Yudhisthira’s shoulder and said, “We need an ally which is invincible. We need the Kingdom of Dwarka on our side and if our spies are correct, Duryodhana is also thinking on the same lines. And can you imagine

what will happen if Krishna and Balarama join hands with Hastinapur? The Narayani Army of Dwarka is invincible in war.” “But Brother,” Sahadeva the youngest Pandava spoke out, “Balarama is your Guru! And Krishna loves us. Why will they side with Duryodhana?” “But Krishna is also the Guru of Duryodhana, you forgot?” “Hmm... that leaves us with one person who can change everything.” Yudhisthira replied. The rest of his brothers sans Arjuna looked at him as if they knew the answer. “We need her; the one who is the lifeline of Dwarka, the one who controls both Krishna and Balarama, the one they say is a fiery warrior no less than a Goddess herself. I remember how Arjuna and she used to play and frolic in their childhood. Arjuna loved her then. He thinks I don’t know but I always knew and if I am right he still harbours feelings for her.”

Yudhisthira turned towards Bheema and said, “Find out where Arjuna is traveling to right now and send him a secret message that he needs to go to Dwarka next. Our dreams and ambitions are all dependent on this person.” But Bheema was troubled, “You know whom you are speaking about? What about Draupadi? No other woman has shared her household, even our other wives reside in their respective places. And Dwarka too will never swallow its pride. And neither will she.” “Yes, I do know that.” Yudhisthira said with a sigh, “But we all need to make sacrifices for a greater vision. And its time Draupadi too learns and accepts that Arjuna cannot belong to her alone. I know there will be turbulence but I am sure that the shadow of Arjuna will be no less than that of Krishna and with her wit and brain she will find a way in this palace.”

All the four brothers silently nodded in unison as they looked at the map below. Enough of sitting and bowing in silence. They knew they will be prepared when the time comes but inside everyone was aware that history was going to change.

## EARLY DAYS

**M**y earliest memories were of the streaming sunlight which used to creep into my room along with the cool sea breeze drafting in. This was one thing I loved most about my beloved Dwarka, the lovely breeze brought by the sea. Even in the hot summers when the Sun used to be blazing high, our city used to be cool with the unending sea breeze. Which reminds me to thank my brother Krishna for having chosen this place to build his city when we were on the brink of a war with Magadha. Its ruler, the cruel Jarasandha, hated our entire family because he believed we were responsible for making his daughters widows. Asti and Prapti, his two daughters were married to my late uncle, Kansa and when Krishna killed him my aunts went away to Magadha.

Krishna, was my beloved brother...my best friend and confidante. Balarama, my eldest brother always used to tease us that I loved Krishna more than him. Although, Krishna was my half-brother being born from Mother Devaki; my father's second and privileged wife. Balarama and I were born from Mother Rohini, his first wife although I was born quite later than both of them. Yet the horrors of my family which befell them before I was born were not unknown to me. Although no one in our family spoke about it any longer, the palace gossips were enough to let me know that Kansa had killed six of my half-brothers in infancy and kept my father and mother imprisoned for what seemed to be a long time. My blood boiled at the very thought; what kind of a man was this Kansa? And why had no one protested and tried to oppose him? And he claimed to love Mother Devaki as his own sister; where was his love gone when he claimed each one of her children and killed them mercilessly? Did he fear for his own life more than the love for his sister? Any brother would sacrifice himself rather than kill his

sister's offsprings and imprison her and her husband. But Kansa was no ordinary man. He was a demon in the guise of a man and I heard that no one dared oppose him, not even Hastinapur which had warriors like Bhishma, the son of river Ganga or Kripacharya and Dronacharya, the famed Kuru Gurus.

But as Krishna says, what is destined, will happen. So, both Balarama and Krishna were raised in the care of Nanda, my father's ally and friend in Vrindavan and when time came, Krishna killed Kansa, thus putting an end to his tyranny once and for all. My heart once again swelled with pride about the thought of my Krishna. No doubt people loved and revered him, for his several qualities. Nowadays, he is always so busy traveling between Dwarka, Hastinapur and his wives' Kingdoms. It seems the entire world wants him and he is the one who has got the time for everyone. While he is away, Balarama looks after the administration of Dwarka

"Time to get up and be ready Princess!" My mother's sarcastic voice startled me all of a sudden. Even at her age she looked so regal and beautiful. "I sent your maids three times to wake you up but as usual you are still in bed. Your father will be annoyed. It's high time you start behaving the way you should. Krishna won't be there to protect you forever." "Oh yes he will be and all the more. He does for the entire world so why wouldn't he do it for his only sister?" I pouted as I got up and tied my hair up in a bun. Mother was no doubt in a foul mood today; I could make it out from her face. Without waiting for her to say another word, I asked, "Has Krishna returned from his trip to Hastinapur?" "Yes he has, but your father wishes to see you first." She replied. I jumped with elation at the thought of seeing Krishna again after fifteen days. "Okay then I better get ready. I will meet you and father at his quarters. What is it that he wishes to see me for? Have I landed in trouble again?" I tried thinking hard about the possibility of any complaint against me. Did any Yadu nobles conspired against me and complained to my father that he should keep his daughter in check? "You will get to know soon." Mother said and went away.

I took a bath and after finishing my daily *Puja* of Lord Shiva, made way to my father's quarters. Upon entering I saw Balarama along with my mother and Mother Devaki sitting with my father, deep in conversation. Suddenly, my father looked up at me and his face beamed

with a radiant smile. "There you are my little angel! Come sit beside me." I walked to him with joined hands and touched his feet. Then my mothers' and Balarama's as obeisance. Balarama looked non-plussed sending shivers down my spine. I had known him; he loves me but he is strict and disciplined and likes to keep things in order, especially when it's about his family. And he did not look too happy. My eyes searched for Krishna. He with his wit and humour can handle any situation however complicated it may be. Moreover, he is the only one who can stand up to Balarama and protect me, which right now I am in a dire need of. Sensing my thoughts Balarama finally spoke out, "Krishna is resting after his long journey. Now will you sit please?"

"Subhadra," My father finally spoke clearing his throat, "You are a Princess and my only daughter. Both your brothers have settled long back and even your nephews and nieces have now grown up. So, I was thinking..."

"So now it's my fault that I was born late?" I cut him back furious as I could now make out what he was going to say. "Or I have now become a tiresome load that you wish to dispose off to the first man available." Balarama glowed in anger. "How dare you? Is this the way to behave with your elders? What we are trying to do is for your own good. When will you understand that? Or do we mean nothing to you? Father," he now directed his words towards our father, "This is your's and Krishna's doing. You all have spoilt her beyond measure." This was much true. I felt tears brimming at the corners of my eyes. My father got up and caught me in his arms and cupped my face, "Now... now, don't cry dear. You know very well your tears can kill me any moment. You know your brother well, he tries to act tough but he loves you like his own daughter. What we were just thinking was, that all your compatriot Princesses have got handsome Princes and have settled down. Don't you want a Prince of your own to live like a queen, to feel loved and have children? We were thinking of holding a *Swayamvar*, where you can choose your own husband.

"What about love? How can I love someone that I will be meeting for the first time in a crowded hall? Father you must know this, a woman wants her husband's love and affection, one who can treat her as equal. She can't be affected by his position and status all the time?" I said bluntly not wanting to be put down so easily. "Love? My dear

Subhadra, you are still living in a world of illusions. You are a Yadava Princess and you must do your duty by marrying into a prominent family. You will have all the time to earn your husband's love." Balarama cut me in between. Sometimes I can't believe Balarama is my own brother. Sometimes I feel he has hidden all his emotions under his play of duty. Unlike Krishna, Balarama thinks emotions makes human beings weak. "So now you want me to barter off like some showpiece to gain an alliance?" I questioned. "I want to know a man well before marrying him. And I don't need anyone's protection. After all I am your sister, brother, and you know very well that I can defeat ten men alone in a battlefield. So if I marry, it will be for love and nothing else."

"That's enough Subhadra! You have become insolent, talking like this with your elders." My mother broke in. My father then suddenly crossed his hands and said "Fair enough, you take your time dear one, but know this you cannot sit a spinster all your life. I am proud that you are well read, accomplished and brave and I am sure that Lord Shiva must have created someone special for you. Your brothers may be my strength but you are my joy. However Balarama is adamant to search an alliance for you. So if you don't find someone, I am sorry I will have to let him find someone for you. That's why I thought of arranging the Swayamvar but since you are so wary of it let us not have further discussion on it."

"And if you don't find someone soon enough, little sister, know this then, you have to accept whoever I choose for you. After all I care for you in ways you fail to understand." Balarama said, bowed to our parents and left the room.

I turned to see our parents and then suddenly realised that my days of freedom were numbered.



# KRISHNA

**A**fter the heated discussion in my father's quarters in the morning there was only one place where I could cool myself off. I strode like a caged lioness to the one person who can calm my heart and mind. I was already angry that he didn't bother to see me after coming back, however hectic the journey may have been. Has his love waned for me ever since he got married to his numerous queens and begot the many children who are now the proud successor of the Yadu dynasty?

I found out that Krishna was staying at Satyabhama's palace, his second most prominent wife after Rukmini, the Princess of Vidarbha. Although she was married third to my brother after Rukmini and Jambavati, Satyabhama thought herself the undisputed ruler of the household. She was beautiful, gracious and accomplished no doubt and one of my closest friends but yet when it came to Krishna, a different type of obsession takes over her. It is no big secret that Satyabhama and Rukmini were arch rivals for my brother's affection and love and they made no qualms about it. I never could understand her reason of insecurity for Krishna. He always used to give equal attention to all his queens and however hard he tried to make her understand, Satyabhama could never let go of the fact that it was Rukmini who was the chief consort and not she.

Reaching her palace, I asked the guard to announce myself and requested an immediate audience. Krishna could sense my anger when he and Satyabhama both came out to greet me. I folded my hands and touched his feet but Krishna caught me and held me in his arms. "How are you?" He asked lovingly. "You seem to know everything in this world and yet you ask me? I can see that I no longer matter to you. Now you don't even bother to come and see me, you always remain busy."

Hearing my complaints Krishna threw back his head and laughed, “Women, I fail to understand and why not! Even Lord Brahma couldn’t understand, so how can I? But I know what can make my sister happy. Won’t you come inside and look at the various gifts that I have brought for you?”

In other times I would have jumped with joy at the very words for Krishna used to lavish me with all sorts of gifts whenever he used to go away on his travels in order to compensate for his absence from our lives. But not today. I crossed my arms and went straight inside and sat on a swing. “Were you aware what was going on in brother Balarama’s mind? I am quite sure you do but you never bothered to warn me. Was it the reason you didn’t come to meet me?” The words blurted out of my mouth which I regretted immediately in the manner that I put it. Krishna winked his eye and gave me one of his most famous mischievous smiles. My blood froze and I jumped up immediately. “How could you? You of all the people! How can you let Balarama have his way? I thought at least you understood me, understood my heart!” Seeing my anguish, Krishna immediately caught me and cupped my face. “Subhadra, dear you misunderstood the situation completely. Brother Balarama did discuss with me before I left but I never thought he was so convinced to put up the proposal all of a sudden. I told him the last decision will always be yours and no one is ever going to force you for anything.” “And yet,” I said, “He has now given me an ultimatum or he will choose whoever he deems seen fit. Apparently he doesn’t trust my judgement.” Looking at Satyabhama who was watching both of us intently he slowly said, “Come let us take a walk by the sea, it has been a long time since we both took a walk together. Do you remember how you use to drag me to take you by the sea when you were a small child. The sea always seemed to soothe you and I am sure it will do so again today.”

We walked slowly on the sea beach that surrounded our entire Kingdom. I left my sandals on a side as I loved walking barefoot on the grainy sands. When I was small, I used to spend the entire day building sand castles along with my friends. For the rest of Bharatvarsh, the river that flows by may be its lifeline but for us here at Dwarka it was the sea which defined us. The great sea used to surround our entire Kingdom like a protective shield and virtually it separated us from the rest of the

mainland. Krishna always said it is this sea which made us invincible from the rest of Bharatvarsh for no army can come undetected to Dwarka.

“So, now tell me, what troubles you? It is not that you don’t want to get married for I know you too well.” Hearing my brother’s voice I shook my head “No, I am not against marriage but at the same time I don’t want to enter into a marriage without love. I want to choose my husband based on my heart and not on his skills. It doesn’t matter whether he is a king or crown Prince but I want to rule his heart rather than his Kingdom. You must understand this better than anyone else.” Krishna’s face suddenly became a shade dark for he knew what I meant although I didn’t say in as many words. “And what makes you think so?” He sounded as if speaking from a distant place. Oh, I hated to touch his most sensitive part, a part which no one in our family spoke about. Trying to find the proper words I still managed to speak “I am not like you to enter into a loveless union. We all know you truly loved one woman in your life, the one you left behind at Vrindavan long time back, the one whose name spells in unison with your name. Yet you married off to different wives including the maidens captured by Narakasura. How can you love someone else and yet seem so happy. Forgive me but I can’t see myself in your shoes. I can only imagine your pain behind your smiling face.”

“My little sister worries too much about me. Bless you Subhadra for being you.” Krishna said “Atleast there is someone who sees me inside my soul. And that is the reason Subhadra you are as much a part of me as I am yours. Someday you will understand the reality of our relation. But I am truly happy and content also.” “Happy! Ha!” I mocked. Krishna continued “Yes, I am because giving happiness to others is also happiness. Isn’t it my fortune that I am being loved by so many devoted wives, wives who think of nothing else except me. You know Satyabhama well, off course she throws tantrums and antics but inside she does it all these to gain my attention and affection because she is obsessed with love for me. And so are Rukmini, Jamvati, Mitrabhinda, Kalindi and others. What more can I ask for? Here people pine for the love of one and I am getting love from so many. Whoever loves me I belong to them.” I still couldn’t understand my brother. Krishna intrigued me and I doubted whether anyone in this Universe understood

him fully. “What about the one you love? Don’t you remember her at all?” I still questioned him. Krishna answered, “You remember someone when you forget them. I never forget Radha even for a second so there is no question of remembering her. True love is something which goes beyond physical presence. You belong to that person even through physically you may not be together.” To which I replied, “I doubt whether I will ever experience such a love.”

My brother then said something which gave me a fresh hope for life. “You, my love sister, is going to create history in Bharatvarsh and you will be remembered for your love and the result is going to play an important role in the coming days.”

Krishna agreed to speak with Balarama to at least postpone picking a random groom for me and to allow me to enjoy freedom for a few more days. I sat through the heated discussion between both my brothers at the dinner table with the rest of the family. “She is our sister and that too the only one. Atleast we owe her the freedom to make her life’s own decisions without our interference.” Balarama did not seem too happy at our alliance. He retorted “You make me sound like a villain. All I want is her happiness. I am her brother not her enemy. But right now, she does not know the facts of life, so being the elders we must take the right decision for her.” Krishna smiled at me and said, “But this is Dwarka, brother and here women are liberated to take their own decisions. We must trust her judgement. Our sister is no mere woman; she is beautiful, brave and educated. I am sure and confident that she will make us proud. And remember when we follow our heart, we can never go wrong for it is our conscience which is the true Brahman dwelling in everyone.”

Balarama conceded defeat to both of us, “Allright I give up! And anyway Krishna, has anyone ever told you that they cannot win against you especially with that sly mouth of yours?” Krishna, my parents and my numerous nephews and nieces burst out laughing which kept the palace buzzing till the late hours of the night.

I often rode out in the morning to feel the cool crispy morning air brushing against my face. Riding always gave me a great deal of freedom and whenever I used to feel dull or happy I used to grasp the reigns of my favourite steed Pavan and we used to ride away amidst the lush greens of Dwarka and by its sea. But today is a different day as

Krishna once again assured me of my freedom to live free by my own will and whims. Although it was quite late, I could not control my happiness and refusing to hear the pleas of the stable hands, I mounted Pavan and decided to break free. We rode below the moon shining brightly on us and slowly our canter became a trot as we neared the entrance to our Kingdom, a narrow stretch that connected our Kingdom with the rest of the mainland. I saw some lights at a distance and thought it must be the tradesman or the numerous people who come in and out of Dwarka attracted by its fabled riches. In Dwarka, we had a tight security at check posts and no outsider could come inside without proper documents or unless they knew somebody in the city.

However, the lights I figured out were not one but many and slowly it turned into thousands. I gave Pavan a slight nudge. He grasped my command and trotted towards the main gates. The caravan of people that I was assuming to be innocent outsiders turned out to be a huge convey comprising of horses, elephants and palanquins with the royal insignia of Chedi Kingdom flying above the masthead. My blood froze for it could mean only one thing- my most dreaded cousin Shishupala has come to Dwarka.

## FRIENDS AND FOE

**S**hishupala was the son of my Aunt, Srutashrava; my father's sister and hence my cousin brother. However, we did not share a cordial relation with them mainly, because of his arch-nemesis with Krishna.

Shishupala never forgave Krishna for having married Rukmini, his betrothed whose brother had promised her in marriage to him. But Rukmini having lost her heart to Krishna requested him to kidnap and take her away from this forced marriage. This event changed our equation with Shishupala forever. Shishupala's birth was also shrouded in mystery. I heard from my mother that he was born with four hands and three eyes and neighed like a donkey when born. There was a heavenly announcement that he would meet death by the hands of the one on whose lap his extra members would disappear. My mother said that my father along with my mothers and brother visited my aunt to congratulate her on the birth of her son. As a custom, the baby was placed on the lap of each family member. When Krishna took him in his lap his extra eye and hands disappeared leaving my aunt and uncle in dread. However, my brother promised my aunt that he will forgive Shishupala a hundred crimes.

Shishupala too heard about this prophecy and dreaded and hated us ever since his childhood, particularly Krishna. On many occasions Balarama wanted to break his neck but Krishna always stopped him, reminding him of the strained relations between our Kingdoms. Father often lamented that the strained relations between the two Kingdoms have driven a wedge between him and his beloved sister and he wished to set it right by inviting them over. I was obviously not happy, for Shishupala was a jackal in the disguise of a man. He was a womaniser with his palace being filled with numerous concubines. Many of the

maidens are the ones he had won over in the course of war. He did not leave a single moment where he could insult us.

As the Royal Caravan drew near, it was stopped by the guard on duty. Shishupala got down from his chariot and kicked him. The guard humbly joined his hands and said, 'Master, I am bound by duty.' Shishupala growled, "How dare you, you insolent wretch? The audacity to stop my chariot! Don't you value your life? I should cut off your tongue at this very instant." Shishupala lifted his sword to strike and the next moment I was hurtling over and stopping his sword with my sword before it could strike the guard. Shishupala was taken aback and his dark hideous face turned towards me. I spoke in a cool voice, "Greetings cousin, please control your anger. He was just doing his duty. It is mandatory to stop every person entering our city gates for security. But to kill a citizen of Dwarka is treason and you definitely don't want to step over that line." I dismissed the guard with a wave of my hand. The guard bowed and slowly backed off. Shishupala did not withdraw his sword. "What can I expect more from the vile sister of the cowherd? Did your father invite us to insult us?" My blood boiled and my anger was slowly getting out of control. "Be careful cousin, for the next words that come out of your mouth, for they may be your last. I can bear anything you say but not a word against my brothers or else I will forget about the promise made by Krishna to our Aunt." Shishupala again moved his sword to strike. I knew that he could kill any woman for he least respected them. The guards suddenly became vigilant of the upcoming duel between their Princess and the Crown Prince of Chedi. Shishupala smirked "I think I should cut off your head and present it to your brothers. That will be a fit gift to them instead of the gifts that my parents have brought along. Seeing you dead, your beloved brothers will definitely die of shock, dear Subhadra." I turned and with a swift action blocked his next blow. "You think women are weak, Shishupala. Today you will see a glimpse of what a woman is all about and by the time we are finished you will be very sorry to have crossed your sword with Krishna's sister."

"Stop both of you!" The sudden cries of a woman made both of us stop. It was my Aunt who had now disembarked from her palanquin hearing the commotion. I withdrew my sword and bowed and touched her feet. She however remained rigid. "Shishupala," she spoke out,

“Please go back to your chariot. Now!” Shishupala did not seem pleased but he dared not disobey his mother. He turned away arrogantly. “And you Subhadra,” my Aunt now turned towards me “What have you turned yourself into? Striking your own cousin! Did your parents teach you nothing? I knew you were a wild child but today you have crossed all limits. And what are you doing riding in the middle of the night? If this behaviour of yours continue, no high-born Aryan will marry you.” I was aghast at my Aunt’s behaviour. How could she turn a blind eye at her son’s fault? It was her protectiveness that had turned Shishupala into the man he is today. “We shall now go to the palace. And you are coming with us. No arguments please. It is your Aunt’s orders.”

The Chedi convoy had reached the palace quite late and hence retired immediately after being shown their rooms. My entire family received my Aunt, Uncle and Shishupala in the morning. Shishupala found faults with everything right from the colour of the room to the mattress and the food. He complained that he was not treated as he should have been being the Crown Prince and demanded that he be allowed to stay in Krishna’s room and Krishna to be shifted to the guest room instead. I dreaded that my Aunt will speak about the incident that occurred at night. After exchanging gifts and pleasantries, my father enquired about the health of my Uncle. To which my Uncle replied “Its high time I retire from my kingly duties, Vasudeva and take Sanyasa. I have planned to coronate Shishupala as the King of Chedi the next month, once the astrologers find a suitable day.” The news was received with an applause. I could not help but notice the contempt of Shishupala as his face turned towards Krishna. However my dreaded moment arrived sooner than I thought. “Brother Vasudeva, you know how much I love and respect you in spite of the terror that your son is prophesized to bring upon my offspring and the next King of Chedi.” My Aunt said to my Father. My poor father was bewildered and hastily spoke, “You do not need to worry Srutashrava; the matter has already been sorted. Krishna will never do such a thing. Let us all forget these old things and start a fresh beginning.” My Aunt shook her head as she spoke out, “I too thought the same brother. And hence accepted your invitation and came over with my entire family. I told Shishupala that your children are his cousins and will support and stand by him even though his own cousin stole away his bride. Can you understand his anguish that he had



to bear?" Father looked at Krishna for he could not deny Rukmini's elopement and the humiliation that had followed for Shishupala. Krishna gave a smile and said, "My apologies Aunt, but you must know that it was Rukmini who wrote to me asking for help and no Kshatriya can turn down the request of a maiden. If she had any feelings for Shishupala then I would not have eloped with her. But she was being forced into marriage with Shishupala and any relationship which is being forced can never turn out to be fruitful. A woman must accept her husband with heart and soul, so says Dharma." Now it was Shishupala's turn to say something. "Oh really, Krishna! You seem to be an expert in rescuing damsels in distress. I heard your big palace is filled with more wives than you can count. The truth is that you and I are not very different from each other. You never loved Rukmini because you took a second wife followed by a third soon after." Balarama clenched his fists, "Shishupala!" He thundered. "Don't you dare insult our women. I tell you!" Krishna caught his arm and said, "Its ok brother. Remember that they are our guests. And as for you Shishupala..." He slowly turned towards him, "I belong to everyone who belongs to me. Any person who loves me selflessly, wins me over and I will not deny them myself and when I speak of anyone, I mean anyone. This is my ultimate truth!"

The atmosphere suddenly turned far from congenial. Both Satyabhama and Rukmini turned towards each other as if they contemplated the worst. I had confided in Satyabhama the previous night incident and she gave me a glance over the shoulder nodding to keep myself calm from this family gathering. My Aunt suddenly turned her attention to me. "It's not only your sons, brother. See how they act and behave. You have absolutely no control over your daughter as well. Last night she nearly killed my son had I not intervened. We will never forget the welcome which we got in Dwarka." Now every eye in the hall turned towards me. "Father, I can explain." I spoke out. "Silence Subhadra, let your Aunt finish." My father thundered. Satyabhama came over me and placed her hand over my shoulder. "Don't worry, we all know the truth about how vile of a man Shishupala is. Your father won't be taken by her words." I wanted to thank Satyabhama for lending me the faint ray of hope. Aunt now grasped the opportunity, "Subhadra is turning out to be an uncontrollable woman. She crossed swords with my son with the intent to slice his throat. And riding at that

ungodly hour. Have you all turned blind? Mark my words, no royal family will accept her however enticing beauty she may possess. You must do something brother, before this girl shames us all.”

My father stood up and slowly came up to me. I got up from my seat contemplating the array of words going to come of his mouth. Have I gone too far this time? Have I embarrassed him so much so that he will refuse to speak with me in the upcoming days. “You may be right Srutashrava, but I know my blood. My daughter will never ever shame us. In fact she is my greatest pride. And who is anyone to choose or reject her? It will be she who will choose. Yes, I have heard from the spies about what happened last night. She was merely defending her city and this makes her a worthy Princess. You in turn must make your son understand to treat all humans equally and follow the path of Dharma. We are not blind, are we? Or are you becoming like Dhritarastra, the blind king of Hastinapur, to turn a blind eye to your son’s vices. It is upto you now Srutashrava, to prevent the future from happening.”

I could not believe my ears. My father stood against everyone and defended me. I gave him a tight embrace and saw the look of pride on the faces of all my family members. “I love you father and thank you for understanding me. I thought you won’t.” My father held me back and said, “I love you too, my dear daughter. And what made you think I won’t understand? And what would I not understand? Your love for your family? Or you standing against injustice? The person who does not stand against injustice is a person who is equally guilty. Know one thing Subhadra, no matter what happens tomorrow, this family will always stand by you even if the world moves from one sphere to another.” I felt tears stringing up in my eyes as I had never felt protected in my entire life. Now I knew. Yes, this is my family and my life.

Apart from Shrutashrava, my father had sister Kunti who was married to Pandu, the king of Hastinapur. Although Pandu soon died due to a curse by Maharishi Kindam, Kunti was left to fend for herself and her five sons who were known as the Pandavas. People said that the Pandavas were actually Half-Gods as they were born from different deities. Yudhisthira was said to be born from Yama, the God of Dharma and Death, Bhima from Pavan, the God of Wind, Arjuna from Indra, the

King of Devas and Nakula and Sahadeva- the twins were rumoured to be Ashwin Kumars, the Heavenly Physicians. Nakula and Sahadeva were sons of Madri, Pandu's other wife but when she decided to follow her husband in the pyre after his death, Kunti brought up the boys as her own. My father and brothers often visited our cousins and Aunt at Hastinapur where they now resided but Kunti's troubles were far from over. For the entire Bharatvarsha knew that the power struggle for the throne of Hastinapur was now evident between the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

Yudhisthira was the eldest and the apparent heir but after Pandu's death, his elder blind brother Dhritarastra ascended the throne as the regent king. Dhritarastra had a dutiful and beautiful wife Gandhari who was famous for her devotion to Lord Shiva. I heard my mother telling me that she blindfolded herself to share her husband's pain of blindness and it was through her severe penance and devotion that Lord Shiva blessed her with hundred sons who were now known as the Kauravas. Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kaurava was also ambitious for the throne of Hastinapur as he felt it was justified, him being the eldest son of the ruling King. And he was ably backed by his uncle Shakuni and his ninety-nine brothers. I often heard Krishna saying that this precarious situation will one day bring about the downfall of the great Kuru race. "And if that happens, who are you going to support?" I asked cautiously knowing that although the Pandavas were our cousins, Duryodhana was the most favourite student of Balarama who was teaching him the art of mace-wielding. I crossed my fingers and hoped that it doesn't bring my two brothers against each other. Krishna smiled and looked at me, "What do you think?" He asked me. I got up from the seat where I was lazing in his chamber and tossed my hair, "What do I know? You seem to favour the Pandavas and brother Balarama favours Duryodhana. I just hope that tomorrow if it happens, don't bring the segregation of war to our home. It will be foolish to stake our peace for somebody else." Krishna did not seem pleased with my answer. He got up and placing his hand on the ornate throne spoke out, "That 'somebody' are our cousins, dear sister. And if that doesn't matter much to you and you heard what I said to Aunt Shrutashrava, I belong to each person who wants me. And if there is a question of Dharma and law how can I step back? Whoever is with justice, law and truth will have

my support. I know brother Balarama loves Duryodhana but he will never make a good king however great a warrior he may be. He believes that his father Dhritarashtra was wronged for being born blind and he is perfectly sound in health so he should get the throne. But to get something you must first deserve and be worthy of it. Moreover he listens more to his Uncle Shakuni than to himself and Shakuni has got a hidden vendetta up his sleeve ever since Gandhari got married into the Kuru household.” I was surprised and curious, “What hidden vendetta are you speaking about, Krishna?” My brother suddenly became perturbed. He slowly said “Shakuni never forgave the Kuru family for having married his only sister to a blind man. He felt insulted when Bhishma, the grandsire of Kuru household put forward the proposal to Gandhara King and Shakuni’s father meekly accepted it out of fear of facing his wrath. Shakuni has vowed to destroy the Kuru family for this very act even if it requires using the offsprings of his very sister. Ever since childhood, he has planted poison in Duryodhana’s mind against his cousins, he even instigated him to poison Bhima during their childhood. And I doubt that they will stop at this. They must be plotting their next action as we speak.”

“O Mahadeva!” I cried out for I could not believe Krishna’s words. “What kind of a family is this? Brothers against brothers? Krishna you must not meddle in their affairs. I know what Dharma would entail you to do but I don’t want their internal fire to rage our family. I know I am being selfish but I would not be able to bear it should anything happen to our family.” The words came out from my mouth in sobs as I recalled our Yadu clan where each member loved one another till death. Unlike the Kuru clan, our entire family and even the next generation comprising of Pradyumna, Samba, Veera, Chandra and countless others loved each other so much so that we took pride in them. “And you think we can escape this fire by simply avoiding it? What about our conscience?” It was the first time in my life that I was seeing Krishna in an angry mood. I had heard that anger was something he didn’t possess but if he did get angry then none in this entire universe can suffice in front of him. “I can!” I still continued with my childish nonsense. Suddenly his face grew dark and he looked closely at me and said, “Don’t say anything in haste, little sister. For it may turn the other way

round. Maybe the one person who will be consumed the most will be you!”

## DISTANT DREAMS

The next few days passed off in a frenzy as I was caught up with my extended family members. I sometimes felt, as the sea cut us off from the rest of Aryavrata, I too was cut off from the rest of the world. I became busy in the city administration along with Satyabhama. We both worked towards the welfare and upliftment of the women folk in our city. We argued with the City Council for giving more rights to women, even to the ones belonging to the lower caste, focusing on rights pertaining particularly to education. “But it is unheard of,” Satyaki spoke out. Satyaki was a powerful Yadu warrior and he raged the ground with his voice. “The Princess has gone berserk. You want to allow low caste Shudra women to sit alongside our women. We will be made a laughing stock of the entire Aryavrata.” Satyabhama pointed a finger and stood up in her full regal splendour. For a moment she looked more formidable than the Chief Queen of Dwarka. “I support Subhadra,” she spoke out. “Unless all our people irrespective of man and woman progress together, how can you expect Dwarka to progress? And I dare say Krishna will also agree with me once he is back.” Krishna and Balarama were both out of Dwarka. I heard from Satyaki that they have been visiting the Kingdom of Panchala for an important errand. It was Satyabhama and I who were part of the City Council of Dwarka for we were born and grew here. Satyabhama’s late father was the treasurer of Dwarka and owner of the famed Shyamantaka gem. Satyabhama always said that the gem was cursed for it snatched her uncle and later her father away from her. However, it currently resided in Dwarka and I reminded her that it was due to the gem that she got married to my brother Krishna. But she never forgave Akrura and Kritavarma who were instrumental in murdering her father for the gem and left no chance thereafter to show them their place. Kritavarma who was our commander

pulled Satyaki by the arm and said “It is futile to discuss with two tigresses right now. I am sure they mean well. Let Krishna and Balarama come back and we will discuss this with them.” I looked at Satyabhama and winked at her at our joint victory.

The return of Krishna came with some disturbing news; news which literally shocked us all. The Pandavas along with our Aunt Kunti were burned alive at Varnavrat where they had gone to visit a fair. Both my parents started wailing at the plight of our cousins. My father was inconsolable at the mere thought of his sister being burnt alive. “Alas! The poor fate of Kunti. What sin had she done? First her husband was snatched at such a young age; she was reduced to the status of a servant in the Kuru clan and now to meet such a dreadful death along with her sons!” My father cried. “It must be the work of that evil Shakuni and Duryodhana.” Mother Devaki spoke out. “I can’t believe how a chaste woman like Gandhari gave birth to a serpent like Duryodhana.” Balarama cut in between “It is too early to blame anyone. Why will Duryodhana kill his own brothers? Mother you must not jump to conclusions.” That was enough to send me out of spiral. I remember Aunt Kunti used to visit us. She was always so sweet and treated me like her own daughter. She often said to our father, “Subhadra is the daughter I never had. If she didn’t mean so much to you, I would have asked you to give her to me.”

“Oh, brother, how could you?” I jumped to my feet and caught hold of the broad shoulders of my eldest sibling. “You are blind when it comes to Duryodhana to an extent that you don’t see what kind of a man he has become?” Balarama eyes shot red, “Now Subhadra, tread around me carefully.” He controlled himself and said, ‘Anyway I shall make arrangements for the tarpan and other procedures for our departed cousins. The Pandavas were my beloved too. Don’t forget that Bhima was my student as Duryodhana was, so if you think that I am not affected, think again. But we must deal with facts also.” He turned to Krishna and said, “Declare a mourning of three days in the city. The entire Royal family will perform the rituals for our Aunt and cousins.” Krishna did not seem perturbed. I very well recognised this face. It meant only one thing that there was something else going on in his mind.

I lay down on my bed as I thought about Kunti and my cousins. I fairly remembered them from our family visits to Hastinapur. Yudhisthira, the eldest one was the gentlest and most patient of all the brothers. Bhima, the second one was of abroad stature and bore a deep dislike and enmity towards his cousin Duryodhana. It was an irony that both were students of Balarama and excelled in mace fighting. I had heard Balarama say that when they practiced, it seemed more like a real war than a practice and he had to restrain both of them many a times. It was also rumoured that Kunti beget Yudhisthira from Yama, the God of Netherworld and Bhima from the Wind-God. That made the Pandavas Half-Gods bearing the same qualities as that of their divine fathers. Next was Arjuna, the third Pandava rumoured to be born from Indra, the King of Gods. I found Arjuna to be more arrogant in nature for he always believed himself to be the best in archery. During our childhood I once told him that he has been designed to be the best by his Guru Drona and Arjuna had barked at me, "What do you mean?" I pouted and said, "I heard somebody say that Eklavya was so skilled that he sewed the mouth of a barking dog without spilling a drop of blood and that too when he didn't have a Guru to guide him because your Guru Drona refused to teach him because he was a Bhil boy, a low caste." Arjuna was clearly angry with my comment and said, "So, what does that it has to do with me? I am the best, Subhadra and believe me I can also accomplish the same feat." I was not ready to give up, for somebody needed to ground his swollen ego. "So," I said. "Why did your Guru refuse him if he had so much confidence upon you and most importantly why did he ask for his thumb as dakshina? Clearly he wanted to remove any contenders from your path."

"Don't you dare say that! I am the best and I shall prove it to you one day. I am the son of Pandu and Kunti and you shall see my glory one day." Saying that Arjuna stomped off. I shouted after him, "Krishna always says nothing is forever, Arjuna. You are good, no doubt but watch your back. There might be somebody who is better."

I suddenly felt tears streaming down. I didn't want this for Arjuna or any of my other cousins. With time all the sons of Kunti had grown to be valiant warriors in their own right. But with age the enmity with Kauravas also came to the front. Apparently after the death of Pandu, his eldest blind brother Dhritarastra was made the regent for Hastinapur.



Dhritarastra who was the apparent heir, always felt that he was denied the throne because of his blindness and this very thought made him bitter towards Aunt Kunti and her sons. This bitterness further fuelled the hatred of Duryodhana who thought himself to be the rightful contender of the throne being the eldest son of Dhritasrastra. And then there was Yudhishthira, the eldest son of Pandu and Kunti as the other contender. I had once asked Krishna what did he think about the entire situation. He said with a soft voice, "It is not the question of the eldest son becoming King. But it is the question of the worthiest becoming the King. Had Duryodhana not been so blinded by his uncle Shakuni's guidance, he would have been a worthy successor." But I was still not convinced. "But Shakuni may also be right in his reasons. Which brother would like his only sister to be married to a blind person and that too only for statecraft? He did what any brother would have felt and done. Sometimes I feel women are only being used for man's selfish purpose." "That I won't disagree." I wondered what Krishna meant by that.

I wondered how Arjuna must look like now. I wished I could have seen him once before death took him in its embrace. It was Nakula, his younger brother who was considered most handsome amongst all his brothers but I have heard that Arjuna's battle prowess had earned him the attraction of all fellow Aryan women. After all he was the son of the King of Devas and tutored by Drona, the invincible warrior who was never to be defeated in battle. For a time I wished I could change back time and made a more amicable friendship with him. But now the sudden news thrashed that hope and I felt anger rising in my head. Duryodhana had just added another enemy in his line.

# ARJUNA

After the mourning period was over, our Kingdom slowly trickled down to being normal. But my father refused to be healed over the pain of losing his sister. I too mourned after Aunt Kunti and the rest of my cousins but it was Arjuna whose death which shook me the most. But it was Krishna's behaviour which puzzled me. He did not seem to be sad at all and carried on with his usual effervescent self. What is wrong with him? My brother was always a mystery to everyone including me but I knew that when he seemed to be all ok that means something was brewing in his mind. I finally went up to him and asked "What is wrong with you? How can you keep behaving as if nothing has happened?" Krishna slowly gave me a quizzing look as if I was asking an alien question... "Huh, What are you saying?" I was in no mood this time to hear about his antics. "Look, I know you too well brother...our cousins and Aunt are dead and you seem to be unfazed. What is cooking inside that brilliant mind of yours?" Krishna shook his hands in the air, exasperated. "No, no, Subhadra dear, you are mistaken. I am deeply hurt and shocked by the sudden news. Poor Aunt Kunti..."

"Oh, come on...please Krishna, tell me... Please tell me there are hopes left. Tell me Aunt Kunti and our cousins are all well and fine. They are the sons of Gods aren't they? How can they die so easily? My heart says Arjuna and the rest of the Pandavas are all well and good."

"Aha! So it's Arjuna you mourn." Krishna gave his famous mischievous smile. O Mahadeva, how can he think of jokes in between all this! "Tell me dear sister, are you also smitten with the great Gandhivdhari? It's no big deal; all women of Aryavrata are swooning over him and why not? He is the best archer, one that can never be defeated and he is handsome as the God of Devas himself." Krishna's

words strung me. Women swooning over Arjuna. But it was no secret either. Arjuna's fame has reached every nook and corner of the country and I knew that every woman in Aryavrata wanted him. What was he really like? The last time I saw him we were kids. They say he can wield the bow with both hands. But what about his heart? Does he also desire someone? The sudden announcement of a messenger snapped me out to my reverie. Krishna asked the messenger to be shown in. The messenger relayed news from different parts of Aryavrata and finally he spoke out, "It is rumoured that King Draupada of Panchala had beget a son and daughter from sacrificial fire." The news astonished me for King Draupada already had a son named Shikhandi. But it was also known that the son actually was a daughter and somehow changed her gender and turned herself into a man. There were also stories that Shikhandi was Amba reborn, the Princess who was rejected by the Grandsire of Kuru clan Bhishma and had now taken rebirth only to take revenge from him. "What are their names?" Hearing me speak the messenger replied, "The Prince is named Dhrishtadyumna and the Princess, Draupadi. The sages have prophesized that Dhrishtadyumna will avenge his father from Guru Dronacharya, the teacher of Kuru clan."

"But isn't Guru Drona and King Draupad childhood friends?" I asked quizzically to Krishna. "Yes, they were as they studied together in Gurukul. King Draupad had promised to give half his Kingdom to Drona when he would become king. But he forgot his promise once he returned to his Kingdom. When Drona went to his friend seeking a cow and reminding him of their friendship. Draupad insulted him for calling him a friend. Drona never forgot this insult and asked his students both Pandavas and Kauravas to defeat Draupad as a part of Guru Dakshina. The Kauravas failed but the Pandavas led by Arjuna defeated Draupad and brought him in front of Drona. Drona forgave Draupad but reminded him of their friendship vow and divided his Kingdom into two and gave Draupad half and kept the other half for himself. From that day onwards Draupad has been nursing this insult."

"Hmm...So that's the reason he wanted a son who can defeat Drona in battle and avenge him. But why this daughter?" The messenger again answered "Oh, Draupad wanted a daughter who can marry Arjuna, the best archer. After all it was Arjuna who defeated him and he knew then

and there that he needed Arjuna on his side if he wishes to defeat Drona.” The words strung me for reason unknown. That means the woman meant for Arjuna is already destined. “How does she look like, I wonder?” She asked the messenger. “Your Majesty, I haven’t seen her but people in Panchala say that she is the most beautiful woman in Aryavrata. And that will be true without a doubt, after all she is born from fire, a gift of Devas itself. They have named her Yagyaseni and Krishna.” I felt the blood rising up in my veins and Krishna could sense it. He dismissed the messenger and turned towards me. “What has gotten into you? Beauty has got no parameters little sister. Haven’t you seen your sisters-in-law? Are they any less beautiful? I thought you were clever enough to understand all this.” “So you mean to say that I am not beautiful. Say it brother or that I am not divine enough because I was not born out of fire?” Saying this I tried to get up but Krishna caught my hand and burst out laughing, “Women...I can never understand. Are you jealous of a woman you have not even met?” I could not bring myself to say that it was the thought of Arjuna getting married with someone else that was panging me. And now there was one who was perfect in every way. I could not judge what feelings were going on inside me at that time. Krishna continued, “Know this Subhadra, every human is born for a purpose and that includes you. And regarding your divinity...hmmm let time come and maybe one day you will realise what your worth is.” Saying this he briskly walked out leaving me to make out what he meant by that.

I twisted and turned in bed as Draupadi and Arjuna dominated my thoughts. What is the purpose of her birth if Arjuna is no more? Alas both of our fates have now turned same. I prayed to Mahadeva to somehow turn my hope into reality, I prayed for a miracle. I thought, did Arjuna remember me in some way? Did he ever think about me? I realised maybe I had fallen in love with him and I had not really realised it. The only tragic part was that it was too late now, or is it?

# THE CHANGE OF POWER

**A**fter a few days Krishna and Balarama were invited for the Swayamvar of Princess Draupadi. Since there was no news of the Pandavas, King Draupad decided to organise a Swayamvar for his daughter to draw out the best archer. The message read that the participants had to aim at the eye of a revolving fish by looking at the reflection below. Although Krishna and Balaram told us before leaving that they had no intention of participating in the competition and are merely going to bless the Princess but I had a sixth sense warning me of something. What is the purpose of this Swayamvar if Arjuna is not alive? Although the only other archer who could match this feat was Karna, the king of Anga and arch nemesis of Pandavas. But I doubted whether he will participate when Duryodhana and other Kauravas will be there. I was still in doubt about the Pandavas being dead. I was trying to connect the dots. The past few days we had been hearing rumours of Hidimba and Bakasur being killed by someone mighty. This could only be true if the Pandavas were alive. No other warrior had the capability to take on the powerful Hidimba and her monster son, Bakasur.

I decided to put my thoughts to rest and immersed myself in the prayers of Lord Mahadeva. Satyabhama, Rukmini and my other family members tried their best to cheer me up but my eyes waited for the sight of any news from Panchala as if my entire future depended on it. A couple of days later I was informed that a message has arrived from Krishna. I rushed as soon as my feet could take me to my father's chambers. I saw my father and my mother's smiling faces as they turned towards me, "Oh Subhadra, look a message from Krishna and it

is good news. Your Aunt and cousins are all alive, every one of them. I knew in my heart that nothing wrong can befall upon my sister. Praise be to Lord Mahadeva.” I couldn’t believe my ears and I jumped with joy. “Where is Krishna and Balarama? When are they returning?” Mother Devaki answered, “You know your brothers. They have gone to Hastinapur along with Kunti, the five Pandavas and Draupadi.”

Draupadi went to Hastinapur? I didn’t want to hear the rest of it but Mother Devaki continued, “Hastinapur has gained a strong ally in Panchala. Arjuna won the Swayamavar and thus the hand of the beautiful Draupadi for marriage. We must congratulate Kunti for gaining such a beautiful daughter-in-law.”

I ran back to my chambers and closed the doors so that no one could hear my wails. How could I tell anyone what had befallen upon me? Why will anyone believe it that I had given my heart to a man who had no idea about me? And now I could never have him. He belonged to Draupadi, fair and square and to make matters worse my brothers have gone all the way to Hastinapur to partake in the celebrations. I knew that brother Balarama had no idea about my mind and heart but I doubted whether Krishna too was unaware of it. He will have lots of questions to answer once he is back.

Nobody in my family saw the difference in me as I put up a brave face. Is it not what women of noble families are meant to do? Put up a brave face no matter how life throws you off balance. But inside my heart was broken. My father queried about it at least three to four- times to know what was wrong. I sheepishly tried to do away with the excuse that I was busy with the affairs of the Kingdom. But he could sense that something was wrong and said that Krishna will figure it out once he is back. And after what seemed to be a very long time, Krishna and Balarama both returned to Dwarka. Krishna peeped into my room, “What’s the matter? On other days you come rushing to me and today you are silently sitting here. Father has high praises for you; he says you managed excellently in our absence.” Seeing my silence, he continued, “Now won’t you even look at the gifts that I brought for you?” I turned my face to face him, “How is Draupadi?” “Yes, she is gracious, beautiful and accomplished no doubt. She was kind enough to praise and respect me like her own brother. And the Kingdom of Panchala was hospitable beyond words. I must tell you Karna would

have won the Swayamvar as he literally lifted the bow but Draupadi stopped him in the middle and said she won't marry a low caste." What! I couldn't believe my ears, how can she insult a warrior like that? "Tell me brother that you didn't have a hand in this. Tell me you had no role in bringing Draupadi and Arjuna deliberately together." "No, no, why should I? My dear sister, man is the maker of his own destiny. Who am I to tell anyone anything? But as I told you before every human is born for a particular purpose and Draupadi was born for Arjuna but of course there is a much higher purpose involved. You will understand it with time." Little did he know that it was my heart that was broken in the midst of all. Krishna gently patted my shoulder, "Subhadra, I know what you feel. But every person needs to make sacrifices. Did anyone tell you that Draupadi had to make an ultimate sacrifice? She had to marry all the five Pandavas."

A woman marrying five men together! Never had I heard of such a thing before. Krishna told me that when Arjuna brought Draupadi to their hut in the jungle, where they were staying, Aunt Kunti mistook it for some offering and asked them to divide it amongst the five brothers without even looking at what they had got. Sage Vyasa offered a solution that Draupadi will stay as the wife of a single Pandava for an entire year and during that period she won't have any relation with the other four brothers. At the end of the year she will walk through fire and will regain her virginity before going to her next husband. I didn't know whether to feel pity or jealousy for Draupadi. It was now evident that she could never belong to Arjuna alone and it takes immense strength for a woman to bear it. But at the same time my heart went out to Arjuna. What must he be going through? It must be difficult to share one's wife even if it will be with your brothers. I knew he will never speak it out and I wanted to comfort him but I didn't know how. But atleast if that rule prevails, for now Draupadi will be wife to Yudhishthira, the first Pandava. This gave me a faint joy in my heart.

The Pandavas soon formed a new Kingdom of their own when it became evident that a collision of power between Kauravas and Pandavas was imminent and to avoid it King Dhritarastra gave them Khandavprastha to form a new Kingdom of their own. Krishna visited the Pandavas and helped them build the new city of Indraprastha, a city I heard that could rival Indra's Amaravati. I too immersed myself in the

workings of the Kingdom of Dwarka trying to forget Arjuna, when a disturbing news broke in. Arjuna by mistake had to enter the private chambers of King Yudhisthira and Draupadi as his bow was there and as a preset rule had to now undergo penance and exile for twelve long years. O my poor Arjuna! I wondered where he was now but there was no news about him. He must be visiting various holy places, as per the rule. But what I didn't know was that trouble was coming my way which was going to change my life altogether.



# LOVE BLOOMS

As the days passed by I slowly started to immerse myself in my Kingdom, my cousins and my life. I was playing dice with Satyabhama and I didn't notice a maid coming in to announce my mother. I came to know of her presence when she was inside the room. I jumped up and touched her feet in reverence. Mother slowly kissed my forehead and said "My dear daughter, I have good bearings for you. You know how much Balarama adores you and frets over you." It was true brother Balarama was always overly protective of me, infact sometimes much more than Krishna. "You know he is teaching mace art to Duryodhana, the Crown Prince of Hastinapur." She continued. "Balarama says Duryodhana is invincible in Gada Yudh. He is going to inherit the powerful throne of Hastinapur after his father. And he has sought your hand in marriage." For a moment I froze. Marrying Duryodhana! After knowing well enough about the kind of man he was! "But mother, what did brother Balarama say?" I asked faintly. But it seemed my mother was overjoyed with the news and my heart sank even before she could answer "Of course Balarama said yes. A powerful husband and a Queen to the Kuru Kingdom, what more can you ask for? I am on my way to share the news with the rest of the family. We must celebrate." Saying so my overjoyed mother turned and went away.

I felt broken. First Arjuna was taken away from me and now marrying his evil cousin brother. Satyabhama gently patted my shoulder. "A woman's fate is never easy, is it? Look at me. I love your brother immensely but here I am, sharing him with sixteen thousand other co-wives and always fighting for his attention. I know what is in your heart but does Arjuna know about it? Why don't you send a letter to him like Rukmini did to Krishna? Maybe he will come and seek you

out.” No, I couldn’t do that. I knew Arjuna was currently undergoing penance and God only knew where he was. Nobody knew about his whereabouts. But I needed to find Krishna. He was my last hope.

I finally found Krishna near the seashore but he was not alone. A Hermit was standing along with him chatting as if they were in some deep conversation. I broke in between, “I need to speak with you and I need to speak right now.” Krishna gave his ever mischievous smile. “Of course, I was coming to you anyway. It’s good you found me.” I was not going to be fooled this time but he continued “Subhadra, I have an important responsibility for you, meet this Holy One... he has been visiting various religious places and finally has come to our city. I want you to take good care of him and extend our full hospitality. Will you do it, little sister?” I turned to the Hermit and bowed my head in obeisance “Gladly. Welcome Holy One. It is our privilege and honour to have you here. I shall make suitable arrangements for you in my garden.” As I looked up I observed the Hermit for the first time. He was young and tall and his eyes had an amazing brilliance. But his body was not like that of a Hermit rather of a warrior. He wore a simple garb of a holy man but something was amiss. Seeing that I had no chance of talking with Krishna in private, I decided to wait and meanwhile look after the holy Hermit.

The Hermit soon made his way to my gardens where I had made arrangements for his stay. I instructed my attendants that he should not be disturbed as he will be busy with his meditation. In the evening brother Balarama along with the rest of the family also came to pay their greetings. Everyone instructed me to take good care of him and serve him. But the Hermit intrigued me. There was an unknown aura which drew me to him. He was always lost in meditation during most parts of the day which was expected. One day as I went to pay my regular obeisance, he gently raised his hand to bless me, “Princess of Dwarka, may Lord Shiva bless you with a husband worthy of you!” I smiled weakly and sat down on the ground, “I doubt that. What if the person you love is unaware of your feelings?” “Oh, not to worry dear one. A man will be fool enough not to notice you. Your beauty transcends the entire Aryavrata.” His words left me confused. “Tell me, Holy One, which all places have you visited during your pilgrimage? Have you been to Indraprastha and Hastinapur?” The Hermit slowly

touched his long flowing beard and said, “Of course, I have. I have seen the Grandsire Bhishma, the Kauravas and the Mighty Pandavas. I have seen the glowing and beautiful Princess of Panchala, now Queen to the Pandavas, Draupadi.”

Hearing her name, a strange feeling enveloped me, I didn’t realise what it was. But I knew she was now wife to Arjuna also. “Is Draupadi very beautiful? Is she what they claim; born out of fire?” The Hermit further answered, “Yes she is, her beauty is such that it may burn even the darkest heart. And the Pandavas glory is increasing with each passing day. You must see Bhima who is matchless in mace fight, and the ever noble Yudhisthira.” I was impatient hearing the name of the rest of the Pandavas, why wasn’t he only talking about the one I wanted to hear? “What about Arjuna, the third Pandava? I heard he is the best archer in the entire Bharatvarsha. He won the Swayamvara of Draupadi by looking at the reflection of the target merely at water.” The Hermit gave a slow laugh “Aha! So you want to hear about Arjuna! Well my dear one he doesn’t like to boast much, lives in the shadows of his brothers. But my dear one, why do you wish to know so much about this one? Neither he is as handsome as Nakula nor as mighty like Bhima. He is also not in line to the throne. Or there is something else fluttering in your heart? Do not lie to a Hermit, Princess.” My cheeks grew red with embarrassment and anger. How dare he? “You shouldn’t be concerned of that, Holy One. The truth is, no one can understand me not even brother Krishna.”

But then something strange happened. The Hermit clasped my hand out of the blue, “Oh well, it’s very much my concern, fair one.” For a moment I didn’t realise what was happening. I pushed him with all my might. “You! Don’t you have any shame? What kind of a Hermit are you? Had you not been a Brahmin I would have chopped off your hands.” But the Hermit instead of being ashamed moved towards me. “A Hermit to the world but not to you. Kill me because I can’t bear this separation any longer. Don’t you recognise me at all? I am your Arjuna and I came all the way only for you dear Subhadra.” Arjuna, my Arjuna my joy knew no bounds as I saw him in person; in flesh and blood. After all, the God’s had heard my prayers. I inched towards him but then stopped. Arjuna gave me a perturbed look. “No, it can’t be. You are a married man now. You belong to Draupadi. I cannot snatch away a

woman's husband." "So what?" Arjuna replied. "Kshatriyas have been known since ages to take multiple wives. Your brother Balarama has agreed to give you to Duryodhana who is already wedded to Bhanumathi. But I love you, please don't reject my offering of tender love." Love, the very words of confession I always wanted to hear. But in my heart I knew he belonged to three another women, for Arjuna had wedded Uloopi, the Snake Princess and Chitrangada, the Princess of Manipur after marrying Draupadi. "No" I said firmly "You don't love me. I am just a trophy for you in this political game of expansion. I know very well both Pandavas and Kauravas want the support of Dwarka and my brothers but I will not allow myself to become a pawn in this game. I am a woman, Kuntiputra. If you even had a ounce of love for me, had you gone around marrying three women in a row? Did you say the same words to them?"

Arjuna's eyes glistened with emotion. "So that's what you think about me? A womaniser who has married multiple women randomly for political gains. O Subhadra, I thought you know me better than that. Don't you have any faith on my skills as an archer? I can win the three worlds with my Gandeiv and even Krishna knows it." I was taken aback at his words for. This was true. Arjuna was no doubt the best warrior one could boast of and why not, after all he was the mortal son of the King of Devas, Indra. "Then why?" I broke down. "Why not me? Why didn't you come for me?" Arjuna slowly sat down beside me and said slowly, "How do I explain it to you? It's difficult. You know quite well we grew up fatherless and our cousins were always there to dethrone us. Yudhisthira tried all antics to settle it down amicably but sometimes your gentleness can be taken as your weaknesses. It might not be a secret to you that Duryodhana even tried to burn us down at the Laksha Griha (a house made of wax). That day we realised that their hatred was to such an extent. Bhima and I tried to take revenge and I wanted to march right back to Hastinapur but at what cost? I had to fight my elders; my Bhishma Pitamah, my Guru who taught me to wield the bow. No, it was not worth it to shed the blood of the innocent to gain a Kingdom. So we travelled incognito and reached Panchala. And that's how Draupadi came into our lives."

But I was still not satisfied. "But why did you participate in her Swayamvar if you had no interest?" Arjuna gave a meek smile but his

next words took my breathe away “Because your brother suggested. He gave me a signal that I must participate in the contest. And you know very well that Krishna is dearer to me than life. You know what happened quite well what happened after. Due to a misunderstanding of our mother, today she is the wife of us five brothers. She does not belong to me alone. Unfortunately, one day I entered her chambers when she was with Yudhishthira and hence I had to take this penance of twelve years. During this phase I first met Uloopi, the Naga Princess who was desperately in love with me. Had I not married her she would have died. And then in Manipur I met Chitrangada, the warrior Princess. For her I have more respect than love. She is a fit mate for a warrior. But you must understand she can never stay by my side as our son will ascend the throne after her father. Now tell me is this my fault that they loved me? Sometimes fate brings people together and I did what a Prince must do. But it’s you Subhadra that my heart truly belongs to.”

Arjuna’s revelations opened doors of doubt for me. I had to find out Krishna and seek answers from him. Am I also a pawn in a bigger political game? Only time will tell.

# REVELATIONS AND DECISIONS

**T**he only thought which was blurring my mind was, why did Krishna ask Arjuna to participate in Draupadi's Swayamavar? I knew my brother very well. He never did anything without a reason. Is Draupadi dearer to him than his own sister? I looked at Arjuna and said, "I won't deny that I have feelings for you. But please understand, you are asking me to be your fourth wife. It's not that I crave for a Kingdom and position but the very thought of sharing my husband with other women is difficult for any woman. Moreover brother Balarama has already thought of Duryodhana as my groom so he might not take this news well."

"So you will marry Duryodhana just at the behest of your brother. You just confessed your feelings for me, is it right for a maiden to marry one while her heart is possessed by another? And you will have to share Duryodhana also if you marry for he has another wife, Bhanumathi. You love me and you know it too. So why deny both of us and bring us pain? And Uloopi and Chitrangada won't stay with me as they have their respective Kingdoms to look after. So, I will be all yours, Subhadra. You will rule not only my heart but my house as well."

For a moment my heart melted. The very words that I wanted to hear for so long. My Arjuna had finally confessed his feelings that he truly loved me. But then again, the thought of Draupadi who is residing at Indraprastha vanished my smile. Will she accept me as her co-wife? Arjuna clasped my hands and said, "Don't you worry. We will think of a way. But please promise me you will marry me." I could not restrain myself any longer as I opened my arms to him and he embraced me tightly. All these days of longing and pain finally broke away. The

thought of letting him go away was killing me. But I composed myself and said, “Arjuna, I will marry you but we must think calmly otherwise you don’t know the wrath of brother Balarama. Let me go and meet Krishna and return. And you must promise me that you will not leave me behind but take me with you to Indraprastha. I won’t consider it otherwise.”

Arjuna replied, “I swear on my Gandeeva that if you agree to be my wife, I will take you along to Indraprastha and make you my Queen there.”

After taking leave from Arjuna my joy knew no bounds. Finally I will have the man that I truly desire. The guard announced my arrival to Krishna who had just finished his evening audience. Seeing my look he understood what had happened. He stood up and caught my chin and said, “I see cupid has finally played its game. Are you happy now sister?”

I slowly put down his hands and said “Yes and No.” Krishna gave a quizzical look “What do you mean? You love him don’t you? I always knew it.” “Yes and that’s what hurts me the most brother. You knew quite well that I loved Arjuna. Yet you didn’t do anything rather I was surprised to learn that it was you who encouraged him to participate in Draupadi’s Swayamvar. Can you tell me the reason? Is she dearer to you than your own sister?” I asked.

“O Subhadra!” Krishna slowly sat down. “I never thought you to be different than me for you are a part of me itself. So there was no question of affection for you and someone else. Yes Draupadi trusts and loves me like her own brother and I love her in return. But you must learn to see the bigger picture. We are all here for some purpose and must play our part accordingly. And I expect you to understand and support me in it.”

Purpose! What was my brother saying? “You mean to say that I too must become a pawn in this political game of Bharatvarsa. Brother how can you stake your own sister in it? I refuse to be a part of this Pandava-Kaurava game.”

“But you are already, aren’t you? O Subhadra nobody not even me can escape one’s fate. One way or the other you are going to become a Kuru Queen for if you don’t marry Arjuna then its Duryodhana. Do you wish that? Believe me sister I wish only the very best for you. And

there is no other warrior who can match my sister who is at par with a Goddess. Yes I did encourage Arjuna to participate in Draupadi's Swayamvar because otherwise Karna would have won it. King Draupad had his eyes set on getting the best archer as his son-in-law and Draupadi was just a pawn for it. Infact he got Draupadi born for this very purpose. And can you imagine what would have happened then. Karna although a righteous man is blinded by his devotion to Duryodhana and if he had won Draupadi then the Kauravas power would have increased multifold. But believe me Arjuna came to Dwarka only for you. He truly loves you."

"So is Draupadi's fate intertwined with the Pandavas?" I asked. "Yes and so are you. You will realise it in a later time and believe me sister I have high hopes from you. I know even if I am not there someday you alone can shoulder my responsibility. But right now we must think about Brother Balarama and your impending marriage to Duryodhana." Yes what Krishna said was true. How to get out of this mess? I knew Balarama too well. He will never listen and will try to fight with Arjuna if he knew about it. And Arjuna will never raise his weapon against Balarama. Thinking about the aftermath made me shudder.

Krishna then suddenly gave his wry smile and I knew he had found a way out "Well brother Balarama may try to fight Arjuna but he won't fight against you dear sister for he loves you more than life itself."

Unable to understand I asked Krishna, "What do you mean? Are you asking me to run away?" "Yes off course but with a twist. Listen, when you go to worship Lord Shiva tomorrow during the festival ask Arjuna to whisk you away on his chariot. But instead of him you drive the chariot and move towards Indraprastha. Leave the rest to me."

Hearing my brother I could not help laughing. He is asking me to kidnap the groom instead of the bride. I will be the first Princess who will be abducting the groom instead of the other way around. I finally touched his feet and said, "Forgive me brother for having doubted you. I promise that I will never ever doubt on you but you also promise me to always stand by my side."

Krishna lovingly put his hand on my head and said, "Always sister, but remember I may someday take very hard decision for you which will give you unbearable pain also. But don't misunderstand me ever



because you know me too well. You are not my weakness like for brother Balarama but instead you are my greatest strength.”

I didn’t understand what he meant but I send a message to Arjuna that we need to flee from Dwarka the next day and he must meet me on my way to the temple.

# MARRIAGE

My heart was pumping as I got ready for paying my obeisance to Lord Shiva. My maids were readying my Puja Thali and the other offerings. The rest of the Palace seemed as usual but I knew what was going to happen after a few hours when news of my fleeing away would reach. Will father be able to bear it? Was I betraying my entire family and putting them in shame? Although Krishna told me it was for the greater good. He even came to visit me in the morning. “I wish you well, Sister. I know I am giving you a big burden on your shoulders but there are very few people that I can really rely upon. I only wish you can find your happiness amidst all these. And remember although Arjuna may have married others it will be you who will rule his heart. I shall be away throughout the day so take care.” Away! I panicked for a moment. Is he deserting me when the entire world will be against me? But he assured me, “Don’t worry you are stronger than you think. And the reason I will be away is for the best of you. But rest assured I shall be back before you even know. But right now I need to be away otherwise Brother Balarama will smell a fish.” And with a faint smile he left away with his blessings.

I did not feel my feet as I moved along with my guards and few maids. I did not worry about them as I knew they were no match for Arjuna. Suddenly I heard the rumble of chariot wheels and as I turned I saw Arjuna in Krishna’s chariot. God! He looked like a demi-God himself as he was dressed in all white and in full armour. The chariot came to a standstill and he extended his hand to me. My hands were shaking with joy and anticipation as I took it and climbed into the chariot. Before I could even ask, the chariot started moving at breakneck speed. I could see my guards and maids becoming frantic as they started running after us.

I took the reins immediately from Arjuna and whipped the horses urging them to move faster. For I knew it was a do or die situation for us. I remembered Krishna's words well, else it will give a message that Arjuna abducted a Yadava Princess and the Narayani Sena will be soon after us. The Narayani Sena of Dwarka was counted as one of the best fighting forces in the entire Bharatvarsa and it had never lost a fight before ever. Arjuna also stood still with his Gandeeva held firmly in his hands. He looked at me assuringly and said, "Subhadra don't worry. I am sure Krishna will be able to convince everyone for our marriage. And now since you are my responsibility I will not desert you. I will fight for you even if that means I have to face Balarama and Krishna and even the Narayani Sena till my last breath. But I am sure Gods won't be so cruel. I am sure your family will accept us with open arms."

However the words failed to pacify me. I had made my choice and now there was no turning back. But it gave me some satisfaction and pride that the man of my choice had promised to stand by me even through it meant facing everyone at war. Maybe I am not merely a pawn of political alliance after all. Arjuna really loved me with his heart as Krishna had said and I slowly loosened the reins so that the horses could slow down. It was not long before we saw a dust bellowing from horse hoofs and soon I saw Kritvarma and Satyaki leading the pack. We halted our chariot and Arjuna took position with his bow as if to defend me from any attack.

However Kritvarma got down from his horse and with folded hands greeted us. "O kuntiputra Arjuna, I bring happy tidings from Dwarka. Balarama had requested you and our Princess to return to the city. As you are aware Princess Subhadra is the only daughter of her parents and they wish to see her wedded in a befitting style suiting her. Rest assured all is well and everyone welcomes you with open arms." Both Arjuna and I looked at each other and heaved a sigh of relief.

As we made our way back to the city Satyaki briefed us what happened after my elopement. Balarama was furious beyond control and wanted to mount an attack immediately upon Arjuna and Indraprastha if necessary. He was supported by all the Yadava nobles also. But Krishna entered at the last moment and said that it was not Arjuna who abducted me but I who had abducted him. The guards with me were called to testify and they all spoke in unison that it was I who

was driving the chariot and not Arjuna. Hence it was proved to everyone that I went with my own free will and hence no one is at fault.

Upon entering the city all the residents stood outside their homes and welcomed us with flower petals and conch shells. “Our Princess has got the Son of Devas himself as her husband!” “They make such a beautiful pair!” Father and Mother along with other Yadavas welcomed us inside. Mother beamed with joy as she hugged me “My darling daughter, had I known before. You have brought great pride to us. Arjuna will make a fine husband. You both are like sun and moon. I have made all the arrangements for your wedding. It will be a wedding which will go down the annals of the entire Yadava and Kuru clan.”

I was too exhausted with the entire ordeal but I needed to apologise to Brother Balarama for having hurt his pride. I went to him while he was busy overseeing the preparation. I suddenly clasped his feet as I felt tears streaming down my eyes. He pulled me up and I could see his eyes were also glistening, “My dear Sister, I only wish the best for you. Believe me I may not be very apt in portraying my feelings but I love you more than my own children. So nothing to fret about. Only thing I am worried about is...” He didn’t complete his sentence.

“What is it? Please tell me brother.” I begged him.

“Well not that it matters now. You have already chosen Arjuna as your husband and I know very well that Krishna has a part to play in it. It’s not that I am not fond of him or not aware of his capabilities. But Subhadra you must understand that Arjuna is a part of Pandavas and they are all tied by a common string Draupadi, their common wife. Till now no co-wife has entered the palace although the Pandavas have taken other wives. And I am just worried whether he will leave you behind as well. Didn’t Krishna tell you this?”

I felt my head spinning. No this can’t be happening. I am not going to sacrifice my pride and honour by being just a lame co-wife. I will rule his heart. Arjuna promised me. I went to my husband and asked, “Arya, I know very well you had left behind your other co-wives in their respective Kingdoms. Are you planning to do so with me also? Brother Balarama just said that your brother’s wives also don’t stay with them. Let me tell you I am not only a Princess of Dwarka but the pride of the Yadavas. Please take that into consideration before making

any hasty decision. Now you are my husband and I expect you to honour and respect me.”

Arjuna’s colour changed a bit but he recomposed himself. “No, no, you are wrong. I do love you. In fact I can’t imagine staying away from you for a moment also. But yes, I am worried, for Draupadi she won’t take it lightly. Subhadra you must understand her pain also. She is in this situation only because of me. Had I not spoken in haste that day she would not have had to marry all five of us. But Krishna has suggested us a way out of it. But I will need your support. Now go and be ready. We shall depart soon after our marriage.”

The marriage was celebrated with lot of pomp and splendour. Relatives from far and wide came and blessed us. The day of my departure also soon arrived. For me it was a moment of great pain as I had to give my splendid city, my parents, brothers and innumerable cousins. The citizens of Dwarka all came out to give us a farewell.

Both Arjuna and I touched our elders’ feet and sought their blessings. My father embraced me and kissed my forehead. He turned to Arjuna and said, “I am giving you my life’s greatest joy and pride. Please treat her with love and affection. Make her the Queen that you promised.”

Balarama said, “This will always be your home remember that, no matter what people say, you will always have a place here.” Krishna and Rukmini along with Satyabhama showered me with blessings and gifts. “I know what’s going on in your heart. But I have chosen you for a far greater responsibility than you think. In you I am sending a part of me to Indraprastha. But when time comes you will return to me.” I nodded and sat down in my carriage. Slowly the procession started moving and very soon the skyline of Dwarka started disappearing till there was no trace of it.

# INDRAPRASTHA

**W**e passed through various cities and towns and jungles before finally reaching Indraprastha. Arjuna kept on reassuring me throughout the journey. The first glance of the city of Indraprastha made me awestruck. Rumours say it was built by a demon known as Maya who was considered at par with the legendary craftsman Vishwakarma, the god of Architecture. The city was well laid out with broad pavements, gardens and palaces. The citizens all came out onto the streets to welcome their beloved Prince and his new bride. I was wondering will they love me like they do at Dwarka? It must be hard for them to accept someone in Arjuna's life apart from Draupadi. And how was Draupadi going to react?

Slowly the carriage came to a halt in front of the Palace doorsteps. I could recognise Yudhisthira, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva. I got down and paid my obeisance to them but I could see that their faces were pensive as if some thunder had struck them. But I didn't see Draupadi anywhere. Wasn't it compulsory for the household's eldest daughter-in-law to welcome the new bride? I looked around at Arjuna and saw that he was deep in conversation with his brothers. He came to me and said, "It is what I feared the most. My brothers tell me that Draupadi has not taken the news well. I will go and speak with her but please try to understand. I am with you but right now go and rest in your room. Let me sort this matter tactfully." I didn't know how to react. Will my husband forsake me and ask me to go back like the rest of his wives? And how did Draupadi forget this that I am the sister of her beloved Krishna who always considered her as his own sister. I became mentally prepared to fight for my honour. I will not give up my rights on my husband. She has to accept me as a queen of Arjuna nothing less.

I was shown to my rooms in Arjuna's palace but I couldn't rest in spite of the hazardous journey. I wanted to hear and know what was going on between Draupadi and Arjuna but I could not go there unrecognised in my bridal finery. So I slowly changed my dress into something more modest. I was an apt master in changing identities a skill I learned in Dwarka. I dressed myself as a maid and tiptoed silently out of my room. I passed through various maids and soldiers and none of them could recognise me maybe because I was new to the city. I slowly made way to Draupadi's palace. It was more grand and vivid than mine. It didn't hurt or mattered to me because I was never attracted to grandeur and riches even while in Dwarka.

I heard sounds coming out of a room as I heard a feminine voice, "O Arya, it was true then finally. All the rumours that you were so besotted with Subhadra were true. But it was my heart that was broken. What was my fault? I was shared between you five brothers, I waited patiently for you all these years while you were doing penance and you came back wedded not once but thrice. Have you ever considered once how would I feel? To love and not to be loved in return?" Arjuna tried to cajole Draupadi but it was evident that my powerful husband was a weakling in front of Draupadi. "Listen Draupadi, it's not what you think. Krishna too felt that my marriage with Subhadra was evident and was for the betterment of everyone and the entire Kuru clan. And she will be like your own sister, not a co-wife as you think. For my sake at least meet her once and welcome her. You not welcoming the Princess will antagonise the entire Yadava race."

I felt pity for Draupadi at that moment as I realised that we both loved the same man Arjuna. To make matters worse she was forced into marriage with all the five Pandavas which meant she could never have Arjuna all to herself throughout her life. I felt lucky that at least I would have Arjuna all to myself while she will be fulfilling her wifely duties to the rest of the Pandavas. Poor Draupadi! Alas the fate we woman share. I slowly moved inside the room. Arjuna was surprised to see me in the garb but I went straight to Draupadi and folded my hands. Draupadi's face was tear stricken but she failed to recognise me. I slowly said, "Hail Queen of Indraprastha. Please accept my greetings."

Draupadi wiped her tears and asked "Who are you fair maiden? Although you look like a maid you possess regal bearings. Where have

you come from?”

I said, “I came from Dwarka. The land of Lord Krishna.” Draupadi became interested on knowing about the wellbeing of Krishna and our life there. It was evident she had deep respect and reverence for my brother much more than Drishdyumna. We spent many a hours talking about various aspects when she finally said, “I have enjoyed your company thoroughly and you have taken my pain away. I would love to have a sister like you. Come stay with me.”

Then gathering courage, I told her my real identity and assured her that we would continue to be sisters and Arjuna would never come between us. Draupadi was surprised but slowly composed herself and said, “No doubt you resemble Krishna so much. You have the same knowledge and piety as him. I feel a part of him is always going to stay with us now.”

“Are you angry with me?” I asked her.

“No, it’s not you. But men will be men. When a second knot is tied the first one is loosened. I don’t deny my feelings and I believe you two understand why I thought so. Because we women are mere pawns in the game of politics by men. And we Queens are more unfortunate compared to common women. We are nothing but mere provinces to be won over.” Little did I knew what our words would mean afterwards.

My days in Indraprastha were filled with fun and frolic. It was a far cry from my extended big family back at Dwarka with number of sister-in-laws, my parents, nephews, nieces and cousins. Here I had my husband, his four brothers, Draupadi and Kunti, my mother-in-law. Kunti had a soft corner for me since I was the daughter of her brother. She used to pamper me and treat me like her own daughter. I enjoyed a freedom which I didn’t have at Dwarka.

Being the Junior Queen I did not have much responsibility unlike Draupadi who was always busy with the court, religious ceremonies and other welfare activities. Infact I loved spending time in the gardens playing with my maids and riding around the countryside. Since we didn’t have the elders of the Kuru race staying with us, there was no one to stop me or put any restrictions either. Arjuna used to stay in my palace along with me as per the agreement with Draupadi.

However I did not miss the one year he was scheduled to spend with Draupadi as her husband. For I had found myself to be a part of this



family. It was not long before I held a lovely baby in my hands. The sages christened him as Abhimanyu. Brother Krishna along with Balarama and other elders both from Kuru clan and Yadu clan came bearing gifts for my son. My family was complete and I couldn't be happier. I wished time to stand still only if it could.

# ABHIMANYU

When Abhimanyu was born, Arjuna lovingly held him in his arms and whispered, “You carry the bloodline of both Kuru and the Yadu race; you shall be intelligent like your uncle, brave like your father and carry the grace of your mother. I may have more sons but you shall be my favourite.”

As was with the ritual after the naming ceremony we decided to draw up his Horoscope and it was none other than Maharishi Ved Vyas who prepared my son’s horoscope. “Hmmm, interesting...O daughter, you are blessed. Your son will turn out to be a finest warrior the earth has ever seen. You will be proud to be known as his mother. But then..” saying he halted.

I became tensed and asked, “Then what Holy One? Is there anything to be worried about? I pray please tell me.”

Ved Vyasa gave me a grave look and said, “O daughter, you are not naïve at the rules of life are you? Anyone associated with Krishna on this planet came for a particular purpose and is not just a mere human being and so is the case with your son. He will fulfil his destiny and you must embrace it with dignity when time comes. Your bloodline will rule the entire Bharatvarsha.” Both Draupadi and the rest of the Pandavas were surprised with this information, for Draupadi too had five sons of her own, one from each Pandava.

My son to lead the entire Bharatvarsha! Not that I was not happy but how is it possible when there are so many to precede him. Draupadi’s eldest son from Yudhisthira Prativindhya is the apparent heir and that too of Indraprastha since Hastinapur was still under the control of Dhristarastra and Kauravas. I never wanted my son to become a king, all I wanted was a happy long life for him. Ved Vyas could sense my

feelings and spoke out, “Do not try to invite sorrow before its due time.” But I am a mother! How could I not worry? “Well if you must, then keep your son away from wars and battles. But I don’t think it’s possible for a Kuru Prince, is it?” I didn’t know how to react. Was my son in some sort of danger. I held him closely. Arjuna came around me and put a hand on me and said, “Don’t you worry, no harm shall come to him as long as I am alive. I shall make my son an impermeable warrior.”

What Arjuna said was true. Abhimanyu displayed his warrior skills as soon as he started to walk. Instead of toys and crafts he used to move around with a tiny bow. He soon became the favourite of his uncles, grandmother and his mothers. My whole life revolved around him and even Arjuna started complaining that I didn’t love him the way I used to before. But the joy of watching my son grow up was something that I couldn’t explain. But in the meantime the Pandavas decided to organize the Rajsuya Yagna to declare Yudhisthira as the Chakravarti King of the entire Bharatvarsha. However grand it seemed a thought crossed into my mind that with the old rivalry of Kauravas it was unlikely to accept Yudhisthira as the Chakravarti King. “Why not?” Bhima said “After all he is the eldest one in the entire Kuru race and with my strength and Arjuna’s warrior skills, I dare anyone who opposes us.” I find Bhima to be somehow lacking in prudence but it was also true that we were currently the strongest Kingdom in the entire Bharatvarsha. We had strong allies in the form of Kingdom of Panchala, Dwarka, Manipur, Madra and a host of other Kingdoms who were all on our side through matrimonial alliances. The Pandava brothers had all taken wives from other Kingdoms the only condition being that none of them could reside in Indraprastha and I was the only one who shared the household with Draupadi.

I sometimes found this trait in Draupadi as strange. Maybe she did not wish to let go of her power over the Pandavas, however great her sacrifice was for the well-being of the family she did not allow her other co-wives to enjoy the same privilege. I often tried to reason with her but she rebuked it everytime, “You won’t understand. I am not heartless and I very well understand my husband’s needs when I am not there. But I am also a Queen. Why is it that only women have to sacrifice? Why can’t men do the same? I have already shared their

hearts and beds but I won't share my rights. It was not my fault that I was shared among five brothers so why should I bear it alone?"

"But you have accepted me, so why not the rest? I am sure we can all live like a big happy family." Draupadi suddenly became silent and then spoke, "I won't disagree I felt jealous of you. You have two men I love the most. Krishna is your brother and Arjuna loves and needs you. But more than that I love you like my own sister. I feel I can trust you. You are so selfless and pure but no other woman is. But tell me sister can I rely on you? If yes, we shall not discuss this again. I want you to support me not to stand against me." I knew she demanded my loyalty and all I saw was a lone woman who was standing strong all the time.

The Rajsuya Yagna preparations went on in full swing. Messengers were sent in advance to all Kingdoms and the Palaces were all decked up to welcome the guests coming from far flung areas to swear their allegiance to King Yudhisthira. I dreaded the moment because after I rejected Duryodhana and married Arjuna my relations were far from cordial. Had it not been for Brother Balarama whose student was Duryodhana, Hastinapur would have waged a war against Dwarka to avenge this insult. There were no blessings for me in the gifts that were sent from Hastinapur and I tried long to sue peace and make myself welcome.

Even the Pandavas intervened and Yudhisthira also spoke to King Dhritarastra to let bygones be bygones and accept me finally as the daughter-in-law of the family. But I could sense that the Kauravas did not take this lightly and were sure to try to pay me back someday. I often spoke about my fears to Arjuna and he consoled me and said, "I know you are paying for marrying me but I give you my word, no mortal shall dare to harm you or our child. It's not that they don't love you. Pitamah Bhishma, Guru Drona and Vidura adore and speak highly of you. The only thing is that they can't speak of it openly since their allegiance to the throne. You are a gem amongst the Kuru women and I feel to be the luckiest man on this earth."

I was not convinced. "Go, you are making fun of me. Gandhari, Bhanumathi and the rest of the women never visited us even during my wedding or on the birth of our son. Do they hate us so much? After all we are one big family. In Dwarka all the wives of my brothers and

extended family live together. Why can't we live the same way here? When will this animosity end? I don't want my son to bear this brunt."

"No he won't I promise you that. Abhimanyu is the son of Arjuna and nephew of Krishna. Nobody will dare touch a hair on his head. You fret too much. Come on now, help Draupadi in the preparations. Maybe this time everything will be sorted. Believe me even I don't like this on-going animosity but you know Duryodhana. Anyway there is also another guest whom you may not like but we have to be hospitable."

"Who?" I asked curiously.

"It's your cousin Shishupala and I have not heard pleasant things about him."

# RAJSUYA YAGNA AND THE SEEDS OF JEALOUSY

**S**hishupala! My Aunt's son. I remembered our last meeting in Dwarka which was not at all pleasant. He has now become the King of Chedi but neither he nor his hatred towards my family has changed a bit. And after Krishna stole his bride Rukmini, the relations between Chedi and Dwarka were far from cordial. Rukmini was the Princess of Vidarbha and her brother Rukmi had betrothed her to Shishupala. But she wrote a letter to Krishna seeking his help and asking him to whisk her away since she loved him and will rather die than marry Shishupala.

And my beloved brother who never broke a heart sped to Chedi and kidnapped her on her way back from the temple, something very similar to my haran by Arjuna. Rukmi was furious and he along with the vast armies of Jarasandha of Magadha, Chedi and Vidarbha tried to stop them but while Brother Balarama pushed the rest of the armies away Krishna defeated Rukmi and let him go after shaving off half his head and moustache as a sign of defeat. But Shishupala never took this insult lightly as Krishna took away his bride and swore vengeance ever since.

It was a joyous time for us as we met our friends and cousins after a long time. I welcomed my brothers who came laden with gifts for me as well as Draupadi and the rest of the Pandavas. For both Draupadi's family as well as mine never differentiated between the two of us and always looked upon us as two sisters born in different clans. I took blessings of all the elders of the Kuru family including Bhishma,

Dhritarastra, Vidura, Gandhari and the rest. It was a joyous moment to meet all my other sister-in-laws, wives of Duryodhana, Dushahsana and other Kauravas.

While some were awe struck about how did I manage to enter the household with Draupadi in place, I simply laughed it off. I was never bothered about riches and position like other queens. I always remembered Krishna's saying that I was born for a different purpose. And now my life solely centred on my son. I have shared my husband's love but my son will be my son alone. I wanted to protect him at any cost as there was an unseen fear always in my mind. I tried to ask Krishna also but he showed himself busy with the Rajsuya preparations. He took upon the task of washing the sages' feet who had come to the ceremony. My heart brimmed with pride, undoubtedly my brother was no less than a God and yet so humble.

It was not long before I crossed paths with Shishupala. I saw him walking the gardens with Duryodhana and Karna. I greeted them but Shishupala did not turn towards me and instead spoke to Duryodhana, "There comes the sister of the cowherd who stole my bride away."

Karna bowed down his head but Duryodhana too sneered at me, "What do you expect from this clan? Brother stole someone else's bride and sister eloped with my cousin even after being betrothed to me."

My anger rose up but yet I controlled myself. After all they were our guests. "Cousin Shishupala, I hope you will forget our past and embrace the friendship and hospitality which we offer. Let there be no further bad blood between us."

Shishupala mocked me "Forget, my foot! You all are shameless people. You think you are safe under the Pandavas protection? You all are trying to be regal but all you are is a bunch of cowherds. Your brother ran away from battle when Jarasandha invaded Mathura. And later he, along with Bhima killed him with deceit."

For a moment I thought of pulling out his tongue but then a blow of conch shell announcing the beginning of the Ceremony interrupted my thought. It was time for us to move to the main Audience Hall.

"Shishupala" I said, "You better control your tongue else it may spell your doom. I don't wish for your wife to be a widow and your son fatherless. I shall hear no more against my brother or my clan, you

know better than that for your own sake.” Saying so I moved away quickly to the Audience Hall.

I took my place beside Kunti and other royal ladies. Yudhisthira addressed and thanked everyone for making it to the ceremony and vowed that he will try to abide by Dharma of a Chakravarti King. Then Sage Ved Vyas got up and requested Yudhisthira to honour the most esteemed guest of the Ceremony. And Yudhisthira announced the name of Krishna as he found no one better than him in the entire Aryavrata. The entire Hall broke in applause with Bhishma, Dhritarastra, Vidura and others hailing the decision. I went to my brother and congratulated him.

Suddenly a voice broke out in middle, “For what are you congratulating him? A lame cowherd or has everyone gone blind.” It was Shishupala. It was enough of my patience. I won’t allow him to further insult my beloved brother and that too in the middle of all the Kings and learned Sages.

I tried to move ahead when Krishna caught my hand, “Not now sister. You are a queen of Indraprastha now and I don’t want any misfortune in Yudhisthira’s coronation ceremony. Don’t worry about me. I am fine. Please go and take your seat.” Draupadi too looked at me as if with a request. With my blood boiling I returned to my seat.

Shishupala continued, “So now you need the help of woman to stand for you. You are no King, you are no warrior. You left the battlefield and stole my bride. And Yudhisthira is also a fool to honour you when there are so many learned men who are far better than you.” Krishna calmly smiled and said, “Dear cousin, please do not test my patience. Remember, I had promised my Aunt to forgive only hundred sins of yours? So keep a tab on your sins and your mouth.” But the vile Shishupala went on insulting Yudhisthira, Krishna and my entire family. Suddenly Krishna got up and said, “Enough! You have said more than enough. Your sins are now complete and I am no longer bound to my promise. You are no longer fit to be called a man.”

With this Krishna called upon the mighty Sudarshana Chakra, his divine discus and in a moment Shishupala’s head was severed and it lay motionless on the floor. The entire Hall broke into murmurs, some out of fear, some out of chaos and rest in shock. Draupadi saw Krishna’s finger bleeding from holding the discus and quickly tore her sari pallu and tied it up. Many people whispered that this was a bad omen of



having a guest killed but none dared to question us. I heaved a sigh of relief yet felt sorry for Shishupala's wife and children. Mother Kunti asked me to send a message to the Kingdom of Chedi about his demise and make necessary arrangements for his body to be sent with due respects.

Later I met Draupadi who was looking regal without any sign of regret. She said "What happened with Shishupala was just. How dare he insult Krishna? Our hands were tied since he was our guest but he should have been killed long before. I heard from my maids that he insulted you too in the gardens alongwith Duryodhana and Karna. You should have come and told me. No one can just say something to a Queen of Indraprastha and walk away. I will ask Duryodhana and Karna to apologise to you."

Apologise! No, it would just make matters worse. I knew Draupadi loved me but I could also see the pride of being Empress in her. "No sister, no. Please don't say anything. Already people are saying that the death of a fellow king is a sign of bad omen for the Coronation Ceremony. The Kauravas are waiting for any moment to strike. We have to be careful. One wrong step and everything may go haywire."

Draupadi hugged me and said, "You think too much about others. Rest assured everything will be fine. The Kauravas are busy visiting the Palace grounds. And the maids were telling me that they were awe struck. It's not every day that you get to see a palace which is a wonder in itself made by a demon." We were just chatting when we heard a commotion outside. We rushed outside and saw Duryodhana in the pool all splashed up. In reality the pool was a trick resembling that of a floral carpet but Duryodhana must have not realised it. He fell into it. Draupadi burst out laughing, "Look Subhadra, a blind man's son will be blind only!" I could see Duryodhana's eyes turning red with insult and fury and I realised what she has done. But the damage was already done. What I didn't realise that this small incident is going to change the course of history, our lives and everyone in it.

When Yudhisthira got to know about the incident he rebuked Draupadi, "Have you gone mad? Did you even realise what have you done? O Panchali, Duryodhana is never going to forgive you or us. You have just stepped on the snake's tail."

But Bhima who was ever so protective of Draupadi stepped in, “Don’t worry brother. Duryodhana can’t do anything as long as I am here. Else I will break his head with my gada.”

Even Arjuna had trouble sleeping that night. “It’s not Duryodhana that I am worried about. It’s his shrew uncle Shakuni. They are leaving Indraprastha with an insult and I have a gut feeling that they will try to get back to us and make the score even. You should have tried to stop Draupadi. You know her nature very well.”

I patted my husband’s cheek, “Rest assured you five are enough to take down an army so nothing can happen to us. I shall pray to Lord Shiva to protect us from harm. But I do realise what Draupadi did was wrong, I just hope his pride is not broken.”

Arjuna smiled and hugged me “You Subhadra are the joy of my heart. You are so selfless and yet so brave. While Draupadi is vivacious and fiery, you are calm and composed. There is something divine in you. Always remember it doesn’t matter how many wives I have. My heart will always belong to you.” It was a moment which I have been waiting for my entire life. Only alas if I knew that my joy was going to be short lived.

# GAMBLES AND HIGH STAKES

I was chatting with Draupadi and Kunti during the morning as our sons were playing when a maid burst in and announced that a messenger had come from Hastinapur bearing an invitation for a friendly Dice game between the Kauravas and Pandavas. And King Yudhisthira had accepted it. My heart suddenly sank for I knew that in Dice game you have to wager something in order to play. “Draupadi you must stop this game! We all know what happened during the Rajsuya Yajna. The Kauravas must be burning with jealousy. I am sure Duryodhana and Shakuni are upto no good.”

But Kunti suddenly stopped me, “Oh come on child, you fret and worry too much. It’s just a friendly game between cousins, not a duel. And they have invited us so we cannot say no else it will be an insult to King Dhritarastra.” Draupadi too seemed pensive for a second as she realised the mistake she had done by insulting Duryodhana.

Moreover even Karna, who was the King of Anga and Duryodhana’s friend, must have not forgotten Draupadi’s insult when she spurned him at her swayamvar by calling him a low-caste. I once again cajoled her, “Sister please, hear my plea. I am having a strange forbearing that this will not turn out to be good, Think about your children.”

Draupadi then hugged me and said with moist eyes, “O Subhadra, if only Krishna was here. I could have counselled him but you know Yudhisthira he will not back out once he has given his word. And being his wife I must go along with him. Plus it has been long ever since I saw Hastinapur. It would be great to meet everyone else. But if you

don't wish to go you may stay behind. Anyways we need someone to take care of our children and the Kingdom in our absence. And there is no one better than you."

I tried to cajole Arjuna also but he seemed confident as always, "You are the wife of the greatest archer and yet you behave like a fear stricken woman. What harm can most befall? The Kauravas know too well I can create havoc alone. But I cannot abandon my brothers. I have to go. But Draupadi was right. You stay behind and look after the affairs of the Kingdom."

Arjuna was right; but I hated this idea of a dice game and wished to have no part in it. Neither had I had any affection for Hastinapur. They had despised me ever since I broke my alliance with Duryodhana, an insult they could never forget. So with a heavy heart I bade the Pandavas and Draupadi farewell as they left for Hastinapur and waited eagerly for their return. But then the world came crashing down.

The news of Pandavas losing everything in the game of dice and Draupadi being tried to be disrobed took the entire Aryavrata by storm. I jumped out of my bed when I received the news. How could men turn so vile to disrobe a woman? I heard rumours that Shakuni, Duryodhana's uncle played with a loaded dice and that is what made him win all the time. Yudhisthira first wagered his wealth, house, Kingdom, his brothers, himself and lastly his wife.

And when he lost even her Duryodhana asked his brother to bring her to the Sabha by pulling her hair forcibly and when Draupadi refused to bow down he asked Dushasana to disrobe her! My blood boiled with fury, how dare he? And to make matters worse, were the Pandavas dumb? Where did the valour of my husband go? The messenger was in tears. "What happened next? Is Draupadi all right? Was she shamed publicly?" The messenger said, "No my Queen, Lord Krishna, your brother saved her. When no one heard her pleas and Dushasana started disrobing her she called out to Krishna and as a miracle her sari started extending till the time Prince Dushasana grew tired." I thanked Krishna silently for he had not only saved Draupadi but the entire woman race. Then the messenger said, "Draupadi tried to curse the entire Kaurava race for their misdeeds but King Dhritarastra out of fear returned the Pandavas their freedom along with their Kingdoms and everything that was lost.

Tears welled up in my eyes. Alas! Draupadi's forewarning came true. It was a woman who paid for the man's sins. I dared not meet her or offer any condolences. I silently waited but this time there were no conch shells or drums playing. It was a Kingdom in defeat and people shied away from greeting or meeting their King and Queen. But inside my fury was building up. What was Arjuna doing? And Bhima? Five husbands could not protect their wife! That was something neither me nor the world will forgive. Draupadi's sons who were of the same age group as that of Abhimanyu looked at me as if they could not understand what was going on. I asked the maids to take them away and waited patiently for my husband and the others. But it was Draupadi who scared me the most. Her hair was all dishevelled and eyes burning with fury. I was able to figure out that she didn't sleep or eat ever since her ordeal.

"Sister! Wait" But she paid no heed to me and strided aside and closed the doors to her palace. And suddenly we could hear loud wails coming out from the closed doors.

Arjuna came to me and said, "Subhadra, go to her! She may do something rash!" I turned my eyes at the man who claimed to be the world's greatest archer yet was a weakling who could not even defend his wife.

"How dare you! And how dare you all! Kings of the most powerful Kingdom and yet could not defend the honour of your wife. Then how can you defend the common people? Tell me King Yudhishthira is this what your dharma says? To gamble away your wife? Tell me brother Bhima, where did your strength disappear when Dushashana was dragging away your wife? And you Arjuna, you claim to be far better than Karna and Ekalvya. What do you have to say now? Who else would you have gambled? Would you have gambled me also?"

Arjuna stepped back horrified. "Say what you want. We know we deserve it. But right now please console Draupadi because right now she is not listening to us. I pray to you please." I went and knocked at Draupadi's door, "Sister please open the door! Atleast if you have some reverence for Krishna, at least for his sake please open." Still there was no answer. "You know pretty well Krishna has never differentiated between you and me. In fact I sometimes feel he treats you with more affection than me. Will you now turn away me too? I know your

husbands have deceived you but I am still standing with you. For the sake of the entire woman race you need to rise again. You cannot be defeated. Please sister.”

Suddenly the door opened and all I could see was a broken woman. Gone were her proud eyes, her regal bearing. Draupadi may have had a hundred faults but she did not deserve it. Infact no woman did. “I am tainted Subhadra! The unholy hands of Dushasana dragged me by my hair in front of all men and all sat there dumbstruck. I cried for help to Pitamah Bhisma, Vidura even Dhritarastra but I was insulted by Duryodhana and Karna as a whore. I don’t wish to live any longer.”

I didn’t know what to say but I have to break her melancholy else she would burn herself. “No you are not tainted! It is the entire Kuru race which has become tainted. I will avenge you Draupadi! I will go and slaughter them all for if they can’t respect their daughter-in-law what else can you expect?” Draupadi suddenly caught my hand “No, don’t do anything which will taint your name as well as your upbringing. Krishna always said there was something divine about you. But don’t worry I shall have my revenge. I have sworn not to tie my hair until it is washed with Dushasana’s blood and Bhima will avenge me by ripping open his chest and drinking his blood. You are right I cannot be defeated and I will not bow down to this injustice. The entire Kaurava clan will suffer and you shall see it.”

That night neither of us could sleep. Arjuna came to visit me and Abhimanyu but I stopped him. “No, don’t you dare touch him. You are not fit enough to be his father. You have been my proud husband and yet today you have ashamed me. Would you have gambled me also had I been there?” Arjuna tried to say something then stopped. He took a deep breath, “I know there is no excuse of what has happened or is going to happen. But dear Subhadra believe me when I say that my heart too boiled when I saw Draupadi being humiliated. She is my wife after all and today I feel all the more guilty for she is paying for my sins. Had I not told mother that I have brought a gift instead of wife Mother would have never asked us all to share her and she would not have seen such a terrible day. But please don’t say that I would have staked you too! Then God forbidding no account of Dharma would have been able to stop me. But you know too well that we brothers can never disagree or go against Yudhisthira.”

I suddenly had this realisation that Arjuna too knew that Draupadi loved him more than any of her husbands. “You cannot blame her for it can you? I won her Swayamvara and the moment she garlanded me she thought of me as her only husband. And they say a woman can share her body but not her heart. It was this very reason she was furious of my wedding with you. But today she trusts and loves you like her own sister.” What about the rest of the Pandavas? Do they also realise this truth of Draupadi? “I doubt others know but Yudhisthira may be aware. But Draupadi has never failed in her wifely duties. And Bhima loves her more than anything else.”

Whatever be the reason I saw my husband for the first time as a weak man instead of a warrior who failed to protect his family. But Arjuna cajoled me “Subhadra you don’t know how much time we have. Please don’t punish me further by pushing me away from you. Let me have a look at my beloved son.” “What do you mean?” I questioned. “Well, when Draupadi took the terrible oath, King Dhritarastra returned our Kingdoms and position but if I know Shakuni and Duryodhana well, they must be plotting their next move.”

“So it’s not over, you mean to say” Arjuna looked at Abhimanyu sleeping and said, “No, it’s not.”

## PANGS OF SEPARATION

Arjuna's fears came true when a messenger arrived with an invitation of another dice game from Hastinapur in a bid to start a fresh beginning. Although we all knew that this was a trap. Kunti said "Yudhisthira you must say no. After whatever happened it will be foolish to even sit for this game." But Yudhisthira was a just and righteous person who knew that no Kshatriya king can say no to either a duel or a dice game. I insisted that I too shall accompany them to Hastinapur but Draupadi intervened "No, we cannot ask you to share our misfortune. We have already entered into a ball of fire and now we cannot step back. This time they have laid a wager of twelve years of vanvas and one year of Agyatvas. And I can say right now that Shakuni with his evil tricks will win this game too." What! I could not believe my ears. And yet they are going to Hastinapur knowing very well that it will lead to their doom. Yudhisthira spoke out "I know very well what is going on inside your mind. Don't underestimate us. We can easily fight back but we must avoid bloodspill. Because when the moment of war comes, we have to fight with the people we love most and I can lay down a hundred Kingdoms for them."

"But war will come." Draupadi broke in "Try however hard you can but after our return I shall have my vengeance."

The inevitable happened as expected. But it was this moment which I dreaded the most. I was busy packing my belongings that I thought will be necessary during the years of hardship in the forest. "What are you doing?" I turned and saw my husband standing. "Well I am also going with you. Isn't that what a wife should and must do?" It was the moment I dreaded most. Arjuna came closer and said "You are not going anywhere. I will not allow my son to be brought up in the hard life of a forest dweller. He is a Prince and not some urchin. I have



already sent news to Dwarka and Krishna is coming to pick you and Abhimanyu and take you to Dwarka. Come now bid me farewell with the warmth of your arms.”

My head started spinning. What was my husband saying? Thirteen years of separation! No this cannot be true! “You cannot abandon me, that is against dharma!” I said with my staggering breath. “I will not allow you to abandon me.” Arjuna caught me in his arms and made me sit down. Then with pain in his voice he said, “I am not abandoning you my wife. Do you think I wanted this? Staying away from you is like death to me. But we have a son and we cannot be selfish. Even Draupadi’s five sons are being sent away to Panchala. Abhimanyu is too young and he needs his mother. So please try to understand. I shall carry your lingering memories in my heart.”

I knew that Arjuna will refuse to come with me to Dwarka because in reality the Pandavas are five bodies but one soul and Draupadi is their common thread. But I cannot allow the love of my life, my husband to be separated from me “Then let us both come with you. Abhimanyu needs his both parents and not the comfort of a palace. But please I pray don’t make me suffer by staying away from you.”

Tears started trickling down from both of our eyes. It was Arjuna who finally spoke “I know I am asking a big sacrifice from you but Queens make sacrifices. History may not remember it but I promise I will never forget. Please forgive me I could not fulfil my promise to you. But I will come back to you. I assure you. But you must make our son the greatest warrior of the entire Bharatvarsha. Because the Kauravas may now rest in peace but we must start making preparations because thirteen years from now on we will be coming back for everything, for all the pain, suffering and insults.” So this is it. I could now see the picture. I was not going to let go without a fight. “It was always Draupadi isn’t it. I may understand her pain and suffering but I don’t understand you abandoning me or our son! Go then if you can leave without us we too can live without you. If you don’t need me I will never try to visit you in these thirteen years.” Arjuna froze as if in pain “Believe me when I say I have no choice. But I can’t blame you for your anger and pain. I too shall suffer in silence for not being able to hold my son and you. But Subhadra wherever I am, it is you who shall always rule my heart.”

I turned my face away. The day of departure soon arrived. Draupadi and the Pandavas gave up their royal clothes and bearings and took the garb of Hermits. The King of Panchala King Dhrupad swore vengeance against Kauravas for having insulted his daughter. Krishna consoled him “We must all have patience and accumulate our strength for the Great War that is coming. You must ensure proper education and upbringing of all the sons of Draupadi so that they may become fierce warriors when the time comes.” I could not believe that even my own brother was blind to my suffering and pain. For a moment a tinge of jealousy crept inside my heart. I may live in a palace but I shall be far from happy. And Draupadi will atleast have her five devoted husbands at her side. Damn you Duryodhana! It is because of him that my marital life is being ruined. I vowed to avenge my pain for snatching my husband away from me. The citizens of Indraprastha bade a tearful farewell to their beloved kings and queen.

I sat silent during my entire journey to Dwarka except while feeding Abhimanyu. I had no answer to his questions that why his father and uncles were no longer there and when shall we be coming back. How am I to tell him that it is going to be a long wait? Krishna was watching me closely as if he could read my mind “I know what is going on inside your mind and I forbade it. Please don’t try to act and do anything foolish.” That was enough for me “Oh really brother! From when have you had the time to think about me? You all can do whatever you wish but I am going to kill Duryodhana and finish this entire episode. There is no one who can stop me and neither have I had any affection for Hastinapur and anyone residing in it.” Krishna looked shocked at my words. “So is this all about? What has gotten into you? How can you be so selfish?” “Selfish and me!” I retorted. “It was Draupadi who insulted Duryodhana at the Palace during Rajsuya Yajna and I am paying the price for it. I have been separated from my husband and dethroned. My son is left to grow without a father. And yet instead of feeling my pain you are blaming me.” I could not control my tears any longer as loud sobs overtook me. Krishna patted me slowly and brushed my tears “O sister, the people who go on the path of Dharma have to pay the price the most and that includes you and me. But please understand killing Duryodhana is not the solution right now. Don’t you think Arjuna or I would have done it by now? But please try and understand that we all

must hope and pray for peace.” “But why peace? And after they have insulted a woman in the open court they don’t deserve to live!” “Yes that’s right,” Krishna replied. “But if a war happens, which I am doubtful it will, you cannot imagine the destruction it will bring and no one in this land or era can escape it. It will be a war which mankind has never heard or seen. Hence both Yudhisthira and I want to reach a peaceful solution somehow.”

For a moment even my heart sank at the news as I saw Krishna face turn gloomy.

## GROWING YEARS

**M**y family welcomed me with open arms particularly my father. “Alas! My poor daughter. I can understand your pain of separating from your husband but child, have strength. This was your home and it will always be” Revati, wife of Balarama, with Rukmini and Satyabhama, Krishna’s wives, welcomed me and Abhimanyu as long lost sisters. I saw all my nephews now grown up in their teens. Pradyumna, Samba, Subanu and a host of them have now grown up to the likes of their father. But I could hear and feel the hushed tones of some of my brother’s co-wives “She went as a Princess and queen and now she has no Kingdom nor a husband.” The words tore my heart. Am I unwelcome and destitute at my own home? Satyabhama could grasp it and said out aloud “I am saying this once and will not repeat it again. Subhadra was and is a Princess of Dwarka. So that makes her son also a Prince. And the insult of a Princess will not be tolerated by me. And her husband has not abandoned her but rather he has gone to fulfil his vow in the forest. And when he comes back and knows that you all have insulted the wife of the great warrior Arjuna, I doubt the result will be to your liking. Come now Subhadra let us go inside.” I thanked Satyabhama from the core of my heart. “They are just wagging tongues. Don’t pay heed to them. You are a Princess and a Queen. The Kauravas has sent the Pandavas in Vanvas but they will have to return their Kingdom once the period is over.” I wish things were that simple I wondered. For I doubted the evil Shakuni and Duryodhana will ever return our Kingdom to us.

That night as I laid my head on my empty bed I missed the warmth of my husband’s arms. All these days it had not dawned upon me that no longer I could hold him in my arms, or see his morning practice with his bow. Although I was angry at him for leaving me yet his handsome

face and features were still vivid in my eyes. How must he be adjusting in the forest? Where must he be sleeping? Did he miss me as much as I am missing him? It was late night when sleep finally overtook me.

The next morning Krishna came to visit me. He took Abhimanyu in his arms and said “There you are growing stronger and stronger. You already have Arjuna’s strength and valour. I can see it.” “But I wish to become a great archer like my father.” Abhimanyu said in his childlike voice. “And so you will dear one and not just any archer but your fame will precede even that of your father. You will become a Maharathi! And for that you need to start right now. Are you ready?” Abhimanyu jumped with joy “I am I am. Tell me uncle, when can we start learning?” “Very soon but first you go outside and wait for me. I have a few things to discuss with your mother.” Abhimanyu touched my feet and soon ran outside. Krishna looked at me and said “It is his destiny. He is born to be a warrior. You will be proud of him one day. What is it that is worrying you?” I sat down as I recollected the words of Sage Ved Vyas which he predicted during Abhimanyu’s birth. I confided Krishna with my fears, after all he is my only son and support. My husband is torn away from me I can’t bear should anything happen to him. “My God! What has gotten into you! You are a Kshatriya Queen, a warrior yourself and yet you fidget like a child. Is this what I taught you?” “But I am also a mother and I shall protect my son! I won’t allow him to be a pawn in this power game.” “At the cost of your husband’s honour! From when have you become so scared? Is this what I taught you? I can’t believe you are my part.” Krishna thundered and this was the first time I saw him this upset with me in my entire life. “Ok fine! I give up for I love you too well brother. I can’t see you being upset. I am sorry I forgot who I am. Make my son the finest warrior of the entire Bharatvarsha, the greatest Maharathi. Greater than his father.” Krishna clasped my hands “O Subhadra, your son’s fame will be so great it will be remembered till the time this earth exceeds. And have I ever told you that I have always been very proud of you.”

As Abhimanyu started his training under Krishna and Balarama I missed Arjuna more and more. There was occasional news about them as they roamed from one forest to another. Sometimes I received a letter from him and Draupadi. Draupadi shared her anguish and pain of her insult which used to torment her daily. Arjuna wrote that he will soon

go away to do penance to gain Divine Weapons for the forthcoming war. Although my heart pined yet I started taking part in the state affairs once again. Satyabhama often used to cheer me up with her chatter and banking that how Krishna loved Rukimini more and how her sons are now growing up fast. “I have been chattering to you for so long, where are you lost? Did I tell you I met Draupadi in the forest of Kamyaka while visiting them with your brother. You should have come along I told you to so many times.” I became suddenly aware “I wish I could but with Abhimanyu’s training now in full swing I just couldn’t leave him alone. Plus Brother Balarama needed my help in running the administration since Krishna is nowadays constantly in his travels.” “Or is it because you wanted to avoid Arjuna and Draupadi?” Satyabhama looked and gazed at me “Oh come on! I know how you feel. Haven’t you forgiven Arjuna yet? But I hope you realise that he had no choice. The second time the Dice game was played Duryodhana had specifically put the condition that if they lose they all go to forest together plus serve one year incognito. And Arjuna cannot just leave his ethics and come to stay with you. His other wives are also not complaining either. At least Abhimanyu is growing up like a Prince and so are the sons of Draupadi. And staying away from Arjuna has made things difficult for you not easy. Why torture yourself so much? Just go and meet him once.” How could I make her understand that if I meet Arjuna I won’t be able to control myself and will either push to stay there or ask him to come with me to Dwarka. It is only the distance that is somehow giving me strength.

“But he loves you. Even Draupadi told me that.” Draupadi, why on earth will she say something like that? “Well” Satyabhama continued “I asked Draupadi her secret as how could she control all her five husbands? And although she did share her thoughts and knowledge she said she knew that Arjuna loved you the most although he is torn away from you by force. And he misses Abhimanyu, infact his eyes glistened when Krishna told him how fast he is growing. He said it is the memories of him and his son that is giving him strength in these difficult times. Poor Draupadi! My heart pained at her sight. A divine Princess and look at her now.”

All the pain of my heart subsided. However far we may be Arjuna loves me and I love him and soon we will be together again. I secretly

thanked Draupadi and hoped for the day when Arjuna and me will be together again.

## HIGH STAKES

**T**welve years passed by in a wink. My son was slowly turning into a teen. Strapping and handsome like his father. But I was more worried about the last year of Agyaatvas as the Pandavas and Draupadi had to live incognito without being recognised. If they will be detected then they have to again serve twelve years of Vanvaas and one year of Agyaatvaas. And if that happens, God forbid, we all will be doomed. I decided to find out what the Kauravas were up to and what were they cooking next? Because I had already received the news that Duryodhan had tried various means and plots to harass the Pandavas. Once they tried to have a picnic near the same forest where Arjuna and his brothers along with Draupadi were in exile. But their plan backfired when Duryodhana was captured by the Nishadas, the local inhabitants of the forest. Krishna told me that later Arjuna and Bhima released Duryodhana from their clutches. All these incidents made me all the more sure that I must find out what Duryodhana and Shakuni were upto.

“Don’t you think it’s a dangerous plan? Hastinapur Palace is an impregnable fortress guarded by hundreds of guards. What makes you think you can just eavesdrop on Duryodhana and Shakuni?” Satyabhama was worried about my idea of spying on the Kauravas. “Don’t worry, I have tried the garb of a maid before and I can do it again. Anyway, both Krishna and Balarama are away so I have to do it. Nothing should come in between their Agyatvaas. Otherwise it will be twelve years of exile and one year of Agyaatvas again. And we both know that Kauravas cannot be trusted. The sly Shakuni must be filling the head of Duryodhana with new ideas. I must go. I will be back before anyone knows. But please take care of Abhimanyu in my absence.” “As if your son needs protection.” Satyabhama winked. “Your son is envied



by everyone. Infact I am sure news of his bravery must have reached even Hastinapur. I heard the other day he defeated even Kritvarma, our commander during his practice session.”

I dressed up as a maid and darkened my face too. It was risky but was necessary. We had people spying for us in all the states of Bharatvarsha. My contact at Hastinapur briefed me, “I plea to you, Your Highness, to think again. It is like entering a Lion’s lair. Grandsire Pitamah Bhishma himself oversees the entire arrangements. Each part of the Palace is guarded by atleast a hundered soldiers with weapons.” I thought for a moment and then suddenly it dawned upon me that the guards, like everywhere, will change during the change of Prahar. I will need to make a move when the guards at Duryodhana’s meeting chamber will change. “What time does Duryodhana have a meeting with his allies?” “Generally after the evening audience and before retiring for the night. But even in your maid garb he as well as Karna will recognise you.” “Don’t worry you just need to ensure that their drinks are laced with this potent herb to make them drowsy. They will think it is their drinks. Have you replaced the maids on duty with our own?” The man nodded and so I made way to the Palace. I walked with my head held low as a maid servant is supposed to. “Always remember,” the words of my Guru echoed in my heads, “It is the body language of a person which sets them apart. When you take the garb of another person you have to behave like that person else your game will be over in a few minutes.” Over the years I was taught to study the body language of different stratas of people, their makeup, including their body odour.

“This is the last year of exile of the Pandavas. Soon they will have to go incognito as per the wager and we must not lose this chance.” Shakuni spoke out. “If they lose then again twelve years of exile and one year of Agyaatvaas.” “It won’t be easy, Uncle. I have tried various means but they seem to be always one step ahead. I swear to you I will never return Indraprastha to them.” The words of Duryodhana made my blood boil but I kept myself in check as I poured the wine in their glasses. Thank God everything was going as per my plan. Duryodhana, Dushashana and Shakuni were too immersed to even observe anything and slowly the herb was making its effect on them and their voices were becoming heavy. “The last news our spy gave us was that they were

seen in the Kamyaka forest. I say Duryodhana let's not wait for the twelve years to finish. Let us infact send our best spies right away to the forest. They will disguise themselves as sages and the Pandavas won't be able to detect them. This time they will not escape us. Our spies will follow them like a shadow and on the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> year itself their game will be over." My heart sank at the words of Karna and I knew I have to pass on this information to Arjuna and the Pandavas else it will doom us all. I slowly exited from the room carrying the wine flask as I came and without being detected reached my steed that was tied to a tree on the outskirts of Hastinapur when suddenly an arrow stopped my path.

It was Karna! "Who are you? My doubt was right. You are no maid however good your disguise is. But I must compliment that you are too good a spy. But I am Karna, the invincible, also a Suta! So I know my own kind more than you. You can fool Duryodhana and Shakuni and the guards, but not me. My sixth sense works even when my other five senses fail." Undoubtedly Karna was a true match to Arjuna. Born with a kavach and kundals, there was something divine in him. I had heard rumours he was found afloat and adopted by his parents. I unsheathed my sword, "Be careful Karna! Don't underestimate me! Had you not been my husband's enemy I would have killed you right now. Let me go else I know how to make way." Karna looked surprised "Aha! It's you Subhadra! Krishna's sister. No doubt you are a master in deception. Are you going to warn your husband now? Why shouldn't I imprison you? After all, the punishment for spying is death." I swiftly put my sword on Karna's neck even before he could budge, "Don't try to provoke me. I would rather die than get caught and let me tell you, no one can imprison me against my wishes. But I respect you as a warrior Karna, although the world may mock you for your caste. Being a warrior, you have already done enough damage by supporting Duryodhana. You know he is wrong! Either you have to fight and kill me or you have to let me go." Karna looked amazed "So the rumours were true. You are a fine warrior too. I admire your bravery Subhadra. You must love Arjuna a lot to risk your life for him. I understand I am one of the causes of your pain of separation from your husband. But I will not taint my hands with the blood of a woman. I already have enough sins on my head. Go now and warn Arjuna. But let me warn you that you cannot

stop the war from coming to you and your family.” I didn’t realise at that moment what Karna meant by that. At certain times I always doubted whether he really was a low caste as people claimed him to be. The brilliance on his face and his unparalleled archery skills made me doubt his origin. Rumours said that he was cursed by his own Guru Parashurama because he was able to bear pain which was not possible for a mere Suta (low caste). I knew Arjuna’s hatred for Karna because inwardly Karna always challenged Arjuna and made him feel insecure about who was the better archer. I always felt that our society was unjust to him as he was denied for everything at every step right from Guru Drona to learn archery, to the opportunity to challenge Arjuna. In a way I respected him for he was a self made man who overcame all societal norms and rose to become one of the most celebrated archer. But that didn’t diminish the fact that he insulted Draupadi by calling her a whore in the open court of Hastinapur. And that made him guilty in front of my eyes. But there was no time to waste. We gave each other a respectful nod and I rode away in the darkness.

I sent a letter to Arjuna warning him of Duryodhana’s plan to detect their Agyatvaas. Although I knew that Arjuna was cursed by Urvashi, the heavenly celestial nymph to be a eunuch for one-year but I was worried for the others. How will Draupadi hide her divine splendour and Bhima, his huge body and gluttony. But when Krishna heard of my dastardly risk later, I saw his eyes glisten, “O Subhadra, you are a veera sahodari (brave sister), veera patni (brave wife) and a veera mata (brave mother). The Pandavas will be forever indebted to you. But don’t worry no harm will come to them. And very soon you will be reunited with your husband.”

I waited patiently till the completion of the 13<sup>th</sup> year when I received a letter from Arjuna. He wrote that they spent the last year in the Kingdom of Matsya. Arjuna disguised himself as the eunuch teacher of Uttara, the Princess of Matsya, Draupadi as Sairandhri, the Queen’s hand maiden, Yudhisthira as Kanka, the game entertainer for the King, Bhima as Ballava, the royal cook, Nakul as Granthika, the horse keeper and Sahadeva as Tantipala, the cow herd. They had successfully completed their thirteen years and were now looking forward to meeting me and Abhimanyu. But most importantly the wedding of Abhimanyu has been fixed with Uttara, the Princess of Matsya. I was a bit upset as

the decision regarding my son's future was taken without my consultation. After all it was I who raised him single handedly for the last thirteen years. And now the Pandavas have decided to get my son married without asking me. But then Krishna told me, "When Arjuna helped King Virata of Matsya in the attack by Kauravas, he offered his daughter Uttara's hand to Arjuna. But we both know how much Arjuna loves you and after marrying you he never thought about remarrying another woman. So he told King Virata that since Uttara was his student in dance and it would be unwise for a teacher to marry his own student hence Abhimanyu is a better choice. Moreover, having the Kingdom of Matsya as an ally will prove detrimental in the future. You should be pleased that your husband is so devoted to you and yet at the same time you are gaining a strong ally. Mind you he could have suggested any other son of the Pandavas but he chose Abhimanyu. Isn't it proof enough of his affection for you? My dear sister I have known it was never Arjuna's choice to stay away from you but we are all bound by karmas and duties. So now rejoice and start preparing for the marriage of your only son." My heart beamed with joy as I realised my husband loved me all these years and his love never diminished over the years. Atlast! The days of separation and pain are over and I have a wedding to celebrate. How time flies!

Abhimanyu came to me and my heart skipped to see my handsome boy. He has just turned sixteen but looked every bit his father. The entire city of Dwarka spoke about his glory as the next Arjuna in making. He touched my feet to pay obeisance and I kissed his head lovingly. "My dear son, how big have you grown! Till yesterday you were walking holding my hand and today you are going to hold someone else's hand." Abhimanyu blushed as his cheeks turned red but he then composed himself and said, "Mother war is at the brink! How can I think of marriage at such a time? I have been preparing for this battle ever since my childhood. And you and Uncle are busy with my wedding preparations." "Wars and battles will always be there my son. You are a warrior no doubt but you are also my son. Don't I have any hopes? I have always lived away from your father, your childhood was filled with training and war practices. I have no companion and family to share my burden with. A daughter-in-law will light up our home and will also be a companion to me. And I have heard Uttara is very pretty

and beautiful. So says your father.” Hearing my cajole Abhimanyu clasped my hand, “Please mother, don’t be melodramatic.” He laughed. “You know fairly well that I can never say no to any of your wishes. You are both my father and my mother. And I worship you. If that is what you wish, so shall it be.”

It seemed for a moment that happiness was finally coming my way after what seemed like a long time. And I started preparing for the wedding in full swing. Invitations were being sent out to all the Kingdoms. Jewellery and silk were purchased and soon it was time for us to leave for Matsya. Arjuna! I will be seeing him after thirteen long years. Thinking about it I fell into a deep slumber, that too after a very long time.

# REUNIONS AND WEDDING

I stepped out of the Royal Carriage in front of the Royal Palace of the Kingdom of Matsya. I could see a teary eyed Draupadi. Yudhisthira and the other Pandavas bore smiling faces. King Virat and his Queen Sudeshna welcomed us but my eyes rested on my beloved Arjuna. He stepped forward as if he could wait no longer. The years of Vanvaas have roughened and hardened him but his eyes still shone with the same brilliance. Abhimanyu paid his respects to each of his elders. Draupadi clasped him and said, “No doubt what I had heard was true. Queen Sudeshna, you are meeting the future warrior of the mighty Kuru Race. Dear Abhimanyu, your valour brings great joy to me. For it is time that you along with my sons avenge what was done to me years ago in the halls of Hastinapur. I have not tied my hair since that day. May your valour and glory surpass even that of your father.” Arjuna hugged him for what seemed to be a very long time. “Dear Son, you have no idea how much your father has missed you. I have remembered everyone including your mother but it was the memory of you that gave me strength all these years. Infact there has never been a day when your father has not remembered you. Welcome son! May God give you a long life and glory.”

My heart brimmed with joy that my son was getting all the love which he had been missing all these years. Both Draupadi and I embraced each other like long lost sisters. “The years have been difficult for both of us, isn’t it Subhadra? But don’t worry, now our family will be complete with Uttara. You must meet her and bless her. Duryodhana got a whiff that we were hiding here and so he stole all the cows of the Kingdom. But he was a day late and Arjuna disguised as

Brihanalla went to fight along with Uttar, King Virat's son. They won and King Virat offered Uttara to Arjuna when he defended his Kingdom against the Kauravas. However, Arjuna refused saying that since he was a Guru(teacher) to Uttara, she was like his daughter. Then he spoke for Abhimanyu as a suitable groom for Uttara." Uttara coyly came to me to pay her respects. She looked like a child who was yet to become a full bloomed flower. But there was a certain tenderness in her that touched my heart. I gave her my blessings and wished that she brings lots of happiness to my son.

It was late at night that Arjuna came to my chambers. It was like a season of rain on a parched land when we both hugged each other. All these years of trials and tribulations, pain and suffering was swept away. He stroked my hair and looked gently in remorse. "I am sorry for putting you through all the pain and suffering. I know it is wrong for me to abandon you as a husband but whatever I did was for you and Abhimanyu. You have no idea but Duryodhana's spies were everywhere and they attempted many attacks on us. Hence we sent all our sons away so that they get a proper upbringing and training. But believe me Subhadra, your husband pined for you each day. Even when I was doing rigorous penance to receive Divyastra (heavenly weapon) it was the memory of you that gave me strength." I wept on his shoulders at the thought of him undergoing so much suffering while we were enjoying the comforts of the Royal Palace. But then Arjuna said, "Subhadra, thank you for risking your life and warning us about Duryodhana but you must never do that again. Your life is too precious. I don't know what tomorrow brings for us but always remember that whether I am with you or not my heart will forever belong to you."

I suddenly became cautious "What do you mean by tomorrow? Is there anything to worry about?" Arjuna looked glumly and said, "I doubt Duryodhana has any intention of returning our Kingdom back. And whatever happened with Draupadi you cannot expect her to forget and forgive everything. But Krishna has said that he will try for peace once again. And Yudhisthira is also against war. Even if Duryodhana gives us five villages we won't go for war. There is too much we don't want to risk."

## CHOOSING SIDES

Arjuna's fears came true. Brother Krishna went as an envoy to Hastinapur and tried to reason with the Kauravas to give us merely five villages and pursue for peace. In my heart I too prayed that this war may be averted for I knew that war will bring untold bloodshed for both the parties. But Duryodhana refused point blank stating he won't give back even an inch of his land. Even worse, he tried to imprison my brother and I came to know later from the messengers that my brother displayed his divine form to bring him to his senses. I always knew that my brother was not a normal human being but someone Divine, although he never admitted it openly in front of me. But over and over again as I look back I have observed that there were many instances which could not be explained and which no normal being could accomplish. Yet I always got carried away with his sweet, affectionate smile.

I knew that now the war could not be averted at any cost. We had to regain our Kingdom and our honour but I was not interested in any palatial life and Kingdoms. My heart pined for a normal family life with my husband and son but the problem was Arjuna did not belong to me completely. And after what happened to Draupadi at Hastinapur there was now no question of turning back. Preparations for the war started at full swing. The sons of Draupadi and Abhimanyu started training hard for the upcoming battle. The entire Bharatvarsha had to choose sides and although Dwarka had a matrimonial allegiance with the Pandavas yet Brother Balarama was the teacher to both Duryodhan and Bhima and that made things complex. Moreover Samba, the son of Satyabhama had married the daughter of Duryodhana so this put forward a huge question about which side Dwarka will be. The Narayani Army of Dwarka was undefeated and invincible in battle and could change the



tide of war in any direction. To avoid further conflict Brother Balarama decided to not participate in the war and instead go on a pilgrimage. Before leaving he said to me, “Don't misunderstand me little sister. You know how dear you are to me and so is Abhimanyu but if I participate on the side of Pandavas, Duryodhana will feel I am partial towards my sister and unfair to his daughter who is married in our own clan. You know he was never in favour of Lakshmana marrying into our family after you chose Arjuna over him.” I knew this to be true. Duryodhana always nursed a grudge against me for choosing Arjuna over him but Samba was also dear to me like my own son. He was notorious in the city of Dwarka and much pampered by his mother Satyabhama. So when he abducted Lakshmana, the daughter of Duryodhana from her Swayamvara, Duryodhana and the other Kuru elders at first imprisoned him. “This Yadavas leave no stone unturned to insult us. First that Subhadra refused me and eloped with Arjuna and now their Prince comes to abduct my daughter. Is elopement a trend in your clan, tell me?” He had questioned. Later it was Brother Balarama who went to Hastinapur and pacified everyone and Duryodhana finally agreed to the match.

I slowly shook my head and said, “I understand Brother, you don't need to choose sides. I understand your dilemma. I have already seen how families get divided over power so let's not let that day come to our family where one has to choose sides. My son and I only need your blessings and nothing more.” Balarama rested his hand over my head and said, “Will you be able to forgive your brother for abandoning you at this hour? I cannot see my own kinsmen kill each other and neither will I partake in it. Hence I have decided to go away and meditate while the entire Bharatvarsha cut each other in their own blood. “Tears welled up in my eyes as I clasped his hand “I wish I too had that choice but my son and husband needs me here. Go brother, God only knows in what circumstances we will meet again.” With Brother Balarama not participating anymore all eyes will now turn towards Krishna. I went and told Arjuna, “I cannot go and speak with Krishna because of reasons you know well. Plus, how can I ask him to support his sister and not his daughter-in-law? So its better you go as a warrior and plea to him. And you better do it fast, for if I am correct, the Kauravas must be thinking on the same lines as well and they will go to any lengths to

get the Narayani Army on their side.” Arjuna said, “I am not interested in the Narayani Army but the support of Krishna. But what if he himself leads the Army? So you speak right, I shall leave immediately for Dwarka.”

We all awaited with bated breath for Arjuna’s return. Draupadi paced up and down and looked at me in anger, “So what if Samba married Lakshmana? Will Krishna go against his own sister? I don’t understand why your Brother Balarama could not support us and instead chose to stay away from the war. You do understand if Krishna along with Narayani Army sides with the Kauravas there is no way we can win this war.” Somewhere we both knew who Krishna was but at the same time we also knew that Krishna always stood by his ethics and not his relations. “If God has written doom before it comes then there will be only one option left that is I will have to step inside the battlefield and then they can face each other over my dead body.” Draupadi looked shocked but I wasn’t pioneering such a thought.

Not long ago Gayan, a Gandharva slighted and offended a revered sage when his spit accidentally fell on the palms of the sage while he was flying in his divine chariot. Enraged the sage asked Krishna to punish the Gandharva for his impudence by killing him and Krishna too agreed to it. But Gayan gandharva when he came to know about his impending death in the hands of Krishna, he asked Sage Narada to ask Arjuna to protect him. He said to him, “O valiant warrior, please save me from death. A King is hell bent on killing me and has taken an oath to kill me. Only you can save me from his wrath.” Arjuna asked him a couple of times the name of the King but the Gayan knowing very well Arjuna’s friendship with Krishna avoided it and pleaded, “It is the duty of a Prince to protect the one seeking protection. You are bound by it. Do the duty of a Kshatriya.” Arjuna finally promised him to protect him at any cost. It was only later in the battlefield that both Krishna and Arjuna realised that they were facing each other. Yet bound by their oaths they got ready to take up arms. I rushed to the battlefield and stood in the middle “I don’t know who is going to live and who is going to die but this battle is going to happen over my dead body for I cannot see the two men I love the most, kill each other.” And the battle had to be stopped. But as I told Draupadi this small incident, I knew this time things will be different. So I hoped for a miracle.

Arjuna returned with good news. He said that Krishna had given the option to either choose the Narayani Sena or himself but on the condition that he won't take up arms in the war of Kurushetra. Duryodhana who had reached in his chambers first chose the Narayani Army and Arjuna was more than happy to choose Krishna. I felt overjoyed, "You made the right decision and a wise one at that. No army can match upto my brother whether he picks up his arms or not. Because the greatest weapon my brother wields is not his discus, Sudarshana Chakra, but his mind and knowledge." The rest of the armies of Bharatvarsha too chose allies but the army of Kauravas was far bigger than ours with eleven divisions or Akshaunis and while our Army had just seven (One Akshauni consisted of five lakh warriors). General rules were laid down for the great war for both the parties which consisted of the following terms: The war will not start before sunrise and will end with sunset; no more than one warrior can attack a single warrior; no warrior will kill any warrior who has surrendered, is unarmed or whose back is turned; and no warrior may attack a woman. In addition, no warrior was allowed to participate in unfair warfare and rules specific to each weapon must be followed religiously. Neither any animal who was not a direct threat may be attacked. Only if I knew that all these rules which are now made will be broken one by one and will crumble down during the course of the war.

# THE BATTLE OF KURUSHETRA

The day soon dawned when the great war of Kurushetra will begin. Yudhisthira appointed Dhristadyumna, the Panchala Crown Prince and the brother of Draupadi as the Commander of our Army. While on the Kaurava front, Grandsire Bhishma, a formidable warrior who was undefeated till date was anointed as the Chief Commander of the Kaurava army. I decided to stay in the camp along with Draupadi and Uttara so that we can help in providing medical aid along with the physicians to the wounded soldiers. Although the idea of Uttara in a pregnant state at the battlefield did not seem to be a good idea to me. I tried to reason with her that she should go back to the palace of Virata Kingdom till she had a safe delivery. After all this was the only good news amidst the war zone. But Uttara refused saying, “Mother, I am the wife of a brave warrior and your daughter-in-law. I have learnt from you never to forsake one’s duties, so how can you expect me to sit and relax in the palace while my husband is at war. Don’t worry about my son in the womb, just as my husband learnt the Chakravyuh in your womb, my son will grow up to be a valiant warrior on learning about his father’s accolade in the battlefield.” My heart blew with pride as I kissed her forehead, “Bless you my sweet child. All our hopes are pinned on your son. You cannot imagine how eagerly I am waiting to hold him in my arms. I promise you I shall personally undertake his upbringing once he is born.”

The night before the battle I found my husband restless and sleepless. Arjuna broke down and said, “I am not worried about the size of the Kaurava army, Subhadra. But the people that I have to face. I have grown up in the lap of Grandsire Bhishma, how can I wield my

weapon against him? How can I take up my Gandeeva against the same Guru who taught me how to wield a bow? Against my own brothers and cousins? Is this war really worth it? Am I not putting the life of my dear sons and other people at stake? And for what?" I gently patted him on the shoulder and said, "Brother Krishna has always taught us to abide by our Karma. Now we both know we have reached a juncture from where there is no return. It is not the question of a Kingdom, but the honour of a woman so that no other woman suffers the same fate as that of Draupadi. And we all need to make sacrifices for it." "And yet you are willing to send your only son in the battlefield to fight someone else's battle? Where do you get so much strength, my dear Subhadra?" Arjuna asked me. I wished I could tell him that I had no choice in it. I never did. "Because that is what I have been taught and shapened to do. I am Krishna's sister, your wife and Abhimanyu's mother. However hard it may be, I will fulfill my duties till the last breath. You are a warrior, husband, so be one. If the rules had permitted I would have joined the battle by your side. But still, in case you have any doubts, you know whom to turn to. Now that Krishna has agreed to be your charioteer, ask him to guide your life also like he will guide you in the battlefield." "And who said you won't be in the battlefield?" Arjuna replied. "You are my greatest weapon Subhadra, my warrior Queen. Only a brave woman can bear a brave son. It is your resilience and wisdom that gives me the greatest strength whenever I am in doubt. You are right, I shall seek Krishna to show me the true path."

I later heard that Arjuna did give up his Gandeeva in the battlefield on seeing both the armies and it was Krishna who gave him wisdom about Karma and human life. Arjuna shared with me, "I literally decided to forsake the war Subhadra, but then Krishna gave me the divine knowledge and now I have decided to not let anything deter me from doing my duties." What did Krishna tell him exactly, I was curious. I had to find my brother just like I used to search him whenever there was a doubt in my mind. I found him in his tent writing a letter to Dwarka. "Arjuna told me you gave him divine knowledge and he is now free from all Maya. What did you show him exactly?" Krishna slowly looked at me with a mischievous smile which was so evident in him always, "Aha, so he can't keep a secret, can he? Well your husband literally sat down when I took him in the middle of the battlefield as he

felt fighting against his own kinsmen was no less than committing Adharma. So I showed him the true path that there is nothing right nor wrong in doing one's Karma." But I was not satisfied as I felt there was more to it." "But what did you show him? Ever since he is back, I have seen a change in him by the way he talks about you. Come on brother, share it with me also. Let us mortals also partake in the divine knowledge." "Of Course, with time everyone will be aware of this divine knowledge and any men who follows it will be free of pain and misery. And regarding what I showed him, it is nothing sweet sister that you don't know. Often the biggest answer lies within your own heart. So you just need to seek it. Now go and prepare for the battle tomorrow. Bless your son as he is going to shine in this war like no other warrior."

The Kurushetra war began and each day there was someone or the other who came dead. Wails of women haunted my dreams and both Draupadi and I shared the grief and fear of losing someone near and dear. The first day we lost heavily to the Kaurava armies however the tide changed on the second day. As the war progressed, on the eighth day Iravan, Arjuna's son from the Snake Princess Ulupi fell down in the battlefield. We all grieved at the loss of a young life. But that was the bitter reality of war. In my eyes this was only the beginning. It was important that Grandsire Bhishma must be defeated but we all knew that he was given the boon of Self death (Icha Mrityu) by his father. Which meant until he himself wished to die nobody can kill him. But how to defeat someone when even death cannot defeat him? It was Krishna who advised that Shikhandi, the brother of Draupadi who was actually a female named Amba in her previous birth should be used as a shield on Arjuna's chariot while fighting the war. As per the rules of the war Pitamah Bhishma will never fight against a woman. There were also rumours that Amba was a Princess of Kashi and had sworn revenge to be the cause of Bhishma's death. She had performed austerities and gained boon from Lord Shiva that she will be the cause of Bhishma's death in the next birth.

I did not feel it was the right way to take advantage of someone in an unjust manner. And Arjuna too felt perturbed as he loved Pitamah Bhishma. But Krishna coaxed him saying, "It is the destiny of Shikhandi to be the cause of Bhishma's death. And never forget that Pitamah Bhishma however great and just he may be is not without flaws and by

fighting alongside Duryodhana he is in the camp of Adharma. And to win this war it is vital that he must be put to rest whatever the means be.”

We all agreed in unison. The next day at war, Shikhandi rode with Arjuna in his chariot thus shielding him. Bhishma refused to shoot arrows at him and as a result Arjuna kept attacking him until he fell on the ground with his body covered with arrows. Both Draupadi and I along with Uttara went to pay our respects to the Grandsire of the Kuru race after the conch shell blew signalling the end of that day’s battle. My heart wept at seeing him in this state but as I touched his feet to pay his respects he blessed me saying, “You should be a proud mother to have borne such a brave son. I have seen his valour on the battlefield. Do not mourn for me for victory will be yours.”

“But I never wanted to see our Pitamah on a bed of arrows; none of us wanted to see you in this state. But we have no way out since you had the boon of self death and without your fall our armies cannot defeat the Kauravas. Please forgive my husband.” Even Draupadi’s and Uttara’s eyes were brimming with tears.

Pitamah Bhishma blessed us saying, “Do not cry brave Queens of the Kuru race for I am not dead yet. Your hearts are pure. But the Kuru dynasty has been polluted by Duryodhana and his vile deeds. And I shall not embrace death till I see the dynasty stabilized after the war. But this is the reality of war. It only takes, never gives. I can only bless you all that may God give you all that much strength for what is coming next.”

What Pitamah Bhishma said was completely true. We must all brace ourselves for what is coming next to us. This was only the beginning.

# THE DEATH OF ABHIMANYU

As the war progressed with each day, we lost our men each day. After the fall of Pitamah Bhishma, Guru Drona was appointed the Commander-in-Chief of the Kaurava armies. But it also signalled that Arjuna's arch rival Karna would be now entering the battlefield. In my heart I had a deep respect for Karna. Had Arjuna not slighted him during the display of arms years ago in Hastinapur, Duryodhana would not have befriended him and made him Arjuna's rival. I tried to reason many times with Arjuna that it was not right to belittle or insult someone based on his birth or caste but Arjuna never wanted to hear anything about it.

One day he told me, "Stay out of it, Subhadra. I don't like my wife siding with my enemy. That Suta fellow insulted my Guru and moreover he himself is cursed by his Guru. A person who is abandoned by his own Guru can never be a good person." After that I never tried to argue with Arjuna and after the episode of Draupadi's dishonour, Karna had spelt his own doom by calling a woman whore. But I knew quite well that Duryodhana was using Karna only as a weapon against Arjuna and now with him stepping inside the battle field my heart suddenly became uneasy.

Uttara was in her advanced stage of pregnancy and both me and Draupadi took utmost care of her since Abhimanyu was busy in the battlefield. However he often spoke to me about his dreams of his unborn child. I often soothed my child as he laid his head on my lap after waging war the entire day. Abhimanyu's glory was spreading throughout the entire Kuru camp as the next formidable warrior who is going to surpass even his father.



After his attempt to stop Pitamah Bhishma, the grandsire himself blessed him saying, “O son of Subhadra, you have surpassed even your father. At this tender age such bravery is exemplary. Your name shall live on even long after you are gone.” I felt so proud of my son.

And even Draupadi claimed to love her more than her own five sons. “I don’t have five, I have six sons. One born from your womb Subhadra.” She often used to say laughingly. Already twelve days had passed since the war of Kurushetra began. Sensing my uneasiness Abhimanyu spoke out, “Guru Drona has not taken any vow like Pitamah Bhishma, so we have to be on our toes. In addition, he has vowed to capture Uncle Yudhisthira and I cannot allow that as long as I am alive. Because if uncle Yudhisthira is captured it would mean we lose the entire war unwittingly.”

I too realised that and in my mind a forewarning came that Guru Drona will be trying to come up with something that will catch us off guard. “Be careful my son. I have a bad feeling that tomorrow Guru Drona will be trying to devise something that none of us have even thought of. I don’t want to stop you from battling since that is your duty and Dharma. But I don’t know why I am not having a good feeling about it.”

Abhimanyu smiled and said “Don’t worry mother. I shall be back even before you realise. And as long as Uncle Krishna and father are there, you do not need to worry. You yourself said that there is nothing in this world that Uncle can’t do. So why worry?”

I was also comforted hearing his words. It is true as long as I have my brother and my powerful husband no harm can come to my son. And there are no warriors on this earth who can single handedly defeat my son. But in the morning when we bade our armies farewell for battle even Uttara confided in me, “Mother, I tried to stop your son. I was having nightmares the entire night. This war has already taken much from me. I lost my brother on the first day itself. I cannot bear to lose more.”

I wiped her tears and said, “I understand daughter, but you are a Queen now and wife of a brave warrior. The women of Kuru household are known for their strength and resilience. While the men fight wars on the battlefields, it is we who face the pain. But now you have our future in your womb. So be strong and stay strong.”

I continuously paced in my room as my heart beat fastened as if it was going to break. Both me and Draupadi were receiving constant news from the battlefield. My heart sank when we received news that Guru Drona had devised the Chakravyuh, a complex battle formation which only few knew how to break. From our camp, only Arjuna and brother Krishna knew but Krishna has vowed not to use any arms. So that left only Arjuna. I prayed that no harm should come to my husband and he may lead our armies to victory. But my fears suddenly turned to reality when we received another news that Arjuna was challenged by the Samsaptakhas army who had vowed to either vanquish Arjuna or die in the battlefield.

Accepting their challenge Arjuna was led away from the battlefield. I then understood the entire battle ploy. Guru Drona realised that until Arjuna was there it would be impossible to capture Yudhisthira hence he devised this plan to take him away. I suddenly realised that Abhimanyu knew how to break in the Chakravyuh but alas he didn't know the way out. I cursed myself for having slept on that day when Arjuna was narrating me the technique of Chakravyuh. I realised that my son was in grave danger and I must help him.

Draupadi saw me and suddenly she jumped "Where do you think you are going?"

I tried to put my armour and said, "You don't realise it yet, do you? With Arjuna away my son will now attempt to go inside the Chakravyuh but he doesn't know his way out. My son is in danger Draupadi and I cannot sit here idle. I must protect him, come what may."

Draupadi clasped me "No, stop! No woman has stepped inside the battlefield and we must abide by the rules laid. Do you think my blood has not boiled as our kinsmen have died one by one?" Rules! What rules can we expect from Kauravas who knows nothing except deceit? Draupadi further cajoled me, "Don't worry dear Subhadra. I am sure everything will be fine. Even if Arjuna is not there the rest of the Pandavas, my brothers are there to protect him. And as per rule one warrior can single handedly fight with another warrior. And we know our Abhimanyu is invincible in warfare. So there is nothing to fear." I somehow sat down and prayed to the Gods to listen to a mother's plea.

But what I little knew that that day all rules were broken as my sixteen-year-old son was slaughtered by seven Maharathis together.

The sound of the conch shell heralded the end of the battle for that day and I eagerly waited at the gates for my son. But the sight of our soldiers further worsened my fears as each one came with head bowed down. Dhristadyumna got down from his chariot and came with folded hands “Sister will you forgive your unfortunate brother? I am the Commander and hence was responsible for each life in this army. But all I can say is that your son has made everyone here proud today.”

I could not sense what he was saying as my eyes frantically searched for the chariot of Abhimanyu. Was he upto some mischief again? Yudhisthira and the rest of the Pandavas also got down their eyes glistened with tears. “Where is my son?” I questioned them.

Bhima finally spoke out, “Abhimanyu entered the Chakravyuh and we also followed suit so that we can protect him. But Jayadrata, the king of Sindhu stopped us at the gate of the Chakravyuh. I don’t know from where he got the strength but he somehow kept all of us at bay. Inside the Chakravyuh Abhimanyu fought all alone and the wicked Kauravas when they could not defeat him justly attacked him all together. Guru Drona, Karna, Shakuni, Duryodhana, Aswathama, Dushashana, Kritvarma and Shalya all attacked him at the same time and killed our beloved nephew. Your son has died a hero’s death Subhadra and your name too shall live along with him.”

In a moment my entire world came crashing down. My son, dead! I lovingly touched his dead body as it was brought to me. I did not hear anything what was being said as I saw the beautiful body of my son bearing deep wounds. There was not a single part where he was not struck. Uttara’s wails suddenly broke me up. Poor girl! To be a widow so soon. I stood like a statue as I awaited my brother. How could he let this happen? After what seemed like a long time Krishna and Arjuna came.

Arjuna hadn’t realised by then that his beloved son was no more suddenly broke down at the sight of the battered body of his son. “That wicked Jayadrata! He is responsible for my son’s death. I swear that I shall avenge my son by killing him tomorrow before sunset else I shall walk into fire and perish.” Krishna came to me and put his hand on my shoulder and for the first time I shook it away, “How could you,

brother? Where were you when my son was butchered? Where was your Dharma? Why were the rules broken? People say you are invincible, omnipresent and omniscient. You have revived the dead son of your Guru Sandipani, then please revive my son too. I have no one else. I know that there is something divine in you. Please have mercy on your poor sister.”

Krishna’s eyes were also moist with tears. “I can’t Subhadra. This was meant to happen. I cannot go against the law of nature. There are some things which even I cannot do anything about. You may blame me but you must know the real truth behind the birth of Abhimanyu. And then maybe you will realise why he cannot live more than sixteen years on this earth.” I became confused. Krishna further spoke, “Abhimanyu is the incarnation of the son of Moon-God. When he was asked to be born on this earth, the Moon God agreed that he will allow only sixteen years to be away from his son as he cannot bear a longer separation from him. With his death Abhimanyu has again returned to his original form and re-joined his father.”

“So my son was not mine?”

“No, he will always be known as Subhadranandan-the son of Subhadra. You remember I always told you we are all born for a purpose. Abhimanyu has fulfilled his with his heroic death. Now the entire Kaurava army will be vanquished.”

“Then what is my purpose brother? With the death of my son I feel hopeless and clueless. This battle was never mine yet I lost everything. I pray please do enlighten me. Otherwise I too shall die.” Krishna caught hold of me as I sobbed against his chest. “Subhadra you have a far greater role than any of us. Abhimanyu’s son is in Uttara’s womb and she is too young now. It will be you who has to raise and guide him. The son born will lead the entire Kuru race in the near future and you solely will be his guardian. So now you realise that this dynasty rests on your shoulders.”

I became perplexed. Does this mean more bloodshed? What about Draupadi’s five sons? Won’t they have any children? Krishna gave me a nod and said, “Keep your thoughts to yourself. Do not try to know what is more than necessary.”

## THE FINAL BLOW

However Krishna said and made me understand, for the first time I could not comply with him. I simply could not understand how. I became embroiled in the crossroads of this great family saga. All I ever wanted was a happy family, my husband's love and affection. All I wanted was to see my son growing up but my son was snatched away from me at the tender age of sixteen. He may be the incarnate of the son of Moon God but it was I who bore him for nine months in my womb. I cursed myself for falling asleep years ago when Arjuna was explaining to me the method of breaking through the Chakravyuh. Alas! Had I been awake my son would have been alive today. But what the Kauravas did was also unthinkable. Seven warriors attacking a child and at the same time. I felt fury building inside my veins and I decided it was enough. Arjuna had vowed to kill Jayadratha but I shall kill whatever remained of the Kauravas. If they can break rules, why can't we? I went to my tent and put on my warriors garb and unsheathed my sword. Even if I die, I didn't care, for what use was the life of a motherless child.

I turned and saw Draupadi who had come to offer her condolences. But she stood shocked as she saw me. "O God! What are you up to? You know the rules of the war. Haven't I told you before? No woman is allowed on the battlefield and being a Kuru Queen, you cannot break the rules."

"As if I care." I retorted back. "Don't speak to me about rules. A lot of them have already been broken. They killed my son and that too seven warriors together? Was killing a warrior who did not possess any weapon right? Wasn't that a rule also? Since you, brother Krishna and Arjuna won't do anything I shall avenge my son by annihilating the entire Kauravas. And let me see whether Karna or Duryodhana can stop

me. Even if I die, I shall embrace death willingly.” Tears were trickling down Draupadi’s cheeks.

She stepped in my path, “I won’t allow it. I am not allowing you to tarnish the name of the Pandavas. We have always abided by the rules and Dharma. I know you are heartbroken and so am I. I considered your son no less than mine but just think what will people say when they hear what Krishna’s sister and Arjuna’s wife have done? Please Subhadra, I beg you. Please stop!”

I didn’t realise what came out of my mouth next. Maybe it was the years of suffering alone without my husband or the pain of losing my only child. “What will you understand Draupadi? This entire bloodshed is on your shoulders. You are teaching me about vengeance and yet did you let go of your vengeance? Every person who is dead is because of you. It was you who insulted Duryodhana by calling him a blind man’s son and he took revenge by disrobing you. But it was I who paid the price so heavily. I was separated from my husband and I brought up my son single handedly. And look, today he was also taken away from me and for what? For your vengeance. You have five sons and I had only one and I lost him too. If you had lost your sons you would have understood my pain. And when finally you are crowned the empress you can sit on the throne and rejoice with your sons. I don’t want any of it.”

Draupadi’s face suddenly turned white. I too realised the mistake I had made but it was too late. Alas, I wished I could have taken away those words if only I knew that I was not a mere mortal. I retracted and embraced Draupadi and said, “O sister, forgive me. I spoke in haste. I didn’t mean any of it. After all I am a mere childless woman. Naturally words spoken in anger should not be taken seriously.”

Draupadi calmly said, “No you are right. I am caught in my own web. I am responsible for all this, for every dead body that is being fallen. But please don’t curse me my dear Subhadra for let me confess I am now scared for what comes next. I have already lost my father in the battlefield. I feel it was I who pushed him to death. Iravan and Uttar have also died at such a young age. I guess all mothers must be cursing me.”

We both stood still with tears falling down as we wept at what fate has brought upon us. Brother Krishna was right, if war comes no one

can escape whether you are in it or out of it. I mourned my son as the last rites were being performed. I wept as I could no longer see his beautiful face or hold him in my embrace. Arjuna too looked broken as he lit the pyre. All the great warriors like Guru Drona, Karna, Duryodhana came to pay their respects.

Guru Drona came to me with folded hands and said, "I do not deserve your forgiveness daughter neither that of Arjuna. Being the Commander of the Kaurava army, I am responsible for every decision taken on the battlefield. But it was impossible to defeat your son through fair means and as long as I am alive I will try to protect Duryodhana. Only God knows that I am truly ashamed of whatever I did and there is no forgiveness for it. I shall rot in hell for sure." I did not know whether I should shout at Guru Drona, the formidable teacher of the Kuru Race or have pity on this old man who was so entangled towards his duty for the Kuru Kingdom. At that moment I could barely speak. I was proud that my son had made even the formidable warriors bow to him and I wanted him to be proud of me.

At night, I kept on watching the moon which was shining brilliantly. For a moment, I wondered was my son really the son of the Moon God? Did he return to his abode? Was he watching me from the above? I remembered when he was a small baby I used to sing him lullaby under the moon and he used to be overjoyed watching the moon. I felt pity and sad at the thought of Uttara. Alas, the poor girl had become a widow at such a young age. Suddenly I felt a hand on my back. It was my husband Arjuna. "I am defeated, wife." His voice was hoarse. "I could not give you any happiness and today I could not even protect our son. But I swear on my dead son, I shall avenge him. Tomorrow if I am unable to kill Jayadrata who was responsible for his death, I shall set myself alight."

I was shocked as I stood numb. I took his hands in mine and said, "No death is easy. You cannot die but Jayadrata has to die. I have lost my son I am not going to lose you. I know he is our brother-in-law but he cannot be forgiven. Be the man that I know you are. You are the father of a brave son who fought till his last breath even with the wheel of a chariot. We cannot be defeated."

Jayadrata was the king of Sindhu but he was married to Dushala, the only sister of Kauravas and that made him our brother-in-law. Draupadi

told me that during their vanvaas, he tried to abduct her but the Pandavas stopped him. Later they let him go but not without shaving his head. Jayadrata was furious and swore revenge on the Pandavas. He did severe penance and pleased Lord Shiva who granted him the boon that on a single day he would be able to defeat all the Pandavas except Arjuna. It was the effect of this very boon that he was able to keep the four Pandavas from entering the Chakravyuh on the day of the battle leading to my son's death. Arjuna was kept engaged in battle with the Trigata Army as a part of Drona's strategy.

Arjuna avenged Abhimanyu as he swore. Arjuna used the Pasupatastra, the divine weapon gifted by Lord Shiva to serve Jayadrata's head and make it fall on his father's lap instead of the ground. Because Jayadrath's father had received a boon that whoever will kill his son and get his head to fall on the ground, he would himself be doomed in an instant. And the aged King who was shocked to see his son's head on his lap got up in a rush making the head fall on the ground leading him to burst into flames. I breathed a sigh of relief as I felt my son's death to be avenged. Somewhere I believed that this war was slowly turning us cold hearted as one by one rules started breaking down. Krishna told me, "Sometimes you need to make bigger sacrifices for the greater good. Just like a wound which is festering needs to be cleaned and it will pain yet it is necessary for it to heal. Similarly whoever is supporting Adharma and Kauravas needs to be defeated, although they may be good."

But when Guru Drona fell, even I could not believe my ears. Because Yudhisthira the eldest Pandava who had never lied or did anything wrong had to lie to save the battle. Yudhisthira came back with his face full of remorse as Draupadi and I awaited the return of our armies. "There was no other way out Panchali. Guru Drona was creating havoc on our army and the only way to stop him was to tell him that his son Ashwasthama was dead." But how can Aswasthama be dead? We all knew that Ashwasthama was no less than a demi-god. Not only he was a skilled warrior and a Maharathi but he also possessed a gem on his forehead which gave him power over all living beings inferior to humans and protected him from hunger, thirst and fatigue.

Bhima then said, "On the advice of Krishna, I killed an elephant named Aswasthama but Guru Drona refused to believe us and came to



Yudhisthira because he knew he would never lie. And Yudhisthira had to say yes.”

Yudhisthira bowed his head in shame “I lied to my own teacher, my Guru. But Krishna said it was necessary. Guru Drona, as soon as he heard this sat down in meditation and your brother Dhristadyumna incapacitated him by his sword.”

I was furious with Dhristadyumna, the brother of Draupadi and our Commander but then what could be done. By now the war had crossed all limits, so any thought was futile. But what nagged me was this feeling that Aswathama was not going to sit silently. He is sure to strike back but the question was how. We need to be very careful as I felt this was the lull before the storm.

# THE BIRTH OF PARIKSHIT

**F**or me the battle had turned meaningless with the death of my son. I once thought to retire to the forests and spend my days in penance as I no longer wished the comforts of a Palace. But with Uttara being in the advanced stage of her pregnancy I could not forsake her. The poor girl became a victim of the war having lost her husband and her entire family. We both comforted each other for the sake of the unborn child.

One by one all the sons of the Kuru clan fell down to the war. Ghatotkach, the beloved Rakshasa son of Bhima was also sacrificed as Karna used his divine weapon Shakti on him. But we were most shocked when we all discovered that Karna was no other than the son of Mother Kunti and the eldest brother of the Pandavas. He was born of the Sun-God by the same boon which the rest of the Pandavas were born with but Mother Kunti had to cast him away since she was unwed then. It came to light only after the great warrior fell by the hands of Arjuna while he was trying to fix his broken wheel. Alas! It was no use trying to count the number of rules being broken in this war as both parties broke every rule of warfare. First Pitamah Bhishma, then my son Abhimanyu, Guru Drona and now Karna. We all went to the battlefield to pay our respects to the great warrior who had lived his life selflessly and sacrificed everything for the sake of his friendship. For me Karna was a doomed warrior who was never given credit by this society for being raised in a low caste.

Yudhisthira when discovered the truth behind his birth, he was furious at Mother Kunti for having deceived them. “O mother! What have you done? You have made us unwittingly the murderers of our

own brother. Where will we wash our great sin now? For your this act I hereby curse all womenfolk that they will never be able to hide any secret henceforth.” He cursed her.

Krishna later shared with me, “I knew about Karna’s secret and so did Bhishma. Hence Pitamah Bhishma asked him to stay away from war. I too went to him and revealed his secret and asked him to join the Pandava’s army but Karna’s friendship mattered more to him even more than his life. He chose not to betray his friend Duryodhana. Hence Karna will always be remembered as Daanveer (a philanthropist). There can be no better example of sacrifice than that of Karna.”

After the fall of King Shalya, only Kritvarma, Guru Kripacharya and Aswathama, the son of Guru Drona survived from the Kaurava armies. Duryodhana lay wounded as Bhima broke his thigh in a mace fight. Although Brother Balarama suddenly arrived at the battlefield and was furious at this act but Krishna justified that Bhima was only fulfilling his promise which he made during Draupadi’s disrobing.

There was great merriment in our camp that night as now we were sure of our victory. I was happy with the ray of hope that now my Abhimanyu’s son could be born any moment and I eagerly awaited his arrival. Krishna suddenly suggested that being victors we must sleep in the Kaurava camp tonight. I retired to my tent when I was suddenly up in the middle of the night by a woman’s wails. I recognised the voice to be that of Draupadi and it was coming from the camp of her sons. I rushed out as soon as my feet could carry me and found her lying on the floor. There were five bodies all bathed in blood. It was her five sons! But who murdered them in the middle of the night?

“Look Subhadra! I have lost everything. My both brothers have been slaughtered by that wicked Aswathama and he ruthlessly killed my children in their sleep.” Saying this she wailed and shrieked again. I tried to console her as now we had both become childless. The pangs of guilt suddenly engulfed me as I remembered what I had said. I loved her sons as my own and she had loved mine. I looked around at my brother but didn’t say anything. Krishna slowly said, “Aswathama is blind with rage as he believes we killed his father with deceit. He wanted to extract revenge by killing the Pandavas hence I asked the Pandavas to sleep in a different camp tonight. He killed Draupadi’s sons thinking it to be them.”

It was the maximum that I could stand now. I took my sword and said to Arjuna “You failed to protect our sons. Today our entire clan is childless. Why did you let that Aswathama go? Simply because he is your Guru’s son? I have accepted that all rules were broken in this war but to kill someone in his sleep is unacceptable and without Dharma. If you all still stand here while we mourn our sons then I will take up arms and show him what a woman can do.” Bhima stopped me and said, “That won’t be necessary. We have suffered enough. I won’t let that Aswathama escape. I will kill him with my own hands.” Saying this, he along with Arjuna, Krishna and the rest of the Pandavas left in search of Aswathama. I tried to revive Draupadi as she had fainted. Poor woman, all her life she had suffered and now she had lost her sons too. After sometime, Draupadi regained her senses, “I am served right. I wished this war and see it has taken everything from me. You were right I was blind with rage. O Subhadra, what am I supposed to do now? What use is this Kingdom for me? For whom shall I live?” I consoled her saying, “Don’t worry we still have hope left in the form of Uttara’s son. Think of him as your own son. We shall raise him and spend our days remembering our sons.” Uttara too consoled Draupadi when suddenly a bright light came from the sky and before we could react it hit Uttara’s womb and she shrieked in pain. I was shocked as Draupadi left her own grief and called for the Physicians and midwives. But I could sense that this was no delivery pain. Something is seriously wrong. Uttara started howling and bleeding as if she was hit by an arrow. The Physicians were also clueless and my worst fears now started coming true. What if she miscarries? What will happen to our family lineage? No this cannot happen. I started praying to the Gods. The physician said to me fear stricken, “Your highness we fear the child is stillborn. It must have died in its womb.”

Krishna and the rest of the Pandavas came rushing. I told everyone about the condition of Uttara when Arjuna said, “Aswathama had used the divine weapon Brahmastra on the womb of Uttara. We caught up on him and both of us fired the Brahmastra. When Sage Vyasa intervened, I asked my Brahmastra to return but he didn’t know the technique so he changed the course of the weapon towards the womb of Uttara. He did this deliberately to extract revenge upon us.”

Now there is only one hope left. I went with folded hands to Krishna and caught his feet. “O Lord have mercy on me! I have lost everything and now if I lose the last trace of my son too I won’t be able to survive. You told me about the law of nature, I agreed but is this right to kill an unborn child? What fault was his? What fault is of Uttara? Haven’t we suffered enough?” Krishna caught me and wiped my tears and said, “Don’t worry, Aswathama has paid for his sins. He has now begot a curse which will make him roam this earth for eternity. As long as I am alive I won’t allow any harm to your grandson. The child shall live and he shall be named Parikshit.” Saying this Krishna revived the child and Parikshit was born.

# END OF KURUSHETRA AND THE FALL OF DWARKA

The war of Kurushetra soon ended with the death of Duryodhana. We were victorious at last but none of us were happy. The wails of the widows and parents haunted us in our dreams. The entire Kuru clan was destroyed along with many other Kingdoms. This war changed the map of the entire Bharatvarsha. The aged King Dhritarastra surrendered and invited us to Hastinapur. I was pensive and worried as how him and Mother Gandhari. Gandhari was a devout wife who had blindfolded herself her entire life to share the pain of her husband. She was also an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva and such was her devotion and power that her eyes beheld a power which converted the entire body of Duryodhana invincible when she laid her sight on him during the war. Only his thighs remained uncovered and that proved to be his vulnerable point which later Bhima broke during their mace fight. Sometimes I feel even Krishna broke too many rules and we won this war in an unjust manner. The day before we left for Hastinapur I went and spoke with my brother, “You know I have never ever questioned your judgement. Even after bearing the loss of my only child I took it in my stride. Even after knowing your unflinching support for Draupadi I never doubted you or felt jealous of her. But I don’t want you to come along with us to Hastinapur.”

Krishna looked surprised and said, “Is this the future Queen of Bharatvasrha talking or my sister?” “Neither,” I replied. “I will and always remain your sister. People will know me to be your sister rather

than the wife of warrior Arjuna. Because that is who I am. But you know very well how we have won this war. And I fear that maybe the aged King Dhritarastra will insult you. Because they have lost their hundreded sons in this war and that too due to unfair means. And I can't bear to see you insulted."

Krishna's eyes glistened softly as he said, "I am far above any insult or respect dear one. Yes they have lost their hundred sons but haven't you lost you only son too? Or Draupadi her five sons? Haven't Aunt Kunti lost her eldest son? We all have lost something or the other. But yes I do agree we had to break some rules but if it is for a just cause so be it. Without it this war would have never been over. The Kauravas began it we finished it. But my work here is far from over. The Pandavas need me and until the Coronation of Yudhisthira I will be here." But I was not convinced. "I am still saying, this is not a good idea. How long will you think for others? You have your own Kingdom to look after. I am not having a good feeling about this. Infact I don't wish to face either King Dhritarastra or Queen Gandhari let alone pay respects."

Krishna broke into a laughter as he clasped me and said, "You think too much Subhadra. Okay fair enough, after this coronation I will leave the fate of the Kuru Clan in your hands. And I will return to Dwarka." Somehow beneath his laughter I could sense another storm brewing.

After paying ablutions to all the dead and departed we finally reached Hastinapur. The city wore a desolate look and people were crying as they mourned the death of its many kinsmen. I got down from the carriage along with Arjuna as we made our way to the chambers of the King. We all touched his feet seeking blessings and he put his hand on our head.

However, the blind king suddenly said, "Where is Bhima? Come to me my son let me hug you and bless you." However, Krishna stopped him in the middle and pointed to an iron statue of Bhima which was there in the hall to put it in his place. We all looked surprised but without making any sound Bhima dragged the statue and put it near the blind King. King Dhritarastra hugged the statue and lo and behold the statue broke in pieces as he cried out, "Duryodhana my son."

I was shocked and filled with disbelief that the aged King was filled with so much fury underneath that he wanted to kill Bhima. Later he

started crying. "What have I done? I am so sorry Bhima, but I was angry that you killed my son by unfair means in the mace fight. Alas my hands have become bloodied with the blood of my own nephew." Krishna spoke gently, "Don't worry your highness. Bhima is fairly well as you broke his statue not him. I knew that you were filled with grief and anger hence I asked him to put his statue in place of him. This war has already taken too much. Forget your grief and anger and have peace in your heart. Accept the Pandavas as your own and bless them."

King Dhritarashtra then felt relieved and blessed us all lovingly, "You are right Krishna. I was always blinded by my ego. I felt that I was deceived for being born blind and my birth right to rule was taken away and given to my brother Pandu. Hence my sons became evil. Had I heeded your offer for peace this bloodshed would have been averted." I felt happy that all the misgivings were now done with and we all began the preparations for the Coronation in full swing.

The city was richly decorated and people started making merriment. After all it was a moment of joy after a long period of war. Priests were called from far and wide and Sage Vyasa himself presided over the Coronation. Draupadi was richly dressed as that of an Empress and she coaxed me too "You must look regal Subhadra. I know you are still pining for the loss of your son but we have our future in little Parikshit. I miss my sons too but let us for a day be happy and enjoy the moment." It was not that I was not happy, but my mind was elsewhere.

When I went to Gandhari to pay my respects I could sense that she was still grieving and blamed my brother for everything "I hope Subhadra you understand the pain of a mother. You have suffered it once, but for me every time news came with the death of one of my son everytime I felt dying myself. Out of my hundred sons if only one could have survived or left to survive I would have accepted it. I know they were vile and evil but they supported my eldest son Duryodhana and that was their only fault." I tried to console her. "Mother, what's done is done. Let us all share each other's grief and freshly start our family. Think of the Pandavas as your own sons and forgive them. Your son insulted and dishonoured a woman in an open court. Even when we tried to pursue peace he refused to give us even five villages. So war was the only option left. We didn't want to fight, none of us did, but we were forced for it."



However, I doubted Queen Gandhari was any how convinced by my words as she spoke in a tone I could hardly recognise “And we women pay the price for it isn’t it? In this great political game what are we but merely pawns. It is we who bear the pain and suffering for the misdeeds of men. I sacrificed my entire life, lived a life of darkness for the sake of my husband. I made the greatest example of devotion and look what I got in return!”

After the coronation ceremony Krishna stood up from his seat and started paying his respects to all the elders. When he touched Queen Gandhari’s feet she said “I have been waiting for this moment for a long time Krishna when you will come to me after this massacre. Are you happy and satisfied now? O Krishna, I know you are not a normal person. You are the supreme divine himself. Then why did you let this carnage happen? If you wished you could have stopped this war. You could have stopped this destruction. There is nothing that you cannot do. But you refused and look at me. At this old age, I am left childless. If you had left even one son of mine alive as my support while I grow old I would have forgiven you. But now you shall too witness the same pain as I am suffering it now. I curse you that your entire Clan will kill each other just like my clan was destructed by killing each other. Your golden Kingdom will immerse itself in sea and no one will survive. And you will die alone and desolate in the hands of a hunter.”

I could not believe my ears at the words of Queen Gandhari. I could not control myself and confronted her “O Mother what have you done? How can you blame my brother for everything when your own sons were evil? Did you ever try to control your vile son’s acts? And you cursed my entire family and Kingdom. Please I pray to you return your curse. You are known to be a devotee of Lord Shiva and a devout woman. I pray please forsake your curse!”

Krishna caught me and said “The curse cannot be returned. A curse of such a gentle soul and pure woman can never be returned.” Then looking at Gandhari he smiled “I accept every word of yours mother. In time, each word that you spoke shall come true.” I could not hear anything further as I blacked out.

When my eyes opened I saw both Arjuna and Krishna at my bedside. Krishna firmly spoke, “As I said after Coronation, I will leave for Dwarka. So I have come to bid you farewell. But you should not

have insulted Queen Gandhari in that manner. It was all predestined and we must all learn to accept it. My work here is done now, bid me farewell.”

I hugged my brother dearly as I started crying “Take me with you. Let me face it together with you. You cannot abandon me brother!” Arjuna understood and left the chambers as we brother and sister stood silently.

“I am not abandoning you Subhadra. How can one abandon one’s own part? You are a part of mine and with time will return to me. Have I ever told you how proud I am of you? Your bravery and resilience in difficult times was my greatest strength. And hence dear one, I bless you we shall be remembered and worshipped together. But now brave Subhadra, bid me farewell. Let go of all ties and emotions. Recognise the truth!” I touched his feet for the last time as I looked at the peacock feather in his crown. He took it out and gave it to me. “Promise me brother, that when the time comes for me to go you will be there to show me the way.” Krishna nodded.

I could not sleep well since that day. Even Arjuna and I shared our fear for the curse by Gandhari. King Dhritarastra along with Queen Gandhari, Vidura and Mother Kunti soon retired to the forest where they soon left for their heavenly abode. Time soon went by and Parikshit was also growing up fast. Yudhisthira and Draupadi often discussed it with me that they should hand over the crown to Parikshit. One day, Daruka a Yadava arrived from Dwarka with grave concern.

He told Arjuna “Krishna has requested you to come immediately with me to Dwarka and save the citizens of Dwarka as time is very less.” I was concerned and full of fear as I remembered the curse of Gandhari “What has happened? Tell me everything. Where is brother Balarama? Where are the rest of the Yadavas? Are my parents well?” Daruka broke down crying “No your Highness! Everything is finished. A few days back a lot of bad omens started happening. The Sudarshana Chakra, the Panchjanya conch shell of Krishna and the Plough of Balarama all disappeared. Seeing these omens Krishna advised everyone to go to Prabhas on a pilgrimage. There every Yadava started merry making and drinking and in that inebriated state a fight broke out in between Satyaki and Kritvarma. Soon everyone became part of the fray and started killing each other. The curse of Gandhari started

coming true. Your eldest brother Balarama gave up his body in meditation when he heard about it. Your father also followed suit. The entire Yadava clan is destroyed and Krishna said that soon it will be his time too. So he sent me to ask Arjuna to take away the remaining people.”

My parents...dead! My dear brother Balarama no more! And Krishna will also leave me! I gasped for breath when Arjuna holded me, “Do not worry Subhadra. I shall bring everyone back safe here. I cannot fail Krishna. You are his sister, be strong!” Although Arjuna said and went I knew that the earthly life of Krishna was over. As predicted by Gandhari, Krishna’s foot was struck by an arrow of a hunter who thought it to be that of a deer. All consolations failed me. Draupadi too lamented the loss “I did not feel this much pain even when my brother died in Kurushetra as I feel today on Krishna leaving us. Dear Subhadra you are what remains of him in our midst.” I wiped my tears and said, “No Krishna has not gone anywhere.” as I touched the peacock feather which he gave to me years ago. “Krishna is everywhere if you can see him and believe him. This is only a journey and not the destination.”

I closed myself behind the doors and wailed loudly. I have lost my entire family, my parents, my beloved brothers, Rukmini, Satyabhama, My nephews, all gone. Alas! the curse of Queen Gandhari came true. Krishna’s sojourn on this earth has come to an end. What am I supposed to do without him? But then I remembered his peacock feather and held it in my hand. I remembered when during my childhood, my mother used to send me away from the room when the wives of Krishna asked her to tell them about his leelas in Vrindavan and she thought it was not appropriate for me to listen. She shooed me away.

However naughty as I was and in awe of my brother as I tiptoed outside the room to listen to the tales of the Leelas. I never noticed when Brother Balarama and Krishna came up beside me to see what I was upto and soon we three got immersed in the tales retold by my mother. Tales that spoke of unadulterated love and affection. Devarshi Narad, the Divine Sage came to visit us and found the three of us standing lost. He remarked, “May you all three stand like this and remembered and worshipped for the greater benefit of mankind.” So without my brothers I was nothing but I hoped someday we will complete the picture for the greater benefit of mankind.

## PANDAVA'S DEPARTURE

Arjuna failed to protect the remaining people of Dwarka as well as the sixteen thousand wives of Krishna. The robbers attacked them and looted and plundered them and even the weapons and great bow of Gandeev failed to work. Arjuna returned as a desolate man. For days he refused to step outside his room even though we all coaxed him. In a way his pride of being the greatest warrior was humbled. I always knew and accepted that Arjuna was not the greatest archer, he was made one by Guru Drona.

There were many others including Karna who was at par with him but Arjuna's pride never allowed him to see it. "How could I fail Krishna? He was always there for us when we needed him and I couldn't defend his wives and people. I failed you. I am not worth living anymore." I consoled him "It is not like that. With time everything changes. Nothing is permanent. Even the Sun sets at its destined time. Your valour and bravery can never be forgotten but that does not imply that tomorrow someone will not be better than you. I suggest you should go and seek counsel from Sage Vyasa. He will be able to guide and soothe your troubled heart."

Arjuna followed my advice and along with him the rest of the Pandavas went to Sage Vyasa. I was busy chatting with Draupadi and Uttara when the guard announced the arrival of Yudhishthira and the rest of the Pandavas. Yudhishthira came and spoke first "We went and sought counsel from Sage Vyasa. After the departure of Krishna none of us is here at peace but we were not able to understand or comprehend the situation.

Sage Vyasa said that all men are born with a purpose on this earth and our purpose here is served. So I have decided to hand over the

responsibilities and Kingdom to Parikshit and retire to the forests. The rest of the Pandavas have also decided to follow suit. Draupadi spoke out “I am nothing without you all. So my role here is also complete. I will also go along with you all.” This time I decided not to be left behind. I went and told Arjuna “This time please don’t leave me. I have no family. My brothers are dead and my Kingdom under the sea. I won’t be able to suffer the pangs of separation from you again. I will also follow the same path as you.” However fate had other plans for me.

Sage Vyasa soon arrived at our court for the Coronation of Parikshit as the new King of Hastinapur. When he heard that I too will retire he calmly told me, “I would not advise the same daughter. Parikshit will be a new King and will look forward for guidance. Without the Pandavas and Krishna you are the only person who can lead and guide him. I know you have suffered and sacrificed a lot for this dynasty but your responsibilities are far from over. Will you leave your Kingdom in the hands of wolves to prey upon?”

I was strung by the words of the great Sage. “I disagree Holy One. Parikshit has his mother Uttara who can guide him in our absence. What am I without my husband? How can you even ask me to survive? I have lived in separation for thirteen years, lost my son, my family, please do not ask me to make another sacrifice.”

Vyasa gently placed his hand over me and said “Only a woman of great strength can undergo such pain and sacrifice. But Uttara is naive and won’t be able to defend this great Kingdom which so painstakingly Yudhisthira and the Pandavas have built.” Yudhisthira too seconded Sage Vyasa, “The Holy One is correct Subhadra. If you leave this Kingdom defenceless, the entire sacrifice of Krishna, our sons, our kinsmen will go in vain. Had Krishna been here he too would have said the same. There is no one else who can shoulder this responsibility. Parikshit will be the King but he has a lot to learn. It will be you who can lead this Kingdom and Dynasty.

I don’t know what game fate always plays with me. I cried as Arjuna cast his royal garments and dressed simply as a mendicant. “So this is it!” I said. “Our love story is finally coming to an end as we go our separate ways.”

“Sshhh!” Arjun put a finger on my lips.

“No it can never end. Subhadrarjuna will always be remembered in times to come. I may depart in body but my heart will always linger in you. I could never do justice to you although I wanted to. I was bound by my duties towards my brothers and Dharma. And even when death comes which it will it will be your face which will be in my mind. The world will always know you as my favourite wife. My Warrior Queen!”

I bade a tearful farewell to Draupadi and the rest of the Pandavas. Draupadi hugged me crying “Take care of Hastinapur and Parikshit. You are now a Queen Mother and a good one I hope. I can never repay your debt or that of Krishna. You sacrificed your son in a war that was not yours. You loved me like your own sister. God knows I have made mistakes and I am now repenting for it.”

For the last time Uttara and Parikshit also took blessings from everyone. And slowly Arjuna looked at me for a final time as we both cried before the chariot sped away. I closed myself in my chambers and let my tears finally flow away incessantly.

## EPILOGUE

**A**fter a few weeks we received news that the Pandavas along with Draupadi left for their heavenly abode. Arjuna had given away his prized bow Gandheeva as well as all his divine weapons to the water God Varuna before they started their ascent to heaven. Sage Vyasa said that they travelled across Himalayas finally to Mount Sumeru which was considered to be the direct route to reach heaven. Both Parikshit, Uttara and I were eager to know what happened to my husband and our family.

I said, “Holy One please tell me what happened during their journey to heaven. All the Pandavas and Draupadi were virtuous people so no doubt heaven is deserving for them.” The great sage slowly nodded his head, “No it is not like that. Except Yudhisithira none of the Pandavas were without flaws in their earthly life. Draupadi was the first one to die.” I was shocked and surprised. Draupadi who was divine by birth, born from fire what flaw could she possess? All her life she remained virtuous and suffered incessantly.

Sage Vyasa continued, “I know you all will not take this news pleasantly but the truth was Draupadi loved Arjuna more than the rest of her husbands and was partial towards him. This flaw in her character and nature made her die and she could not ascend in her mortal body.” I knew somewhere in my heart that although Draupadi loved Arjuna he loved me. After all it was he who had won her years ago in Swayamvar.

Sage Vyasa further said that Nakula and Sahadeva were the next to die since they suffered from the flaw of pride and vanity. I shuddered as I braced myself to hear what was coming next. “Arjuna thought himself to be the best archer in the world, thought no one was in equal with him. So he too fell on the way and so did Bhima who suffered from the flaw of gluttony.

It was only Yudhishtira alone who reached heaven in his mortal body.” Hearing the words of Sage Vyasa I realised now that I have become a widow. My husband is no more and hence I casted away all my royal clothes and finery and decked myself as a widow and soon I knew my time will also come.

I knew that soon my time was also coming to a close. I taught Parikshit all that I could and the young King soon became a formidable force in the entire Bharatvarsha. I called Uttara to my chambers one day “Uttara my duties here are done. Parikshit has now become an able King and this dynasty is also safe now. Now I will retire to the forests and spend the rest of my days in penance and meditation.” Uttara became aghast at my news.

Over the years she has become more of a daughter to me than my daughter-in-law. She used to look after my comforts and serve me like a daughter. Parikshit also used to take all decisions only after counselling with me. Uttara fell at my feet, “O Mother, please don’t leave us. What are we without you? Parikshit is still young and I have been under your care ever since I married your son. I cannot manage everything alone.” But I stroked and kissed her forehead, “It is time to meet my brother and my husband. I have long been separated from them. Please do not stop me this time.”

Parikshit too cajoled and begged me to stay but I was steadfast this time. “Rule well and remember what your uncles and I have taught you. Always try to imbibe the cultures of your great ancestors. Respect your mother and heed her counsel always. Always upright your dharma.”

Parikshit touched my feet and with folded hands said, “The Kuru race will always be indebted for your sacrifice. I will always try to bring honour to your lineage.” I gave away my belongings to the people as I made way to the forests. The calm and soothing nature of the trees, foliage and nature soothed my overburdened heart. I built a small hut and spent my time meditating on the Supreme Lord. My entire life started coming back to me in flashbacks.

My childhood, the time spent with my parents, my lovely brothers, Draupadi, Arjuna and my beloved Abhimanyu. It was at this time when the voice of Krishna awoke me. I was surprised to see him. He smiled and holds out his hand for me as I took it. “Am I dreaming I asked?” To which he replied. “No you are not. What is the difference between



dream and reality?” He once again gave his mischievous smile “It is time for the part to submerge into the whole.” I did not understand but saw a warm glow evolving all around me. I felt peaceful. “You have come for me at last as you had promised. “It has been so long and I am now tired.”

“Of course I had to come I had only one thing of me left on this earth and with due time I had to take it back.” So that means... does it mean? Krishna grew more and more radiant and I could no longer see my body. “Krishna what illusion is this?” Krishna laughed and said “You are illusion yourself Yogmaya. You simply forgot yourself. You are my cosmic illusion. Love me or hate me, but we have always been together.” Krishna smiled and said, “You remembered what Sage Narada said to us during your childhood.”

“Yes?” I asked.

“So we three will always be together and worshipped and remembered together. People have known you as Warrior and Mother now they will know you as a Goddess too.” I became all the more surprised, “So does that also mean I am divine? I am a part of you?”

“Shhh....you ask too many questions. Lets go home.”

I looked below and saw the Ganges and the Himalayas and Hastinapur. I now understood what was my role in this great saga. A mighty Kingdom which was laid by King Bharat saw innumerable bloodshed and yet again rose to triumph. A Kingdom where men played each other and shapened by its strong women. A Kingdom which brought the entire Bharatvarsha to the brink of destruction. A Kingdom which has now been passed on safely to its next generation. Yes that was my role to save this Kingdom from complete annihilation. I now understood what my brother was saying all these years. I am now happy and at peace as the warmth started increasing and engulfing me. This is my legacy and it will remain so in the coming days.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Krishna's sister is a mythological fiction on the life and story of Princess Subhadra in the backdrop of the great war of Mahabharat and the sacrifice and the pain that she went through. It also explores the relationship she shared with her brother and mentor Lord Krishna as well as her husband Arjuna and co-wife Draupadi. Subhadra is also worshipped as a deity at Jagannath Puri, one of the holiest shrines in India. Priyanka Bhuyan has been doing freelancing since her college days in various newspapers and magazines. Her debut book-Kaleidoscope of Love, a collection of short stories is on the varied emotions of love and was published this year itself. A corporate communications professional she is from the beautiful green state of Assam and Guwahati-the place she calls her home. Her first book Kaleidoscope of Love is a collection of short stories dealing with various facets of love and human relations. Reading has been her passion ever since childhood, apart from traveling and music. A travel blogger you can follow her at [girlsliketotravel.com](http://girlsliketotravel.com). Currently in a workaholic phase, she has her parents, brother and dog as her family.

[www.girlsliketotravel.com](http://www.girlsliketotravel.com)

authorpriyanka

priyanka.bhuyan1

priyankabhuya16