

RISE OF KALI

DURYODHANA'S MAHABHARATA



Yudhishtira to Drupada:

Dharma is subtle and we do not understand it. We faithfully follow the path tread by our predecessors. My voice does not speak untruth, nor does my mind dwell in *adharma*.

Duryodhana to Krishna (*Sabha Parva*):

I know what (your) *dharma* is. I know what you call *adharma* is. Yet I follow my heart. If you are Janardhana, it is you who dwell in my heart and make me do what I feel. Is it not my Kshatriya *dharma* to protect what is mine?

Krishna to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

O Partha, that intelligence which is covered by darkness, believes that *adharma* is *dharma* and gets all meanings backwards. That is ignorant intelligence.

Bhishma to Yudhishtira (*Anusashana Parva*):

But it is not always easy for mere mortals to arrive at *dharma-vinischaya* (definition of *dharma*). Only *kala* (time or Yama, the God of Time or *Yamam*), knows what is *dharma* and *adharma*.

Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

I AM TIME.

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AJAYA

Epic of the Kaurava Clan

BOOK II

ANAND NEELAKANTAN

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To the loving memory
of my beloved mother,
D. Chellammal Neelakantan,
who left us on Thiruvonam day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I WAS BORN IN A QUAIN little village called Thripunithura, on the outskirts of Cochin, Kerala. Located east of mainland Ernakulam, across Vembanad Lake, this village had the distinction of being the seat of the Cochin royal family. However, it was once more famous for its hundred-odd temples, the various classical artists it produced, and its music school. I remember many an evening listening to the faint rhythm of *chendas* from the temples and the notes of the flute escaping over the rugged walls of the school of music. However, in recent times, Gulf money and the rapidly expanding city of Cochin have wiped away all remaining vestiges of that old world charm. The village has evolved into the usual, unremarkable, suburban hellhole, clones of which dot India.

Growing up in a village with more temples than was necessary, it was little wonder that mythology fascinated me. Ironically, I was drawn to the anti-heroes. Life went on...I became an engineer, joined the Indian Oil Corporation, moved to Bangalore, married Aparna, and welcomed my daughter Ananya, and son, Abhinav. But the voices of yore refused to be silenced. I felt impelled to narrate the stories of the vanquished and the dammed, and give life to those silent heroes we have overlooked in our uncritical acceptance of the conventional renderings of our epics.

This is Anand's third book and follows the outstanding success of his #1 bestsellers, ASURA Tale Of The Vanquished and AJAYA Book I, Roll Of The Dice. Anand can be reached at: mail@asura.co.in

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

WHY WRITE ABOUT THE DEFEATED?

In the first volume of *Ajaya*, I elaborated on my reasons for choosing to write the *Mahabharata* story from Duryodhana's perspective. Since its publication, I have received numerous e-mails from my readers – some critical, others adulatory or analytical of the perspective I brought to the age-old epic. There were readers who were unhappy that I had cast Krishna in an unflattering light and portrayed the Pandavas in a negative way. Hence, a short note about my portrayal of Krishna and the Pandavas is perhaps merited here.

I have written *Ajaya* from the perspective of the vanquished side – the Kauravas. For them, Krishna was a rival, if not an enemy. If the Kauravas had accepted Krishna's divinity and agreed to whatever he ordained, the Mahabharata war would not have taken place. It would thus be unrealistic, even ridiculous, for the Kauravas to be seen worshipping Krishna. There would have been no story left to tell. The great sage, Vedavyasa, never portrayed Krishna as God or an *avatar* in his original version, *Jaya*. It was only later, in the *Mahabagawatam*, that he is seen as an *avatar* of Vishnu. There were many criticisms voiced about Krishna in the *Mahabharata*. Characters like Shishupala, Suyodhana, Gandhari, and even Balarama, his brother, sometimes made scathing verbal attacks on Krishna. Vyasa effectively used these opposing viewpoints to create a rounded story.

The *Mahabharata*, in essence, is a narrative without a hero. Rather, every character is a hero. I suspect the sage Vyasa adopted the title *Jaya* for his great epic in order to point out the irony of violence and a war in which no one wins. For me, *Jaya* is an anti-war story. I have condensed the *Gita* and placed it slightly ahead in the conventional storyline, as a conversation between Balarama and Krishna. The two brothers, though they loved each other, had many disagreements over the Kauravas and Pandavas. While

Krishna favoured Arjuna, Suyodhana was Balarama's favourite. In this rendering, Balarama denounces Krishna before the war for the violence he is trying to unleash. But for Krishna, it is the call of duty and *dharma*. I have used this space to imagine how the conversation between Balarama and Krishna might have gone. Here, as in the original, Krishna is unable to convince Balarama about the necessity for a war; this would have been an argument between two great intellects. I have used this space to voice Balarama's doubts as he speaks to Krishna. Rather, they are my own doubts on reading the *Gita*. I plead guilty to putting my words into Balarama's mouth, and occasionally Arjuna's. Vedvyasa just says Krishna and Balarama disagreed about the war and that Balarama went on a pilgrimage when it took place. I have included the *Gita* in its conventional space, though some of the doubts Arjuna airs are my own. The original *Gita* is a conversation between a mentor and mentee, when Krishna convinces Arjuna to fight the war.

As I have stated in the many interviews I have given and articles I have written, I am a seeker; my stories are more about questions than answers. I claim neither the intellect nor the scholarship to make a critical analysis of the *Gita*, words which have inspired countless men and women over the centuries. My questions are mundane and ordinary, like the doubts that gnaw at a child's mind when an adult tells him wonderful stories. The child knows the stories are fascinating but curiosity still makes him ask questions for a better understanding.

Recently, on the auspicious occasion of Thiruvonam, the day the great Asura emperor, Mahabali (Lord Vishnu, in his Vamana *avatar* had banished Mahabali to *patala*, the underworld), comes to visit his people on earth, I suffered a shattering personal loss when my mother passed away. I sought solace in Krishna's message in the *Gita*, but the analogy of the *atma* (soul) departing the body as being nothing but a change of clothes, did not give me any comfort. Death is real and devastating and no intellectual

circus can take away the pain of the people who are left behind. When the rituals were over and my mother's ashes sent to Kashi for immersion in the Ganga, I was left feeling bitter and bereft. I asked the chief priest of my village, who had conducted the rituals, whether there was any meaning in such customs. In response, he told me this story:

Mandana Misra was a great scholar and authority on the *Vedas* and *Mimamsa*. He led a householder's life (*grihastha*), with his scholar-philosopher wife, Ubhaya Bharati, in the town of Mahishi, in what is present-day northern Bihar. Husband and wife would have great debates on the veracity of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Gita* and other philosophical works. Scholars from all over Bharatavarsha came to debate and understand the *Shastras* with them. It is said that even the parrots in Mandana's home debated the divinity, or its lack, in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*.

Mandana was a staunch believer in rituals. One day, while he was performing *Pitru Karma* (rituals for deceased ancestors), Adi Shankaracharya arrived at his home and demanded a debate on *Advaita*. Mandana was angry at the rude intrusion and asked the Acharya whether he was not aware, as a Brahmin, that it was inauspicious to come to another Brahmin's home uninvited when *Pitru Karma* was being done? In reply, Adi Shankara asked Mandana whether he was sure of the value of such rituals. This enraged Mandana and the other Brahmins present. Thus began one of the most celebrated debates in Hindu thought. It raged for weeks between the two great scholars. As the only other person of equal intellect to Shankara and Mandana was Mandana's wife, Ubhaya Bharati, she was appointed the adjudicator. Among other things, Shankara convinced Mandana that the rituals for the dead had little value to the dead. Mandana became Adi Shankara's disciple (and later the first Shankaracharya of the Sringeri Math in Karnataka).

When the priest related this story to me, I was shocked. He was not giving me the answer I had expected. Annoyed, I asked him what he meant by the story if Adi Shankara himself said such

rituals were no use to the dead. The priest replied, “Son, the story has not ended.” And he continued... A few years later, Adi Shankara was compiling the rituals for the dead, to standardize them for people across Bharatavarsha. Mandana, upset with his Guru’s action, asked Adi Shankara why he was involved with such a useless thing. After all, the Guru had convinced him of the uselessness of such rituals. (Lord Krishna also mentions the inferiority of Vedic sacrifice to other paths, in the *Gita*. *Pitru karma* has no vedic base either.) Why then was the Jagad Guru taking such a retrograde step? Adi Shankaracharya smiled at his disciple and answered, “The rituals are not for the dead but for the loved ones left behind.”

This demonstrates how critical thinking is the basis of all our philosophy. We have no concept of blasphemy. This openness to criticism is what makes the Hindu religion and its traditions unique. Vyasa did not hide Krishna’s faults, nor did Valmiki remain silent on Rama’s shortcomings. This openness to debate and discussion has helped us evolve over time and withstand thousands of years of foreign rule, reforming as the times demanded. Otherwise, Hinduism would long have been dead, like the ancient religions of Greece and Egypt. It is said that for every village there is a *Ramayana* and for every person there is a *Gita*. In chapter 18:63, Lord Krishna says:

*iti te jñānam ākhyātam
guhyād guhyataram mayā
vimrīśyaitad aśeshena
yathecchasi tathā kuru*

[I have given you the most confidential of all knowledge.

Analyze it critically and act as per your wish and understanding.]

Krishna does not ask Arjuna to follow blindly, nor threaten him with hell if he disobeys. In voicing my own doubts, I too have followed Krishna’s advice by critically analyzing the *Mahabharata*. I hope that those who possess a deeper understanding and knowledge of the epic will aid me in finding answers to the questions which have troubled me. I believe I am not alone in

my occasional puzzlement. Some of my readers certainly share my doubts. I request you to bear in mind that this is a work of fiction, in the best Indian tradition of *Vada-Prathivada*. The Gurus of yesteryear opined that the best way to understand something is to debate it. I have rolled my dice with the prayer:

vimriśyaitad aśeshena

yathēcchasi tathā kuru

[Analyze it critically and act as per your wish and understanding.]

SELECT CAST OF CHARACTERS

Aswathama: Suyodhana's close friend and son of Guru Drona, this Brahmin youth refuses to blindly follow tradition. He believes Suyodhana's cause is just and is willing to fight even his illustrious father. He views Arjuna as his arch foe.

Balarama: Leader of the Yadava clan, an idealistic dreamer who wishes to bring prosperity to his people and believes in the equality of all men. He sees the path to progress as lying in farming and trade. A pacifist at heart, he builds an ideal city on the west coast of Bharatavarsha, where he puts his ideas into practice. He longs to prove one can rule without compromising one's principles. Krishna and Subhadra's elder brother, he is also Suyodhana's Guru-mentor, and inspires men like Karna to reach beyond the limitations of caste.

Bhishma: Grand Regent of the Kuru clan and granduncle to both the Pandavas and Kauravas. Also known as Gangadatta Devavrata. Referred to here as the Grand Regent or Bhishma, a name acquired after he took a vow of celibacy and relinquished his claim to the throne, as a precondition to his father marrying Satyawathi, a fisherwoman (who had another son, Krishna Dwaipayana Vedavyasa, prior to this marriage).

Dhaumya: An ambitious and unscrupulous Priest, he is Parashurama's eyes, ears and arm in Hastinapura. His aim is a perfect society where Priests will decree and the rest follow. He is Kunti and Yudhishtira's chief advisor.

Dhritarashtra: Son of Vedavyasa, he is the legitimate, though blind, King of Hastinapura, and father of the Kauravas. Denied the Kingship due to his blindness, Pandu (his albino younger brother), reigns instead; on his death, Dhritarashtra assumes the Kingship nominally, with Bhishma as Grand Regent.

Draupadi: The wife shared by the five Pandava brothers. Dhristadyumna is her brother, and Shikandi (a eunuch), is an adopted sibling. She is spirited and does not take insults quietly. Fiercely determined, she is perhaps the real 'man' in the Pandava camp.

Durjaya: A man of the gutters, he rules the dark underworld of Hastinapura. A crime lord, he engineers riots and is in the pay of the Gandhara Prince, Shakuni.

Ekalavya: A tribal youth who desperately wants to become a warrior, he is ready to give his life to achieve some dignity for his people.

Gandhari: Princess of Gandhara, Bhishma forcibly carries her off to marry his blind nephew, Dhritarashtra. She voluntarily chooses to bind her eyes to share her husband's blindness. She is the mother of Crown Prince Suyodhana and his brothers, the Kauravas. Her brother is Shakuni.

General Hiranayadhanus: Father of Ekalavya and Commander-in-Chief of Jarasandha's army, he has risen from the lowliest Nishada caste by dint of his own merit and the friendship of King Jarasandha.

Guru Drona: Teacher to both the Pandavas and Kauravas; and Aswathama's father, he will do anything to make Arjuna the greatest warrior in the world. His love for his disciple is legendary, exceeded only by his love for his son. Orthodox to the core, he believes in the superiority of his caste and that no low castes should have the privilege of knowledge. The poverty of his early life haunts him.

Indra: The last king of the Deva Empire, he lives in penury in the forest. He wishes to make a secret weapon for Arjuna, without which he fears his son is doomed.

Iravan: Son of Arjuna and the Naga princess Uloopi. In the north Indian versions of the *Mahabharata*, Iravan is a minor character who dies a heroic death on the 18th day of the war. In the south Indian versions of the epic, Iravan is the epitome of sacrifice, who gives his life before the war to aid victory for the Pandavas. He is worshipped as a major village deity in the South.

Jarasandha: The King of Magadha. In his kingdom, merit rules instead of caste.

Jayadratha: King of Sindh, he is Suyodhana's brother-in-law.

Karna: A low-caste Suta and son of a charioteer, he is willing to travel to the Deep South to become a warrior par excellence. Generous, charitable, exceptionally gifted, he is Suyodhana's answer to Arjuna's challenge. He is spurned for his low birth and insulted by Draupadi, but Suyodhana staunchly stands by him.

The Kauravas: The legitimate scions of the Kuru clan that holds suzerainty over all the kingdoms north of the Vindhya ranges. Crown Prince Suyodhana and his siblings are determined to hold on to what is rightfully theirs.

❶ **Suyodhana:** Meaning 'one who cannot be easily conquered', the eldest Kaurava (Dhritarashtra and Gandhari's firstborn), is the legitimate Crown Prince of Hastinapura. This book narrates his fight to claim his birthright. Perhaps the most celebrated villain in Indian mythology after Ravana of the Ramayana, we see him here as loyal, generous, brash and arrogant, his mindset against the taboos and convoluted arguments of orthodoxy.

❷ **Sushasana:** Suyodhana's next sibling, more famous as Dushasana.

❸ **Sushala:** The only girl child among the Kauravas, she is known as Dushala in popular lore, she is also the loving wife of Jayadratha, King of Sindh.

Khatotkacha: Son of Bhima and Rakshasi Hidumbi.

Kripa: A maverick genius as well as a learned Brahmin warrior, he does not believe in caste. He is Drona's brother-in-law (his opposite), and Aswathama's uncle. He believes Suyodhana has a point. A carefree soul without boundaries, he is outspoken to the point of arrogance but kind-hearted beneath his rough exterior. He believes knowledge ought to be shared freely.

Krishna: A Yadava Prince who many consider an *avatar* of Vishnu – one of the Hindu Trinity. He believes he has come to save the world from evil.

He is also Arjuna's brother-in-law and mentor. He sees the Great War as an inevitable conflict for *dharma* to be reinstated. His greatest challenges come from men like Jarasandha, Suyodhana, Karna, Ekalavya and Carvaka.

Krishna [black] **Dwaipayana** [born on an island] **Vedavyasa** [chronicler of the *Vedas*]: The great scholar-author of the *Mahabharata*, the *Mahabhagavatha* (the longest epic in the world), and 18 *Puranas*. He codified and edited the *Vedas* and is considered the patron saint of all writers. Son of Satyawathi, a fisherwoman and Parashara, a Brahmin saint, he is the Grand Regent's stepbrother. He is also the biological father of Pandu, Dhritarashtra and Vidhura, and hence the grandfather of all the main protagonists of the *Mahabharata*.

Kunti: First wife of Pandu and collective mother of the Pandavas, she has an illegitimate son as well. Ambitious, ruthless, and self-righteous, she is determined to ensure Yudhishta succeeds to the throne of Hastinapura.

Mayasura: A great architect and a low-caste Asura.

Pandu: Dhritarashtra's younger brother and briefly King of Hastinapura until his premature death. Cursed never to have marital relations, his two wives, Kunti and Madri, are impregnated by sages and Gods. There are, however, enough hints in the *Mahabharata* that their five sons were not, in fact, of divine origin. The sons, called the Pandavas, are recognized as Pandu's sons though he did not father them. He dies attempting sexual union with Madri, who commits *sati*, leaving Kunti to care for all five boys.

The Pandavas (Five Sons of Pandu):

❶ **Yudhishta (Dharmaputra)**: The eldest, was born to Kunti, fathered by Dharma or Yama, the God of Death. His claim to the throne of Hastinapura rests on the fact that he is considered Pandu's son, has divine lineage, and is older than Crown Prince Suyodhana by a day. The whole *Mahabharata* hinges on this accident of birth.

❷ **Bhima**: Kunti's next divine progeny is the Crown Prince's archenemy. Renowned for his brute strength, he is ever ready to use it on his brothers' behalf.

❸ **Arjuna**: Youngest of Kunti's three divine sons, he is a great archer and warrior, and Yudhishta's only hope of winning against the Kauravas.

❹ **Nakula & Sahadeva**: Madri's twins, also of divine lineage, play minor roles in the epic as sidekicks to their three older siblings.

Parashurama: Drona, Kripa and Karna's Guru, friend-turned-foe of the Grand Regent, and the supreme spiritual leader of the Southern Confederate. A fanatical Brahmin and the greatest living warrior of his time, he curses Karna for duping him about his caste. He yearns to defeat Hastinapura and bring all of Bharatavarsha under his sway. He rues the peace treaty he signed with the Grand Regent years ago and awaits the opportunity to ignite a great war.

Parshavi: Vidhura's wife.

Purochana: A corrupt but efficient bureaucrat in league with Shakuni.

Samba: Son of Krishna and the Vanara woman, Jambavati, he is credited with starting the civil war that destroyed the Yadavas, and is often portrayed as irresponsible and impulsive.

Shakuni: Prince of Gandhara, Queen Gandhari's younger sibling and maternal uncle to the Kauravas, his only ambition is the destruction of the kingdoms of Bharatavarsha, in order to avenge himself against Bhishma for sacking Gandhara, killing his father and brothers, and abducting his sister. Skilled at dice and intrigue, he always carries the loaded dice made from the thighbones of his slain father.

Subhadra: Suyodhana's first love, and later wife of his greatest foe, Arjuna.

Takshaka: Leader of the rebel Nagas, who wishes for a revolution whereby the Shudras and Untouchables will become the rulers and the high castes their slaves. He is a fierce warrior and a megalomaniac dictator in the making.

Uluka: Son of Shakuni

Vasuki: Deposed Naga king, he is old and frail, but desperately wants the leadership back. He believes Takshaka is leading his people to destruction.

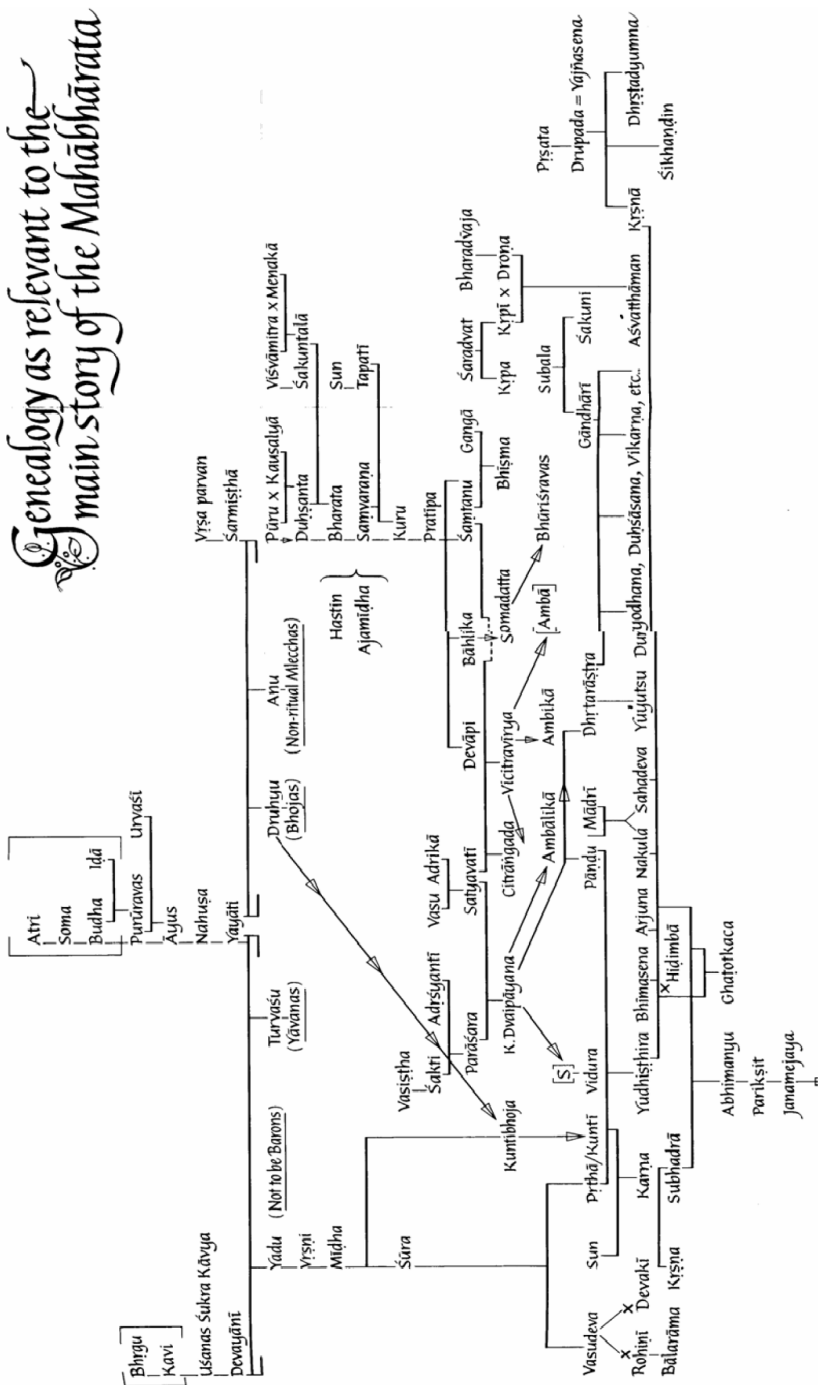
Vidhura: Youngest of Bhishma's three nephews, he was born of a lowly *dasi* and the sage Vedavyasa. A renowned scholar and gentleman, but of low caste, he is the Prime Minister of Hastinapura, and the conscience-keeper of the Grand Regent.

Yuyutsu: The son of Dhritarashtra and the Vaishya woman, Sugadha. He is older than both Yudhishtira and Suyodhana, but never lays claim to the throne. The merchant-warrior is a master strategist and one of the survivors of the Great Mahabharata war.

And finally, the most important of them all:

Jara and his blind dog, Dharma: A deformed beggar, Jara lives on the dusty streets of Hastinapura, and sometimes Dwaraka, accompanied by his blind dog, Dharma. Illiterate, ignorant, frail and dirt poor, he is one of the many who believe in the divinity of Krishna. He is a fervent devotee of the *avatar*. An Untouchable, rejected by all and spurned by most, yet Jara rejoices in the blessings of his beloved God and celebrates life.

Atri
Soma
Budha Idā





Prelude ROLL OF THE DICE

HASTINAPURA, THE MOST POWERFUL EMPIRE in Bharatavarsha, is faced with political strife. King Dhritarashtra is blind and rules but in name. His younger brother, Pandu, is dead. Pandu's widow, Kunti, arrives at the palace with her three sons – Yudhishtira, Bhima and Arjuna, as well as Nakula and Sahadeva – the sons of her co-wife, Madri, who has committed *sati*. Together, the five brothers are known as the Pandavas, or the sons of Pandu. However, it is an open secret that Pandu was cursed by a sage never to have marital relations. The Pandavas are thus not his biological children.

But Kunti is determined to make her eldest son, Yudhishtira, the next King. Dhritarashtra's foreign-born Queen, the beautiful and imperious Gandhari, believes otherwise, and sees her own firstborn, Suyodhana, as the legitimate successor. Crown Prince Suyodhana and his 99 brothers, scoff at the Pandava claims and call them bastards. In desperation, Kunti claims her sons are of divine lineage and aligns herself with the orthodox elements of the clergy. Dhaumya, an ambitious and cunning priest, dons the role of her chief advisor. Meanwhile, Suyodhana, a headstrong, idealistic and generous-hearted youth, disregards the caste system, believing that only merit matters.

The new martial arts Guru of Hastinapura, Drona, is a supporter of Kunti; Arjuna, the third Pandava prince, is his favourite student. Drona arrives to replace the maverick Kripacharya, as the royal Guru, making young Suyodhana's life miserable by openly favouring the Pandavas. However, Aswathama, the Guru's son, becomes Suyodhana's close friend.

As rivalry between the cousins escalates, there are attempted murders, allegations and counter allegations. The air is thick with intrigue. Civil war looms. Holding the empire together is the noble patriarch, the Grand Regent of the Kurus – Bhishma Pitamaha. He rules the country with an iron hand, with the help of his scholarly and able Prime Minister, Vidhura, who is also step-brother to Dhritarashtra and Pandu, but born of a palace maid, hence considered of lowly birth.

When Bhishma attacked Gandhara years ago and forced Gandhari to marry his blind nephew, Dhritarashtra, the patriarch, had committed a grave error in sparing the life of the young Gandharan prince, Shakuni – Gandhari's brother. Shakuni has vowed to destroy Bharatavarsha (India, as he calls it). He is a foreigner, despised by many, but works his way through the politics of the Hastinapura court, moving his pieces dexterously to foment trouble.

As the orthodox elements impose a crushing caste system on the populace, a revolution brews in the forests of Bharatavarsha under the charismatic leadership of the Naga leader, Takshaka. Shakuni secretly helps the elements of destabilization, bringing the crime lord, Durjaya, back into action.

Ekalavya and Jara are untouchable Nishadas. Ekalavya yearns to become an ace archer, but Guru Drona rejects him as a pupil because of his caste. He learns archery by secretly watching the Guru teaching the Hastinapura princes. In time, his skill excels even that of Arjuna, Drona's favourite. When Ekalavya finally musters the courage to demonstrate his archery to the Guru, Drona asks him to cut off his bow thumb as his *gurudakshina*, so that Arjuna remains unchallenged. Ekalavya burns with hatred and vows to become the better archer despite his handicap.

Jara becomes an accomplice of the crime lord, Durjaya. His life would have ended in the gutters but for a chance encounter with a pious Brahmin, when Jara arrives to loot his house. Jara

has a change of heart when he discovers that the Brahmin and his family have been mercilessly killed by Durjaya's men. He becomes a staunch devotee of the Yadava Prince, Krishna, whom many believe to be an *avatar* of Lord Vishnu. Thereafter, Jara roams the streets of Hastinapura with his blind dog Dharma, singing paeans to Lord Krishna.

Krishna himself wants a stable society and believes Suyodhana is dangerous. Though he does not promote caste hierarchy, Krishna believes each person should follow his *kula dharma*, which has been predetermined. Only then can society be peaceful, happy and prosperous. He is a charismatic leader, loved by many.

Krishna's elder brother, Balarama, is the supreme leader of the Yadavas, as well as Prince Suyodhana's Guru. He wishes to expand cultivation, agriculture and establish new trade routes. He builds a model city, Dwaraka, on the west coast of Bharatavarsha. A pacifist, he is deeply fond of Suyodhana and wishes him to marry his sister, Subhadra as the two are in love.

The Yadava clan has migrated from the northern plains to the west coast to avoid further confrontation with the monarch of Magadha, Jarasandha, a sworn enemy of the Yadavas. He runs a tight empire based on merit. The untouchable Nishada, Hiranyadhanus, Ekalavya's alienated father, is the Commander of his armies.

Meanwhile, Karna, son of the low-caste charioteer, Adiratha, wishes to study archery and become a warrior. Guru Drona and many other high-caste individuals of the court and clergy spurn him. However, Karna is determined. He travels on foot to the South to learn the warrior's art under Parashurama, the supreme leader of the Southern Confederate. The Confederate, eyeing a takeover of Hastinapura, views Bhishma as a liberal who is negating caste values. Karna learns archery from Parashurama by posing as a Brahmin. He gains the supreme accolade of becoming the *Dharmaveera* but narrowly escapes with his life when his secret is blown, leaving Guru Parashurama prostrate and unconscious with shock.

Karna arrives in Hastinapura on the day the Kuru princes are set to display their prowess in arms. He enters the arena and outdoes Arjuna in every feat of archery, but is still ostracised by Drona and the other Brahmins because of his low caste. Prince Suyodhana steps in. Defying orthodoxy, he elevates Karna to become King of Anga on the spot, thereby earning the wrath of the Brahmins and Karna's lifelong friendship and loyalty.

Suyodhana pays the price for his rash act when Subhadra rejects him and elopes with Arjuna, persuaded and aided by Krishna, leaving him devastated and deepening the enmity between him and Krishna.

Guru Drona demands that his students defeat and drag to Hastinapura in chains, his friend-turned-foe, King Drupada of Panchala, as his *gurudakshina*. Prince Suyodhana and his friends thus arrive in Panchala. To their surprise, King Drupada gracefully accepts his wrongdoing in humiliating Drona when the latter had approached him as a supplicant. In Panchala, Karna meets Princess Draupadi, the King's beautiful daughter, and they fall in love. Suyodhana returns to Hastinapura bearing King Drupada's apology to Drona as well as gifts from him. But the Guru remains adamant. He orders his favourite disciple, Prince Arjuna, to defeat Drupada. Arjuna's men descend on an unsuspecting Panchala and wreak havoc. King Drupada and his sons, Shikandi and Dhristadyumna, are dragged to Hastinapura in chains. Bhishma intervenes to free them, but Dhristadyumna believes that Suyodhana cheated them by offering peace and then sending his cousins to destroy Panchala. He also warns Aswathama that one day he will murder Drona.

To avoid further family friction, Bhishma asks Kunti and her sons to move to Varanavata, where a new palace is built to house them. Shakuni bribes Purochana, the officer-in-charge of the project, to use inflammable materials in the construction. Shakuni leaks this secret to Kunti through a spy. The Pandavas thus believe that Suyodhana has conspired to kill them. Kunti

determines to outwit Suyodhana and entices a Nishada woman and her five children into the palace, which is then set on fire. The Pandavas escape but the rumour spreads like wildfire that Kunti and her five sons have perished in the fire. The Nishada woman and her sons who are the true victims of the fire, are related to Ekalavya, causing him to vow revenge. Ekalavya believes that Krishna is the reason for all his miseries.

On the day of Princess Draupadi's *swayamvara*, Karna is insulted once again for his caste when Krishna persuades Draupadi to reject him, even though he has won her fairly in the competition held for the suitors. Draupadi marries Arjuna instead. However, Kunti decides, in interests of family unity, that all the Pandavas will share Draupadi. Thus Draupadi becomes the common wife of all five brothers, and Yudhishtira, as the eldest, gains the first right to live with her for a year, followed by the others, in order of seniority.

To avoid any clash among the brothers over the beautiful Draupadi, Krishna persuades Bhima and Arjuna to travel to Magadha with him. In a duel that follows, Bhima kills Jarasandha and his general Hiranyadhanus, Ekalavya's father.

Meanwhile, Suyodhana marries Princess Bhanumati, daughter of Chitrangada, King of Kalinga, and sires a son and daughter – Lakshmana Kumara and Lakshmana. Karna too, marries Vrishali, a charioteer's daughter. Arjuna and Subhadra have a son, Abhimanyu, who grows up to be close to his uncle, Suyodhana.

To avoid war, Bhishma persuades King Dhritarashtra to hand over the forests of Khandivaprastha to the Pandavas, where they can build a new city. Krishna advises Arjuna to burn the forest and purge every living thing in it in order to enable a new city to be built there to rival Hastinapura. Arjuna and his soldiers kill thousands of Naga men and women but spare the life of the young architect, Mayasura, who bargains for the life of a few women and his foster father – Indra, the fallen Deva King. Maya builds a splendid palace and city but is then banished from his

creation, being an untouchable. Indra, Arjuna's biological father, refuses his son's offer to live in the palace and follows Maya into exile. However, Indra decides to build a deadly new weapon with Maya's help, to gift to his son. He believes that without it, his son is doomed.

The Nagas are incensed by the pogrom that killed their people. Shakuni fans the flame of hatred. Ekalavya is welcomed by Krishna's foes, such as Shishupala and Shalva, and they decide to capture Krishna during the *Rajasuya* sacrifice being done by Yudhishtira to inaugurate his new palace. Suyodhana too, receives Yudhishtira's invitation to attend the *Rajasuya*.

At the *Rajasuya*, Shishupala defies the Brahmins by seating Ekalavya near the holy fire. But when the Pandavas elect Krishna as their honoured guest for the *Rajasuya*, Shishupala stands up to accuse Krishna of many wrongdoings. Krishna kills Shishupala on the spot. In the tussle that follows, Ekalavya escapes. He and Shalva rush to Dwaraka with their army, intent on pounding Krishna's city to dust. Krishna is forced to leave the *Rajasuya* to save his city. Unknown to him, Takshaka and his army of Nagas, have planned to ambush him on the way to Dwaraka.

Suyodhana reaches the Indraprastha palace angered by the treatment meted out to Mayasura and the other common folk of low caste. In the course of an argument with the Pandavas, he accidentally falls into a fountain. The entire Sabha bursts into laughter and Draupadi mocks his soaked nakedness. Suyodhana vows revenge for the insult and storms back to Hastinapura.

Unknown to them, Parashurama, the Supreme Leader of the Southern Confederate, has recovered from his coma and the southern armies are on the move towards Hastinapura to capture Karna.

Shakuni moves his pieces carefully. He persuades Suyodhana that defeating Yudhishtira in a game of dice is an easier way

to take revenge than to fight him. At Suyodhana's invitation, Yudhishtira arrives in Hastinapura for the game. One by one, Yudhishtira pledges his possessions, city-state, brothers, and even his wife, against the wily Gandharan, and loses them all. Suyodhana orders his brother Sushasana to bring Draupadi, who dared to mock and humiliate him, to the Sabha – to be stripped like a whore before all.

The story continues...



1 SHAME

DRAUPADI KNEW HE WOULD BE BACK. She had merely bought time by cowing the messenger sent to fetch her with an imperious glare. She had sent him back with a question for the elders in the Sabha: Had her husband pawned her before he himself had become a slave or after? A slave belonged to his master, he had no rights, no possessions and could not have staked her. The messenger had bowed in confusion and rushed back to convey her words. The door had slammed shut but the enormity of what Yudhishtira had done began to overwhelm Draupadi's mind. She could sense the stunned silence in the Sabha when her question was repeated.

Draupadi forgot to breathe when she heard heavy footsteps hurrying up the stairs. They were coming for her. Her words had not deterred them. She stood with her back to the wall, her heart thudding in her chest as fear crept insidiously up her body from her toes. She desperately clutched the single sari that custom dictated women don during menstruation. As the other women in the chamber watched in aghast silence, the door was kicked open. Prince Sushasana stood with his feet planted on either side of the threshold, a lopsided grin on his flushed face. He rushed towards Draupadi but Subhadra threw herself between them. Sushasana roughly shoved Subhadra away and grabbed Draupadi by her long, lustrous hair and pulled viciously. She fell to her knees in pain.

'Why is he doing this to me? Where are my husbands?' Frantic thoughts flooded Draupadi's mind. She could bear the pain but not the shame. She clung to the bedpost, the door, the handrails – anything that would stop Sushasana from dragging her half-clad to the Sabha. But she was no match

for the burly Kaurava, drunk with soma and lust. The women of the royal household watched the brutish display in wide-eyed horror. Not a word was uttered; the only sounds were Draupadi's pitiful appeals to the Prince and his loud laughter echoing down the stairway...

Murmurs ran across the Sabha like a wind through a field of wheat. Every eye was on Sushasana and the woman he was dragging into the marbled hall, one hand at her breast, the other grasping at anything that could stop her being dragged away. The bruises on her arms and face marked her torturous and resisting journey. She sensed the men staring at her but did not raise her head. She noticed every petal and frond of the design inlaid into the marble at her feet. She could smell the incense in the air and the odours of the crowded Sabha. She could feel the lustful gaze of hundreds of men on her bowed, scantily-clad form. She could sense their thoughts.

Suddenly, raucous laughter echoed around the vast hall. Unbidden, her father's parting words rose to Draupadi's mind: 'Whatever the destinies may have in store, my daughter, always remember that you are of royal blood, the daughter of a King, a Princess. Act in accordance with that knowledge, which no one can take from you.' Unable to bear the thought of her proud father hearing of her humiliation, Draupadi raised her head defiantly. Karna's blazing eyes stared back at her, contempt and pity mingled in their glowing depths, his fine lips set in silent condemnation.

Sushasana pulled Draupadi forward by one arm. Trembling with anger and fear, she clutched at the flimsy sari covering her breasts.

"This is ignoble! This is no way to treat a woman! Cousin Yudhishta is my brother Suyodhana's slave. How can a slave stake anything?" The lone voice of Prince Vikarna, Suyodhana's young brother, rang out, extinguishing the laughter and chatter. There was pindrop silence in the Sabha. Draupadi closed her eyes in relief. Someone to protect her at last.

"Prince Vikarna, this is a matter between a master and his slave. It does not concern anyone else." Karna was standing up, pointing a finger at the young Kuru prince.

Draupadi felt breathless as she waited for her lone supporter to answer. But all she heard was defeated silence. It was the law.

Finally, Vidhura pleaded in a soft voice, "She is a Kuru wife and daughter-in-law..."

"Sir, you are a scholar. Is it for me to remind you that our laws consider a woman who shares the bed of more than four men a prostitute? This woman serves five men. She was pledged in the dice game by her husband. Prince Suyodhana won her fairly with all of us as witnesses. He is entitled to decide what is to be done with her."

'Karna, how can you be a party to this? How can you do this to *me*?' Draupadi stared at Karna, the silent words beating in her heart before she hissed at him, "Enough, you Suta!"

Before Karna could retort she turned towards her husbands, standing beside the dais where the fateful game had been played out. "Am I your chattel to pawn when you wish, share when you want, and sell when you fancy?" She looked at Yudhishtira's stooped shoulders, trembling fingers and bent head with contempt. "Speak! Do something! Can you not see what is happening? How could you pledge me when you were already a slave?"

When the erstwhile Prince of Indraprastha, considered a font of knowledge, remained mute with his eyes downcast, Draupadi closed her own eyes in despair. Was this the same man who had braved his warrior-brother's wrath to share her?

Jayadratha, King of Sind, his eyes flickering over Draupadi's slim form gave a mirthless laugh and said, "They are slaves now, lady. They cannot speak without permission from their master." Shakuni chuckled in glee.

"Arjuna, do you not hear these taunts?" Draupadi whispered. But all five of her warrior husbands remained silent, their eyes

fixed to the floor. "Are you Kshatriyas? Are you even men?" Draupadi's chest heaved in agitation as laughter resounded round the Sabha.

"Draupadi, be patient, they are consulting the holy books," Jayadratha said to fresh roars of laughter.

Draupadi dropped to her knees and covered her flaming face with her hands. No, she would not weep because her five brave husbands had forsaken her when she needed them the most. She was still the daughter of a King. She looked up at Suyodhana and asked in bewilderment, her throat burning, "Prince, why are you doing this?"

"Did you really think you would go unpunished after insulting me? Did you think you could get away with abusing a man like Karna? You are a slave now and must do as you are told, like your valorous husbands over there," Suyodhana snapped, his eyes blazing. He slapped his thigh and commanded, "Come and sit here, Draupadi or you will be stripped naked in front of the entire Sabha."

The laughter ceased. An uneasy silence reigned.

Shakuni leaned forward and spoke. "Perhaps Devi Draupadi is ignorant of the law of *karma*. She should seek instruction from her first husband. For every action there will be a..."

"Shut up, you Mlecha!" Draupadi yelled in fury. But Shakuni merely grinned and ran his fingers through his greying beard.

"Pitamaha..." Draupadi's lips trembled as she turned to the Grand Regent. Bhishma sat rigid, his gaze fixed on an invisible spot on the ceiling.

Draupadi turned to the King, her hands joined in supplication. "I am your daughter-in-law, Sire."

Dhritarashtra turned to his scribe and asked in a low whisper, "Sanjaya, where is Gandhari?"

"Acharya Drona..." Draupadi pleaded, turning to the Guru, who looked in embarrassment at Dhaumya for support.

"Guru Dhaumya..." Draupadi cried. The High Priest vanished behind a group of clergy.

"Acharya Kripa?" Draupadi asked with a sinking heart, hoping the maverick would do something to save her. He had championed the most unlikely people in the past.

An ironic laugh was his answer as he got up to walk out. She gazed at him incredulously as he stopped in front of her. "Daughter, it is for you to ask your husband why he gambled you away. Ask the gamblers on both sides whether they realised they were gambling with destiny."

"Devi Draupadi, may we get on with the business at hand without further delay?" Shakuni's words got a few laughs from some of the Kaurava princes. "Prince Sushasana, what are you waiting for? Strip her!" he ordered, caressing the dice between his palms.

Draupadi shrieked and turned to run, but Sushasana quickly grabbed hold of the end of her sari. Her five husbands stood staring at their hands, not looking at her – puppets controlled by priests and obscure texts. 'Krishna! You were the one who told me to marry these cowards.' With anger scathing her heart, she cried aloud, "Krishna... Krishna..."

Sushasana tugged hard at Draupadi's sari while she struggled to preserve her modesty. Finally, drunk and bemused, he tripped over the unending cloth and fell. Draupadi crouched on the floor, her head on her knees, yards of sari spread around her, unable to face the Sabha. Oh shame! Was there not a man in this Sabha who would raise his voice in protest of this atrocity against a woman?

As if reminded by some higher powers, murmurs rose in the assembly, condemning Suyodhana and his loyalists. When the great priests and noble Kshatriyas remained silent, Vidhura moved to the centre of the Sabha and stood near Draupadi. For the first time in his life, the son of a *dasi* stood before the Kshatriyas and pious priests with his head raised high and

addressed them in a contemptuous voice, "A question has been raised in this Sabha of noble men, by a helpless woman, about *dharma*, and all you answer her with is your silence?" His eyes blazing, Vidhura turned to his master, Lord Bhishma. "Sir, Prince Vikarna tried to answer Draupadi's question with whatever knowledge he has. You are the Grand Regent of the Kurus, the most noble of the Kshatriyas, why do you then remain silent in the face of *adharma*? Answer this daughter-in-law of the Kurus. How could he pawn what he did not own in the first place?"

Bhishma glared at his longtime and loyal aide, who had put him in such a difficult position now. All eyes were on him. He cleared his throat and said in a voice devoid of its usual commanding timbre, "I am unclear about this point of *dharma*. It is true that Yudhishtira had already become a slave when he pawned his wife, but some Shastras say a wife is the property of her husband, so when he becomes a slave, she too is a slave. I leave it to the King's wisdom to decide."

Karna sprang up from his seat. "Suyodhana! These three men, Vidhura Mahasaya, Bhishma Pitamaha and Guru Drona, will always side with the sons of Pandu. You have all the rights here to do whatever we please with these slaves."

A sudden tussle broke out among Pandavas. The normally silent Bhima shouted at Arjuna, who was trying to restrain him, "Let me go Arjuna, unhand me! Bring me some embers of fire and let me burn Yudhishtira's hands which itch to gamble. How dare he make the purest of all women suffer like this? It is not Duryodhana who has brought misery upon us but he who always speaks of *dharma*."

At these impassioned words Suyodhana and his friends burst into laughter. The man who was considered the epitome of *dharma* was exposed for what he was, thought Suyodhana. Yudhishtira continued to stand with his head bowed.

Vidhura turned to the Crown Prince, his face flushed with anger. "Suyodhana, are you not ashamed of what is happening

here? You are the man who speaks of noble conduct and the blood of the great Bharata flowing in your veins. Yet now you behave like a boor. Where are your principles and famed generosity of heart now?"

Suyodhana winced at his uncle's words. He had never thought things would go this far. He had won his cousin's kingdom and reduced the Pandavas to slavery. He could afford to be generous. But when he looked at his cousin Yudhishtira, standing before him, resentment rose in him like bile. When he had been shamed in Yudhishtira's Sabha, there had been neither Vidhura nor the other learned men to support him. There had been no debate about *dharma* and *adharma*. Shaking away Shakuni's restraining hand, Suyodhana stood up.

"Draupadi, I see your point. Yudhishtira had no right to pledge you as he had already become my slave. Neither had he any right to pledge his brothers. Let him say aloud in the Sabha of the Kurus that it was *adharma* to pledge you and his brothers. Let him say that he uttered a lie when he gleefully pledged all of you when he did not own you. Let him say he did it in the hope of winning what he does not deserve – the inheritance of Hastinapura – from me. And all of you shall denounce him and declare you do not belong to him. I shall then restore all he has lost and even consider giving my cousin Indraprastha back, as a vassal state. This is the promise of a Kshatriya. Speak! You can regain everything you have lost."

There was an embarrassed silence in the Sabha. Even Bhima, who had been agitated a few moments before, remained silent. Suyodhana's generous offer put Yudhishtira in a fix. His four brothers looked at him. Draupadi's eyes glowed like jewels in her face. Surely if there was one man who had the humility to admit a grievous fault, that one was Yudhishtira?

"Tell him you were wrong, brother. Once we have Indraprastha back we can declare war against evil Duryodhana and punish him for what he has done to Draupadi," Bhima hissed into his brother's ear.

But Yudhishtira shook his head. He was a gambler who longed to win the throne of Hastinapura, but he would not go back on his word. "My brothers and my wife will not deny that, as eldest, I have the right to decide for us all. I committed no *adharma*, nor do I question destiny. If it is my destiny to suffer at the hands of my cousin's injustice, I shall do so with dignity, as will my brothers and wife." Yudhishtira's voice was quiet but firm. An animal cry rose from Bhima's throat. Draupadi's shoulders drooped in despair.

"Duryodhana, you are trapping my brother with vile words and low tricks. Come and fight me like a man," Bhima shouted.

"Loud words, Bhima," Shakuni intervened. "As loud as an empty drum and as hollow. Masters do not fight slaves. Ask your brother."

"I beg the forgiveness of the Sabha for my brother's outburst," Yudhishtira said, ignoring the burning condemnation in Bhima's eyes.

There was a stir at the door and Gandhari stormed into the Sabha with Subhadra and Bhanumati hurrying behind her. The Queen found her way to Suyodhana and touched his face to ensure it was indeed her eldest son. He attempted to rise but before he could do so, his mother slapped him hard across his astonished face, leaving her palm print emblazoned on his cheek.-

There was a collective gasp in the Sabha and then utter silence. Bhanumati rushed to Draupadi, trying to cover her, but she pushed her back angrily.

Turning to where Sushasana lay in a drunken stupor, Draupadi kicked him with her bare foot. He did not stir. Clutching her dishevelled hair, she said in a voice that shook with emotion, "Each one of you hear me now...I will not tie my hair, touched by this swine at my feet, until my husbands are men enough to kill him. Then I will wash my hair with the blood of those four evil men – Duryodhana, Dushasana, Karna and Jayadratha."

Bhima took a step forward. "I will kill them for you, Draupadi." She snorted and flicked her hands as if he was an annoying fly.

"I am ashamed." Gandhari's voice silenced the Sabha which had begun to hum with voices. "Where were the Acharyas and Gurus when a woman was being humiliated in our own Sabha?"

Draupadi glared at the courtiers, refusing to cry, refusing to be pitied. She was a Princess; she would not bow her head. She had done no wrong. The roomful of warriors, nobles, courtiers and high-caste clergy, stood with their heads bent. The silence damned them all. The Grand Regent sat as if carved from stone.

Gandhari turned towards her sightless husband. "Perhaps arrogance and pride made them blind, but you, my Lord, our King? Draupadi is but a woman. She begged for your mercy. Why were you silent?"

Vidhura walked up to the Queen and guided her to a chair beside Dhritarashtra. When she touched his arm, the King's eyes shone with unshed tears. There were no words. He had done an ignoble thing. He had tarnished the crown he wore.

A haunting howl rose from the palace gardens. The courtiers looked at each other, some in fear, many in confusion. Gandhari turned to her husband. "Prabhu, our son has shamed us by his ignoble actions. Do you not hear the ill omens? Jackals have dared come near the palace in broad daylight. They are the harbingers of a dark future. I see war and death. The Kuru dynasty is cursed with the tears of its women, and now we have added Draupadi's name to that inglorious list. My Lord, I know you will be just and follow *dharma*."

The King felt bitter and angry at his Queen's words. His son had won the game of dice fair and square. Suyodhana had even offered them their kingdom back. All his brother's high-principled son had to do was admit he had acted against *dharma* in pledging his wife and brothers; but he refused to do so. No one had forced him into the game. And now he, Dhritarashtra, was being blamed for permitting it to happen in the Sabha. Where had the priests,

who were ever eager with unwanted advice, gone? Everyone remained silent and he was to take the blame. Even his son was acting mighty and generous after shaming him and making him look a fool – a blind, good-for-nothing fool. No, the Dhritarashtra who had fought elephants bare-handed and could crush rocks with his palms, was second to none when it came to nobility and generosity. He was the greatest Kshatriya and would be generous to the sons of his cursed brother, Pandu, who had taken the throne citing his blindness. Dhritarashtra would shame his dead brother's soul with his generosity and greatness.

The murmuring which had begun in the hall subsided as the King stood up and said in a voice hoarse with emotion, "Something has taken place here which should never have happened. Draupadi, my daughter, no words of remorse can undo what was done to you. Yet I ask you to find it in your heart to forgive us all."

Suyodhana sat stunned by the turn of events. He was proud of the ethical stand he had always taken, often going against the established norms. No longer could he claim the moral high ground. He had committed a grave error of judgment. But as he listened to his father, he felt anger stir within him like a hooded cobra.

"Daughter, you may ask me for three boons and as King of the Bharata clan, I promise to bestow whatever you seek. Ask. Allow a blind man to try and right the wrong that has been done to you."

Draupadi looked up in surprise when she heard the King's words. Shakuni's fingers wrapped around the dice, his knuckles turning white. His sister had spoilt everything. Now that fool Dhritarashtra would act high and mighty and undo the good work he had done. But when he looked at Suyodhana's stern face, his smile returned. He could work this out. He would wait.

"Oh King, the greatest of all Kurus!" Draupadi exclaimed with folded hands. Dhritarashtra's lips broke into a satisfied smile. "Free my husbands from your son's slavery."

"Daughter, your wish is granted," Dhritarashtra said. There were murmurs of approval from the Sabha. They would be singing his praises in the streets of Hastinapura. His fame would travel far and wide and history would judge him as the greatest of all Kings.

"Restore my husbands' kingdom and all that we have lost," Draupadi said, eyeing her husband with contempt. Yudhishtira looked up and gazed at his wife in amazement.

"I restore to the Pandavas all they lost in the game. I also give to my nephew, Yudhishtira, half my kingdom, to rule independently."

Murmurs of approbation rose on all sides as Dhritarashtra sat down. Yudhishtira's face lightened. Suyodhana's eyes burned with fury. How could his father give back Indraprastha to the Pandavas? The kingdom, the wealth, the power, it was all his by right. How could some bastards take it away?

"The Pandavas receive their kingdom from the hands of a woman and they dare to call themselves Kshatriyas? Devi Draupadi, you are more than equal to all five of them put together," Karna said, his eyes mocking the men who had always insulted him for his caste.

Arjuna sprang up in a fury. "Suta! I am no longer a slave. Come forward and fight me like a man."

"Why would I fight you, Arjuna? If you lose, you will go to your wife, who will beg the King to rescue you."

Yudhishtira restrained Arjuna, holding onto his wrist. Before things could get uglier, Bhishma rose and all eyes turned to him. "The Sabha is closed. Let arrangements be made for King Yudhishtira to travel to Indraprastha."

Shakuni panicked. He had been on the verge of success when his sister arrived and destroyed everything. Something needed to be done quickly. Wiping all doubt from his face, he moved to Yudhishtira, who was picking up his discarded clothing. "Your Highness, why be indebted to Suyodhana's charity and a woman's mercy like this? Would you care to try one more throw for a chance to win back everything, like a true Kshatriya?"

“Shakuni, I know what you are up to...” Gandhari cried when she heard her brother’s words.

“Sister, this is the accepted protocol between dice players,” answered Shakuni suavely, his customary smile back on his face. “It is my duty to give my opponent a fair chance to win back his losses. It is the code of the dice. Of course, if the King of Indraprastha does not care to take up the challenge, that is another matter.”

“I will play.” Yudhishtira once again climbed onto the dais, still laid with the dicing cloth. Cupping his palms, he accepted the dice Shakuni held out to him.

‘Some people never learn,’ the courtiers whispered to each other.

“What is the wager, Your Highness?” Shakuni asked with elaborate courtesy.

Before Yudhishtira could answer, the Grand Regent stood up. There was complete silence. “The Princes Suyodhana and Yudhishtira have both chosen to prove before this assembly that neither has attained the maturity or wisdom to rule a country. A ruler is but the custodian of the land he rules, he does not own it. Similarly, a husband is an equal partner in the marital relationship; he does not own his wife. It remains their shame and our sorrow, that these noble Princes of the Kuru clan have forgotten the tenets which mark civilized men.” Lord Bhishma paused, his eyes fixed not on the assembly but the glistening river beyond the windows. The Sabha waited.

“Since my grand-nephews have decided to gamble again, despite what has happened today, I will decide the wager. The person who loses will surrender his kingdom to the winner and face banishment to the forest for twelve years. In the thirteenth year of exile, the loser will remain incognito. Should the winner find him during that period, the loser will repeat the cycle of twelve years in the forest and one year in hiding.”

There was appalled silence in the Sabha. Twelve years and another in hiding, hunted by one’s foes? Was it even possible to win free?

"I agree to the terms," Yudhishtira said immediately.

Gasps of disbelief sounded through the assembly but the Pandava Prince merely looked straight at the Grand Regent, calm and assured. He was sure he would win this time. In one throw he would regain Hastinapura and banish Duryodhana and his evil cronies forever.

Draupadi stood frozen. What was Yudhishtira doing? Could he not see her anguish? Had she not suffered enough? Bhima turned to walk out, telling Arjuna to inform him when it was time to go into exile. Arjuna held on to his arm, begging him to stay.

Gripped by gambling fever and overcome by his public humiliation, Yudhishtira's years of intellectual training deserted him. Touching his lucky amulet, he mumbled, "This time the charm will protect me. I have always followed *dharma*. *Dharma* will protect me from evil. Trust me, my brothers, our luck will turn. We will all witness the auspicious event of Duryodhana losing everything."

Shakuni merely smiled and threw the dice. Once again the bones rolled. A lucky talisman, crafted by a superstitious country clashed with the skill of a master strategist. "Aha! I win." Shakuni said, raising one hand in victory.

Yudhishtira sat in shocked silence. He had lost everything. Again. A crow cawed from the garden, seeming to mock him. The crow was considered to be the vehicle of Shaneswara; the God of Misfortune was calling him. It was his destiny to bear this with a calm mind. He felt bitter thinking of the countless hours he had spent in prayer, in fasting, for the hours spent in studying the scriptures. In the moment it mattered, the Gods had forsaken him. *Dharmo rakshithi rakshitaha* (*Dharma* will protect he who protects *dharma*) – his Guru's words echoed in his ears. He could feel the heat of Draupadi's accusation and contempt searing his skin; he could hear Bhima's anger in his laboured breathing. He, son of *dharma*, had lost everything to a foreigner. The Suta was laughing at him; men were ogling his wife; and his brothers were standing with heads bowed. 'Lords of heaven, why are you punishing me like this?'

After a few moments of utter disbelief, Yudhishtira stood up and shook out the folds of his *dhoti* – the only possession left to him. Bhima, almost blue with rage, shouted across the Sabha that once they returned he would personally rip apart Duryodhana and his brothers with his bare hands.

Arjuna ignored all the others and pointed a finger at Karna. “Suta, you have won for now, but do not doubt that we will meet in battle, when we will finish this.”

Karna bowed low. “Arjuna, rest assured I will be waiting for you.”

At the massive doors of the Sabha, which towered over him like a tomb, Yudhishtira hesitated for a moment. He waited with the forlorn hope that Bhishma would call him back, or perhaps the King would ask Draupadi to seek the third boon he had promised, or that Guru Drona would speak. He heard Draupadi’s voice, as cold as the ice on the Himalayas, hiss in his ear, “Walk!” With bent head, Yudhishtira walked into the afternoon sun. The guards standing on either side remained upright. Somewhere in the distance, thunder rolled, sounding like frenzied war drums.

Draupadi followed her husbands out of the Sabha, wrapped only in her sari, her head held proudly erect, her hair flying wildly in the playful breeze. She glared at Duryodhana and Karna as she passed them. The hatred burning in those fiery black eyes sent a chill down their spines.

Shakuni breathed a sigh of relief. The Sabha had ended but the courtiers refused to disperse. They clustered in groups and discussed the rights and wrongs of what had happened. Shakuni looked at them with disdain. It had not gone as perfectly as he had planned, but nevertheless it was a victory, considering everything. It had been touch and go with Gandhari interfering and making a mess of his plans. Fortunately, the fool Yudhishtira fell into the trap he had set. He could still hear the faint sounds of the procession accompanying the Pandavas out of the city. Gandhari was speaking to Suyodhana, but Shakuni did not

want to stand and listen to his sister's harsh words. Lazily, he walked through the massive archway that separated the Sabha from the wide veranda which ran around the hall. He paused to admire the intricate carvings on the ceiling. Though it was late afternoon, the air was hot and dust swirled outside the fort, creating a haze all around.

Effeminate Indians! Which husband sat and watched someone strip his wife? Which husband wagered his wife in dice? In his country, men died to protect the honour of women. His fellow Gandharans would never believe such things could happen. The audacity of these Indians to call themselves the greatest culture in the world! It was time to get out, time to visit the motherland. He needed to take care of a few things and then he would go back to Gandhara. It would be the start of winter there and all would be painted white – the colour of purity, of God – unlike the dust and grime of India.

Suddenly, Shakuni's hard eyes caught sight of a stranger talking to Jayadratha. He looked travel worn and agitated. What was he saying to the King of Sindh? When the man turned, his gaze froze on Shakuni's face and his jaw dropped. Jayadratha followed his companion's gaze and frowned. Shakuni saw Aswathama join Jayadratha and they all stood staring at him. Something was wrong.



2 ESCAPE

SHAKUNI'S HEART POUNDED LIKE THAT of a cornered beast. He had to get to Gandhara quickly. He needed a horse. He hurried towards the stables, weaving through the men grouped outside the Sabha discussing the day's events. He could hear someone following him and his walk became a trot. He could sense danger behind him but did not dare to look back as he hurried to the stables.

The smell of horse dung and urine assaulted his senses. The man in charge of the royal stables was sitting with his head hung, as if in shame, his hands supporting his forehead. Worry creased the face already lined by the sun. In the slanting afternoon light the tired eyes glistened with tears but Athiratha did not move even when Shakuni reached him and impatiently shook his shoulder. The charioteer sprang up with a start, shocked that a noble had touched him. When he saw who it was, Athiratha relaxed.

"What has happened to you?" Shakuni asked Karna's father.

"My son died today, Swami. What is the use of education and learning if you cannot use them? How will I tell his mother how her Karna behaved today? How could he behave like that to a woman? He was never my son... and never will be."

As Athiratha rambled on about his son's fall from grace, Shakuni's eyes scanned the area for danger. His heart skipped a beat when he saw Aswathama running towards them. "Athiratha, get me a horse quickly." Shakuni threw his gold bracelet to the amazed charioteer.

Athiratha caught it by reflex and then looked down at it as if he had hold of a live snake in his hand. "Swami, are you joking

with me? I have many faults but I have never stooped to taking bribes. I have lived an honest life..."

"Athiratha, hurry!" Shakuni smashed both his fists on the stable wall.

Karna's father flinched at the uncharacteristic display of anger by this usually cool and controlled foreigner. "You are the Queen's brother, Swami. Please take whichever horse you wish," Athiratha said in a flat tone.

Aswathama shouted at Shakuni to stop. He was so close. Shakuni jumped into the saddle of the nearest horse as Aswathama leapt over the fence and lurched at Shakuni, making a grab for the reins. Shakuni kicked off his hands as the horse jumped the gate and shot forward. Aswathama ran after him for a few yards, coughing in the cloud of dust thrown up by the galloping horse.

"Where was he going?" Aswathama asked Athiratha, panting.

"I don't talk to scoundrels who misbehave with women." Athiratha slammed the stable door shut in Aswathama's face.

The Brahmin kicked the stable door with all the force he could muster, battering it with both fists, but the door remained closed. Defeated, he turned and shook his fist at Shakuni, now a black dot on the horizon.

The two guards bowed and backed out silently. They knew when to leave the Grand Regent alone. They closed the massive doors and stood outside, their spears crossed over the door to prevent anyone entering the chamber.

Bhishma wanted to be alone. The lone six foot oil lamp that stood in the corner, threw gigantic shadows, making the huge chairs, upholstered diwans and decorated pillars look like crouching beasts. Bhishma paced the room, shaking his head forlornly. However hard he tried, the image of a pleading Draupadi refused to leave his mind. Had he lowered the prestige of the

Kurus? Why had he not put a stop to the shame? He could have ordered it done and even arrested the two fools who were gambling with what did not belong to them. The country belonged to him, Devavrata Gangadatta Bhishma. Dhritarashtra and his sons merely enjoyed what he had gifted them.

When had the Kshatriyas of the Kuru clan started thinking partially? A woman was shamed and it did not matter *who* had shamed her. He should have punished the culprits. Perhaps Suyodhana had been justified in doing what he had done. The Pandavas were his grand-nephews too, but there was a difference. Unlike Suyodhana, they did not have the blue blood of the Kurus flowing in their veins. The shame of five Pandava brothers sharing the same woman still rankled. He had never understood it. Years of forced bachelorhood and self-willed celibacy had made him bitter, though he was always a thorough gentleman in his demeanour. No one showed more respect to women in public, no one was more decorous in his courtesies nor so polite in his speech than him. In public, he always supported women taking an active role in the administration of the country.

But in his heart he despised all women, especially women like Kunti and Gandhari, who were not content to live in the *antapura* and played politics. His heart had hardened after what Kunti and Gandhari's internal strife and intrigues had done to the country. He still rued the day he had permitted them to attend the Sabha. Gandhari had even had the audacity to chide the King today. That it had taken a woman to speak the words he should have uttered, made him all the more bitter. Dhritarashtra had surprised him with his generosity, by giving back all that Yudhishta had lost. Had not the young fool fallen for Shakuni's tricks, the entire world would have now been praising the greatness of the blind King – a King who had taken the right decision when a great man like Bhishma remained silent, a King who had the grace to ask for forgiveness of a woman who had been wronged. Bhishma had never known Dhritarashtra to act so decisively and that too, angered him. He was losing his grip on the King. Things were getting out of his control. Bhishma

hated Draupadi for having made him into a man who did not do the right thing when it mattered. He was terrified that history would stand in judgement because of his silence. That woman had no business sharing five men.

With a shock he realised he was thinking like the Suta, that Draupadi was immoral because she had five husbands. He could bear anything but the laughter of the Suta. How dare Karna come to his palace and mock his granddaughter-in-law? In his rage, Bhishma forgot that Karna was not the reason why his beloved Suyodhana had behaved like a street ruffian. 'Uncultured boor, son of a charioteer,' he fumed.

Suddenly, Bhishma remembered something and rushed to his table. He ruffled through various messages and threw down the scrolls of birch and palm leaves after a quick glance at each. Where was that message? When he had received the message from the Southern Confederate that morning, he had not given it much thought. It was written in the bombastic language typical to the South, with couched threats hidden in oblique praise. He had dismissed the usual banter about the South invading Hastinapura and not given a second thought to their demand to hand over Karna. He had not even thought it worth discussing in the Sabha. Now, an idea started forming in his mind. He could do something that would save his face. He would sacrifice the Suta and become a hero again. Bhishma was afraid that one day the rivalry between his grand-nephews would flare up to destroy his beloved country. And that Suta upstart was a danger to both sides.

For a moment, Karna's handsome face came to mind; the Suta who had had the courage to challenge the Kshatriyas. A grudging respect for the underdog who has fought his way up made Bhishma hesitate in his decision. Then he slammed the message on the table and drew to his full height. He had to do it for the sake of the country. The thought gave him courage and helped him push away considerations of fairness. The Suta had to be finished. Without Karna, he could control Suyodhana and

remain kingmaker. No, he was not hungry for power; Bhishma hastily corrected the insidious thought. His life was a sacrifice – for his father in his youth, for his nephews in his middle age, and for his grand-nephews in the twilight of his life; a life lived for others. He smiled at the thought, pleased with himself.

Bhishma called the guards and asked for Senanayak Mahaveera. Without turning to look at the bewildered Captain, he said in a voice from which all emotion had been banished, “Arrest the King of Anga and hand him over to the Southern Confederate.”

As the Captain bowed and went out, the guards closed the door, leaving the Grand Regent to his solitary state.



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