"And . . . ?"

My brother faltered, forcing me to offer assistance from behind the curtain. "Forefathers," I hissed. "Vengeance."

"And most of all," Dhri took a breath and continued, "he must bring renown to his forefathers by avenging the honor of his family."

Through the gauze of the curtain I could see the tutor frown. The holy thread that hung across his bony chest quivered with agitation. Though he was alarmingly learned, he wasn't much older than us. The curtain was there because otherwise my presence flustered him so much that he was quite unable to teach.

"O great prince," he said now, "kindly ask your sister princess to refrain from prompting you. She is not helping you to learn. Will she be sitting behind you in your chariot in battle when you need to remember these important precepts? Perhaps it is best if she no longer joins us during your studies."

He was always trying to discourage me from attending Dhri's lessons—and he wasn't the only one. At first, no matter how much I begged, King Drupad had balked at the thought of me studying with my brother. A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchaal! Only when Krishna insisted that the prophecy at my birth required me to get an education beyond what women were usually given, and that it was the king's duty to provide this to me, did he agree with reluctance. Even Dhai Ma, my accomplice in so many other areas of my life, regarded the lessons with misgiving. She complained that they were making me too hardheaded and argumentative, too manlike in my speech. Dhri, too, sometimes wondered if I wasn't learning the wrong things, ideas that would only confuse me as I took up a woman's life with its prescribed, restrictive laws. But I hungered to know about the amazing, mysterious world that extended past what I could imagine, the world of the

manuscripts fell, helter-skelter, from his hands. I had to pull the end of my sari over my face to hide my laughter, although I knew there would be trouble later. But inside a current surged through me at the discovery of a power I didn't know I had.

Dhri shot me a remonstrative look as he helped the tutor pick everything up. Later he would say, "Did you have to do that!"

"He was being so difficult. And all those things he accused women of—you know they're not true!"

I'd expected my brother to agree but instead he gave me a considering look. With a shock I realized that he was changing.

"Besides, it was just a smile!" I continued, but with less confidence.

"The problem with you is, you're too pretty for your own good. It'll get you into trouble with men sooner or later, if you're not careful. No wonder Father's been worrying about what to do with you."

I was surprised—first at the news that my father spared me any thought, and second at my brother's compliment, backhanded though it was. Dhri never commented on my looks; nor did he encourage me to comment on his. Such useless talk, he believed, made people vain. Was this another sign of change?

But I merely said, "How is it that Father never worries about you? Is it because you're so ugly?"

My brother refused to rise to the bait. "Boys are different from girls," he said with stolid patience. "When will you accept that?"

. . .

In revenge, the tutor shot a last comment at me from behind the safety of the door that led to the passage. "Prince, I have recalled one rule of conduct which you may tell your sister: A kshatriya

horses and elephants, to manage a chariot in case his charioteer was killed in battle. From the nishad who was my father's chief hunter, he learned archery and the ways of forest people: how to survive without food or water, how to read the spoor of animals. In the afternoons, he sat in court and observed my father dispensing justice. Evenings—for a king must know how to use his leisure appropriately—he played dice with other noble-born youth, or attended quail fights, or went boating. He visited the homes of courtesans, where he partook of drink, music, dance, and other pleasures. We never discussed these visits, though sometimes I spied on him when he returned late at night, his lips reddened from alaktaka, a garland around his neck. I spent hours imagining the woman who had placed it there. But no matter how much sura he drank or lotus fiber he ate, each morning my brother was up before daybreak. From my window I would see him bathe, shivering, in the cold water he insisted on drawing, himself, from our courtyard cistern, ignoring Dhai Ma's remonstrations. I would hear him chanting prayers to the sun. *O great son of Kashyap, colored like the hibiscus, O light of lights, destroyer of disease and sin, I bow to you.* And then, from the Manu Samhita, *He who has not conquered himself, how will that king conquer enemies?*

Some evenings, Dhri didn't go out. Instead, closeted in with one minister or another, he learned statecraft: the art of preserving a kingdom, of strengthening its borders, of allying with other rulers—or subduing them without battle, of recognizing spies who may have wormed their way into the palace. He learned also the differences between righteous and unrighteous war, and when to use each. These were the lessons I most envied him, the lessons that conferred power. They were the ones I needed to know if I were to change history. And so I cajoled Dhri shamelessly, forcing him to share reluctant bits with me.

decided that when the time is right I must go to Drona in Hastinapur and ask him to accept me as his student."

I stared at him in shock. Surely he was joking! But my brother never joked.

Finally I managed to say, "Father has no right to humiliate you this way! You must refuse. Besides, why would Drona agree to teach you when he knows you'll use the knowledge to try and kill him?"

"He'll teach me," my brother said. He must have been tired, for he sounded bitter, which was rare for him. "He'll teach me because he's a man of honor. And I'll go because it's the only way I can fulfill my destiny."

. . .

I don't wish to imply that King Drupad neglected my education. An unending stream of women flowed through my apartments each day, attempting to instruct me in the sixty-four arts that noble ladies must know. I was given lessons in singing, dancing, and playing music. (The lessons were painful, both for my teachers and me, for I was not musically inclined, nor deft on my feet.) I was taught to draw, paint, sew, and decorate the ground with age-old auspicious designs, each meant for a special festival. (My paintings were blotchy, and my designs full of improvisations that my teachers frowned at.) I was better at composing and solving riddles, responding to witty remarks, and writing poetry, but my heart was not in such frivolities. With each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me. I had a destiny to fulfill that was no less momentous than Dhri's. Why was no one concerned about preparing me for it?

When I mentioned this to Dhai Ma, she clicked her tongue with impatience.

through me. I hadn't realized how much I craved companionship. I'd long been curious about the queens—especially Sulochana—who flitted elegant and bejeweled along the periphery of my life. In the past I'd resented them for ignoring me, but I was willing to let go of that. Perhaps, now that I was grown, we could be friends.

Surprisingly, although the queens knew I was coming, I had to wait a long time in the visitor's hall before they appeared. When they did arrive, they spoke to me stiffly, in brief inanities, and wouldn't meet my eyes. I drew on all my speaking skills, but the conversations I began soon disintegrated into silence. Even Sulochana, whose blithe grace I had so admired during the festival of Shiva, seemed a different person. She responded to my greetings in monosyllables and kept her two daughters close to her. But one of them, a charming girl of about five years with curly hair and her mother's shining complexion, squirmed away from Sulochana and ran to me. Her eye must have been caught by the jeweled peacock pendant I wore—I'd dressed with care for the visit—for she put out a finger to touch it. I lifted her onto my lap and unclasped the chain so she could play with the pendant. But Sulochana snatched her away and slapped her so hard that red finger marks marred the child's fair cheek. She burst into bewildered tears, not knowing why she was punished. I stared at the queen in shock, my own face tingling with shame as though I were the one who'd been slapped. Soon afterward, Sulochana retired to her chambers with excuses of ill health that were clearly false.

When we reached my rooms, I couldn't hold back my tears. "What did I do wrong?" I asked Dhai Ma as I wept against her ample bosom.

"You did fine. Ignorant cows! They're just scared of you."

"Of me?" I asked, startled. I hadn't thought of myself as particularly fearsome. "Why?"

"And he promised I'll be married on full moon day in the month of Sravan—"

"So?" Dhai Ma responded scathingly from the next room, where she was setting out my clothes. "Fortune-tellers are always predicting weddings. They know that's what foolish girls want to hear most. That's how they get fatter fees."

"No, no, respected aunt, this sadhu didn't take any money. Also, he didn't just make vague promises. He said I'd marry a man who tends the king's animals. And as you know, Nandaram, who works in the stables, has been courting me! Didn't I show you the silver armband he gave me last month?"

"It's a long leap from an armband to the wedding fire, girl! Come Sravan, we'll see how accurate your holy man was. Now set out that blue silk sari carefully! And watch how you handle the princess's breast cloth. You're crushing it!"

"But he told me about my past, too," the maid insisted. "Accidents and illnesses I had when I was a girl. The year my mother died and what her last words were. He even knew about the time Nanda and I—" here her voice dipped shyly, leaving me to guess at details.

"You don't say!" Dhai Ma sounded intrigued. "Maybe I'll go see him. Ask him if that good-for-nothing Kallu will ever change his ways, and if not, what I must do to be rid of him. What did you say the Babaji's name was?"

"I didn't ask. Truth to tell, he scared me, with a beard that covered his whole face and glittery red eyes. He looked like he could put a curse on you if you made him angry."

"Princess," my sairindhri said, bowing. "Your hair is done. Does it please you?"

I picked up the heavy silver-backed mirror while she held another one behind my head. The five-stranded braid hung glossily

But because I was the closest thing she had to a daughter, or because she sensed the desperation beneath my cajolery, or maybe because she, too, was curious, she finally relented.

. . .

Swathed in one of Dhai Ma's veils and a skirt several sizes too large, I knelt in front of the sage, touching my head awkwardly to the ground. My entire body ached. To get to the banyan grove where the sage was residing, we'd had to ride in a palanquin through the city, then cross a lake on a leaking ferry boat, then sit for hours on a rickety bullock cart. It taught me a new respect for the hardiness of commoners.

I was startled by a rumble like a thundercloud. The sage was laughing. He didn't look too frightening. In his lined, cracked face, his eyes shone mischievously.

"Not bad, for a princess!"

"How did you know?" I said in chagrin.

"I'd have to be blind not to see through such a terrible disguise. At least the old woman could have given you some clothes that fit! But enough of that. Eager to learn your future, are you? Did you ever think how monotonous your life would be if you could see all that was coming to you? Believe me, I know! However, I'll oblige you both—in some part. You first, old woman."

He informed a delighted Dhai Ma that Kallu would perish soon in a drunken brawl, that she'd accompany me to my new palace after marriage, and that she'd bring up my five children. "You'll die old and rich and cantankerous as ever—and happy, because you'll be gone before the worst happens."

"Sadhu-baba," Dhai Ma asked in concern, "what do you mean by *the worst*?"

"No more!" he snapped, his eyes turning tawny, making her

Stung, I retorted, "I'm no child, and I do know what I want! I want to leave a mark on history, as was promised to me at my birth."

"Very commendable! But there are other things—perhaps unknown to you—that you crave more. No matter. The spirits will see into your heart and answer accordingly."

He clapped his hands and the spirits swirled faster. Yellow whispers came to me through the smoke.

You will marry the five greatest heroes of your time. You will be queen of queens, envied even by goddesses. You will be a servant maid. You will be mistress of the most magical of palaces and then lose it.

You will be remembered for causing the greatest war of your time.

You will bring about the deaths of evil kings—and your children's, and your brother's. A million women will become widows because of you. Yes, indeed, you will leave a mark on history.

You will be loved, though you will not always recognize who loves you. Despite your five husbands, you will die alone, abandoned at the end—and yet not so.

After the voices fell silent, I sat stunned. Much of what they said—the part about five husbands, for instance—confused me. The rest filled me with despair.

"Oh, don't look so dejected," the sage said. "How many women can claim to be envied by goddesses? Or become queen of queens?"

"I don't want them if it means the other parts will be true as well. What good is it to own the most wonderful palace in the world if I'll have to lose it? And all those deaths! I refuse to be the cause for them, especially Dhri's."

"You don't have a choice, my dear."

"I'll enter a hermitage! I'll never marry—"

His crooked teeth flashed. "Destiny is strong and swift. You can't trick it so easily. Even if you hadn't come seeking it today, in

"You've borne the harshness of the prophecies well, so I'll give you a parting gift—a name. From now on you'll be known as Panchaali, spirit of this land, though in your wanderings you'll leave it far behind." He turned to a thick book made of palm leaves and opened it.

"What are you writing?" I couldn't help but ask.

He ran a hand through his thick mane, exasperated. "The story of your life, if only you'd stop interrupting it. And of your five husbands. And of the great and terrible war of Kurukshetra that will end the Third Age of Man. Already you've kept me from it for too long. Go now!"

. . .

"Done so quickly?" Dhai Ma asked. "He didn't have much to tell you, did he?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you barely stepped in, then stepped out. I'm glad, though." She dropped her voice as she pulled me toward the waiting cart. "These sages with their sorcery—you never know what they might do to a young virgin."

Inside the sage's circle, had time taken on a different gait? I climbed onto the cart, too preoccupied to feel its jolts. I peered through the shadows of the banyan one last time. The gloomy light played tricks on me: it seemed that there were two figures sitting inside the circle. One of them was the sage. The other—why, he appeared to have an elephant's head! The cart lurched away before I could point him out to my nurse.

"What did he say?" Dhai Ma was all curiosity. "Nothing bad, I hope. You look so solemn. I knew this heat would be too much for you! Remind me to get you some green-coconut water when we go through the bazaar."

Was I then no better than the women who surrounded me, wrapped in the cocoons of their unimaginative lives, not even knowing enough to want to escape? It was a mortifying thought.

Other nights I considered the mystery of the book the sage showed me, the story of my life. How could such a book be written before I'd lived the incidents it described? Did this mean that I had no control over what was to happen?

Surely it wasn't so. Otherwise, why did he take the trouble to warn me?

. . .

I didn't speak to the sage again for many years, though I heard of him from time to time. I learned his name: Vyasa the Compendious, because of the many hefty books he'd written. Vyasa the seer, born on a dark island of a union between an ascetic and a fisher princess. On my wedding day, I would see him in the marriage hall, seated on my father's right, his placement revealing an importance I hadn't guessed at. He'd gaze at me, blinking mildly, as though he'd never seen me before. When I'd make my first great mistake, his expression would remain unchanged, so that I wouldn't realize the enormity of what I'd done until it was too late.

Later, among my wedding gifts, I'd find a wooden box. When I'd open it, a familiar smell, wild and bitter, would rise from the powder inside. I'd use it in Khandav, and later in the Kamyak forest. Thrown on fire, it warded away insects, just as he'd promised, and nightmares as well. On those nights, my rough bark-bed seemed softer. But no matter how much I called for them—for by now I had other, wiser questions—the spirits did not return to me again.