

B H I M S E N

by

Prem Panicker

Adapted from

"Randaamoozham"

by

M T Vasudevan Nair

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Kahani hamari Mahabharat ki

As a child growing up in the ancestral *tharavad* in Calicut, Kerala, dusk was my favorite time. My grandmother would ritually light the lamp, bring it out into the front porch to the traditional call of *dee-pam!*—the call that signaled that her work for the day was done, and the story-telling could begin.

Grandma was a brilliant narrator, with skills stage performers would envy: thus, rather than tell the tale in linear fashion, she would set the stage, conjuring up a vision of the setting, the characters, the backdrop, and then leading into her story which she told with dialog, occasionally poetical riffs, and an educated ear for the inherent drama.

The *Mahabharat* was her favorite go-to book when it came time for telling stories; mine too. Though she ritually worshiped the *Ramayan* [there's this one month in the calendar when, at dusk, she would bring out her copy and read aloud from it for an hour; I'd find other things to do, but as I heard her end the day's reading, would come running back for the sweetened *poha* and other goodies that were a part of such rituals]. She sensed that the very linear, black-and-white morality play that is the *Ramayan* was not conducive to gripping narration the way the *Mahabharat* was, with its highly charged central narrative embellished by the underlying filigree work of side stories and tangential asides.

That halcyon period developed in me a taste for epic narrative that subsequent years have only enhanced. It prompted me, during my teens, to read the *Mahabharat* in its entirety, as translated into Malayalam prose by Vidwan K Prakasam.

I then discovered various re-tellings of the epic, each brilliant in its own way: the plays derived from the epic, by Kavalam Narayana Panikkar (no, no relation); Chellappan Nair's play *Karnan*; PK Balakrishnan's novel *Ini Nhan Urangatte* (Let me sleep now), a brilliantly textured retelling of the *Mahabharat* with the focus on Karna as seen through the eyes of Draupadi; and of course M T Vasudevan Nair's *Randaamoozham*, an amazing re-imagining of the epic from the point of view of Bhimsen.

This soft spot for the epic prompted me to pick up Chitra Bannerjee Divakarunni's *Palace of Illusions* the day it hit the bookstores, and to read it that same evening/night. Had I written a review next morning, as I was tempted to, it likely would have been unprintable; now that some months have gone by, initial disgust has been replaced by—indifference, I think. I noticed at the time that Jai Arjun Singh on his blog had reacted with initial contempt, followed by [a more sober appraisal](#); rather than look at the book in my own turn, I'll leave you with his take. [If you are into this sort of thing, read also Jai's [excellent essay](#) on modern renderings of mythological tales.]

Anyway, to the point of this post: At the height of my being pissed off with Divakarunni's book, I re-read a couple of my favorites, including the books of 'MTV' and Balakrishnan [the latter, incidentally, is conceptually on the same lines as *Palace of Illusions*, in that the Karna-Draupadi relationship is a dominant theme—but there the similarity ends]. And that in turn led me to attempt a recreation of MTV's *Randaamoozham*.

It is *not* a translation. It is not even a transcreation, if you go by the accepted meaning of the term. What it is, is a re-telling, in which—with profound respect for one of my favorite writers—I intend to stay faithful to the central narrative and its governing emotional undercurrents, but manipulate time lines and incidents, and where necessary even chapter progressions, to suit my own narrative.

Let me put this another way: I was so pissed off by *Palace of Illusions*, that I decided to piss all of you off with my own attempt at a version of the *Mahabharat*. You have been warned; episode one follows. In fact, I'll manipulate the date and time stamp on this thing so the first episode comes under this post, not above. I have a bit written already, but not much; since I'll mostly be doing this on the fly, I'll try and stick to a schedule of two episodes a week, upping it to three if I can find time to get sufficiently ahead in the narrative.

PS: If anyone out there knows where I can get hold of an English translation of Sivaji Savant's *Mrityunjaya* [Which is the *Mahabharat* from Karna's point of view; while on that, Karna more than any other figure from the epic appears to have been the springboard for outstanding interpretative literature], I'd dearly love to get hold of a copy.

Behind Bhimsen

Wow, that's neat—far more mail feedback on the Bhimsen episode than I imagined, and here I was wondering whether such an effort would bore readers to extinction. So okay, doubts firmly erased; next chapter tomorrow, and at least two a week here on.

A couple of readers asked if there was some other reason for my doing this, other than the pleasure of sharing a good story. Actually there is—the final push came out of a discussion with my hugely literate uncle, shortly after a recent re-reading of the MTV book my own effort is based on. But to recount that discussion will be to jump the narrative gun; I'll keep this thing in mind, and bring up the discussion when I get to that point in the story that triggered it. Meanwhile, the best answer for why came in a mail from [Jai Arjun Singh](#); the relevant bit reproduced here with his permission:

Would love to read translations of some of the lesser-known re-tellings/re-imaginings from around the country - it would be very revealing because, as you know, the specifics of these old stories and myths vary greatly as one moves from one part of the country to another. There's a north Indian village, for instance, where Duryodhana is historically worshipped. With a work as staggeringly vast as the Mahabharata, the only way to do justice to it is to read as many different versions, written from as many different points of view as possible.

Precisely. And while on that, appreciate feedback from you guys on versions you may have read in your own languages, what you liked and what you did not—to cut a long sentence short, talk to me.

And while on this, also [read Jai's take](#), in Tehelka, on Ekta Kapoor's television serial on the epic [I caught a couple of early episodes, and haven't bothered since].

My criticism of Ekta Kapoor's *Kahaani...* isn't based on a rigid preconception of what the Mahabharata should or should not be. To the contrary, I see the epic not as a holy text with lessons that are set in stone but a complex, fluid work of literature privy

to constant rethinking and re-analysis – its many interpretations range from Kamala Subramanian's unabashedly sentimental view of the characters to Irawati Karve's coolly anthropological take in *Yuganta*. The Mahabharata offers easy answers to no one, except perhaps to those who are determinedly seeking only the easiest answers (in which case the simple-minded 1960s film version – a collection of audience-pleasing setpieces about the heroics of Bheema and Arjuna, played by Dara Singh and Pradeep Kumar respectively – should suffice). When freed from the shackles of a morality play, it provides imaginative filmmakers and scriptwriters with so many rich possibilities.

Just one example: while Krishna can be depicted as the dewy-eyed God of the Bhakti tradition - omniscient, forever in control, naughty smile permanently in place (which is how every mythological serial inevitably chooses to depict him) - it's equally possible to show him as a shrewd Yadav chieftain with a powerful understanding of the hearts and minds of other men. Or even as a vulnerable Avatar who has only a dim view of the role he must play in the larger picture, and who is frequently swayed by the human dramas around him. (Ramesh Menon's renderings of the epic show Krishna as a lonely, almost frightened God as he prepares to impart the Bhagwad Gita to Arjuna, knowing that this is the moment that his whole life has led up to, and wondering if he will pass the test.) Each of these readings could be fascinating and insightful if done well, but sadly only one – the first – will ever make it to our mytho-soaps.

....The most potentially interesting mytho-serial I've seen recently is Sahara One's *Draupadi*. Though it features the usual over-decorated sets and actors with Colgate smiles, it eschews the "big picture" of the Mahabharata in favour of the quotidian details of the characters' lives – their living-room conversations, their gossip. Theoretically, such a show could stretch on for decades and this would necessarily have the effect of humanising all the people; for example, it would be difficult to think of Duryodhana as a cardboard-cutout villain after you've seen him having a relaxed, post-dinner chat with his wife and children. I wonder if turning our epics into never-ending daytime dramas might be the best way to capture all their complexities."

Episode 1

"Who is this Yama Dharma?"

I looked up at my mother; she frowned down at me.

"Why are those singers saying elder brother is Yama Dharma's son? Isn't Pandu our father?"

Mother shushed me, signaling her impatience with a quick rap of her knuckles on top of my head. Elder brother Yudhishtiraa turned around to stare at me, in that very adult, disapproving way he had even at age six.

The court singers seated on the raised platform just outside the gates of Hastinapur sang on, of how Yudhishtira was Dharma incarnate; how he would conquer 14 kingdoms and become emperor.

I giggled at the thought of my elder brother waging wars and conquering kingdoms. When we played our games in the forest, all it took was a push, a poke, to make Yudhishtira squeal in pain and run off to complain to mother.

The sun beat down on us; the crowd that had gathered around us, staring, whispering, pointing, kept growing. Mother, carrying Nakulaa on her hip and holding on to Sahadevaa's hand, looked around anxiously. "Where is Arjuna?"

I went off to look, and found my younger brother perched in one of the chariots lined up just outside the gates. He was holding the reins and pretending to drive, while a watchful charioteer held the horse in check with a hand on the bridle.

I grabbed Arjuna's hand and walked him back to where mother stood waiting, with a patience I didn't share. Before we set out from the forest that morning, the maids had decked us out in silk robes and the heavy gold ornaments uncle Dhritarashtra had sent for us: a many-tiered necklace that almost covered my chest, a circlet of gold studded with pearls on my forehead that was starting to pinch, chunky gold

bracelets on my wrists, a golden band crusted with diamonds around my waist...

Now I was sweating profusely, and under all that gold and silk, I had begun to itch.

The balladeers ended their song to a flourish of the *nadaswaram* and *mridangam*; after a beat, they started up again and this time, I heard them sing my name.

Bhimasen, they sang, was born to be the strongest man in the universe. They sang that shortly after I was born, when mother Kunti was cradling me, I wriggled, slipped out of her arms and fell on the rock she was sitting on – and the rock splintered into a thousand fragments.

He is the son of Vaayu, the God of Wind, they sang of me while the crowd pressed even closer, pointing at me and murmuring.

I heard one woman say that on the day I was born, jackals had wandered the streets of Hastinapur in broad daylight howling, attacking people at random. Someone else said the *rishis* who cast my horoscope had told King Dhritarashtra that I was born to destroy the Kuru race.

Why were they calling me the son of Vaayu? Why was I born to destroy the Kuru clan? Did the rock really splinter when I fell on it?

It wasn't a good time to ask questions – mother's attention was clearly elsewhere, she was looking towards the city gates with relief and anticipation on her face. I turned in time to see the enormous gates swing open. Two men, bodies slick with oil, climbed onto the raised platforms on either side of the enormous flagpole that reached into the sky. With drumsticks as thick as my legs, they began pounding out a rhythm on the two enormous kettle drums set on either side of the gate.

A man came striding through the open gates – an elderly man, with long white hair piled like a crown on top of his head, and a white beard that streamed over his chest.

"Grandfather Bhisma," mother said under her breath as she walked forward, pushing Yudhishtira, me and Arjuna in front of her. Setting

Nakula down, she fell to her knees in front of the old man, her bowed head touching his feet.

He raised her up, smiled down at her. "The children have come. Good!" Yudhishtira, who always seemed to know the right thing to do, was prostrating at Bhishma's feet; as he bent down to bless my brother with open palm on top of his head, mother pushed me forward to pay obeisance in my turn.

As he blessed me, he said something I didn't hear in the din of the drums and the crowds; I got back on my feet and tried to brush some of the dust off my arms and chest. By then, a procession had come through the gates, and surrounded us. A group of priests began reciting some *mantras*; maids carrying trays with burning lamps, incense and flowers circled us while others bent to wash our feet with water from golden pots.

"Come," I heard Bhishma telling mother. "The king and queen are waiting to greet you."

He bent down, picked Nakula and Sahadeva up and swung them onto his shoulders. Mother took Arjuna by the hand. Yudhishtira walked ahead of us and, as the drumbeat mounted to a frenzy and the crowd cheered and called out our names, we walked through those gates and entered the kingdom mother told us we were born to rule.

Episode 2

It all felt very sudden, very strange.

Two weeks ago, we were living a carefree life in the forest – five of us, plus father Pandu, mother Kunti and *cheriyamma* [younger mother] Madri. Our home was a wooden lodge in the middle of a clearing, attended by two maids and a cook.

The *rishis* and others who lived nearby were frequent visitors; they referred to our father as king, and paid obeisance whenever they came visiting – just one more of those things I didn't understand at the time.

There were many such things. My mother often told me I was slow, stupid. So did elder brother Yudhishtira. The difference was that mother always had a teasing, fond note in her voice when she called me those names, but my brother's comments seemed to be laced with impatience, contempt even. And each time he called me those names, I felt the anger bubble up inside of me.

Neither of them would trouble to answer my questions, though. If father was a king and we were princes, why were we living in this small wooden home in the middle of the forest? Where was our kingdom? I never got answers. Maybe, I sometimes thought, this whole thing about us being princes was just a fairy story.

Living in the forest was fun. Early each morning we went swimming in the river, though Nakula and Sahadeva only sat on the bank with the maids, watching and laughing when I tried to pull Yudhishtira under water just to hear him squeal. After breakfast, one or the other of the *rishis* from the hermitage would come over, and teach us – actually, just me and Yudhishtira; Arjuna was four and Nakula and Sahadeva just three – *mantras* to say at various times of the day; and stories from the *puranas* that had lessons in them about *dharma* and all sorts of other things I did not properly understand or even care too much about.

The rest of the time, we could play in the forest, though Yudhishtira mostly stayed with the *rishis*, asking them all sorts of questions about things that bored me. I'd take the little mace a carpenter who came to do some repairs on our home had made for me, and wander off into the forest, to chase rabbits and deer or to see if I could catch fish with my bare hands, or to fight endless battles against the trees and bushes that in my imagination became big *rakshasas* or powerful enemy princes.

Occasionally I'd come across some wandering jungle tribe, and that was always fun. They would feed me deer meat and little birds roasted in the fire; their children and I would wrestle in the mud or play hide and seek among the trees.

I usually returned home after dark. Every evening an old, blind lady would come and sit by a fire in the courtyard, to sing songs of ancient heroes and their deeds. Unlike the singers outside the gates of Hastinapur, this woman had no *nadaswarams* accompanying her, no *mridangams* to provide the beat.

All she had was this dried out, hollow gourd attached to a bamboo pole, with a metallic string stretched from the tip of the pole to the end of the gourd. Her fingers strummed this string so fast the sound became a continuous hum, and she sang to us of Rama and Ravana and of a titanic battle in a city in the middle of the sea, while I gripped my mace and pranced around, pretending I was Hanuman.

That day two weeks ago, we were at our lessons; mother was minding Nakula and Sahadeva, and Arjuna was shooting off his toy arrows at the maids. Father and *cheriyamma* had wandered off into the forest. I had seen them go from the window of our room, father laughing at something *cheriyamma* was telling him.

Suddenly we heard the sound of wailing, and ran out of our room. In the courtyard outside, mother and Madri *cheriyamma* were hugging each other, crying; the maids were sitting on the ground, beating their breasts and wailing loudly, and the *rishis* who had come hurrying up from their ashrams were talking to each other in whispers.

Our father, I learnt, was dead.

Yudhishtira and I went with the *rishis* to where his body lay near a rock, under the trees. There was blood around his head. I heard one of the *rishis* telling another that father had climbed the rock to pick a

fruit for Madri *cheriyamma*, who he loved very much and would do anything for. He slipped as he was reaching for the fruit, fell, and hit his head on the rock.

Some hunters we met on the way helped carry his body back to our home. The *rishis* spread plantain leaves on the ground and laid father's body on in. A lamp burning ghee instead of oil was placed at his head; the *rishis* sat around the body, chanting hymns for the peace of the departed soul.

The hunters cut down a big tree, chopped it up into logs and piled them high. Our cook brought out a big barrel of ghee, which he poured all over the logs. The *rishis* lifted father's body onto the pyre. Yudhishtira, who had come back from the river with his hair and clothes still wet, walked around the pyre three times, with a flaming log in his hand, and then touched the log to the pyre.

As the flames sprang up from the ghee-drenched logs, mother knelt before the pyre and touched her head to the ground. And then I saw *cheriyamma* come out of the house, wearing her best silk robes and all of her jewelery. She hugged each of us, then walked around the pyre thrice, her head bowed and lips reciting some prayer.

She turned, looked once at my mother and then, almost casually, she walked into the flames.

Nakula and Sahadeva started to bawl; Arjuna ran away inside the house and one of the maids ran after him. Only mother and Yudhishtira stood there, unmoved, as if they knew what *cheriyamma* was going to do.

I was too paralyzed to move, too horrified to cry out. I wanted to turn away, but I stood there watching in a kind of horrified fascination as the flames covered her from head to foot.

She just stood there, not moving, not crying out, not even once. I choked back my tears and bit my lip on a dozen questions I didn't know who to ask.

Two days later, I was wandering around in the forest when I heard the clatter of horses' hooves. I ran towards the clearing, and saw two chariots pull up in front of our home. A man wearing red robes and a very big headdress got out of the first chariot. Mother called out to Yudhishtira; they all went inside, and talked for a long time.

Two men got down from the second chariot and began unloading several big wooden boxes which they carried inside our home.

Much later, after the men had driven away in their chariots, mother told us, "We are going back to Hastinapura, to our kingdom."

That was when I finally realized it was all true – we were princes; elder brother Yudhishtira was heir apparent of the Hastinapur throne and someday would be its king.

And I – mother told me that I had to stop my playful ways, apply my mind to my studies. You are Yudhishtira's deputy, the next in line, she told me. You have to support your brother always, and to be a good deputy, you have to learn much.

She then took us to where the maids were unpacking the boxes the men had carried inside. Uncle Dhritarashtra had sent us silk robes and all kinds of ornaments so that when we returned to Hastinapura, we would be dressed like the royal princes we were.

The blind singer came to us that night. We all sat around the fire, and for the first time, she sang stories of our family, our clan.

Episode 3

A tall, thin lady with gray hair and a black cloth covering her face stood at the palace doors.

On our last night in the forest, the singer had told of *valiyamma* [elder mother] Gandhari, the adopted daughter of the king of Gandhara who, when she learnt that she was to be married Dhritarashtra, the blind prince of Hastinapura, vowed that from the day of her marriage she too would give up the use of her eyes.

Mother ran up and prostrated at her feet; *valiyamma* lifted her up and embraced her and the two women sobbed in each other's arms, while we stood around wondering what to do.

Grandfather Bhishma gently urged us towards *valiyamma*, and we prostrated at her feet in turn. *Valiyamma* hugged each of us, running her fingers lightly over our faces and murmuring blessings in our ears.

"Come, my husband is waiting to see you," she told mother as she led her into the palace. Yudhishtira walked beside grandfather Bhishma and great uncle Vidura. Arjuna and I followed, looking around at the tall pillars, the endless corridors, and the groups of soldiers who stood around in clusters, their bodies slick with oil and weapons gleaming in the lamplight. Nakula and Sahadeva laughed and chattered happily, in the arms of the palace maids who had taken them from mother.

The two giant warriors standing guard at the gates of the main audience chamber lowered their spear points and stood aside as we approached. We walked across the threshold and into a hall lit by dozens of lamps wedged into the walls and pillars. My feet, used to the rough forest floor, slipped and slid on the polished marble as we walked down the length of the hall.

The songs we had heard in the forest spoke of King Dhritarashtra, our uncle, as the most powerful man in the world, capable of taming a thousand *masth*-maddened elephants. Like most of their songs, this was probably an exaggeration – but seated on the golden throne at the far end of the chamber was the most physically powerful man I

had ever seen. Everything about him was huge – his head, his enormous chest, arms and legs bulging with muscle and barely covered by a deep red silk robe.

What struck me most of all was the way he held his head – tilted up and away from us, eyes turned upwards at the ceiling as if he was straining to hear every sound.

"I, Kunti, the widow of your brother Pandu, prostrate before you." Mother's voice sounded as if she were crying.

Uncle Dhritarashtra got up from the throne. Eyes still turned towards the ceiling, he reached down and lifted my mother up as easily as if she were a child, wrapping those massive arms around her, stroking her hair and murmuring something in her ears.

Valiyamma took my mother by the hand and led her off to one side. Without waiting to be told, Yudhishtira stepped forward, said his name, and paid obeisance at uncle's feet.

Then it was my turn. Uncle plucked me off the floor and lifted me into his lap. I looked up and for the first time, I saw his eyes – flat, cold, white, frightening. I felt his fingers prodding at my face, my chest, arms. "Son Bheema has grown well; he will be a giant, a peerless warrior," he announced in a thin, reedy voice that sounded odd coming from such a huge man.

When we had all paid our respects in turn, uncle gathered us all into his arms and turned towards where my mother was standing. "I now have five more sons," he said in her direction.

We already knew he had a great many children—a hundred sons, the songs said. I looked around the great hall, wondering where they were and why they hadn't come to greet us. A glint of gold near a pillar behind the throne caught my eye.

I moved sideways to get a better view, and found myself staring at a boy my own size who was staring fixedly right back at me. He was dressed in yellow silk robes. A circlet of gold held his long hair in place; his chest was covered with a gold necklace of many strands; gold arm bands circled his upper arms and a thick gold chain glinted at his waist.

I smiled at him. He kept staring. And then, abruptly, he turned on his heel and disappeared through an opening in the wall behind the throne.

I stood there, feeling very foolish. I was angry with myself, angrier still with this unknown boy covered all in gold who had turned his back on my smile.

Episode 4

I woke to the sounds of the *conch*, the *nadaswaram*, the *mridangam*, the *bansuri* and the *veena* combining in harmony from the courtyard of the palace that had been set aside for us.

Those sounds had, on our first morning in Hastinapura, startled me out of deep sleep and sent me stumbling to the window of my room. As days grew into weeks and weeks into months, the burst of pre-dawn music, such a startling contrast to the quiet of the forest, became the signal to get started on the activities with which our days were increasingly filled.

We five brothers now slept in our own rooms. Even as I blinked my eyes open, my personal maids and male attendants would be at the door with hot water and fragrant oils for my bath, fresh clothes and ornaments for me to wear, and braided flowers for my hair.

It took me some little while to get used to all this attention, to stand still while attendants stripped off my clothes and applied oil all over my body and the maids scrubbed my chest and back and legs while others washed my hair, whispering to each other and giggling all the time.

The hardest thing to accustom myself to was the flowers in my hair – only women wear flowers, I protested that first day, but the maids only giggled some more while braiding the flowers into my hair, and then fixing a circlet of gold with a diamond the size of an egg around my forehead to keep the hair in place.

Even as the maids fussed, other sounds began to intrude: the neighing of horses from the courtyard below; the shrill trumpeting of elephants in their enclosure; the sudden blare of the enormous trumpets signaling the changing of the guard.

Once we were dressed, we had to go to the *gurukul* for our lessons in the *vedas* and the *shastras*. Yudhishtira was always the first to arrive; I was inevitably the last. The bath always made me hungry, and though we were forbidden to eat before class, my maids would

smuggle in some meat dishes and a plate of sweets for me to gobble down before I ran to school.

We had a teacher to ourselves; he would be waiting for us, seated cross-legged under the enormous *peepul* tree in the courtyard of our palace. Uncle Dhritarashtra's sons studied under a different teacher, in their own palace. Uncle Vidura's sons were supposed to join us for lessons, but they never came. 'Good,' Yudhishtira once told me when I asked, 'They are *sudras*; they shouldn't be seated with us *kshatriyas* anyway.' He was a big one for that sort of thing, my elder brother, very conscious of who he was and who was inferior to him.

I found my mind wandering while the guru recited from the *vedas* and explained the meanings of the various *slokas* and *mantras*. We were taught the prayers we were to say at different times of the day and their meanings: the Gayatri, which we had to recite immediately on waking; prayers to Indra, the Lord of Gods; to Agni, the god of the seven flames; to Rudra, the fearsome manifestation of the wrath of Brahma the Creator.

In the privacy of my own room, I added another prayer – to Vaayu, who wanders the earth with the seven winds on a leash, and who the court singers said was my father.

It started with this strange dream I had, my first night in the palace. I was playing around in the elephant paddock when suddenly, one of the elephants broke loose from its chains and came charging at me, trumpeting furiously.

I screamed and ran for my life; behind me, I could hear the thud of its feet as it bore down on me. I saw a tree and ran towards it, thinking I could climb it and get away from the charging elephant. But just as I neared the tree, I saw a man in full armor standing below, his hands holding a silver mace raised threateningly in my direction. I whirled around, and saw the elephant was almost on me, its head lowered and tusks poised to rip my body in half.

I woke up screaming, and sat up in a strange bed in a strange room, feeling the sweat on my face and body. Gasping for air, I walked over to the window and pushed it open – and felt the touch of a gentle breeze like a caress, stroking the sweat off my body, soothing me, making me feel safe, protected.

From that day, the last thing I did every night was pray to Vaayu. Actually, prayed is the wrong word – I stood at the open window and I spoke to him like you speak to an affectionate father, telling him of things that had happened to me that day. And always, the very last thing I said was, 'Vaayu, my father, while you wander the earth, remember me; remember your little boy. Keep me safe from harm.'

And just then, a gentle breeze would come out of nowhere, caressing me with the softest of touches, soothing away my fears. Or maybe I was just imagining it.

Episode 5

The best part of my day began once Vedic studies were over, and we went to Guru Shukracharya for lessons in the martial arts.

Shukracharya's *gurukul* was just outside the palace gates, surrounded by open fields on all sides, and it was in those fields that we practiced what we were taught.

As princes, we had to learn the intricacies of the *chaturanga sena*, the four-pronged army with the foot soldiers as the base and chariots, horse and elephants ranged around them. Our lessons were divided into two parts: we had to learn to fight in each of the four prongs – on foot, on the chariot, on horseback and while mounted on the big war elephants. And we also had to learn strategy – the strengths and weaknesses of each of these units, and how to combine them in formations to best advantage when waging war in different conditions.

Our cousins studied under Guru Kripacharya, while we were busy playing catch-up under Guru Shukracharya because grandfather Bhisma felt our education had been neglected during those years in the forest. Within two years, however, he decided that we had done well enough to graduate to Guru Kripacharya's class, and for the first time since we returned to Hastinapura, we began spending time with our cousins.

I enjoyed the lessons, even though I didn't care much for the way I was treated. Everyone – our guru, my cousins and even my own brothers – seemed to think of me as a fat, slow-moving, dull-witted sort of fellow who was only fit for hand to hand combat.

In Kripacharya's eyes, Yudhishtira was the master of the chariot and Arjuna of the bow and arrow. In their books, I was fit only to wrestle and fight with the mace, and even in these disciplines, our *gurus* thought cousin Duryodhana was my better.

They were wrong, all of them, or maybe they just didn't see what was becoming obvious to me. I was growing up strong, powerful. I loved to swim, to run with the horses in the exercise yard. Through these and

other amusements, I had developed power and agility—for all my size, I found I was able, when fighting from a chariot, to hop on and off at will, approaching the enemy on foot when it offered me an advantage, and jumping back onto the racing chariot again whenever I wanted to, in a way Yudhishtira could never match.

And over time, the power in my arms and shoulders and back helped me bend the bow deeper, draw the string further back, send the arrow flying faster, further, than even Arjuna could manage, though with the bow and arrow I was more deliberate than my younger brother, who seemed blessed with the ability to find his target almost without conscious effort.

I found it difficult at first to keep my anger in check when Kripacharya praised others and ignored me—but in time, I decided it was better to keep my thoughts and my growing belief in my abilities to myself. In class, I played the part of the bumbling fool they had decided I was; once class was done and my brothers and cousins had gone off to play, I wandered off to some quiet corner of the field to with my bow and arrows, or practiced weaving the single-horse chariot, which is much harder to control than the four-horse variety, at great speed around various obstacles, or driving it at top speed in rapidly narrowing circles while hopping on and off at will.

I was not the only one who stayed back after class. While the others gathered in groups and went off to play, Arjuna invariably headed off to the fenced-in area meant for archery practice, and spent hours working with his bow and arrow. The two of us, each driven by our needs and desires, gradually grew close. We talked a lot, and helped each other when we could. I taught him exercises to build power in his wrists, elbows and shoulders; he taught me how to adjust for wind, how to gauge the speed of a moving target and lay off my arrow so it went where the target was going to be, and not where it was when I shot.

He was just 10 years old, but he already knew he wanted to be the greatest archer of all time. He believed that Indra, God of all gods, was his father and prayed to him constantly. He told me that when the time was right, his divine father would come to him, gift him celestial weapons and teach them their use. And in the meantime, he practiced relentlessly with his bow and arrow, keeping it up even long after I had finished and gone off to my room for a bath and a meal.

One evening, a group of traveling singers from Magadha came to our palace. They have the gift of sight, my attendants told me; they could see the future. That night, they sat around a fire and sang, long into the night, stories of our clan and its glories, of kings and queens and marriages and wars and above all, they sang of my younger brother.

They sang of a future in which Arjuna, the greatest archer of all time, would set out in a chariot drawn by four white horses to subjugate the known world, with his god-gifted bow in hand and an inexhaustible quiver at his back. Kings and emperors would bend their knee to him, they sang; princesses would be enamored of him; his dark good looks would seduce even the Apsaras in heaven. Agni and Varuna, they sang, would be poised on the tip of his arrows, ready to devastate on his command.

They didn't sing much about me—just that same old story of how I would destroy the Kuru clan single-handed, how I was born to drink the blood of my cousins.

As the Magadhans sang, mother cried silently—tears of great happiness as she listened to the songs that foretold the glittering future of her favorite son. When the fires died down and the singers finished their songs, mother lavished gifts on them – costly robes and silver trays loaded with sacks of gold coins.

Most evenings, while Nakula and Sahadeva played with my mother, and Yudhishtira joined them and sometimes even Arjuna, I would slip away to the elephant paddock. The mahouts soon got used to my being around, and since I was the only one of the Hastinapura princes who bothered to visit the elephants, they indulged me, allowing me to climb on the elephants, feed them sugarcane, and help in their washing and grooming.

There was this one very old mahout, very thin and so frail you would think an elephant would blow him away just by breathing on him, but he was the one all others acknowledged as their guru. They told me he had learned the science of elephant-training from the rishis in the Himalayas; that he could stop a maddened elephant in its tracks just by reciting a mantra.

At first this elderly mahout ignored me, but as the days passed and my interest in the elephants only increased, he took me under his wing and began teaching me things. He marked out a young elephant and 'gave' it to me for my own; he told me that it would grow with me, and

that he would help me train it to obey my commands alone, and to make it the most fearsome war elephant in the entire stable.

I was grooming my elephant one evening, rubbing coconut husk dipped in water along its trunk and forehead, when I sensed that someone was watching me. Near the massive wooden gates at the far end of the paddock, I saw Duryodhana standing hands on hips, watching me. With him was Dushasana and, to my surprise, Yudhishtira.

Wondering why my brother and cousins had come to see me, I handed my elephant over to a nearby mahout to finish the grooming, and walked towards them.

It was only when I got closer that I realized my mistake: it was not Yudhishtira standing there with my cousins, leaning casually against the giant pine trunk that held the door of the paddock.

It was Karna.

[This [post by Jai Arjun Singh](#) is also worth your while—not for the fact that he mentioned this serial, for which of course my thanks, but because Jai on the subject of the Mahabharata and of literature in general is always insightful, and because in a way, his earlier writings on this and other epics, and [his review](#) of *The Palace of Illusions* were among the mental prompts that got me started on this exercise.]

Episode 6

I did not know Karna, not really, not then. He was just one more face in the crowd around the Kauravas, Duryodhana in particular, when we met for lessons.

This was the first time I was seeing him up close, and it struck me how much he looked like Yudhishtira. Up close, he was a shade darker than my brother, but otherwise the resemblance was uncanny.

When I stepped out of the paddock the three of them moved quickly, putting themselves between me and the gate. I realized that this was trouble – if they wanted to stop me from going back inside, it meant they were planning to do me some harm.

I could have shouted for help, but something, maybe the fear of being thought afraid, stopped me. I pretended to be unconcerned. 'It's getting late,' I said. 'I'm going for my bath.'

I walked away. Behind me, I heard their footsteps rapidly closing in on me. I spun around – and found them just a couple of feet behind me. They stopped.

Duryodhana laughed. 'Look, the fat fellow is afraid!'

Dushasana laughed too, like an echo of his elder brother. He was like that – everything Duryodhana did, he copied. Karna, who had stopped a couple of feet behind the other two, just smiled. There was something about his smile though, an edge of contempt perhaps, that angered me more than the laughter of the other two.

'Look at him, Duryodhana,' Karna called. 'This is the fellow who they say is born to destroy the Kauravas. Look at him, standing there trembling like a fat fool.'

'Fat fool!' Everyone called me that.

I was always fond of food, and watching me eat more than my brothers put together, my mother would call me that, half in exasperation, half in affection. Elder brother Yudhishtira often called

me that, when I dozed off in Vedic studies, or when I got bored listening to him and uncle Vidura discuss the rules and obligations of kingship. Even my gurus, Shukracharya and Kripacharya, often called me that when they thought I was slow to pick up something.

But this was different. To hear those words from the son of a charioteer, as I remember Yudhishtira once telling me Karna was – that I couldn't ignore.

Duryodhana stepped closer to me; Dushasana followed like his shadow. They were strong, well built, and particularly adept at wrestling. I saw Duryodhana settle into the *ardha mandala* stance, feet slightly bent, knees out, centering himself at the waist as we had been taught. I knew what would happen next – he would lunge with his upper body, get his arms around me and lock me to him, while Dushasana attacked me from the side. I could see Dushasana edging sideways, waiting for his brother to make the first move.

This was no time to worry about rules, or to fight the way we had been taught. I focused on Duryodhana, sensed him tensing for the lunge and at that precise moment, I kicked out hard, hammering the heel of my foot into his right knee with all my force. He yelled in pain as he lost his balance. Before Dushasana could react, I spun sideways and crashed my bent arm into his face, aiming my elbow at his nose.

Surprise is a good weapon but you can only use it once. The two brothers would recover, and this time they would be more careful – and I didn't know if Karna planned to take a hand. I slipped behind Dushasana, who was yowling in pain, and grabbed him by his hair. It was slick with oil; I had to twirl his hair tightly around my fingers to get a good grip. I leaned over and as Duryodhana scrambled up from the ground, holding his knee, I reached out with my other hand and got a good grip on his hair.

Standing behind them, holding them firmly by their hair, I tugged hard. They yelped. Karna stood where he was, watching, making no move to interfere.

I had to finish this quickly – I couldn't just stand there holding them forever.

Bunching my muscles, I cracked their heads together. Bang, and then again and again. Duryodhana moaned; Dushasana began to yell at the top of his voice.

I sensed people running towards us—some mahouts, a couple of soldiers who must have been standing guard at Kripacharya's gates. 'What are you doing? Why are you hurting them? Let them go!' I heard the voices, but didn't pay any attention; I kept banging their heads together... bang... bang...

Finally someone wrenched me away; others surrounded Duryodhana and Dushasana, checking them for injuries, wiping away the blood streaming from their heads.

Karna stayed where he was, acting as if he was no part of all this. I stared at him; I wanted him to know that his time was coming. One day I'd find him alone – and then I'd pay him back for his taunts, his contempt. I'd pay that debt with a horse-whip on his back—the son of a charioteer deserved nothing better.

I turned around, and walked away towards the river.

When I got back to the palace, it was dark. I walked towards my mother's room, and found her talking to Yudhishtira. They looked up when I walked in.

My brother came towards me and gave me a brief hug. It surprised me – Yudhishtira was never the kind to hug, to show affection openly. I hugged him back, walked over to where my mother was seated, and bent to touch her feet.

'Why did you attack Duryodhana and Dushasana from behind and hurt them badly?' she asked me. Apparently the story of what happened that evening had already spread; even mother, who never stepped out of the pavilion, had heard.

'I didn't.' I didn't say anything else – I just stood there waiting, not elaborating.

'That *suta putra* Karna, came into the hall when I was with grandfather Bhisma and uncle Vidura,' Yudhishtira told me. 'He said you hid behind some trees, and when they were going towards the river for a bath, jumped on them from behind and hurt them badly.'

I looked at him, but said nothing. My mother reached out, caught me by the arm and pulled me into her lap.

'Son, keep away from those boys as much as you can. Even if you are not at fault, you will be the one who is blamed for any trouble.'

I touched her feet and turned to go. 'Bhima, child, be very careful,' Yudhishtira said. 'Duryodhana doesn't like to be beaten. He will want revenge; they will try to get you alone and cause you harm. Always be on the alert. Don't go out alone, especially after dark.'

I nodded and walked away. I may be a fat fool, but I had already figured that out.

Episode 7

Once every few weeks, we'd get a break from our studies.

On such days we left the palace before dawn, riding our ponies into the surrounding forest, accompanied by hunters, dogs, beaters, and an army of cooks and attendants.

Hunting is an accepted part of princely education – or maybe it is just that the Kuru clan loved hunting so much we found excuses to indulge. That was one of the mysteries about our father that I hadn't found an answer for – the way we were told the story, he was king at the time. He was the younger brother but uncle Dhritarashtra was blind, so grandfather Bhishma decided that our father Pandu should rule.

He was very fond of the hunt, and he went one day into the forest to indulge in his favorite pastime. When kings go hunting, there's a little more to it than just riding out into the forest, shooting a deer or two and riding back at nightfall. The whole thing is planned ahead of time; workers go out into the forest to build a luxurious lodge for the king and his courtiers, and an army of cooks, maids and men servants are on hand to ensure every comfort.

So our father Pandu went into the forest for a hunt, accompanied by his wives and favorite courtiers and his best hunting dogs – and then something happened out there. I never learned what it was, but Pandu never returned to his kingdom. Right there in the forest he took off his royal robes, handed the crown to his brother, and stayed there in that lodge until his death.

It was just one more of the many mysteries surrounding our family history, but today I wasn't thinking about that. I enjoyed such days, and looked forward eagerly to when I would get to spend the day in the forest, observing and learning as the experienced hunters stalked their prey and brought it down with arrow or spear.

There was something about that moment that fascinated me. The deer, startled by some sound, would bound into the air and hurtle forward. The hunter, bow string drawn back to its full extent, the bow

quivering with the tension, would lead off, aiming ahead. The *twanggg* as he released the arrow; the liquid thud as it slammed into the body of the deer; the suddenness with which an animal running at full speed would buckle at the knees, fall, and lie inert – I never could get enough of it.

'Brother, watch! Today, I'll bring down a deer,' Arjuna said as we set out for the forest.

We were deemed too young, still, to take active part in the hunt. The idea of organizing such days in the forest was so we could learn jungle craft, understand animals and their habits, learn how to read the marks on the forest floor, how to stalk an animal, how to ride it down at full clip on our horses. But though we carried small spears, and hunting knives at our belts, it was mostly for show.

Arjuna was everyone's favorite, though. I guessed that some of the hunters must have decided to indulge him a little, allow him a chance.

In the forest we split up, each of us going off with one party of hunters, deep into the forest. The hunter leading our group found some fresh tracks. We all got off our horses. He pointed out to me the dead leaves that had been crushed into the forest floor; showed me how deep the leaves had been pushed down into the mud, and showed me how to tell which direction the beast had taken from the markings.

'A boar!' I guessed. The hunter patted me on the head. 'Very good – it's a boar, and judging by the sign, it is a very large one. Let's go get him.'

Just then, from another part of the forest we heard the distinct notes a hunter blows on his horn to mark a kill. There was the sound of much whooping and yelling, so we knew this was a big kill. We got back on our horses and galloped in that direction, racing through the trees until we came abruptly to a large clearing.

In the middle of it lay a large deer, its antlers alone almost as big as I was. Next to it stood Arjuna, bow in hand; around him crowded a group of hunters, laughing, applauding, cheering him.

He came running up to me. 'I got him! One arrow – straight to the heart!'

I hugged my little brother, proud of his skill. More people came running into the clearing. Yudhishtira... Duryodhana, Dushasana and a few of the other Kauravas... a big crowd was building up.

Yudhishtira went up to Arjuna, smiling proudly; they hugged each other and danced around in joy. 'It is your first kill. Don't forget your duty as a *kshatriya* – you should make an offering to the god of the forest,' I heard Yudhishtira saying.

Duryodhana and the others stalked away. They didn't seem too pleased that Arjuna was the first among us cousins to take that major step towards becoming a *kshatriya*, a warrior – that he was the first to draw blood.

I left my brothers and the hunters to their celebrations and, attracted by some sounds in the distance, walked off towards the forest. The sounds grew louder – some large beast seemed to be racing through the forest. Suddenly, with an almighty roar, an enormous boar burst through the trees and appeared in the path I was heading towards.

It was huge. Its bristles stuck out from the mud covering its body; its two tusks, sharp as spear points, gleamed on its lowered head as it raced in my direction.

I froze. I couldn't speak, I couldn't move – I just stood there, paralyzed.

Vaguely, as if from some place far away, I heard the hunters behind me yelling, the beaters hammering at their drums, trying to distract the beast. I heard voices calling out to me, urging me to turn, to run back towards the clearing.

I could only stand there, frozen to the spot. I remember thinking, so this is how it ends – Bhima, born to destroy the Kurus, killed by a boar in the forest. That is how they would sing of me.

The boar had clearly scented me. With lowered head and churning legs, it charged towards me and, when still some feet away, it leapt.

At some point, though I had no clear memory of doing it, I had gripped my spear with both hands and was holding it, point down, in front of me. Suddenly, as the boar flew through the air at me, my mind cleared. I saw with great clarity the beady little red eyes glaring at me, the tusks flashing in the light of the fires in the clearing. As the

boar loomed over me, I ducked and thrust upwards, burying the spear just below the head, feeling it sink into flesh as the boar hit me, knocked me off my feet and tumbled me to the ground with the violence of its charge.

Even as I fell I remembered to keep my grip on the spear. As I hit the ground, I put my shoulder to the silver butt of the spear and, with the weight of my body, drove it in deeper. The boar roared, a sound that froze the blood; it thrashed desperately, yanking the spear out of my hands – and then, suddenly, it lay still.

I got back on my feet, feeling my head swim, my heart thump like a drum inside my chest. My legs felt weak, unsteady; my vision was blurred.

I stumbled over to the boar, grabbed hold of the end of my spear and, with my foot on its stomach, yanked it out. A great spout of blood flew up and splattered over my face, my body. My nostrils flared at the smell and I breathed in, deep; without thought, I licked at my lips, tasting a few drops of blood.

I had, almost without being aware of it, become a *kshatriya*. I had killed—and, as the shock wore off, I realized I liked that moment, that feeling.

Episode 8

It was very late when I walked away towards the river.

We, Arjuna and I, had waited while the hunters skinned our kills, and then made our ritual offerings to the forest gods. The cooks had built a fire and were preparing the meat; I asked them to send some to the palace, and went off for a bath.

I wanted to wash the blood away; more than anything else, I wanted to pray Vaayu, my divine father, for keeping me safe from harm.

I hadn't felt his presence in the forest, in those moments when I saw death hurtling towards me. But somehow, my mind had cleared at the last possible instant; I had known exactly what to do. I could have panicked, turned around and ran, as the hunters had yelled at me to do, and that would have been my finish. But somehow, I had found the strength and the courage to stand my ground, to kill where I thought I would be killed.

I took off my clothes and dove into the river, going deep, holding my breath, sinking down till my feet touched the earth. I stood there, letting the water lap at my body, soothing me, calming me, till I could hold my breath no longer. I shot up to the surface – and found myself in trouble.

On the bank stood Duryodhana, Dushasana, Karna and over a dozen other of my cousins.

Ever since that day outside the elephant corral, I had always taken care never to go anywhere alone, particularly late in the evening. But the hunt, the excitement of my first kill had driven all those thoughts from my head – and given them the chance they must have been waiting for.

I tried to clamber out of the river. They surrounded me. I felt hands hitting me, blows raining on my head and body. Thankfully, they were all crowded together, very close to me, all eager to hurt me – the fools

didn't realize that by attacking me as a crowd, they were only getting in each other's way.

I needed to find a way to escape, to somehow distract them so I could break away. A thought occurred to me. I pretended to be hurt more than I was, kept my hands at my sides and took the blows on my arms, my body, my chest and back.

I had hoped through this tactic to find enough of a gap to break free and run away, but as it happened, in the midst of all the pushing and shoving I got my chance when Duryodhana and Dushasana came within reach of my arms. I reached out, wrapped my arms around their necks, and tumbled backwards into the river, dragging them in with me.

I hit the water and went deep. I had taken a deep breath before making my move, but Duryodhana and Dushasana, taken by surprise, weren't prepared to go underwater. I squeezed, holding on tight and ignoring their struggles as they thrashed about. It was only when I felt their struggles weaken, felt them go still, that I headed back up to the surface. I dragged them towards the shore, and threw them down in the mud.

I clambered out of the water and walked to where my clothes were. The others stood back, clearly afraid. I wanted to lash out, pay them back for the beating they had given me – but I knew that if I took that first step towards them, they could get their courage back or, out of sheer desperation, come at me—and the sheer weight of their numbers could put me down.

I dragged on my robe and turned back to where Duryodhana and Dushasana lay crumpled in the mud, gasping, retching out water with every other breath. I walked up to where they lay, and kicked at Duryodhana. 'Look at me!' I roared.

He raised his head and caught my eye.

'The next time you try to do me harm, I'll kill you. I'll kill all of you!'

I turned my back on them and walked away.

Late that night, I was in my room, finishing dinner. The best thing about being in Hastinapura was the food – dozens of different dishes that the giggling maids loved to keep heaping on my plate. Whenever

I ate with my brothers and my mother, she would frown at me; Yudhishtira would stare, call me a fat fool, and read me a lecture on gluttony. In the privacy of my own room, though, I could eat all I want – my maids competed among themselves to see who could tempt me into taking a second helping and a third and a fourth. And today, I needed no tempting—the exertions of the day put an edge on my appetite, and the meat of deer and boar were doubly spiced by the knowledge that they came from Arjuna's kill, and mine.

A guard came in and said I was wanted in the main palace.

I hastily washed my hands and walked out into the courtyard. Mother was already there, and Arjuna. Yudhishtira came out just then, holding Nakula and Sahadeva by the hand.

Without a word, mother led us across the courtyard and into the main palace. We walked through the maze of corridors, until we came to valiyamma Gandhari's room. We went up to her, spoke our names aloud, paid due obeisance. When my turn came, I had this strange feeling that even through the thick black cloth covering her face she could see me; that her eyes burned with anger.

Duryodhana came into the room just then, with his brothers, and they went up to pay their respects to their mother.

'So you have already started a war among yourselves, have you?' Her voice, made harsh with anger, lashed at us.

'If you have decided to fight each other, to kill each other, tell me now. I don't want to stay here and see you spill each other's blood. Kunti and I will go away into the forest, and when we are gone you can do what you want. Fight, kill – at least we won't be around to see our children's blood spilt.'

She sat there in her chair in the middle of the room, erect in her anger, the light of a single lamp underlining the harsh black of the cloth that covered her face.

I had heard the traveling Magadhans sing of her, that of all the many beautiful princesses who had come to Hastinapura as brides down the years, this adopted daughter of Subhala, the king of Gandhara, was the most beautiful.

Grandfather Bhisma had gone to King Subhala and asked for her hand for the blind prince of Hastinapura. At the time, Subhala was being threatened by rival kings and welcomed the idea of an alliance with the strong Kurus to save his own kingdom. Without telling his daughter what kind of man she was going to marry he sent her off with Bhisma, accompanied by one hundred male attendants, a hundred and fifty maids, several carts filled with gold and jewels and her brother Shakuni as escort.

When she arrived in Hastinapura, the Magadhans sang, the people thronged the gates, marvelling at the blinding beauty of the young Gandhara princess. And then, at the palace gates, she saw her husband for the first time.

She stared long and hard at Dhritarashtra, who stood at the palace gates waiting to receive the bride he would never see. And then she turned to her brother Shakuni, asked him for a black cloth, and tied it over her face. From that moment on, she hadn't looked at anything else in all her life – not at the sons born to her, or those other children her husband had fathered through his various concubines, and not even at Dusshala, her only girl child.

'The men of the Kuru race have always delighted in the tears of their womenfolk,' *valiyamma* Gandhari said, her normally soft, gentle voice as harsh and vicious as the crack of a whip. 'I know that. I have lived that life.'

Mother bent down and whispered something in her ear, but *valiyamma* paid no heed.

'All of you will grow up and get married – and I feel sorry for those unfortunate girls you will bring home as brides. Each night as I walk through the corridors of this palace I hear the sighs, the sobs of those beautiful young women who have been sacrificed to the so-called men of the Kuru race—uncaring men, impotent men, blind men...'

Her voice cracked.

No one moved, no one breathed. No one dared break the awful silence that enveloped the room, seeping into us like the winter chill.

'In this palace there are men who smile and bow and scrape at you. But inside their minds and hearts, they wish us ill. We surround ourselves with ghouls in the guise of astrologers and *rishis* and

courtiers, all of whom want to see the ground littered with the bodies of Hastinapura's princes. They will tell you stories and sing to you songs of how you were born to destroy each other, how you were born to kill each other, how jackals howled and the moon turned red the night you were born...'

Valiyamma sighed. For a long moment she sat there, lost in thought.

'You were not born to be enemies. You were not born to destroy our race, my son Bhima. And you, Duryodhana, my child, you have no reason to hunt your cousin like a dangerous animal. You are brothers, all of you; you are meant to learn and to play and to grow up together – but they won't tell you that, those courtiers and singers we surround ourselves with. They will never tell you that if all of you stand together, there is no king, there is no power on this earth that will be able to resist you.'

'What do they teach you, these gurus of yours, Shukra and Kripa and all those others who live off our bounty? They teach you to kill, but have they taught you what your real strength is? No, they have not, and they will not. They don't want to see you strong; they don't want to see you stand united, because your strength is their weakness.'

We stood there, heads bowed, not looking at her, not looking at each other.

'If I ever hear that any of you fought outside the training grounds, I will leave this palace that day. Kill each other or die trying if you must, but I will not remain here to see any of it.'

Slowly, painfully, *valiyamma* got up from her chair. Mother took her by the hand and together, the two women walked slowly out of the room, leaving us standing in our silence, and our shame.

Episode 9

One of the maids came in to tell me I had a visitor. I looked up as cousin Chitrasena walked into my room.

That night in her room at the main palace, valiyamma Gandhari had not forced us to make any promises, but her words had affected all of us, and it showed in the changed atmosphere when we cousins met for our martial studies. We no longer avoided each other; instead, there were smiles and jokes all round, and we even got together for games after our studies were over.

A disciple of our maternal cousin Balarama had joined the school to teach us the art of fighting with the mace. Invariably, Duryodhana and I, the strongest among the Kauravas and Pandavas, would be paired together. Though we practiced in dead earnest and each tried his damndest to defeat the other, there was no animosity and if one of us got injured, the other was quick to offer help.

'Aren't you coming?' Chitrasena asked.

Where?

'We are going to the water pavilion – no studies today, so we planned a picnic. Games, good food, plenty of fun. Come on, they are all waiting for you.'

I got ready in a hurry, and walked into the courtyard of the main palace with to find Duryodhana, Dushasana and the other Kauravas already there, joking and laughing with Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva.

None of them knew where Yudhistira was, so I ran back into the palace, and finally tracked him down to a small room near the main audience chamber, where he was learning the game of dice from one of uncle Dhritarashtra's ministers.

Yudhistira seemed uncomfortable when I walked into the room and caught him at the dice board. When I told him about the planned picnic, he frowned and said he wasn't coming. 'We are all waiting for you', I told him. 'You know we never go anywhere without you.'

Very reluctantly, my brother got up from his game and walked out with me. Duryodhana was already mounted on one of the chariots; he invited Yudhistira, Arjuna and me to go with him. 'Don't worry, Bhima,' he said, laughing and clapping me on the back as I climbed onto the chariot. 'I sent father's chief cook and three dozen helpers ahead to make sure we have a splendid meal waiting for us.'

We piled into more than a dozen chariots, and drove along the road leading to the Ganga. There was a deep bend in the river at one point, where it almost doubled up on itself forming a vast water body. The water pavilion where Kuru kings and princes loved to sport, especially in the hot summer months, was a lovely structure nestling in that bend. It had rooms to rest in, a very large kitchen and a larger dining area, and on the river bank, pillar-like structures of various heights from which you could dive into the water.

I went first to the kitchen, where the chief cook of Hastinapura, a fat, jolly fellow who knew my fondness for food, was bustling around. 'We have a feast for you today,' he told me. 'The meat of deer and boar dressed in a dozen different ways; roasted partridges and fried fish; and all the sweets you can eat.'

He invited me to taste. I picked up a couple of *modaks* and headed out for a swim.

We had a great time. I dived off the tallest of the pillars, showing off to the younger ones; went deep under water and held my breath as long as I could; with Dushasana stretched out on my back I swam to the other end of the river and back.

The younger ones tired first and clambered out, heading to the dining area. I was the last to come out of the water. As I headed off to the dining pavilion, Duryodhana came up to me. 'No, where are you going, there is a special arrangement just for the two of us, come.'

He walked off towards the trees. Blankets had been spread on the ground, with comfortable pillows to sit on and lean against. Attendants stood by with huge silver plates piled high with food. Duryodhana signaled to an attendant, who brought two covered mud pots. He took one, and passed me the other.

'What is this?'

'Soma!' he laughed. 'The best alcohol, just for the two of us.'

I was startled. 'Are we supposed to be drinking?'

'You are a warrior. You've made your first kill – and in the forest that day you didn't kill from far, with a bow and arrow. You killed a full-grown boar with just a spear! You are no longer a boy.'

When we returned from the forest that day, mother had praised Arjuna for his skill. Grandfather Bhishma, on hearing of how Arjuna brought down a grown deer with a single arrow, had embraced him and arranged a special *pooja* to mark his passage to *kshatriya* status. Even uncle Dhritarashtra had sent for my younger brother, praised his skill and blessed him.

No one took any notice of the fact that I had killed a grown boar, except Yudhishtira. 'You fat fool, don't you have any sense? How could you have wandered off like that, all on your own and with no hunters for company?' he had scolded me that evening, when we met in mother's room.

And here was Duryodhana – the first to acknowledge my kill, to mark me out as a *kshatriya*, a full-grown warrior. I felt this sudden rush of affection for my cousin.

'You think we should drink?'

'This is not Sura, Bheema, that stuff is for peasants. This is the best Soma, from my father's private stock.' He removed the cloth cover on his pot and took a deep swig. 'Of course, if you are scared...'

I couldn't have Duryodhana thinking I was too frightened to drink, especially not after he had just praised my first kill and hailed me as a man. I ripped the cloth off my pot, raised it to my lips, and took a big mouthful. It was sweet but also kind of tart, like raw lemon. I gulped a big mouthful down and felt a surge of nausea. Fighting to keep from showing it and disgracing myself, I reached out for a chunk of deer meat and popped it into my mouth.

'The first animal you hunt, the first enemy you kill, the first drink you taste, the first woman you enjoy – you can never forget these experiences,' my cousin said, as he drank deep. I took a second gulp, and found it easier to get down my throat than the first.

'Do you know which king is physically the strongest in the world?'

I thought about that for a bit. Not my cousin Balarama of Dwaraka, for sure. For one thing he was not yet king, and for another, I'd heard how Jarasandha the Magadhan king had easily defeated Balarama in single combat.

'Jarasandha,' I said.

'No,' laughed Duryodhana. 'Jarasandha is strong, yes, but he is only second best. The most powerful in the world today is my father, king Dhritarashtra.'

He gulped down another mouthful; not to be left behind, I did the same.

'My father, when he was younger, went into the forest and did penance for a long time. The rishis were pleased, and blessed him with the strength of one thousand elephants. In time, I too will get that strength, as a boon from my father.'

'Vaayu, the god of wind, can crumble mountains and whip the sea into fury with his strength. One day, I too will inherit that strength,' I said, not to be outdone.

Duryodhana laughed out loud – and the contempt in that laugh made my face flush.

'Don't laugh – I, Bheema, son of Vaayu, am telling you this!' I grabbed my pot and took a deep gulp, then another.

'Oh-ho, yes,' he said, and there was a sneer in his voice. 'Yudhistira, the son of Yama. Bheema, son of Vaayu. Arjuna, son of Indra. Nakula and Sahadeva, twin sons of the Ashwini twins – what, did the Ashwinis come to your stepmother Madri's bedchamber together? It's a nice trick – a trip into the forest for a hunt that becomes an extended stay, during which the impotent Pandu miraculously has sons. *Rishis* and paid singers keep repeating the story of all those divine fathers and miraculous births, and the people believe any nonsense that is sung to them. But Bheema, must you inflict these fairy tales on me? Believe what you chose about your mother, but don't imagine I am as big a fool as you!'

I sat stunned, as the full meaning of his words seeped into my mind like little drops of acid. He had called us bastards, suggested my mother and Madri *cheriyamma* were immoral, that they were

adulteresses. Furious, determined to give him a thrashing he would never forget, I drained my pot and jumped to my feet – and felt the world spin as a wave of nausea hit me.

Duryodhana's sneering face was an indistinct blur; his words seemed to come from somewhere far away. 'Fat fool, believing your mother's silly stories about who your father is...'

I took a step towards him, lost my balance, and fell. I tried to reach out with my hands and break my fall, but my limbs wouldn't move. I hit the ground hard, and felt a sharp pain as my cheek smashed against a stone.

I tried to push myself up, and realized I was helpless, that my limbs wouldn't move. Indistinctly, I heard the sound of more voices and much laughter. And then, even in that half conscious state, I heard a voice louder than the rest.

'Where is the rope?'

It was the *suta putra*, Karna.

'Get the rope. This time, he must not escape. He dies, today!'

Episode 10

It was pain like I had never felt before, and it felt like an elephant was sitting on my chest.

I was jolted into consciousness, and realized I was sinking. I tried to swim, and found my hands were tied behind my back and my legs too were tightly bound.

This is the end, I thought, and breathed a swift prayer to Vaayu – but even as I said the words in my mind, the memory of Duryodhana's taunts came back to me, and anger replaced panic – and with it, a determination to somehow escape, to get back to shore, find my cousin and smash his sneering face with my bare hands.

I hit bottom, and fought to stay upright. I first tried my strength against the rope binding my wrist, but it was tied too tight. As I struggled, I stumbled forward, and felt a sharp, sudden stab of pain as something cut into my bare foot.

I was beginning to feel dizzy, and realized I couldn't hold my breath for much longer. Leaning forward, I peered down at the bed of the river, and saw something, a coral perhaps, sticking out of the mud. Inching forward, I managed to manoeuvre myself onto that rock, felt with my foot to see where it was sharpest, got that bit between my ankles and pressed down, hard.

I felt the rope give, just a little. I pressed down again, with all my strength... again, and again, my urgency increasing as the pain in my chest mounted, until suddenly I felt the rope split, and a sharp pain shoot up my legs as the sharp end of the rock cut deep into the flesh below my ankle.

Involuntarily, I gasped and, as the breath rushed out of my lungs, water rushed in. There was no time to try and cut the bonds on my arms, so I kicked out hard at the ground, pushed myself off, and paddling with my feet, angled up towards the surface.

It seemed to last forever, that slow crawl through the water. I loved swimming, and whenever I went to the river for a bath, I'd take a deep breath, sink deep, and see how long I could hold my breath.

This time was different, though—I was unconscious when I was thrown into the water, I hadn't prepared myself, and I could feel the last of my breath burning in my lungs.

My head burst through the surface. I took a deep breath, choked, and threw up. I gulped in huge lungfuls of air, kicking with my feet to keep my head above water. Once I was breathing easier, I flipped over so I was lying flat on my back, breathing slowly, concentrating on just floating on the surface while I got my mental bearings.

I couldn't quite make out where the shore was, but I knew I couldn't just lie there. Paddling gently with my feet, I let myself float on the slight current, focusing on moving in one direction, not particularly caring which shore I was drifting towards.

Crocodiles infested parts of the river – the local singers would say they were people who had been cursed by rishis to live in the Ganga and feed on the flesh of the dead. If one scented the blood from the cut on my ankle and came at me now, there was nothing I could do – with my hands bound, I was totally helpless.

The thought lent an added urgency, and I paddled as hard as I could with my feet. Without my hands to provide balance, there was just so much I could do – if I paddled too hard, my head went below water and I ended up getting water in my nose and mouth.

It felt like hours; I was getting tired, and my legs had begun to cramp. I kicked out hard with my feet, trying to gain some speed. That extra effort made me lose my balance; I sank under water, a cough bursting out of me as the water went into my nose. I struggled frantically. My head came up out of the water and my foot touched something hard. Crocodile, I thought in a panic; I lashed out with both feet, and yelled in pain as my toes crashed against a rock.

I realized I was near the shore. Gingerly, I felt with my feet, avoided the rock, stood upright and found the water was only up to my neck. I walked slowly forward through the water. In front of me I could see the river bank, but with my hands bound I couldn't climb up out of the water.

It was dusk, and in the distance I saw the flicker of light among the trees. The light moved, vanished, reappeared. I realized someone with a torch was moving through the forest. Without thinking if it was friend or foe, I yelled at the top of my voice.

Abruptly, the light stopped moving. I thought I could hear the murmur of voices, and then the light began moving in my direction. I called out again – and almost cried in relief as I heard the sound of many feet running through the forest, heading in my direction.

The long struggle in the water, the fear, the moment of sheer panic when I thought a crocodile had found me – it all hit me in a rush. I felt a sudden wave of dizziness, and I closed my eyes, wanting only to sleep.

Episode 11

I gradually returned to consciousness, and struggled to get my bearings. I was being carried through the forest by two squat, muscular men on an improvised litter.

In front of and beside the litter trotted more men, all with spears or bows in their hands and knives at their belts. Some held torches aloft to light the way.

I felt cold, and realized that sometime during my struggles in the water I had lost my robe. Now I was totally naked, but I was also too tired to care.

After what seemed a long time, we arrived abruptly at a very large clearing ringed by small wooden huts. Women and children came running out and surrounded us as the two men laid the litter down on the grass in the middle of the clearing.

A young man, slightly taller than the others and wearing a headdress embellished with peacock feathers, walked up to me.

'Who are you?'

Bheema. A Kuru prince of Hastinapura. Son of King Pandu and brother of Yudhishtira and Arjuna.

He nodded and walked away. I heard him say something in a language I did not understand.

A young woman, wearing only a deerskin skirt, giggled as she lifted my hips up to slide what felt like a large piece of deerskin under me, before bringing the ends together in front and knotting them in place. A dozen children crowded around, pointing at me and laughing, chattering in that guttural language I had never heard before.

The woman squatted at my feet, picking up my feet one at a time, closely examining them. She prodded below my left ankle with a finger, and I yelled in pain. I must have cut myself badly on that sharp

rock or whatever that I had used to slice through the ropes binding my feet.

I felt her washing the soles of my feet and my ankles. She rubbed some sort of paste on my feet – it felt cold, almost icy, and I wriggled my toes in discomfort. She giggled some more, while carefully applying more of that paste to the cut below my ankle.

The man who had spoken to me earlier came back and, with his arm under my shoulders, helped me sit up. He held out a bowl. I took it from him, raised it to my lips and drank – something thick, like a paste that tasted of meat.

It was hot but I gulped it all down, realizing only then just how hungry I was. I held out my bowl for more; the same girl, who couldn't seem to stop giggling, ran away with my bowl and brought it back, brimming.

I drained the bowl, tossed it aside, and curled up on the grass. Within moments, I fell asleep.

When I woke, I found myself inside a hut. My body felt stiff and sore. As I struggled to sit up, two children got up from a corner and ran out of the room, yelling at the top of their voices. Within minutes the same man came back, bearing a bowl of that thick, slushy liquid.

'Who are you?' I asked. 'Where am I?'

'We can talk later. You need rest. Drink this, then sleep.'

I drank. I slept.

I stayed there for eight days, and all I did the first two days was drink that slushy soup and sleep. When I woke on the third day, I felt stronger, much better. I got up, pulled the leather robe tight around my waist and walked out of the hut.

The tribe called themselves Nagas, the snake people, and the young man with the headdress was clearly their leader. They lived in the forest, hunting, fishing, occasionally going over to the other side in shallow boats to visit other members of their tribe who, I learnt, were scattered in dozens of little camps on both sides of the river.

They hunted with the bow and arrow, and always by night. It was easier, the young man explained – in the dark, you could see the bright eyes of animals from a distance, judge where they were, and creep up on them without being seen.

I began to join in the nightly hunts. They taught me how to move without making a noise, even where the forest floor was covered with dried leaves and twigs. They showed me how to identify the presence of animals, recognize them by their sounds and by that first glimpse of their eyes; how to judge height and distance, and how to bring down with bow and arrow or spear an animal I couldn't even really see in the dark.

The Naga chief asked me how I came to be in the river. 'Who did that to you?'

An enemy, I said.

'Find him and kill him,' he said. 'You can let an animal go free, even a dangerous animal, but never let an enemy escape. If you do he becomes doubly strong, and the next time he attacks, you will die. Never show mercy – if a man is your enemy, seek him out and kill him, before you have your next meal.'

He didn't need to convince me – if I had found Duryodhana and that coward Karna in that forest then, I would have killed them with my bare hands.

On the eighth day I left the Naga camp. Two members of the tribe walked with me to the river; I clambered into a small boat one of them had pulled from under an overhanging tree, and they rowed me across to the other bank.

I got out of the boat, and began walking in the direction they pointed out. It was a long walk but I was feeling fit again, and they had given me dried strips of meat and a leather jug filled with water. I walked on, not counting the time, until I found myself on the edge of the forest and on the horizon, saw the towers of Hastinapura palace.

I walked, tired and sweating and mud-stained and wearing only one strip of deer leather around my waist, through the palace gates. The guards came up to me, exclaiming, asking me questions. I walked on, past the main palace, into the courtyard of our own smaller palace, and through the corridors into my mother's pavilion.

Arjuna and Yudhistira were with her when I walked through the door.

'Where did you disappear, where were you all these days?!' Arjuna asked, running up to hug me.

I walked over to my mother, and bent to touch her feet.

'So you have become a big man now, wandering off for days without a word to anyone?'

I looked up. In her face, I read relief.

I sat down at her feet, glanced at the door to make sure no one was within hearing distance, and told them the story of what had happened to me.

'Let's go, brother – let's go teach Duryodhana and that Karna a lesson they will never forget!'

'No, Arjuna,' Yudhishtira said. 'We will only get blamed again for starting a quarrel. What we should do is go to grandfather Bhishma and *valiyamma* Gandhari and tell them what happened to Bheema.'

'You will not tell anyone anything!' mother said, command in her tone. 'None of you will talk about this incident outside this room. Bheema, my child, tomorrow you will go as usual for your studies, and act normally. Even if anyone asks you, say nothing of what happened to you, and where you were these last few days. Let's see how they react, Gandhari's children, to the sight of you.'

I learnt that these last few days, while my brothers and grandfather Bhishma hunted all over for me, my cousins had pretended they knew nothing. 'Duryodhana told us that you drank Soma with him that afternoon, and that after a while you wandered off, saying you wanted to swim,' Yudhishtira told me. 'They never saw you after that, they said; Duryodhana and a few others even joined us when we went looking for you in the forest and along the banks of the river.'

I nodded. It was just what I had expected they would do.

We paid our respects to mother and walked away to our own rooms. Our mother's voice followed us: 'Be very careful at all times, my children – especially you, Bheema and Arjuna. You are our strength, and they will do whatever they can to harm you. Be very careful.'

Episode 12

Guru Shukracharya was the only one to ask what had happened to me.

I told him part of the truth: I fell into the river, became unconscious, and when I regained my senses I found myself on the other side. I then got lost in the forest, and wandered around for a few days before finding my way back home.

I had rehearsed various versions of this story, and even thought up some embellishments to satisfy the more curious – but as it turned out, everyone was consumed by a new topic of conversation. Dronacharya.

That evening in the elephant corral, the mahouts told me that Dronacharya had wandered into Hastinapura one evening soon after I disappeared. He was amusing the little children who had gathered around him with various tricks of archery when grandfather Bheeshma came up, saluted him with respect, installed him in a house within the palace gates, and asked him to teach us princes the arts of war.

Word of his arrival and of his reputation had spread rapidly, and princes from neighboring kingdoms were coming to stay in Hastinapura and learn from the master. I had already sensed the air of excitement that morning—Dronacharya was clearly the main teacher, with Shukra and Kripa deferring to him and acting as his assistants.

And oh yes, Arjuna already seemed to have been installed as the teacher's pet.

It didn't take me long to realize that Drona was partial; that he had very definite ideas about how far he wanted each of his students to go. On the third day after my return, he came up as I was practicing chariot warfare and told me to concentrate on the mace instead. "Leave chariots and archery to others who are more capable, Bheema, the mace is your weapon," he told me.

I nodded, with a respect I did not feel – and inwardly, I determined to practice even harder with the chariot, the bow and arrow and spear

and sword. If Arjuna was determined to become the greatest archer of all time, I was equally determined to train myself into the best all-round warrior, equally adept with all weapons.

Drona spent more time with Arjuna than with any of the other students, and my brother played up to him. He had developed the habit of going, late in the evening, to Drona's home to engage in *guru sishrusha*, performing the menial tasks that are part of the *guru-shishya parampara*, and then practicing archery for long hours in the courtyard while Drona looked on.

And yet Arjuna was not satisfied. "He does not teach me all his arts, his secrets," my brother complained one evening, walking into my room unannounced for one of our periodic chats. "All his most important secrets are saved for his son Aswathama."

It was Aswathama that Arjuna constantly spoke about, but it was Karna he seemed most perturbed by. The charioteer's son was no longer a regular at our daily lessons. One of my attendants told me that though Duryodhana had urged Drona to permit Karna to attend the daily lessons, the master had refused to teach him directly, citing his low birth as the reason.

Angered by Drona's contempt, Karna had apparently taken to going off on his own, and the rumor among the palace servants was that he had found some other teacher to learn from, though no one knew who that was.

Karna's absences, which had begun to stretch into weeks at a time, had begun to worry Arjuna. "I wonder who he is studying from, and what skills he is learning?" my brother fretted.

Though he referred to it only rarely, Arjuna had one other worry on his mind – a boy of the jungle who everyone said was the best they had ever seen, far better than Karna, Arjuna, even better than some of the *acharyas* themselves.

I was grooming my elephant one evening when one of the mahouts asked me, had I heard the story? "Late last night some people attacked that Nishada boy Ekalavya as he was sleeping in the forest. No one knows where he is now, and whether he is alive or dead."

Next morning, we were practicing under the eyes of our *acharyas* when I noticed a man, bent double with age, coming slowly towards

the grounds from the direction of the forest. His tribal marks proclaimed him a Nishada, and a chieftain of some sort.

I saw Shukra walking up to him. The old man was clearly asking something, and Shukra kept shaking his head no. The man then gave Shukra some kind of package and walked away, out of the grounds and back into the forest.

Sukra walked up to where Drona stood, close to where I was practicing with my mace. "It is the father of Ekalavya," I heard Shukra say. "He has given you something from his son. He told to say that this is Ekalavya's *guru dakshina*."

Drona took a small leaf-wrapped parcel from Sukracharya and opened it. I saw his face turn pale; I saw him glance quickly towards where Arjuna was practicing his archery.

I wandered closer and took a peek at what Drona was holding in his hand – a severed thumb all covered in blood.

I normally fall asleep the minute I close my eyes, but that night I tossed and turned, disturbed by thoughts of what I had seen and heard that morning.

Why had Drona glanced, guiltily it seemed to me, at my brother as soon as he opened the package? I knew, none better, the extent of my brother's ambition, the ferocity of his desire to become the greatest archer of all time. But what lengths was he capable of going to, to attain that dream? Could he have been somehow responsible for this? Could he have had his rival attacked in the middle of the night, like a coward?

Or was it Drona himself who had ordered the attack on that Nishada boy, and if so why?

Why had our teacher gone pale, why had he looked as if he was about to faint?

Episode 13

Nakula came to my room before I was even fully awake.

He had grown into a handsome fellow, this baby brother of mine, but the trouble was he knew it. Arjuna and I would laugh over the way he often posed in the courtyard, one hand on hip, doing nothing much, just standing there so the maids could get a good look at him.

"I thought of wearing this blue robe, see, it is the best silk from Varanasi, at my waist, and this yellow one over my shoulder."

He was fizzing with excitement. "Oh and look, I have this new crown, actually it is just a thin band of gold for my hair, with one diamond set in the middle and there's this other gold chain for my waist. That should be enough, don't you think? People should want to look at you, not your jewelery and clothes, no?"

I yawned.

It was competition day. Dronacharya had announced a week ago that there would be a grand contest so his students could show off their skills. From then on, it was frantic activity – workers were busy day and night building pavilions for the kings and queens and other important guests, and galleries for the public; messengers had gone out to the nearby kingdoms, inviting their rulers for the show. Others walked the street every day, beating on their drums, announcing the coming spectacle.

I didn't see Arjuna all week – he was off somewhere, polishing his weapons, putting a sharper edge on his arrows, practicing.

The old mahout had found me a personal charioteer, a nephew of his named Visokan. He was just a few years older than me, but with the reins in hand he was a master. When our lessons were done, we went off by ourselves so I could practice getting into and out of the chariot while he held the horses at a dead run. I soon realized that besides being a wizard with horses, he was a brilliant strategist, adept at all aspects of war craft. This suited me just fine—I grew to trust him to do

much of the thinking for me, while I concentrated on building strength and speed and skill.

Visokan had his own idiosyncrasies, like insisting that I learn to fight standing on the right side of the chariot while he sat to the left – which meant that the hand holding the mace was very close to the chariot's side and I had to make allowance for that. 'That is how you go to war,' he told me. "When we go to get you a bride, I will sit on the right side, and you will stand on the left."

I didn't spend much thought on what I was going to perform at the competition, partly because I couldn't really be bothered, and partly because I trusted Visokan to work all that out for me.

He was waiting with my chariot when I walked out into the courtyard. I jumped in, and found my bow and arrows and maces all shining bright, arrayed in the order I liked best. We drove towards the site of the contest, through the enormous arched gate that had been specially erected by the master woodworkers, and towards the special pavilion that had been erected for us Pandavas.

The galleries were already full, and so too were the special pavilions for the important guests. Judging by the number of chariots near the pavilion, over two dozen kings had turned up for the show.

I looked over towards the royal enclosure and found, to my surprise, that uncle Dhritarashtra and *valiyamma* Gandhari had decided to come for the show and had already taken their seats, with Sanjaya, whose job was to serve as my uncle's eyes and ears, in his usual position just behind them, and my mother sitting beside *valiyamma* on a lower throne.

The *acharyas* – Drona, Kripa, Shukra – were at one of the ground, overseeing the *bali*, the ritual offerings to the gods. Drona then walked to the center of the ground, with Ashwathama a pace behind him. The trumpets blared, and the two big brass drums set on either side of the ground thudded out a compulsive beat.

The competition had begun.

Drona began calling out names, and the student named walked out from the enclosures, took his place at the center of the ground, and went through his skills.

I was in no mood to watch. Leaving my seat beside my brothers, I went over to the chariot, climbed on, and assumed the *padmasana* pose, hands on my knees. I closed my eyes, shut out the din of the drums and trumpets and the constant roaring of the crowd, and sat unmoving till I felt a light touch on my shoulder.

Visokan, having signaled that my time had come, began driving the horses towards the royal enclosure. As he picked up the pace, I picked up my sword, jumped out on the right side and, running flat out beside the chariot, twirled the sword behind my back, then in front of me, then off to the side. Still running, still twirling the sword this time over my head till it was a blur, I vaulted back into the chariot and, without pause, dropped the sword, picked up my mace, jumped out the other side and kept running, till Visokan brought the chariot to a dead halt in front of the royal pavilion.

Oblivious to the roaring crowd I saluted my mother first, then the king and queen, and then jumped back into the chariot as Visokan got it moving again.

'Enough of these chariot tricks,' Visokan said. 'Five arrows in the target. Now!'

The horses sprang forward. I picked up my bow and quiver and, as the chariot neared the far end of the ground, I spun around and sent five arrows, one after the other, into the open snout of a boar's head that had been mounted on a pole in the middle of the ground.

The crowd roared again, louder than before. I thought there was a tinge of surprise in their applause.

Dronacharya hurried towards me. He seemed annoyed. 'Enough. You are not here to play with bows and arrows. Take your mace!'

'Duryodhana!', he called out.

My cousin stepped out from the Kaurava pavilion and walked towards the center of the ring. Three attendants bearing maces marched behind him. He picked out a mace, tossed it in the air to test weight and balance, rejected it, tried another. Satisfied, he stepped up.

Ever since I returned from the Naga village, he had taken great care to avoid me. Now, finally, we were face to face.

I faced him, silent and still. Dronacharya stepped back.

Without warning, he leapt high in the air, mace whirling overhead and whistling down towards my head. I took one quick step back, then another, and turned my head away, letting his mace whistle harmlessly past my side.

He controlled the swing and, without pause, reversed, aiming backhanded for my ribs. I took another step back. The pointed crown of the mace flashed in front of my stomach; he reversed direction again and swung from the other side. Again, I dodged, making no effort to engage him.

'Coward!' His voice was pitched so only I could hear. 'Stop running and face me!'

Even as he spoke, he thrust his mace in a straight line from the shoulder, the sharpened point of its crown aimed straight for my throat. I angled my body to one side, brought my own mace up and, with a light push, knocked his weapon off line.

Dimly I heard the crowd, now roaring non-stop. It was no secret that there was bad blood between us; the crowd was aware, even if our *acharyas* were not, that this was a real battle.

He swung. I blocked. Again and again. Each time, I glided a half step away from the direction of the swing to disrupt his momentum, and at the last instant, knocked his mace off line with a light tap of mine.

I lost all sense of time, of place. The roar of the crowd sounded distant in my ears, a light hum that matched my breath. He swung, I parried; he swung again and in mid-swing, tossed his mace across his body, caught it with his left hand, reversing the direction of the blow. In my state of preternatural awareness, I read the trick even as he thought of it and parried with ease.

The day before I left the Nagas, the young chief had challenged me to a fight with blunt wooden sticks. I was taller than him, and far more powerful, and I thought I could finish it fast—but he proved impossible to pin down, constantly sliding away from my blows, deflecting them with his stick and forcing me to try harder and harder, till I felt myself tiring.

He laughed at me. 'Strength is good, but you have to learn to use it well,' he told me. 'You need to learn patience, to pick the right time to use your strength.'

Duryodhana was beginning to tire. I could sense it in the reduced power of his swing, in the longer time he took to recover between each blow. He swung. I parried, using my wrists to knock his mace off line – and this time, as he fought to control his mace, I spun on my heel, whirled my mace and crashed it into his just when it was at the farthest extent of its back swing.

It was the first time I had attacked, and it took him by surprise. He lost his balance, and almost lost his grip on the mace. Without pause, I swung again, this time aiming for his ribs. He staggered, scrambling to bring his mace into line to block my blow. In his eyes I saw the beginning of doubt, of fear.

I smiled. I had waited a long time for this moment.

He stepped back, taking several paces away from me, his mace in a defensive line, one hand raised to dash the sweat out of his eyes. I took a big stride forward, swinging from the waist, aiming for his mace and crashing into it with all my strength. He staggered back under the impact, panting. I reversed and swung, again targeting his mace.

The trick to fighting with a mace is in the wrists—they are the first to weaken, even before the arms and shoulders, from the successive shocks of blows dealt and received. Visokan had pushed me into training my wrists. Every day we would head off into the forest; he would give me a mace in each hand, and make me crash them over and over against a giant tree, pushing me to make the chips fly with each blow.

'This is war. Not cowardly tricks with poisoned wine. Come, I've waited a long time for this.'

Duryodhana heard my taunt and took another hasty step back. I thrust at him and, even as he tried to defend, leapt high, my mace whirling over my head. At the height of my jump, I bunched my muscles and brought the mace down in a crushing blow, aiming for the top of his head. He bent backward and managed to bring his mace up in defense, but the blow knocked him off his feet, driving him down into the ground. I landed on my feet and immediately, reversing direction, swung for the side of his head.

Ashwathama stepped between us, his crossed hands blocking my swing even as Kripa stepped in front of Duryodhana, shielding him from what would have been a killing blow. I hadn't seen them come up; I had seen nothing except Duryodhana's sneering face, heard nothing except the voice that had mortally insulted my mother, my father...

'Enough!' roared Drona. 'This is a friendly contest. It is not war! Have you lost your mind?!'

With one glance at my cousin, who was still cowering behind Kripa, I turned on my heel and walked towards our pavilion. As I climbed up the tiers to my place beside my brothers, Arjuna came skipping down. As he passed me, he gave me a quick hug.

'The old Brahmin made a mistake, didn't he?!', Arjuna said, laughing. 'And now it's my turn. Watch!'

Episode 14

It was almost as if it was Drona's moment, not Arjuna's. The guru strode out into the middle of the ground and dramatically raised his hands overhead to still the roar of the crowd and the blare of conches and drums before making his announcement.

'Here he comes, my favorite disciple, the one dearer to me than my own son – Arjuna!'

Clad in a blood red silk robe anchored at the waist by a yellow sash, wearing a breastplate studded with golden stars and arm guards of gold plate studded with hundreds of tiny diamonds, my younger brother certainly looked the part as he strode across the ground towards his guru.

Every eye was on him; around us, young women in the stands screamed his name at the top of their voices, competing with the flourish of trumpets as Arjuna took his place in the center of the ring after paying formal obeisance to Drona to the two other acharyas.

My brother knew how to put on a show. He first demonstrated the power in his arms and shoulders, sending a stream of arrows whistling over the heads of the crowd and into the far distance. Replenishing his quiver, he then put on a show of speed, firing arrows in such swift succession it seemed as if he had drawn one continuous line from his bow to the target.

Seemingly oblivious to the continuous cheering of the crowd, Arjuna walked calmly over to the farthest end of the ground and, spinning around to face the boar's head that was the main target, he sent a dozen arrows into its mouth. Without pause, he switched hands and, with his left, fired off another dozen arrows into the target. The successive arrows squeezing into that narrow space struck sparks off each other till it seemed the boar's mouth was on fire.

'Enough of these childish tricks, Arjuna!'

The clear, strong voice cut through the roar of the crowd. Seeking its source, every head turned to the far entrance to the stadium.

For several weeks now, Karna was missing from the Kaurava camp. Arjuna was more than usually perturbed. 'I wonder where he is, who he is learning from, what skills he is mastering,' he mused, often enough to exasperate me.

Now there he stood, resplendent in golden armor that covered him from head to foot. As the crowd fell suddenly silent, Karna strode into the arena. Firing as he walked and without seeming to aim, he sent a string of arrows at the target that sliced through the ones Arjuna had just fired, cutting them all down.

Swaying back at the waist, he shot a stream of arrows high into the air; a collective gasp went up from the crowd as they came whistling back to earth and formed a swastika at his feet. He shot a golden arrow high into the air and, as it fell, met it with another arrow and another, firing so rapidly the golden arrow danced in the air, high above our heads.

The crowd roared its appreciation, a great wave of sound that washed over Arjuna as he stood there seemingly stunned, his eyes on the ground. Beside me, Yudhishtira muttered in disgust. 'Who gave that *suta putra* permission to contest?!

Duryodhana, Dushasana and a dozen other Kauravas had come running up; they surrounded Karna, applauding him, embracing him, cheering.

'Enough of these fairground tricks!' Karna's voice sliced through the crescendo of applause. 'Meet me in single combat, Arjuna, right here, right now!'

Sensing trouble, I jumped down from the stands and ran towards my brother. He had turned pale; for the first time I saw fear on his face. 'He deserves no pity, no mercy,' I told him. 'Kill him; I'll take care of the others.'

Karna shrugged free of the Kaurava embrace and, refilling his quiver, prepared for combat. My brother seemed to have shaken off his fear and stood there, calm and composed, awaiting his rival.

I saw grandfather Bhisma hurrying towards us; with him were the acharyas, Drona, Kripa, Shukra, and Drona's son Ashwathama.

'Ask him if any son of Kunti will do,' I told them. 'I have a few scores to settle.'

'No, brother – he is mine,' Arjuna interrupted. 'He came here uninvited; now I'll send him where he deserves to go.'

'Choose me!' I spoke directly to Karna. 'Your choice of weapons....'

Kripacharya stepped into the space between us. 'This is Arjuna – the third son of King Pandu and Queen Kunti, prince of Hastinapur,' he said, pointing at my brother. 'Who are you?'

Karna glared at the acharya. 'In *kshatriya dharma*, single combat is between equals. State your name and your parentage.' Kripa was inexorable.

Even as Karna hesitated, Duryodhana stalked forward. '*Kshatriya dharma* also says the parentage of heroes is immaterial.' Raising his voice, Duryodhana announced: 'From this moment on, my friend Karna is a king. I hereby gift him the kingdom of Anga that I received from my father.'

'Where are the pandits, the priests?' he roared. 'What, not a single one here? When you have no need of them they are forever at your heels, hands held out for alms. Where are they now?'

An old priest and his son came scurrying up. At Duryodhana's direction, Dushasana raced away and came hurrying back with three pots of water. To the chant of vedic mantras, the priest poured the water over Karna's head. Duryodhana took the circlet of gold from his own head, and put it on Karna's.

'This will do for now – we will hold a more formal coronation with all due celebration later,' he said. Turning to Kripa, Duryodhana said: 'This is Karna, king of Anga. Who dares question his right to combat now?!'

Just then, I became aware of a disturbance in one of the stands. From the middle of the crowd an old man in ragged attire, bent double with age, shuffled across the ground and came towards us.

'Where is my Karna?' I heard him say as he drew closer. 'Where is my son? Is he hurt?'

I saw Karna put his bow down and run over to the old man, bending to touch his feet. 'Father?! You here...?!'

So this was the charioteer Adhirathan, I thought. And despite myself, I felt a surge of pity – for the old man, who had feared for his son's life and was now running his hands over his face and body, and for Karna who stood there in the embrace of his father while the contemptuous sniggers of the crowd washed over him.

Pity was short-lived; the words of the Naga chieftain came back to me: It is when you sympathize with an enemy that you are weakest, most vulnerable; when your foe is down, your *dharma* is to finish him, to end it.

I laughed out loud. 'So this is the father of the great king of Anga! Put down that bow, Karna, and stop pretending to be a *kshatriya*, you who were born to hold the whip! Duryodhana gave you a crown you do not merit – me, I'll give you a job in our stables, which is all you deserve.'

Shaking with anger, Duryodhana stalked up to me. 'No one questions the origins of heroes and rivers, Bheema. Just as no one asked how the impotent Pandu became the father of five sons, either!'

I rushed at him; Ashwatama and Sukracharya got between us, pushing us back. I saw Drona signaling towards the stands and, in response, a flourish of trumpets broke out.

'The competition has ended,' Drona announced, and with an arm around my brother's shoulders, walked him back towards the pavilion.

I stood there for a bit, watching as Adhiratha leaned on Karna's arm and walked back, slowly and painfully, towards the stands.

The sun was still a long way above the horizon; the light was still good. It seemed to me that thanks to the acharyas, we had missed a chance to end this once for all.

Episode 15

"Your mother had fainted, didn't you notice?"

Visokan had driven the chariot up to where I stood in the middle of the ground. Around us, people were climbing down from the stands and making their way out of the arena, their excited chatter an indistinct buzz in the evening air.

"What?! When?"

"When Arjuna and Karna were preparing to do battle."

I glanced across at the royal enclosure, and found it empty. "They took her back to the palace. Shall I drive there now?"

"No – take me to the river."

I walked slowly along the banks of the Ganga, heading towards a rock that jutted out over the water. Perched on it, my feet dangling just above the gently drifting waters, I looked around and up at the clear, cold sky. There was no sign of a breeze, no clouds, not a hint of thunder and lightning.

Where were they, these supposed parents of ours? Where was Vaayu and the seven storms he held on his leash? Where was Arjuna's father Indra, with the voice of thunder and with lightning bolts for fingernails? And Yamadharma, the god of wisdom and of death? Why had they all forsaken us? Why, for the second time, had they listened to Duryodhana's taunts about our mother, about our parentage, and chosen not to vent their anger on him?

Why was he still alive?

I sat there for a long time, alone with my thoughts, but no answers came – not even the light breeze that invariably came to stroke away my fatigue each evening, and which I always imagined was the calming touch of a gentle, affectionate father. My father.

Back at the gates of the palace, I hopped out of my chariot and walked towards my rooms, Visokan trailing after me. As the maids stripped off my robes and ornaments and rubbed me down with wet, perfume-drenched clothes, Visokan said, "Don't brood so much about today, don't let it upset you. In the end, nobody won – but nobody lost, either."

"Send me alcohol. Lots of it. Good Sura."

He nodded and walked away. The maids came back with heaping platters of food. I gestured to them to go away – for once, I was in no mood to eat.

The gentle tinkle of anklets woke me from my reverie. I saw a young maid, one I had never seen before, walking into the room carrying four covered earthen pots on a silver salver. She placed the pots on the ground near me, smiled, and walked away.

She was very young, this girl, and clad in just a thin robe tied at her waist. Silver anklets twinkled on her feet, and her hips swayed in time to the tinkling of the bells. I reached for a pot of Sura and, pulling away the cloth covering it, raised it to my lips and drank deep, savoring the slightly sour, harsh tang.

The room began to feel stuffy; sweat was pouring down my face, my body. I got up and walked out of my room, and along the corridor. As I passed Yudhishtira's room, I heard the faint murmur of my brother's voice from within.

He must have summoned a maid to the room for the night, I thought, but just as I was about to walk on I heard the voice of another man, speaking very softly. I knocked, pushed the door open, and walked in.

Yudhishtira and *cheriachchan* [father's younger brother] Vidura were seated cross-legged on the floor, talking. "Sorry," I said, and turned to go.

"No, no, my child, we were just remembering old stories, come, sit," *cheriachchan* said as he got up. "I was just about to leave, anyway – it's time for bed."

"How's mother? What happened to her?", I asked, as *cheriachchan* walked out of the room.

"She's okay, don't worry – she fainted, that's all. It must have been the heat, or maybe she was worried for Arjuna, when that *suta putra* challenged him. I went to her room sometime back, but her maid told me she was sleeping. Let her rest, it's good for her."

We sat in silence for a bit, each lost in our own thoughts. My brother pulled a silver tray towards him, picked up a little silk sack and opened it. Out rolled four ivory dice sticks. "Come, let's play."

"I don't know how," I said, not adding that I wasn't in the least bit interested in such silly games.

"Oh, it's simple. See, the dice have spots on it – one, two, three, four. The play is about rolling them to get the numbers you need. The calculation is based on dividing by four. Four and eight are the perfect throws," he said, and began to explain how gains and losses are calculated. I sat there, letting his words drone on in my ears while my own mind wandered far away.

"Come, let's play – you start."

Mechanically, I rolled the dice, and he called the throw. "Now watch. There, eight – see?!" We threw in turn, my brother keeping score.

"Ha ha... you lost!"

I sat there, staring at this elder brother of mine, wondering how on a day like this he could be so absurdly content with such childish games, petty victories.

"Cheriachchan was advising me that I should go about among the people of the city, meet them, let them get to know and like me," he said, idly tossing the dice with his left hand. "He said I should visit neighboring kingdoms, make friends, build alliances. The people should want me to be crowned *yuvaraj*, the call should come from them, he was telling me just now."

I nodded. "That makes sense. They say he is very wise, *cheriachchan* is. Are you going to do as he suggests?"

"Hmmmm yes, I've been thinking of what to do and how best to do it."

We rolled the dice again, in turn. Again, he claimed the win, laughing, very pleased with himself. "The trick is in the wrists, in the way you

flick the dice out of your palm to make them fall the way you want them to. I'll send you a nice new set to practice with, so we can play in the evenings."

I shrugged, wished him good night and walked out of the room. Out in the corridor, the stone lamps were guttering as the oil ran out. I walked down the steps and out into the garden. The two palaces, ours and theirs, were very quiet; there were no lights showing from any of the rooms. I wandered over to a stone bench deep in the shadows and lay down, feeling the cold of the stone against the sweat on my back as I stared up at the clear, cloudless sky.

A soft footfall nearby startled me out of my doze. I jumped up and peered into the surrounding darkness, just as she walked out from among the bushes and came towards me.

It was the same maid who had brought me the alcohol. She had taken off her anklets; her footsteps were silent as she shimmied towards me out of the darkness.

"What is your name?"

She murmured something that escapes my memory now, and came even closer. Looking up into my face, she pulled the robe free from around her waist and let it drop to the ground. With one hand on my shoulder she pushed me back onto the bench; taking my hand in hers, she guided it over her breasts, over the delicate curve of waist and the slight swell of her belly. Her skin felt smooth to the touch and warm, and soft, softer than the silk of my robes.

She leaned in closer, her breath whistling against my ear as her hand, and mine, dipped lower. I felt the rasp of thick, curly hair under my fingertips, then a sudden hot wetness.

I sat there passive, unmoved, my hand inert under hers.

Abruptly, she stepped back, and stared at me for a long moment. Bending to pick up her robe, not even pausing to drape it around her waist, she walked away into the darkness.

I watched the swing of her hips and the gleam of moonlight on her back and thighs until the darkness swallowed her up.

I felt a sudden surge of anger. Had Pandu, king of Hastinapura, passed on his impotence to me? Was I, for all my size and my muscles, doomed to go through life limp, inert, a figure of fun for the women to whisper about and to laugh at?

Back in my room, I grabbed the one remaining pot of Sura and, without pause for breath, gulped it all down. Ignoring the bed of soft *khusa* grass my attendants had made up for me, I stretched out on the cold stone floor. As my eyelids closed under the weight of fatigue and alcohol combined, Visokaṇ's words drummed around in my head like a *mantra*: Nobody won. Nobody lost.

[And that ends what I'll loosely call the first chapter, or book if you will: The coming of age of the Pandavas and the Kauravas.]

Episode 16

I poked around among the ploughs and sickles and other agricultural implements, checked out the packets of herbs guaranteed to cure all sorts of illnesses and, bored out of my wits, walked out of the little stall and into the blistering heat of Varanavath.

Dry red post-harvest earth stretched all the way to the hills that bounded our horizon on one side, and to the line of trees on the other. In the immediate vicinity, a few stalls similar to the one I had just left lined either side of the footpath. Off in one corner stood a few middle-aged, tired looking elephants that, I was told, would take part in a race the next day.

The celebrated prostitutes from the kingdom of Madra waited for custom outside their little thatch sheds, somewhat removed from the stalls of the traders. I had heard much about them, mostly about their infinite capacity for alcohol and their foul tongue. They had a certain coarse, hard beauty that was appealing in its own earthy way, but ever since that midnight meeting with the maid, I had steered clear of testing my sexual ability.

I made my way back to the little *pandal* that had been set up at one end of the square, and saw that Yudhishitira was still playing the role of public benefactor that had begun early in the afternoon, shortly after we arrived. He stood on the dais, elevated above the heads of the long line of people, and doled out alms with a generous hand – grain and gold to the Brahmins; grain and cloth for everyone else.

“Give generously,” *valiyachchan* Dhritarashtra had told us before we left. “I have sent men ahead with cartloads of grain and gold and cloth; don’t stint when it comes to giving alms.”

I stood off to one side, watching my brother do what he was so good at. As each person stepped to the head of the line my brother smiled, spoke to him or her, asked some question, and handed over the appropriate amount of alms. He had been doing this for over an hour now, and still the line of people who had come from the surrounding villages to get a glimpse of the Pandavas stretched out in front of him.

I sat under the scant shade of a tree and, filled with meat and a jug of Soma, the cheap country alcohol that was freely available in the stalls, I dozed.

"Wake up!" Arjuna shook my shoulder. "The others have all gone off to the lodge."

Dusk was falling. The *pandal* was empty; the people had wandered off towards the stalls and to the vendors lining both sides of the path, selling cows and goats and trinkets. We pushed through the crowd and walked away towards the line of trees in the distance.

From the outside, the hunting lodge at the edge of the forest looked beautiful, the wood brand new and highly polished. It was a one-storey structure, reasonably large by the standards of a hunting lodge. *Valiyachchan* Dhritarashtra had told us he was sending people in advance to tear down the existing lodge and build a new one just for us.

Arjuna and I walked in. The place smelt overpoweringly of new wood, and some gummy substance, like lac or some such that I couldn't quite identify. As I walked through the doors and stood in the middle of the main quadrangle I felt my nerves tighten, the hair on the back of my neck prickle with a premonition of some hidden danger.

"You are imagining things," Arjuna told me. "Anyway, we are five of us, we have our weapons, what do we have to fear?"

Mother and Yudhishtira were in the inner courtyard, talking quietly. As we walked over to them, Nakula and Sahadeva wandered in from outside.

"What are we doing here?" Nakula voiced the thought that was in my mind as well. "This place is boring; there's nothing here for us to do. Let's go back to Hastinapura tonight."

Mother glanced swiftly across at where Purochana, the servitor the king had sent with us to cater to our needs, was carrying meat and vegetables into the kitchen for our meal. "No, my child, King Dhritarashtra took so much pains to organize this trip for our pleasure – to leave now will be to insult him. Let's spend a few days here and enjoy the fair."

Nakula looked as if he was about to say something more, but mother glared at him, and he subsided.

"I'll be back in an hour to prepare and serve dinner," Purochana told mother as he walked out of the lodge.

"Nakula is right, mother – let's go back," Yudhishtira said, as soon as Purochana left.

"How can exiles go back, child?" Mother smiled.

We looked at each other, puzzled. "You were the one who kept saying we should go to Varanavatha, son – didn't you realize that was exactly what your uncle wanted? What is the use of all your learning if you cannot read people and realize what they are doing to you?"

For weeks, Dhritarashtra and Sakuni and some of the other Kauravas had talked of nothing else but the Varanavatha fair. It was, they said, something that had to be experienced at least once in a lifetime – a glittering affair full of all kinds of brilliant amusements. My brother had fallen under their spell and insisted that we go.

"You were getting too popular, my son. The Kauravas couldn't afford that, and they couldn't let the people think they had chased you away either – so they talked to you about this fair and tempted you into going. Now they have gotten what they wanted."

"But..." Yudhishtira was clearly upset at mother for questioning his wisdom. "Mother, look how much pains uncle Dhritarashtra has taken for our comfort. He had this lodge rebuilt, he sent dozens of cartloads of grain and cloth and gold so we could give alms liberally..."

"Yes, and he has gotten you out of the palace, he and his sons now control the treasury and the army—a cartload of gold and a few cartloads of grain is a cheap price to pay."

"But what can they do if we go back?" Nakula persisted. "They can't turn us away, can they?"

Mother shook her head in exasperation. "If we try to return, we will never reach the gates of Hastinapura alive – some 'accident' will happen to us," she said and, leaning her head against the wall, lapsed into thought.

"I saw uncle Vidura talking to you just before we left," mother said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "What did he tell you?"

"Oh, nothing much," Yudhishtira was still sulking. "He told me we should enjoy ourselves, make friends with the people. And in his usual way he spoke some words of general wisdom."

"He is not the sort of person to say anything without a purpose," mother's voice was sharp, impatient. "Tell me what he said, exactly what he said, the words he used."

"He said weapons are not made only of iron, that war is not waged only in the battlefield. He said there are things to be observed and lessons to be learnt everywhere, from everyone – the people of the forest, he said, learn even from the porcupine, the mole."

Mother looked at him for a long moment. She seemed abstracted, lost in her own thoughts, her eyes fixed on a long line of ants that trailed across the floor near where she sat, bustling into and out of a crack between two planks on the floor.

"Fire!" she said suddenly. "They plan to kill us with fire."

Even as she spoke, I realized what had caused that nameless sense of dread I had felt when I walked into the lodge. Arjuna pulled out the hunting knife at his belt, slipped it into the crack the ants were vanishing into, sniffed at the tip and passed it on to me. I smelt ghee, tasted it on the tip of the knife.

We walked around the lodge, using our knives to explore the cracks in the wooden walls and floor. Everything was wood; ghee had been melted and poured on the ground and the flooring laid on top of it; the walls were packed with lac.

I walked over to the door at the back, beyond the kitchen, and tested it. It couldn't be opened; it had been sealed fast with brass bands.

I felt my anger grow as I thought of the duplicity of the blind king and Shakuni and the others. Killing us must have been the idea all along—clearly, much thought had gone into preparing this house of death for us, and into tempting us to come here of our own free will. Now they could burn us to death and then shed tears and pretend it was all a tragic accident.

"When Purochana returns, I'll kill him—one blow is all it will take."

"No!" Yudhishtira, who seemed to have recovered his wits, said. "Don't do anything rash. Purochana is a danger we know—kill him, and we won't know who the enemy will be, who else is in the Kauravas' pay."

Mother nodded approval. "All of you should act absolutely natural—don't by the slightest sign let Purochana know you've sensed the danger," she advised, as she got up to go to her room.

Pausing at the doorway, she beckoned me over. "Keep an eye on Purochana at all times, child—especially at night. And start thinking of how to escape from this trap—you have to be the one that leads us to safety."

Episode 17

We sat around the fire and, to the accompaniment of the priests' chants, offered sesame and grains 108 times. The chanting reached a crescendo, at a signal from the chief priest, the five of us poured ghee onto the fire.

The flames leapt up, golden-bright and clear and steady. Mother, who had been intently watching the *puja*, sighed with relief and nodded at us.

It was the afternoon of *amavasya*, the new moon night. We were performing a ritual *bali*, a sacrifice, to propitiate our ancestors.

We were supposed to die that night.

Six days ago, Arjuna and I were walking back to the lodge after spending the morning in the forest. Under the pretext of hunting we had looked for paths, caves, hiding places. We hadn't yet figured out how to escape the trap that was set for us, but Yudhishtira pointed out that it was vital to gather as much information as possible so we weren't caught unprepared.

"It is not enough to escape," he had said the night we had discovered the trap. "We have to make it appear that we are dead. We will hide somewhere where no one knows us, and watch to see what happens when the people of Hastinapura, and the neighbouring kings, believe the Pandavas are dead."

As we neared the lodge, we saw Purochana standing in front of the door, arguing with someone. Mother came out from within.

"This man is a wandering mendicant, he says he has been traveling for a long time and is hungry. I've been telling him the Pandavas are in residence, he can't just come in and..."

"This is the home of the Pandavas – it is not seemly to turn away someone who is hungry," mother said. "Let him come in."

Gathering his tattered robes more tightly around him, the mendicant followed mother into the inner courtyard, and devoured the food set in front of him with a ferocity that spoke of the extent of his hunger.

Purochana, who didn't take kindly to serving the wanderer, walked off saying he had to procure meat and some other essentials for the night meal.

As soon as he was out of earshot, the mendicant's demeanour changed. "Vidura sent me," the mendicant said, his voice pitched low. "He said to tell you Purochana has been ordered to set fire to the lodge on the night of the new moon – six days from now. Vidura has ordered us to dig a tunnel that will lead from here to the forest – we are already working on it."

"What must we do?" Yudhishtira asked.

"Nothing – act normal, stay alert, and be ready."

He got up and walked to one end of the courtyard. Indicating a section of the floor, he said "Mark this spot well – the tunnel will open out here. We can't dig through the floor because that will give the game away, so we will leave the last bit undone. On that night, you have to pry the floorboards away and dig down for a couple of feet – our men will be waiting."

He touched mother's feet, bowed to Yudhishtira, and reverting to his role of tired wanderer, limped away towards the forest.

The next five days were excruciatingly slow. There was little we could do but hunt, eat, and sleep. Yudhishtira, who never went anywhere without his dice, tried to lure the rest of us into a game, but no one was in the mood.

On the afternoon of the fifth day, mother spoke to Purochana. "Tomorrow the princes will perform *bali* here. It is *amavasya*, the night of the new moon, an auspicious time for *kshatriyas* to propitiate their ancestors. Please make all arrangements – and make sure all the Brahmins in the area come here early to help perform the rituals."

A young Brahmin boy came up to the *bali* mandap, leading the sacrificial goat after its ritual bath. The chief priest dipped his hands in sandal paste and smeared the white fleece; with his forefinger, he applied a broad *tilak* on its forehead.

"May the Universe accept your life's breath!" the priest intoned. As one, he and the other Brahmins stood, and turned their backs on the goat. "Silence the animal," he commanded.

The sacrificial animal is never killed – just 'silenced'. Two of the locals caught hold of the goat; one held it tight while the other slowly, deliberately strangled it to death.

Yudhishtira picked up his sword in both hands, bowed low to the animal still held upright by the two villagers and, with one stroke, severed its head. Picking it up by the ears, he threw it into the sacrificial fire.

The flames flared high, clear, smoke-free. The chief priest scooped handfuls of *haldi* and *kumkum* into the big round bowl of water, picked it up in both hands and with a quick turn of the wrists, upturned it over the fire.

"The gods are pleased with your children," he told mother, bending low to bless her as she prostrated before him. Each of us paid obeisance in turn and handed over alms to the chief priest and a dozen other Brahmins who had come with him.

Later that evening, there was a small commotion outside the lodge. We went out, and found on our doorstep a tribal woman and her five grown sons, who had heard about the morning's bali and were hopeful of alms.

Yudhishtira went inside to get some grain and cloth. Mother stared at the tribal family for a long moment, then suddenly said, "No, don't stand out there – come in, there is food for you."

Had mother gone mad? Today of all days, with a death trap to escape from, what was she thinking, inviting people into the lodge and lavishing hospitality on them, wasting time we couldn't afford to waste?

Mother seemed oblivious of the look I gave her, my gestures. "I thought I saw some leather jugs of alcohol in the storeroom – go get it," she told me, in a tone that precluded argument.

The tribals sat at their ease in the main quadrangle, drinking wine and gorging on the food and getting increasingly raucous as evening turned into night.

"We have to go," the woman said at one point, staggering to her feet.

"No, no," mother insisted. "It is late, where can you go now? You can sleep here tonight, and resume your journey tomorrow morning."

I hastily took her aside. Arjuna and Yudhishtira joined us. "Mother – not tonight, what are you thinking of? We have to escape..."

"Exactly. And when this lodge is burnt down and tomorrow, Dhritarashtra's spies come to confirm we are indeed dead, what will they find? The bodies of a woman and five grown men – their bodies," she said, nodding at the tribals who were doing their best to drink themselves into a stupor.

I looked at her, stunned. "Mother! They are our guests, they have eaten our food... how can we..."

"Hush! The gods are pleased with your bali this morning, they have been good to us – why else would a woman and five men come to us, at exactly this moment?"

"Tonight, we escape. And they die."

Episode 18

I knocked on the door of the little room next to the kitchen, where Purochana slept.

The door opened and, as he stepped out into the dark, I brought my fist down on top of his head, stunning him. As he fell, I grabbed his head in both hands, broke his neck with one sharp twist and dropped him to the floor.

It was the first time I was killing a man, and I felt absolutely no qualms over what I had done – if all had gone according to plan, Purochana would later that night have slipped out through the front door, locked it from the outside, and set fire to the lodge, burning us to death in our sleep.

I went back to where Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, using an axe and their hunting knives, had pried open the floorboards at the spot Vidura's man had indicated to us. I took the axe from Nakula and began to dig.

I didn't have to worry too much about the noise – the tribals were sprawled all over the inner courtyard in a drunken stupor.

Within minutes, the axe broke through. "Come, it is time to leave." The voice of uncle Vidura's man came to us from deep within the tunnel.

Yudhishtira went first; then Nakula and Sahadeva. I handed mother down into their arms, and then the two big bundles containing our arms, and another bundle with some clothes. "Go – I have something to take care of," I told Arjuna.

Running into the kitchen, I grabbed two barrels of oil and carried them back to the inner courtyard. I slipped a thin strip of metal into the latch of the main door and twisted it tight—it was now impossible to open the door in a hurry.

Picking up a long branch I had cut down in the forest that afternoon, I wrapped some cloth tightly around one end and dipped it in the oil in one of the barrels. I then splashed the oil on the front door, and the nearby walls.

Lighting the torch from one of the low-burning lamps, I touched it to the door, and jumped back as flames leapt off the wood. I ran around the room, torching the walls, the floor, the back door.

It was then that I fully realized the extent of the Kauravas' treachery – the flames, fueled by the new wood, the lac and the ghee, were spreading throughout the lodge with incredible speed. Had we been asleep when Purochana set fire to the lodge, we wouldn't have had a chance to escape.

Trying to ignore the screams of the tribals who had woken from their stupor, I raced across the scalding floor. By now, I couldn't see a thing; it was by sheer blind luck that I tripped on one of the floorboards we had pried loose, and stumbled right into the opening of the tunnel.

Bent almost double, we hurried in single file along the tunnel, with two of uncle Vidura's people walking ahead to light the way with their torches. After what felt like a very long time, the tunnel ended at a rock wall. Overhead, we could see the faint light of the moonless sky.

Our two guides scrambled up the side of the rock. Nakula, Sahadeva and Arjuna followed them up. Then Yudhishtira climbed a few paces, slipped, and fell back down the hole.

"Wait, let me help mother first."

It was not a particularly difficult climb—the rock face was steep, but I could see enough hand- and leg-holds, some of which looked like they had been recently cut. I called up to Arjuna to throw down a robe. I stood in front of mother, got both her hands around my neck and, with a piece of cloth ripped from the robe, tied them together. I then twisted a bigger strip of robe into a rope, and tied it tight around my waist. When I was ready, Yudhishtira took the last piece of cloth and used it to tie mother's legs around my waist.

"When I start to climb, catch hold of the rope at my waist with one hand, and climb up in my footsteps," I told my brother.

With the weight of my mother and brother dragging me down, I began to climb, ignoring the pain as my fingernails cracked with the effort of holding on to small crevices in the rock. Halfway up, I felt giddy with fatigue. "Wait," I called down. "I need to catch my breath."

I felt mother's fingers stroking my face, wiping the sweat off my eyes. Realizing that the longer I stayed where I was the more tired I'd get, I gritted my teeth and climbed on, one painful hand and foot hold at a time.

Many hands grabbed at my shoulders and arms, pulling me over the edge of the rock. Someone untied mother's hands and legs, and lifted her off my back; I saw Arjuna helping Yudhishtira over the rim, while Nakula ran to get me some water.

I collapsed.

"We need to get away from here quickly," one of our guides said. "Look!"

We could see a horde of people surrounding the lodge, rushing around in futile efforts to put out the fire. The lodge was completely engulfed in flames; as we watched, we saw the roof cave in, and a huge tongue of flame shoot skywards.

We hurried away, down the side of the rock and through the surrounding trees, until we got to the banks of a river. "Someone will be here any minute to pick you up and take you across," Vidura's man said, bending low to touch my mother's feet. Even as he spoke, we heard the sound of oars, and saw the dim outline of an approaching boat. "Do you have any message for my master?"

"Tell him my sons and I send him our gratitude, and our prayers," mother said. "Tell him our journey has begun."

Episode 19

The forest was dry, arid, its thirst evident in the clumps of parched brown grass and masses of dried leaves.

My brothers had swept the leaves into piles and stretched out on them, exhausted after a trek that had taken most of the night. I lay down on the dried grass under a tree, but sleep wouldn't come.

Mother was awake too. "We need water, son," she told me, voice soft so as not to awake the others. "There doesn't seem to be a drop anywhere nearby."

Cheriyachchan Vidura had through his messenger assured us this forest was safe – neither the Kauravas nor the other kings in the region came here for hunting, we had been told.

In the boat that ferried us across the river we found bundles of clothes and weapons, a large package of food, and goatskins filled with water. The boatman, another of Vidura's people, told us the arms were to replace ours if we had been forced to leave them behind.

I had always thought of uncle as an other-worldly man, almost an ascetic, wandering around in a world of higher wisdom all his own and disconnected from the material requirements of the real world – but repeatedly through these last few days, he had proved to have considerable foresight, and a shrewd sense of the practical.

Except, of course, when it came to water – there seemed to be no provision for replenishing our supply.

I got up and wandered off into the forest. A rabbit, startled by my approach, jumped out of a little burrow at the foot of a tree and scurried away in a rustle of dried leaves. A few paces further on I stopped, and bent to prod at something that caught my eye.

My guess was right – it was a fox's turd, and when I poked at it with a stick, I realized it was still fresh.

Where there are animals around, I reasoned, there had to be water. Recalling the lessons the Nagas had taught me, I examined the tracks to get a sense of the fox's direction, and walked on.

The small pond materialized almost out of nowhere. It was little more than a bulge in a tiny stream flowing through the trees, but it was water, fresh and pure. I knelt down and drank deep.

My body, my clothes, my hair all smelt of smoke; the accumulated grime of the fire and the trek through the tunnel and the forest had matted on my skin. Stripping off my robe, I eased myself into the refreshingly cold water and let it wash the fatigue from my mind and dirt from my body.

Clambering out, I wrung my robe dry and draped it around my waist, then looked around for the means to carry water back to my waiting mother. A lotus leaf seemed like a good idea, but when I shaped it into a cup and filled it with water I found that within just a few steps, the water slid off the waxy surface of the leaf and spilled onto the ground.

I stood there wondering what to do, and heard from the nearby bushes the sound of a giggle. I glanced in that direction, and saw a young girl part the bushes and walk towards me.

She was almost as tall as I was and dark as night, and dressed in a deerskin draped at her waist. For ornamentation, she had a feather tucked in her hair and a necklace of tiger's claws strung on a thick leather twist and hung over her bare breasts.

She signed for me to wait, and ran off into the forest. Within minutes she was back, carrying two dry, hollowed out gourds which she filled with water from the pond. I attempted to take it from her, but she just shook her head no, balanced a gourd on either hip, and nodded at me to walk ahead.

"Who are you?" Mother asked, as we walked into the little clearing.

"Hidimbi," she said. "I live in this forest."

"Are you alone?" Yudhishtira, very much the *yuvaraj*, asked.

"Mostly," she said, speaking in a modified form of Sanskrit that, in her guttural accent, felt strange to our ears. "I have a brother, but he spends most of his time hunting in the Kamyaka forest nearby, all the

way up to the Gandamadhana mountains. He comes to these parts very rarely."

She put the gourds down on the ground and kneeling on the ground, touched her forehead to mother's feet. "Be well," mother blessed her before picking up one of the gourds and drinking thirstily.

"There's a pond a little way away from here, we should shift closer to it so we have a handy supply of water," I said.

Hidimbi looked at mother, and then at me, and ran away into the jungle. "You should be very careful," Yudhishtira told me when she had gone. "These people who live in the jungle, some of them are known to use magic to do harm – don't go into the forest alone, and especially at night."

Hidimbi came hurrying back within minutes, carrying a sizeable portion of fresh killed deer and a hollowed out bamboo that was filled with fresh honey, and offered it to mother. With a glance in my direction, she turned and walked back into the forest.

We cooked the meat and ate, washing it down with the honey. Stretching out on the grass in the shade of a tree, I dozed.

It was late evening when I woke. Yudhishtira and Sahadeva were fast asleep; Nakula and mother were talking quietly under a nearby tree. In the distance, I saw Arjuna practicing with his bow and arrow against a target he had marked out on a tree.

"Let me see if I can find something to eat," I said, and picking up a short spear and a hunting knife, walked off into the forest in the opposite direction to the one I had taken that morning.

A rabbit of some considerable size popped out onto the path in front of me, stood stock still for one startled moment, and then raced off along the leaf-littered forest path. I could have brought it down with my spear, but didn't. Just as I was wondering why, a brown form streaked past me and raced after the rabbit.

I watched, bemused, as Hidimbi went charging down the path and, suddenly, sprawled headlong with her arms at full stretch.

Reckoning that she must have tripped over a root, I walked over to help. She sprang back to her feet, triumphantly holding up the rabbit

by both ears. She laughed as she turned to face me; entranced by the sheer exuberance of her, I laughed along.

We moved together down the path and, when I came to a little rock, I perched on it and reached out for her hand. She came against me, sudden and swift, her body pressing up against mine, my nostrils dilating to the heady scent of woman and some kind of animal fat she had rubbed all over her body.

I sensed her deerskin covering come apart under my fingers and slip down to the ground between us, and then the time for thinking was over.

Much later, as I lay on forest floor with her weight on me, one thought kept drumming through my head: My father may have been impotent, but not I.

Episode 20

I woke to the sound of considerable confusion.

It was late evening, and our small camp was in an uproar. The loudest voice was Yudhishtira's, and it seemed to me that he had raised his voice another couple of notches when he saw that I was awake and listening.

"It must be her, that damned girl from the jungle. They are *mayavis*, magicians, these tribals who live in the forest. During the day they approach us like ordinary people, come into our camps and sniff out our secrets. At night, they use their magic powers to turn invisible and rob us of everything we have. I knew right from the start we should never have allowed her to come anywhere near us, but nobody listens..."

I walked up to Arjuna, who was sitting some distance away with his back to a tree. "Brother is not too fond of the girl you found," he said with a half smile. He told me that at some point, someone had come into the camp and, from mother's hut had robbed us of everything we had stored: the gold, clothes, the spare arms, sacks of grain, everything.

Arjuna had gone into the hut in search of some spare bowstrings and discovered the loss; no one had any idea when exactly the theft had occurred.

I walked around the camp, carefully examining the ground. I spotted the usual tracks of deer and smaller animals that, especially at night, tended to wander in from the forest. And then I spotted what I was looking for – fresh footprints that clearly did not belong to any of us.

I bent low to examine the tracks. It was a man's. The length of the stride indicated he was tall; the depth of the impressions seemed to suggest that he was big, even enormous.

I picked up my spear and walked off into the forest in the direction of the pond. As I neared it, a voice I knew whispered from the nearby bushes. "Don't – there is danger there!"

Dropping my spear, I reached into the bushes, and grabbed a fistful of well-oiled hair. I pulled; she yelped in pain but I only pulled harder. "Did you take our gold and grain and clothes?" I asked, as she jumped out of the bushes, her head twisted to one side to ease the pain. "Why did you rob us?"

I knew it was not her – but I also knew she knew who it was, and she was afraid. I heard the sound of rushing feet behind us and whirled, letting go my grip on Hidimbi's hair.

The man who came rushing out of the forest, upraised hands holding a thick branch he must have just broken off from a tree, was enormous – very tall, very broad-shouldered, with muscles like thick ropes on his arms and shoulders and chest.

He swung the branch from the side. I jumped back, but he was very quick – the jagged edge of the branch grazed my chest as I slipped the blow, and I felt the searing pain of a cut, the sudden ooze of blood. As he gathered himself for another blow, I noticed that his legs, in contrast to the strength of his upper body and even his thighs, were thin.

The rules of combat are for show, for those times when warriors meet in exhibition contests. In battle, I knew, there are no rules except one: kill, or be killed. To kill is a *kshatriya's dharma*, and if you die in the attempt, paradise is assured.

He swung, but this time, I was ready for it and skipped quickly out of the way. The branch he had picked was unwieldy – a bit too long and heavy to properly control. I waited for his next swing and when it came, dropped suddenly to my knees, ducking under the blow and before he could recover, I kicked out hard with my right foot, driving the ball of my foot into his knee with all my force.

He stumbled. I kicked out again, this time aiming for his ankle, sweeping his legs out from under him. He crashed to the ground. Before he could recover, I grabbed his right foot in both hands, flipped him over onto his back with a twist of my arms and, slipping my bent leg under his knee, brought his leg down on my thigh with all my force.

The sharp crack as his leg broke was almost drowned by his roar of pain. I jumped to my feet, gathered myself and fell on top of him, driving my knees into the small of his back, letting my weight drop on him like a stone. He was flailing around with his right hand, trying to get a grip on me. I grabbed his wrist in my hands and pivoted with my shoulders, cracking his arm with one twist.

The battle was over – all I had to do was finish it. Resting a knee on the small of his back, I reached forward, slipped my right arm under his neck, grabbed my right wrist with my left arm and with his neck in a vise, I yanked back, pulling with an inexorable pressure, bending his body backwards against my knee.

It was over almost before I knew it. One minute he was thrashing in pain, his unbroken left arm and leg beating the forest floor, looking for purchase. The next moment he was limp. Dead.

I had killed my first enemy in combat – and it had taken mere moments; a minute, maybe, or two. And yet, as I got back on my feet, what I felt was not the triumphal rush of adrenalin.

I felt deflated – and I knew why.

Even in those brief moments of frenzied battle, in the back of my mind I knew who I was battling. And the sound of sobbing behind my back only confirmed it.

I turned round to see Hidimbi kneeling in the dust, next to the inert body of my foe. She looked up at me, tears streaming down her face.

“He was my brother,” she said.

Episode 21

We walked back to camp early next morning. Hidimbi went up to mother and prostrated before her.

"She will stay here and serve you as your hand-maid – and my wife," I said. Perhaps because I was alert for signs of a reaction, I was the only one who caught a momentary flash of surprise, apprehension almost, in mother's eyes.

"Welcome, child. You are the first bride a son of mine is bringing home, the first of my daughters," mother said, her palm on Hidimbi's head in benediction. "I am desolate we don't have a home to welcome you to or even a gift to give you, but better times will come, and I will remember. Stay with me, not as my handmaid, but as my companion."

Hidimbi quickly moved over to where Yudhishtira was standing, and knelt before him. My brother murmured something that sounded like a blessing. I introduced her to Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva in turn, and my younger brothers greeted her with smiles, with affection and a few jocular comments aimed at me.

Yudhishtira took me aside, out of earshot of the rest. "They are magicians, these people of the forest," he said. "Be very careful of them. Don't go to her bed at night – that is when they are most powerful..."

I had heard the stories of the *rakshasas* of the jungle and their magical accomplishments from the time I was a child – stories of Mareecha, who could assume any form at will and who came in the guise of a golden deer to tempt Sita and lure her husband Ram and his brother Laxman away; of Raavana, the great *rakshasa* king with many heads, who took the form of a *sanyasi* to kidnap Sita and take her away to his kingdom...

Balladeers sang these stories, and the maids repeated them with wonder. I had no idea how much these stories were based in fact and how much was exaggeration, but I knew this: If Hidimban had magical powers he wouldn't have come at me with a broken branch last

evening, nor would I have been able to kill him as easily as I did – in fact, I am not even sure I could battle someone with shape-shifting powers and other magical skills.

I showed Yudhishtira the bundles I had dumped at the edge of the clearing – the gold and grain and clothes and arms that had been stolen from our camp. “It was her brother Hidimban who did it. A renegade who wanders these parts, looting and killing.”

My brother looked at the bundles and quickly glanced all around, as if he expected Hidimban to come rushing out of the forest.

“He is dead,” I told him. “I killed him.”

The previous evening, Hidimbi had spent some considerable time sitting beside the body of her brother, sobbing softly to herself. To give her grief the space it needed, I walked over to the pond and waited there, my back against a tree, trying to come to terms with the fact of my first kill.

It was night when she walked over and sat down beside me. “He was not a good man,” she said, her voice stained with tears. “He killed anyone he found in these forests, even *rishis* and other holy men. But he was my brother, the only family I had, the only one I could call my own. Now I have no one.”

I reached out for her hand. “You have me.”

Her eyes searched mine; tentatively, she came closer, her fingers reaching out to brush, light as a breath, against the wounds Hidimban had given me with that jagged branch. For the rest of that night, we forgot about the blood on my hands, and the grief in her heart.

She woke me up before dawn, and led me deep into the forest, wading across a small stream and pushing her way deeper until we suddenly came to a cave – nothing more, really, than a hollow in a rock. “We’ll find the things that were taken from your camp here,” she told me. “My brother lived most of the time in the Kamyaka forest, but when he came here, this is where he stored the things he robbed.”

Over the next few days and weeks, Hidimbi showed me the forest in a way I had never known forests before. As princes, we were used to having everything programmed for us: when we went hunting, servants went ahead to clear the way and find the best places to find

game in and the best ponds and rivers to bathe in; an army of cooks and servants went before us to assure every comfort.

With Hidimbi as my guide, I discovered that the forest could be just as delightful, fruitful, for a man on his own. She showed me how to find pristine watering holes and the best game and the best grass for beds; how to live in the forest for days on end with nothing but a hunting knife; how to fashion ingenious traps out of branches and roots. She showed me delightful little lakes to sport in, and little forest streams where the clear-running water was as sweet as the purest honey...

It was an idyllic time, and I spent most of it with her, returning to camp only once every few days to make sure all was well.

On one such visit, I found the camp in a state of bustle. "We were waiting for you," mother told me as soon as I walked up to pay my respects. "It is time to leave."

Arjuna told me uncle Vidura had sent one of his people to us, to brief us on what was going on in Hastinapura and to tell us where we should go next. "The Kauravas think we are dead; the blind king even set up a great lament when messengers brought the news that our hunting lodge had burnt down," Arjuna said. "But a few, like Shakuni, are not so sure; they suspect we might have escaped and are hiding out in the forest, so they have sent their best spies and trackers everywhere, to try and find us."

"So where are we going now?"

"To this place called Ekachakra," Arjuna said. "Apparently it is little more than a village. Uncle Vidura says we should live there in disguise; he will find us and send us word when it is time to move on."

In a corner of the camp, Hidimbi was busy packing strips of meat, and honey in hollowed out bamboo shoots.

"She cannot come with us," Yudhishtira said.

Hidimbi stopped what she was doing, and sat there with her eyes fixed on me. Mother went up to her, sat on the forest floor beside her.

"It is not that we don't want you with us, my child. We are going to be disguised as Brahmins, and it will be too risky to take you with us."

Hidimbi nodded, and silently returned to her self-imposed task of packing food and water for our journey.

"She is pregnant," I told Arjuna.

"Mother knows," he said. "She told us."

One by one, my brothers picked up their arms, strapped them to their backs and prepared to leave. "When you are gone, I will clear this place and remove all signs of your having been here," Hidimbi told mother.

"Bless you, my child. Your first child will be a hero, he will make you proud. I have nothing to leave behind as a gift for when he is born – but tell him of this grandmother, and of his father and uncles, and how we lived with you in your forest. And when he is grown, send him to me, tell him I want to see him, the first of my grandchildren."

Mother blessed Hidimbi, signed to me to follow, and walked away. One by one, my brothers followed her. I stood still in the middle of that clearing, not knowing what to do, not being able to look her in the eye, not having words to tell this woman who I had taken as my wife and who was now carrying my child in her belly that she had no further place in my life.

Hidimbi knelt at my feet, touched her forehead to my feet.

"Go!" she said, a wealth of love and longing and grief in her voice.

I wanted to reach out and pull her into my arms. I wanted to stay there, in the forest, with this woman who I had learnt to love. I wanted to see the birth of my first child, I wanted to hold him in my arms and play with him and teach him how to hunt and to fight. I wanted an end to this life I found insufferable – always on the run, always pretending to be something we were not, never daring to use our names, our identities, fearful always of being discovered...

I tried to meet her eyes, and found I couldn't. I tried to tell her I loved her, that I would never forget her, but the words wouldn't come.

I turned away abruptly and, not daring to look back, walked hurriedly away into the forest down the path my mother and brothers had taken.

Episode 22

I could never listen to balladeers sing of my battle against Bakan without feeling the urge to laugh out loud. They called him an *asura* and invested him with all kinds of magical powers, but the fact is that he was nowhere near as dangerous an opponent as Hidimban. The battle itself was merely a matter of killing someone who needed it – a quick, clean kill with nothing to recommend it in terms of strategy and tactics.

We had found shelter in the home of a poor Brahmin of Ekachakra, who set aside a portion of his own house for our use. In the guise of Brahmins, we spent our mornings going door to door begging for alms, mostly food. Each evening, we would pool everything we had collected, and then share it out among the six of us. Mother was in charge of the sharing, and she always set aside an extra large portion for me before dividing the balance among my brothers and herself.

Two days after we had settled in Ekachakra, mother overheard the sounds of sorrow from our host's portion of the house – and that is how the rest of us heard of King Vaitrikeya's human sacrifice. And as always it was Yudhishtira, who spends all his time learning the Vedas, who could explain it all to us.

The ritual of human sacrifice lasts for 40 days, he told the rest of us. The sacrificial victims were typically drawn from all sections of society, he explained. Thus, you sacrificed Brahmins so you could gather to yourself the benefits they had accumulated through their prayers; *kshatriyas* so your imperial ambitions could be fulfilled; *vaisyas* who were sacrificed so you could be blessed with material wealth; *sudras* who were killed as a form of atonement for your own sins... My brother rattled off a long list that included musicians and dancers and thieves and pretty much every category you could think of, with reasons for each type of sacrifice, but after a point I stopped listening because it all seemed somewhat silly to me.

What god was going to make me a king just because I sacrificed a *kshatriya*, or wealthy because I had killed a *vaisya*? If I had kept them alive instead, I thought to myself, the *kshatriya* would fight for me and

thus make me stronger; the *vaisya* would earn profits through trade and share it with me and thus make me richer...

And then, said my brother, there was the *maha bali*, the grand sacrifice where the person who was doing the ritual offered himself up as the final, ultimate sacrifice. This seemed even more pointless: if earning divine blessings was the point of any sacrifice, then why would I go to all these elaborate lengths, only to die at the altar myself?

"You will be reborn with all the fruits of the sacrifice," Yudhishtira explained and in my mind I thought, well, who knows? If I want something in this lifetime, I'll fight for it – my next life, if there is such a thing, can take care of itself.

Anyway, so the story was that Vaitrikeya was conducting a human sacrifice, selecting victims from all the villages in his territory, and a powerful Nishada named Bakan had been given the job of rounding up potential victims from Ekachakra. One of Bakan's henchmen had come to the Brahmin's house that morning with a demand that one member of the family be sent to him next morning.

"I told them I will send Bheema," mother said.

"Mother, are you mad?"

That Yudhishtira could speak to her in that manner showed just how perturbed he was.

"In all these days and nights of extreme danger, it is the knowledge of Bheema's strength that has helped us sleep without care. When I think of ways to assert our right to our inheritance, it is my brother's strength that I build my plans on. And now you want to offer him up as a human sacrifice?"

"No. I want to send Bheema to kill Bakan, and to end this practice so the people of Ekachakra can live in peace." Mother's response was matter of fact.

"We don't know who this Bakan is and how powerful he is. What if Bheema is killed? What then?"

"My child, you plan to use Bheema's strength to do battle against the Kauravas and their enormous armies, but you don't have faith that he can kill one man?"

"Bheema won't be defeated," Arjuna said. "There is no one man born who can defeat him in single combat."

Yudhishtira sighed. "At least we will earn the blessings of these Brahmins, and that is a good thing," he said.

I fought back a smile. That was so typical of my brother – in every situation, his instinct was to calculate the pluses and minuses, the profits and the possible losses, all with an eye to fulfilling that ambition of reclaiming his inheritance, of getting back the throne of Hastinapura.

Mother told us she had overheard the members of the Brahmin's family debating who should go. The father, the mother, the young son, the daughter, each came up with reasons why he or she should be sent. "But when their youngest, that five year old, picked up a small stick and said he would go and kill this monster, my heart went out to them, and that is when I said I'd send my son," mother said.

"Take Arjuna with you," Yudhishtira told me late that night, as we were preparing to sleep. "Together, the two of you can kill this Bakan..."

I nodded, but when I set off to meet Bakan next morning, I went alone. The Nishada lived in a huge cave on the outskirts of the village; when I got there, I found three henchmen waiting by the entrance. They crowded around me, discussing the plus points of this latest sacrificial victim; one of them ran off into the cave to inform Bakan that the day's victim was ready for delivery to Vaitrikeya.

Bakan was much bigger than Hidimban, but it was all flesh. When he walked, rolls of fat jiggled on his chest, his belly, even his arms and legs. His hair was unkempt, his eyes bloodshot; even at a distance, the reek of stale alcohol was strong.

I didn't think he was going to give me much trouble. Hidimban may have been smaller, but he lived a hard life, constantly wandering through the forests, hunting animals and human beings alike. He was hard and fit; Bakan on the other hand was just one big lump.

I decided the only danger was if I let him come close enough to get a grip on me. I could be easily smothered in those big arms, against that enormous chest; he could wrap his arms around me and squeeze me to death.

While waiting for him to emerge, I had spotted a huge brass vessel on a wooden fire by the entrance to the cave. Molten ghee bubbled inside; from the remains strewn around, I guessed they were frying a deer.

"I am Bheema," I said. "I killed Hidimban, the magical *rakshasa* of Kamyaka, in single combat. The jackals and vultures are still feasting on his body – and now I have come to kill you."

Such boasts are part of battle strategy; we use them to plant doubt in the enemy's mind, to put him off balance.

Bakan roared his anger and began slapping his arms against his chest and thighs. Bad move – such demonstrations were wasted on me, and left him vulnerable to a surprise attack. Before he knew what I was about, I spun sideways, grabbed the brass vessel and hurled it straight at his chest. He screamed in pain and rage, his hands frantically wiping at the molten ghee that had splashed onto his face and chest.

I charged, lowering my neck and driving my head straight into his midriff. He toppled backwards, thumping down onto the ground with an enormous thud. I ran around him and, before he could recover his wits, grabbed his head in my two hands, bunched my muscles and with one sudden, sharp twist, broke his neck.

It was over, and it was like I thought it would be: quick and dirty.

There is much talk of what is permitted and what is not in combat, but I saw no need to adhere to any of those rules here. This was after all not a battle between social equals, nor was it for show – I had a job to do, and that was to make sure I came out of this alive. Anything I had to do towards that end was just fine with me.

"Take this fellow's body and throw it in the forest," I told those three henchmen of Bakan's, who stood there looking at me in shock and fear. "If I ever see any of you in Ekachakra again, I will kill you all."

As I turned to go, it was not the fact of my second kill that weighed on my mind. I was cursing myself for having thrown that brass vessel at Bakan – it felt like ages since we had eaten meat, and I could have made a good meal before going back.

Some years later, a group of Magadhan balladeers came to our palace in Indraprastha and sang of this battle. According to them, the two of

us fought for an entire day with clubs and maces and branches broken off trees, and our battle devastated the forest for miles around before I finally, heroically, caught him in a wrestling hold and broke his neck.

Nakula and Sahadeva, who didn't know the details of the fight – I only ever shared details of my battles with Arjuna—looked at me in awe as they heard the song; it was all I could do not to laugh out loud. Arjuna grinned at me. "If they sang that you threw hot ghee on him and snapped his neck while he was still trying to clear his eyes, would mother give them any alms?", he asked.

That day, when I reached home and bent to pay my respects to mother, she looked at me with as much casual unconcern as if she had merely asked me to go fetch some water from the well.

My mother is so sure of my strength, I thought to myself, that she doesn't even worry when she sends me into danger.

The only one to react when I got back home that day was Yudhishtira. He jumped up when he saw me, ran over and hugged me tight.

I understood. I was safe – and my strength was still available for him to make plans around.

Episode 23

Life at Ekachakra had palled on me.

There was nothing much to recommend the little village in the first place. Ekachakra was an arid piece of land with a cluster of about three dozen small wood-framed homes, all inhabited by Brahmins. All you ever heard was the sound of *vedic* chanting; instead of meat, all you ever ate was mismatched assortments of foods that we had gotten as alms.

Killing Bakan had one good result – the Brahmins in the village vied with one another to share the alms they got with us. But it also meant that I was doomed to spend all my time indoors.

“Don’t go outside,” Yudhishtira warned me. “We hear that Dhritarashtra’s spies are all over the place, seeking for signs of us. There are very few who could have defeated Bakan in single combat, so the danger of discovery is now even more...”

I didn’t know what the fuss about Bakan was all about, but I knew only too well how reputations grow on the wings of song. Bakan had a fearsome reputation, and that was enough to feed the stories of his deeds and of the unknown hero who had killed him in single combat after a titanic struggle.

Much though I chafed at the restriction, I knew my brother had a point – no sacred thread was ever going to disguise my bulk, and unlike Arjuna and Yudhishtira who had both grown reasonably long beards to hide their features, hair just wouldn’t grow on my face. It used to bother me, to the point where I had the maids assiduously oil the few wisps on my chin and the light scattering of hair on my lip. But the growth remained scanty and after a point, I just gave up. It was far easier for the others to cope with life in hiding. Arjuna had taken to disappearing into the forest for long periods each day to practice his archery, while Nakula and Sahadeva went house to house to collect alms. Yudhishtira tried to get our landlord interested in games of dice but when that failed, he engaged him in long discussions on religion and philosophy.

Mother never stirred out of the house, but of late she had begun to get an increasing number of visitors. All of them were Brahmins, and most of them were people I had never seen anywhere in Ekachakra before. They would come early in the morning, before the village was awake even, and leave very late at night when no one was around.

I wondered what they talked about, but mother and her visitors always pitched their voices too low for me to overhear anything. "I heard them say something about marriage, the other day," Sahadeva told me once. "I was passing by, but when they saw me, mother and this Brahmin who was with her lowered their voices so I couldn't hear anything more."

It seemed an odd topic to discuss. Here we were, reduced to begging and without even a roof over our heads, and mother was discussing our marriage? One day, I asked her about it. "You are princes in exile, without a kingdom or an army, so you will find none to be your friends – at least not openly," mother explained. "The only way to build your strength back is through marriages, through alliances with powerful kings..."

"But mother, which king is going to give his daughter to someone who was driven out of his kingdom and is forced to run and hide?"

"Wait," she said, "all in good time. The people who visit me are uncle Vidura's spies – through them, he will let us know when the time and the occasion is right."

One night, I decided I had enough of being cooped up. Under cover of darkness, I slipped out of the house and wandered off into the forest. I walked for a long time, not knowing where I was going, just working off my restlessness, and at some point I thought, what if I never turned back? What if I kept walking? Two days – that is all it would take for me to get to the Kamyaka forests – and there I would find my Hidimbi. I could hunt and catch fish and sport with her and see the birth of my child – who needed the throne of Hastinapura, if getting it meant a life of running and hiding?

It was not the boredom that irked me about life in Ekachakra so much as the cowardice of it all. One evening, when we were all sitting around talking and I was feeling particularly fed up with our life, I said to no one in particular, "Let's go to Hastinapura, let's challenge the Kauravas to single combat – one by one, we'll take them on, all who

want to come against us. Arjuna and I are enough to settle them all. Isn't that what *kshatriyas* are duty bound to do?"

Yudhishtira looked at me like I had gone mad. Mother shook her head at me like I was an idiot child. "My son, we wouldn't get within miles of Hastinapura. The closer we get to our kingdom, the more we will find people who know us – and once word spreads that we are alive, they will send their spies and their soldiers, and we will be slaughtered before we even get within sight of the city gates. I don't doubt that you and Arjuna can fight the Kauravas—but even the two of you are not good enough to fight an entire kingdom and win. We need allies before we can come out in the open and take them on, and that is just a matter of time. Patience, son..."

My stock of patience was rapidly running out. I stood there in the middle of the forest, thinking of that dark-skinned girl who I had abandoned to come and hide in this little village, and who was just two days away. I longed for the uncomplicated life we used to live, and I was tempted to give it all up—our dreams and ambitions and plans and patience, everything, and to go find her.

But what then? 'Bheema the mighty, the second Pandava, left his family and ran away.'

That is what they would say of me, the same people who now sang of how I was born to destroy the Kauravas. And once that story spread, Dhritarashtra and our cousins would know they could come after my mother and brothers with ease, since I was no longer around to protect them.

Reluctantly, I turned my back on that remembered idyll and walked back home. They were waiting for me, impatience on their faces.

"Uncle Vidura sent a messenger to us today," Yudhishtira said, even before I could sit down. "Our time has come.

"King Drupada has announced the swayamvara of his daughter, Draupadi."

Episode 24

What I remembered most clearly about King Drupada was the gentle smile with which he had greeted our threats of war.

Shortly after our contest of skill, Dronacharya had egged us cousins to go to war with King Drupada. We were told that Drona and Drupada were childhood companions and that when Drupada had become king, he had insulted Drona and driven him out of the kingdom.

Now the *acharya* wanted to use his disciples the Pandavas and Kauravas and the Kuru army for his revenge. He would be satisfied with nothing less than half the Panchala kingdom, he said.

He made it sound like it was our duty, but I had my doubts. What does a Brahmin want with wealth and power and a kingdom, I wondered. As always in those days, it was Visokan I voiced my doubts to in private, and as always he had the answer.

"True enough if you are talking of pure Brahmins, not just those who have been born in that caste," he said. "For them, purity of thought and action and a comprehensive knowledge of the Vedas and the Shastras is the real wealth. But while Drona was born a Brahmin, he has been brought up and has lived all his life as a *kshatriya* – and that is why he thinks like one, and why today he has his eye on the wealth of the Panchalas."

While the Kuru armies readied for battle, Arjuna and I were sent to the Panchala court as Drona's envoys. We were given a straightforward message to deliver – Drupada must apologize publicly for insulting the *acharya* and give up half his kingdom if he wanted to avoid war – and we delivered it with all the unthinking arrogance of our youth.

Drupada, seated in state in the royal audience chamber, heard us out and then he smiled his kind, gentle smile. He was middle-aged, somewhat older I thought than King Dhritarashtra, but there was an aura of power and majesty about him that we, young as we were, could recognize at a glance. Our journey through the Panchala kingdom had already given us the sense that it was larger, richer and more powerful than ours.

"I am desolate that my son Dhristadyumna is away," King Drupada told us, without directly responding to our threatening message. "He is only slightly younger than you, and would have been company. I am too old to entertain young princes. But come – my attendants will show you to your rooms. You must be tired after your journey. Please rest—we will talk again this evening."

The maids who attended on me said Dhristadyumna had only left that morning to study archery. Knowing Arjuna would be interested, I asked them where he had gone, but they only knew it was someplace far off. Much later, I heard from Visokan that the young Panchala prince was already being hailed as peerless in the art of chariot warfare.

Dhristadyumna had an elder brother, Sikandi. He too was away, the maids said. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I thought they did not speak of him with the same joyous affection as Dhristadyumna. They never mentioned a princess, and it never occurred to me to ask.

The feast laid out for us that evening surpassed anything I had known in my life, and Drupada was a gracious, kindly host. He asked about our studies, praised our *acharyas* and said we couldn't have found anyone better than Sukra, Kripa and Drona to teach us the arts of war.

Next morning, we went to the audience chamber to receive his reply, and found the king waiting for us. "I have decided to come with you and meet Drona in person," he said. We thought he would ride at the head of a sizable army, but when we set out, the king was accompanied only by half a dozen personal bodyguards in one chariot, and about a dozen guards to keep an eye on a treasure chest that had been loaded onto another.

He told us that this time, he wouldn't be visiting the palace and meeting King Dhritarashtra. "Both my sons are away, and I shouldn't leave the kingdom unattended for too long," he smiled. So Arjuna and I rode ahead to alert the *acharya*. Drona rode out in his chariot, and met King Drupada outside Hastinapura's walls.

One evening some days later, Visokan came to my room with a jug of fine Sura and the story of that meeting. Drupada had told Drona that no insult was ever intended to him; that as a young boy he enjoyed a freedom of behavior that was not possible once he had assumed the crown and had to treat everyone equally. He told Drona that he was

sorry if his old friend felt slighted, and had brought some gifts in token of his remorse.

"But," said Visokan, "King Drupada also told the *acharya* that if his coming here in person to apologize did not satisfy him, and he insisted on laying claim to half the Panchala kingdom, then Drupada would return at the head of his army and crush Drona and anyone else who dared take his side. That is why I am not entering Hastinapura now, Drupada told the *acharya* – I don't want to sit down to a meal with a king I might have to declare war on for no fault of his."

Visokan had this uncanny knack of knowing everything that was going on – but this was too much for me to believe. The two of them had met in the middle of a vast open space outside Hastinapura's gates. How could Visokan possibly have heard every word that was said at that meeting?

"You princes are an arrogant lot," he laughed. "You think your charioteers, like your horses, can neither see nor hear anything."

"You must take part in the *swayamvara*." Mother's voice broke in on my reverie. "If you fail, nothing is lost, but if you win..."

She didn't need to complete the thought: with the powerful Panchalas allied to us in marriage, we could end our life in exile and stake a strong claim to our rightful inheritance.

That night, none of us could sleep for contemplating the immense possibilities that had suddenly opened out before us. Nakula and Sahadeva were too young at the time to know what had passed between Drupada and Drona after the contest of skill. "Why did the Panchala king drive Drona out of his kingdom?" he asked me. "You and Arjuna had gone as envoys – you must know?"

"When they were young children, they went to the same *gurukula*." It was Arjuna who answered. "As children will, Drupada told Drona that when he becomes king, he would give his friend half of everything he had. Then Drupada became king, and after a while he got so fed up with Drona's constant demands that he drove him away – that's all."

"Don't you know better than to mock your guru?" Yudhishtira had been quiet all this while, but this was apparently too much for him.

"What did I say but the truth?" Arjuna rarely spoke out, but when he did he wouldn't back down. "No matter how much Drupada gave, Drona asked for more. His greed was boundless. Wasn't that why Drupada threw him out of his kingdom, and he came to us?"

Yudhishtira subsided into silence.

Much later that night, as I lay there in the dark willing sleep to come, I felt someone sit down beside me. "You should have heard uncle Vidura's messenger describing Draupadi!"

Arjuna's voice was taut with excitement. "He said she is beauty incarnate, that there is no woman in the world to rival her."

I wasn't surprised. I had heard that Drupada wanted a daughter so bad, he had spent a fortune in *pujas* and *yagnas* and other observances. And the Panchalas were a good-looking race anyway, as I had noticed when we visited the kingdom.

"He said something else..." I could sense the smile in my brother's voice.

"He said Draupadi's sweat has the fragrance of the lotus."

My brother was clearly smitten, even without having set his eyes on the Panchala princess. If the *swayamvara* involved a test of skill and if that test was archery, he would be the one among us who would compete—but could he win?

He didn't speak about it much, but Arjuna constantly fretted that he was falling behind in his archery. He had practiced assiduously during our time in exile, but he missed learning under a master—and I knew he fretted about where Karna was, and who he was learning from.

I wondered if Karna would compete in the *swayamvara*. Not likely, I thought – the Panchalas were *kshatriyas*; *sutas* and other low-born would not be permitted.

But then again, Karna was the crowned king of Anga, and kings have no caste – so maybe he could take part after all...

At some point that night I finally drifted off to sleep. And for the first time in a long while, I didn't dream of a dark-skinned woman with

large eyes and oiled hair and bare breasts and sweat that smelt only of desire.

Episode 25

Drawing premature attention to ourselves was no part of the plan, so we drifted into the great hall of King Drupada's palace singly and dispersed ourselves amongst the Brahmins who were seated around the ceremonial fire, tending it with Vedic chants and ghee.

I looked around the hall, and it seemed to me the spectators were outnumbered by the princes and kings, some of them old enough to be my father, who had come there as aspirants for Draupadi's hand.

A large group of Kauravas, with Duryodhana at their head, walked in shortly after us and took their places in the front row of suitors. I scanned the group, spotted Karna in their midst and felt a momentary regret that I was not armed.

I glanced at Arjuna, and found him totally absorbed in studying an arrangement in the center of the hall. At the base of a tall pillar was a large vessel of highly polished brass filled with water. Next to it, covered by a red silk cloth, was what from its outline looked like an enormous bow. Hanging from the pillar was a slowly revolving cage and within it, rotating in the opposite direction, a metal fish with a diamond for one eye.

Clearly, the *swayamvara* was going to involve a test of archery.

A group of balladeers, seated on a raised platform at one end of the hall, sang songs that told the history of the Panchalas. They sang of how King Drupada's two sons had grown into famed warriors; of how the king wanted a daughter and how he held the greatest *yagna* the world had ever seen.

They sang of the hundreds of Brahmins who chanted hymns seeking divine blessings, of the thousands of cattle that were sacrificed. And then, they sang, the sacrificial fire suddenly erupted, stretching to the sky in a veritable pillar of flame – and from it, her skin singed dark by the heat, emerged the most radiant beauty the world had ever seen.

Mother had, during our journey from Ekachakra, told us how much King Drupada wanted a daughter, and how he had spent untold amounts in rituals and sacrifices and alms before finally being blessed with a baby girl. All along the route to the palace, the only topic of conversation was this wonderous daughter of the king, and everyone spoke of her as dark-skinned.

Krishnaa, they called her. I admired the poetic conceit of the balladeers that sought to explain her skin tone as the side effect of her miraculous birth.

A hush fell on the assembly as King Drupada strode to the center of the hall. He gazed around at the throng of suitors, and bowed to them with hands folded in greeting. "I am truly blessed that all of you have come here for my daughter. I bid you welcome in her name and mine."

He glanced around, smiled in sudden joy, and went rushing up to greet two people who were just entering the hall. I had never seen Krishna, and I was a child when I last saw Balarama – he had come to Hastinapura shortly after the death of our father to pay his respects to mother. Yet I had no trouble recognizing them – Balarama the powerful and beside him Krishna, tall, slender, dark-skinned, with no adornment save a peacock feather thrust into his hair.

Showing every mark of respect, King Drupada ushered them to the place of honor. I saw Krishna glance around the assembly, and it seemed to me that as his eyes roamed over where we were seated among the Brahmins, he lingered on Arjuna for the space of a heartbeat, and a smile.

A sudden hush fell on the hall. All eyes turned on cue to the doorway of the *mandap*, and the resplendent young man who stood there. A circlet of pearls held his curly hair in place; his chest was covered with a 20-strand gold necklace; a waistband of diamond-encrusted gold set off his blood red silk robe.

Dhristadyumna – it had to be him – stood there for a moment before stepping aside, and a collective gasp went up from the assembly. Draupadi, in stark contrast to her brother, wore only a robe of the sheerest white silk, and was unadorned save for a circlet of flowers around her forehead – but that simplicity of attire only seemed to enhance a beauty that was almost other worldly.

I was as mesmerized as everyone else; it was a while before I realized that this was no simpering maiden. Draupadi stood tall and erect beside her brother, head proudly raised, eyes of a brilliant black surveying the assemblage of suitors for her hand, and a smile – almost mischievous, I thought – flirting with her lips.

Dhristadyumna strode into the middle of the hall, and in a voice that carried easily in the hushed assembly, announced that his sister stood ready to wed any eligible suitor who could win the test of skill. Removing the cloth that had covered it, the young prince revealed a bow of burnished metal that was easily seven feet long.

The challenge, he said, was to string the bow and, looking only at its reflection in the bowl of water, to fire an arrow through the bars of the cage and hit the diamond eye of the bird.

The first to try was the prince of Kalinga. I had figured out that the trick lay not in the target itself, which merely presented the problem of timing, but in the bow. I had seen bows as long – the Nishadas and the Nagas liked to use bows six feet or more in length. But that was finely cured bamboo; this was metal.

Within moments of the Kalinga prince lifting the bow up, I realized I was right—but even so, I hadn't even begun to guess at the real trick. I watched closely as the prince, a fairly powerful young man, tried to control the bow which, like a living thing, wriggled around in his grasp.

It was then that I understood the nature of the bow, and of the problem. I estimated that the bow was a metal tube into which molten metal had been poured – not evenly, but in such haphazard fashion that the bow's balance was impossible to fathom.

As I watched, the Kalinga prince managed to wrestle the bow upright, and transferred his grip to the upper end to try and string it. As his hand reached for the notch and his grip shifted, the bow wriggled in his grasp, its weight sagging into him and catching him by surprise.

The prince staggered and fell, the bow crashing down on top of him. Laughter welled up from the ranks of the spectators – but none among the assembled suitors so much as smiled. They were realizing the complexity of the task confronting them – and some at least seemed already to have lost heart.

Princes from Chedi, Vidarbha Vanga and Kamarupa [[a wiki map of epic India here](#)], perhaps more enamored of Draupadi than worried about making fools of themselves, tried their hand in turn, but the bow defeated their best efforts. None of them managed even to string it, and their struggles with the bow only afforded more amusement for the spectators.

There was a lull, with everyone looking at everyone else and no one prepared to step forward to try his hand. I was attempting to catch Arjuna's eye and signal to him that his time had come, when I heard the balladeers announce the name of the next contestant: 'Karna, crowned king of Anga.'

He was a mortal enemy who had on more than one occasion been part of plots to kill me – but that didn't stop me from admiring his air of casual confidence as he strode over to the bow. Clearly, he too had been watching closely and had formed his own ideas about the bow and its challenge. I watched closely as he gripped it a little lower than the center – an unusual, splay-fingered grip that I guessed was an attempt to gain more control.

I saw the muscles of his shoulders and arms bunch and knot as he raised the bow, but nothing of that strife showed on his face. He raised the bow upright, trapped one end between his toes and, with little adjustments to his grip, gradually brought the wriggling bow under total control.

After what seemed an eternity when nothing moved, not the bow or the archer, he plucked the bow string he had tucked into his waistband. Moving carefully, clearly intent on not disturbing the equilibrium he had gained, he slipped the string into the notch on the lower end of the bow and in one swift move, looped it over the upper end and pulled it taut.

The vibration of the strung bow made eerie music in the breathless hush that had engulfed the hall.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Dhristadyumna lean his head down towards his sister, who seemed to be whispering something. Straightening, the Panchala prince said in a voice that filled the hall: "Wait! This *swayamvara* is for *kshatriyas* only!"

Without losing control of the bow, Karna turned to face Dhristadyumna. His face, almost preternaturally calm as he wrestled with the bow, was now suffused; a killing rage blazed in his eyes.

Dhristadyumna seemed not to notice. "The king of Anga is welcome to test his skill – we will admire and applaud if he succeeds. But," he said, a half-smile on his lips, "my sister will not accept anyone from a lower caste as her husband."

I saw Karna glance at Draupadi; I saw the Panchala princess, regal and proud, lock eyes with his. I saw Karna wilt visibly under that gaze, in which hauteur and contempt blended to a nicety.

The great bow crashed to earth. Karna spun around and, head bowed, walked past the suddenly silent spectators, through the massive double doors and out of the hall. I watched him go and, for a second time, felt a twinge of pity for this man whose birth so often, so cruelly, had come in the way of his ability.

A tap on my shoulder recalled me to my surroundings. Arjuna had edged around to where I sat. "Elder brother says he won't make the attempt," he whispered. "You are the second – it is your turn."

"This is not for me. You are the one – and may Indra, god of gods, aid your arm."

As a tall young man, face and skin dark from smeared ash, stepped out from their midst and strode into the middle of the hall, the Brahmins around me burst into loud cheers. One of their own – or so they thought – was about to attempt a feat kings and princes dare not attempt.

Episode 26

I had spent hours anticipating this moment. When it finally came, I saw very little of it.

Arjuna had worked out how he was going to approach the challenge – and he was clearly intent not just on succeeding but on putting on a show, proving a point.

He went down on one knee, grasping the bow with his left hand well below the centre and, with one burst of strength, hoisted it onto his shoulder. For a long moment he stayed thus, gradually bringing the wriggling bow under total control. Moving very slowly, he gently looped the bowstring onto the end of the bow that was resting on his shoulder and, in one swift move, tied and tightened it at the other.

Still kneeling, he bent over the brass bowl, intent on the reflection of the target. Very gradually, still using that off-center grip, he brought the bow down off his shoulder, notched an arrow to the string and slowly lifted it overhead.

As he began pulling the string back, the bow bucked in his hand. He paused, all his senses focussed on the task of controlling the bow. When it stilled, he pulled the string back a little bit more and again, waited for the bow to stabilize.

It seemed to take an age—an age in which no one moved, no sound broke the stillness. Inch by agonizing inch, he pulled the arrow back as far as he needed it – and then he went totally still.

Some Brahmins seated in front of me jumped up for a better look. I scrambled to my feet but even as I rose I heard the sudden thunderclap of cheering and knew I had missed the moment.

Arjuna was rising to his feet, the bow held low at his side. His arrow had displaced the diamond eye and pierced the target almost to the feathered notch. The Brahmins surged around him in frenzied acclamation.

Draupadi, flanked by her father and brother, walked up to where he stood. Taking the *varanamalyam*, the ceremonial garland, from Dhristadyumna's hands, she went up on tiptoe to garland Arjuna as her husband of choice.

Pandemonium broke out as the *kshatriyas* surrounded Drupada and Dhristadyumna, remonstrating. Duryodhana was in the forefront; his voice was raised the loudest: "When Karna accepted the challenge you said this contest was for *kshatriyas* only. We will not accept this result – if Draupadi doesn't repudiate that Brahmin, there will be war..."

I saw Dhristadyumna make a sign to his *senapati*. Moments later, the sound of trumpets reverberated through the hall, signaling the call to arms.

I grabbed hold of one of the poles holding the *mandap* up, pried it loose with one huge heave and jumped into the middle of the commotion. It was rapidly developing into a riot; there was no time for me to look for more conventional arms.

"All those who refuse to accept the winner can talk to me," I roared, taking position so I could cover my brother's back.

Sakuni, face suffused with rage, rushed towards me at the head of some of the Kauravas. I was always convinced that he was behind the cowardly plan to burn us in our beds. I needed no second invitation – my bunched fist crashed into his face, sending him flying backwards.

"Come on, come on, one at a time or all together, I don't care!" The frustration of all those months and years in hiding boiled up within me; I was primed to kill.

Duryodhana had rushed to where Sakuni lay prone. As he straightened, I saw the dawning realization in his eyes.

The *kshatriyas* seemed to be having second thoughts. They stepped back, clearing space around us. An elderly king I couldn't identify gave them the excuse they were looking for. "If Drupada wants to throw his daughter away on a Brahmin beggar, why should we care?"

The *kshatriyas* moved away, muttering among themselves, but I guessed the danger was not over yet. I turned to tell Arjuna it was time to leave, but it was Draupadi who caught my eye. If I had the time to think about it, I would have expected her to have run away to

the safety of her people or at least, to be cowering behind Arjuna. Instead, she stood there between the two of us, excitement in her eyes and in her broad smile as she watched the near-riot around us.

I caught Dhristadyumna's eye. "Get us a chariot."

Walking in front to clear the way, I rushed Draupadi and Arjuna out of the palace and into the courtyard, where a chariot stood waiting. "We will come back tomorrow," I told Dhristadyumna, who had accompanied us with drawn sword.

"Go, quickly," he said. "Don't worry about the scene here – I'll take care of this."

I looked around for my brothers but they were nowhere in sight. Arjuna jumped into the chariot and reaching down a hand, pulled Draupadi up beside him. As I jumped in behind them, a few arrows came whistling towards us from the gathering crowd outside.

Pushing the charioteer aside, I grabbed the reins and whipped the horses, racing the chariot forward and scattering the crowd in front of us. I drove at speed through the city, pulling up only when we got to the outskirts.

I jumped down from the chariot. Arjuna followed, but Draupadi looked doubtful.

"Don't worry," my brother told her. "Our people are nearby."

In the distance, we could see the little village of potters where we had sought shelter the previous night. I told the charioteer to return to the palace, and the three of us began walking towards the village.

"You needn't be afraid, princess," Arjuna said. "We are..."

He stopped in mid sentence and looked doubtfully at me.

"I guessed," Draupadi said. "You are Prita's son Arjuna." Looking at me, she continued on a gurgle of laughter: "Brahmins aren't quite so bloodthirsty—and they don't usually make war with posts uprooted from a *mandap*! Your role-playing is not quite as good as your brother's..."

We laughed.

"When my father was preparing for my *swayamvara*, he said he would spread the word far and wide," Draupadi said as we walked abreast down the lane. "The Pandavas will hear and they will come, he told me."

"The Pandavas? But I heard they died in a fire in Varanavata or somewhere?" I tried to keep the pretence going.

"Oh, even the Kauravas were not fools enough to believe that!" she laughed. "We knew you were alive and that you would come. My brother was teasing me, saying I should pray you were alive because he thought only Arjuna could pass the test—if he didn't come, I would have to remain unwed for life!"

We reached the house where we had taken shelter the previous night. "Wait, let's play a trick on mother," I said. I knocked. "Mother, come out – see what alms we got today!"

I heard her footsteps coming towards the door. "Whatever it is, share it among you," she said as she opened the door.

We burst out laughing. "This is what we got today, mother," Arjuna said. "The Panchala princess."

Draupadi went down on her knees in obeisance. "God bless you, my child. Welcome," mother said, raising Draupadi to her feet and leading her indoors.

Just then Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva came hurrying up. I couldn't resist sharing the joke. "Guess what? We told mother we had gotten some alms, and without knowing what it was, she said we should all share it!"

Nakula and Sahadeva collapsed in laughter. "How could you be so stupid to play such a prank?" Yudhishtira said to me. "Now we have to jointly marry her – there is no other way out. Even if it was said unknowingly, a mother's command is sacrosanct. It cannot be broken – that is what the *shastras* say."

I gaped at him in total shock.

We had been through so much, the five of us; we had survived so much and finally, our hour was at hand. And now, just when we should be celebrating the imminent end of our life in exile, my brother

produces the most ridiculous argument I had ever heard: A mother's command! The *shastras*!

Excuses to hide behind, when the fact was that he wanted Draupadi himself and thought this was his chance.

I didn't trust myself at that moment. In a blind fury, I walked away.

"Bheema, wait!" Yudhishtira's voice followed me. "Balarama and Krishna are coming here. Wait!"

I kept walking, wanting to get as far away from there, from him, as I could.

Episode 27

The wealth of the Panchalas lay spread out before me: cattle-sheds as far as the eye could reach, with thousands of cows and goats and hundreds of workers tending to their needs.

I sat on the steps of one of the many stone tanks that punctuated the cattle sheds and let my mind drift, trying to distance myself from my own rage.

I sensed someone coming up behind me. I thought it might be Arjuna, but it was my elder brother who walked up, and settled on the steps beside me. We sat there for a long time, not talking.

"Balaram has gone back to Dwaraka. Krishna and Arjuna have gone out looking for some good Sura to celebrate with."

"Hmmm?" I was in no mood for small talk.

"Arjuna is lucky. Actually, it is not even luck – he really deserves Draupadi; no one else could have beaten that bow and won her," Yudhishtira said. "To tell you the truth, I never thought dark, almost black, skin could be so attractive till I saw her."

I remained silent.

"He should marry her, isn't that the right thing to do?"

I looked at him. "What a stupid, pointless question! In the *swayamvar mandap*, Draupadi garlanded our brother. She chose him as her husband. That's it – according to *kshatriya* custom, they *are* married already. What is there to debate and discuss?"

My brother chose to ignore that point. That is always his way—whenever I produced some inconvenient argument, he would pretend he hadn't heard.

He sighed. "It is just that mother is upset that her words will go in vain."

I bit back the harsh words that rose, like so much bile, in my throat.

"In any case, one woman wedding many is not unknown in history, as you know..."

"I don't know – you are the one who is forever buried in the past."

"Oh yes – for instance, Jadila, the wife of the seven *rishis*, and that is only one example of many. It is clear in my mind that Draupadi is Arjuna's – only, there is the problem of mother's word..."

My brother was, in his usual convoluted fashion, trying to convince me that the path he had fixed in his own mind was the correct one. He is an adept at using words as weapons – respond, and he will use your words as the starting point of a discourse on the Vedas and Shastras and Puranas, and talk till you give up. I knew what he was doing, and lapsed into the silence that was the one weapon he never knew how to counter.

"If grandfather Krishna Dwaipayana or uncle Vidura or someone like that, someone well versed in the Shastras was around, we could at least ask them for advice."

"What advice?!" The anger I had been trying to get over boiled up afresh. If my brother wanted to cling to the straw of 'mother's words' to fulfil his own desires, that was his business – but if he thought to talk me around to his point of view...

"Arjuna won Draupadi, and that is that – at least as far as I am concerned. If you want to use the excuse of 'mother's word' or lean on examples from history to justify sharing her with our brother, that is your business. I'll only say this much – it is not what you want or what mother said that matters, it is what Arjuna thinks. And of course, what Draupadi thinks – though of course, we Purus have never bothered to ask our women what they want, or to consult them before deciding their fate..."

"That is not true! We have always treated our women with honor and respect, we have always been known to consider their welfare!"

"Really? We Purus bought *valiyamma* Gandhari and married her to the blind Dhritarashtra. Knowing he was impotent, we bought Madri *cheriyamma* from Shalya for a few bars of gold, as second wife to Pandu..."

"Our father!"

"Oh yes, our father who was impotent and who could never beget children but who is our father nevertheless! Did anyone consult *valiyamma* Gandhari or *cheriyamma* Madri? Did their wishes even matter?"

Sighing deeply, Yudhishtira got to his feet and began to walk away.

"Wait!"

I caught up with him, my anger a throb in my head and a haze over my eyes that kept me from seeing clearly. "Leave Nakula and Sahadeva out of this – they are in any case young, there is still time for them to be married. And leave me out of this. I have a wife – and by now, maybe a son – waiting for me in the forest. Mother may not think she is good enough to be with us as part of our family; you may not think she is exalted enough to live in a Kuru palace, but that does not matter to me.

"You forget that we don't have a palace, or even a home for that matter. And mother forgets that we didn't even have a name when she met me and cast her lot with mine. Hidimbi is my wife and she is all I want. If you want to claim a share of the wife Arjuna won by the strength of his skill then so be it, let our age have its own Jadilas. But for god's sake, whatever you do, make sure it is not against Arjuna's wishes, or I can promise you this: You will never win that prize you dream of all the time, the throne of Hastinapura."

As I walked away, I felt the rage that had filmed my eyes melt away; I felt a sudden calm, a sense of peace.

I owed Yudhishtira the love and the respect due to an elder brother – and I tendered it gladly, I always would. I believed in his right to sit on the throne of Hastinapura as our father's successor, and I would gladly put my life on the line to help him to that throne.

But loving him, respecting him, identifying with his ambition—all of that did not mean I had to agree with everything he said and did, that I had to give up my own principles and embrace his will and his whims—and I was glad of this chance to let him know.

Episode 28

The shadow flirted with other shadows, merging, occasionally emerging, always moving closer to the hut we had made our temporary home.

I stood in the deep shadow of a neighboring hut, watching, attempting to get a sense of this new danger that threatened us.

He had reached our hut and was peering in through a window. An enemy waiting for the opportune moment to attack? I thought not – our enemies knew us well enough to not risk attacking singly. Besides, a single assassin could never be sure of killing all five of us, and to leave any one of us alive was, as our enemies would surely know, to invite terrible retribution. This was more likely an advance spy sent out by those who would do us harm.

I crept up behind him; once within range I leapt, hammering my shoulder into the small of his back and taking him down. I straddled his back, pinning him, my hand on the back of his head pushing his head into the mud as he struggled to escape.

"Who are you? Who sent you here to spy on us?"

The reply was muffled. "I am no spy. I am Dhristadyumna, prince of Panchala. I came to find the Brahmins who came for the swayamvar and won my sister."

I let him up. "One of them stands before you now," I said. "I am Bheema, the Pandava. My mother and brothers are inside, with your sister."

"I thought at first that it was Arjuna who won my sister – but after you left the palace, all sorts of rumors were flying around, there was much talk. Father began worrying, so I offered to do some spying. I'm glad – I had suspected you were alive when I heard that a Brahmin had killed Bakan in combat, and put an end to Vaitrakeyan's human sacrifice..."

I smiled. "Yes, that was a Brahmin."

"And Hidimban, who was notorious in these parts for killing all who wandered into the Kamyaka forest...?"

"Oh, that was a nameless, casteless wanderer – before he became a Brahmin," I laughed.

Dhristadyumna bent to touch my feet, then wrapped his arms around me in an embrace. "I am glad the Pandavas are alive. We have heard the stories, we know how Dhritarashtra and the Kauravas betrayed you, tried to kill you. We are with you – whatever you need from us, whenever you need it, just ask..."

"Oh, we'll certainly need your help and when the time is right we'll ask for your support, your armies. Let's go in, you can meet the others, see your sister..."

"No, not now – let me go reassure my father. I'll meet your brothers at the formal wedding ceremony – we'll celebrate then."

Dhristadyumna touched my feet, and vanished into the darkness. I pushed open the door and walked in. In one corner of the hut, Draupadi lay sleeping peacefully at my mother's feet. Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva were stretched out near the far wall, fast asleep. There was no sign of Arjuna and Krishna.

A plate of food had been kept for me. As I sat in front of it, mother raised the wick of the lamp and came over to sit beside me. "The wedding celebration has to be grand – everyone should know, everyone should come."

"Mmm...hmmm..."

"A Brahmin priest, one of your uncle Vidura's people, was here. I had the *bali* performed to offer thanks to the gods, and I've have sent him back to Hastinapura with all the news."

I ate in silence. Mother, usually never one for small talk, seemed unusually talkative – the palace at Dwaraka was not complete yet, but the Yadavas had already moved there. Balarama had just spent a month at Hastinapura, to teach Duryodhana the art of fighting with the mace...

I finished my meal.

"That Brahmin, your uncle's messenger – he is very learned, very wise. He explained to us that it was perfectly okay for Draupadi to marry all five of you – he said it was in fact the wise thing to do..."

Yudhishitira must have told her of our talk, I thought to myself.

"Mother, I don't think that right now the important thing is whether Draupadi marries Arjuna or all five of us. Thanks to my brother, we are finally in a position to end our life of exile, of running and hiding – the last thing we need to do right now is to annoy King Drupada by doing something that will create a lot of talk."

"Of course you are right—I agree. But remember this, child – far more important than the support we get from outside, from Drupada or whoever else, is that the five of you should stay united always; that there should be no dissension between you. If you are not together, then no amount of support will help us achieve the goal. That is why I insist that all of you should marry her – and if there is support for it in the Shastras, if the learned men of our time have no fault to find with it, then all the better..."

All the words I found so effortlessly when arguing with my brother earlier failed me now; in the presence of my mother, I felt like a child obstinately refusing something he knows is good for him.

"Mother, why do you imagine we will not stay united? We've endured much together, we've suffered together and we have stayed together though we could have gone our different ways. I could be back in the forest right now with my wife, my child, living a life of ease..."

"My child, this is different. Draupadi is different. Earlier today, when all of you came back from Drupada's palace, you were watching Draupadi and I was watching you – and I saw the desire, the lust, in the eyes of every one of you. Even Sahadeva, even your youngest brother, when he looked at her... I am a woman, I can see what men try the most to hide."

I wanted to protest. I wanted to lift my eyes to my mother's, to show her that my eyes at least were clear of lust.

The words of protest wouldn't come. I kept my head down, my eyes fixed on the empty plate in front of me, for fear my mother might read in them things I wasn't even aware of myself.

Hastily, I got up, picked up my plate and went outside to wash it. I sat down on the stoop outside, thinking to avoid going in, resuming a conversation I found increasingly uncomfortable.

"I heard that you quarreled with your brother today – that you were angry, you raised your voice to him."

Mother was standing by the door, her voice pitched low so as not to wake the others.

I didn't deny it. I didn't make any excuses.

"You are my second son, Yudhishtira's heir. If something were to happen to him, you will inherit his throne, you will rule. Don't you, as the second in line, want to share Draupadi after your brother's turn? Look at me, tell me the truth..."

For the second time that evening I struggled to raise my head, to meet my mother's eyes with my own; for the second time that evening, I was suddenly fearful, ashamed, of what might be there.

"When you knocked on the door and said come see what alms we found, I knew it was Draupadi you were talking about, you fool." That note of affectionate amusement that always crept into mother's voice when she called me fool was there again – but this time there was an undercurrent of something else, something I had never sensed before: a grim determination, a sense of implacable purpose.

"The five of you didn't go out this morning to beg alms, you went to Drupada's palace for the *swayamvara*. Don't I know my children well enough to know that either Arjuna or you would have won the prize? When you knocked, I knew she was there with you, and I knew exactly what I was saying and why."

She turned and went back inside. I stayed out there on the stoop, hoping the chill of the night air would ease the fevers of the mind. Through an endless night when sleep refused me its shelter, my thoughts kept turning back to mother, with a mixture of pride and wonder and even fear.

What must she be made of, I thought to myself – married to a king who couldn't for most of his life give her the privileges and luxuries of a queen nor satisfy her as a woman; facing constant calumny over the children she had borne the impotent Pandu; putting up with the life of

an unwelcome widow in Dhritarashtra's palace and of untold hardship during our wanderings in the forest... and yet, despite it all, fixed with fierce resolve, unwavering clarity, on her sole ambition: a throne for her eldest, a kingdom for her children.

To that end, she would do anything, sacrifice anyone. Draupadi was nothing—just a means to acquire rich, powerful allies. She would sacrifice her with as little qualms as she had the tribal woman and her five children in the hunting lodge at Varanavata.

If she had to, I thought, mother would set fire to the world; if that was the only means to the goal she had determined on, she would even sacrifice one of us.

I shivered, feeling the chill of the night air in my mind, in my heart.

[And with that, the end of Book Two.]

Episode 29

Days became weeks, became months – and never had I known time to pass so slowly.

Around me, people worked night and day to transform a vast jungle into a city.

The forest of Khandavaprastha—an overlooked, outlying part of the Hastinapura kingdom – had been given to us as our ‘share’ of the inheritance. Just another form of exile, I thought when I first set sight on the forest.

I had argued, with considerable heat, that we should fight for our right to Hastinapura. With the Yadavas under Krishna and the Panchalas under Drupada and Dhristadyumna on our side, we were stronger than ever; we could wage war against the Kauravas if we had to, take by force what was rightfully ours. Arjuna agreed with me and said so; Dhristadyumna was even more vehement. But Yudhishtira was unwilling to trigger a full-scale war, and mother sided with him.

So we moved – and to my surprise, people began flocking to Khandavaprastha in increasing numbers. A dozen women who had served my mother when we lived in Hastinapura were the first to come, with their husbands and families; pretty soon, their relatives and friends followed.

Vaisyas sensed an opportunity and came in growing numbers to set up their businesses. Housing was the immediate need, but wood was plentiful and stonemasons and woodworkers poured in, attracted by the vast amount of work to be had.

Yudhishtira decreed that each person who joined us could take for free an amount of land that was pre-determined by his occupation and his station in life. The news spread, and the trickle became a flood as people rushed to get the first pick of the prime plots in their allocated sector.

Nakula and Sahadeva, who had worked on the land allocation decree with Yudhishtira, proved to be talented administrators. They surveyed

and mapped the land that had been allotted to us, divided it up into sections, decided where the various castes would have their territories and where the cattle sheds would go and the elephants and horses would be housed and which sections would be cleared for farm-land, and they oversaw the work of construction. My two youngest brothers had grown up overnight; with a rapidity that was almost miraculous, they were creating a kingdom out of a wilderness.

They had a sizeable treasury at their disposal to fund the task—Drupada and Dhristadyumna had overwhelmed us with their generosity during the elaborate wedding ceremonies, one for each of us.

Even as those ceremonies were being organized and messengers were being sent to invite neighboring kings and princes, Duryodhana led the Kauravas in a sneak attack on us. Dhristadyumna seemed to think it was all good fun, an unlooked-for addition to the celebrations. He led the Panchala army out with Arjuna and me for company, and we met the Kauravas in a field just outside the kingdom's main gates.

It was my first real battle and it proved to be a short one, lasting just about three hours or so. The Kauravas had come with a small force; Arjuna reasoned that they did not want to mobilize on a large scale and tip off grandfather Bheesma and uncle Vidura about their intentions. Duryodhana and Karna led; allies like Bhurisravas and Saubhala, and the Sindhu king Jayadratha who had married Duryodhana's sister Dusshala, were in the front rank.

Arjuna was unstoppable. At one point I saw Karna, hit by my brother's arrows, fall off his chariot; the *suta putra's* charioteer bundled him in and raced away from the field. But well as Arjuna fought, it was Dhristadyumna who astonished us all – when mounted on a chariot, he was magical; he seemed to have the knack of being in a dozen different places all at once and wherever he appeared, he cut swathes through the enemy, disrupted their formations, and made it easy for his men to cut through. The young lad fought with enjoyment, with joy almost – battle, for him, seemed to be high sport.

The Kauravas were overwhelmed; they turned tail and ran, leaving behind over one hundred dead not counting a few dozen horses and some elephants. We lost 20 of our soldiers, and six horses.

Shortly after this skirmish, uncle Vidura came to Drupada's palace as Dhritarashtra's envoy to plead for peace. Dhristadyumna mocked him

in open court; I had to intervene and get the prince to calm down by telling him of the many times Vidura's advice had saved our lives.

Uncle advised us that though it seemed unfair for Dhritarashtra to fob us off with an uninhabited forest as our 'share', we should accept it. We were now strong, he agreed, but we were not yet strong enough for a full-scale war with a Hastinapura army that would be led by grandfather Bheesma and guru Dronacharya and backed by the many allies the Kauravas had gathered to themselves during our time in exile. Besides, he pointed out, we had tremendous goodwill among the people of Hastinapura – when the news spread that we had settled in Khandavaprastha, many of them would follow us there, and we would have the nucleus of our own kingdom.

Drupada and Dhristadyumna sent us off in splendid style. Dozens of wagons accompanied us, each loaded down with grain and chests of gold and precious stones; following in their wake was an endless column of cows and goats, horses and elephants. The Panchala king also sent a team of his best architects and sculptors to help us set up our kingdom. And then there was Krishna, who sent us many more wagonloads of grain and hundreds of cattle. He had come for the wedding celebrations, and when he presented Draupadi with two dozen chests of gold and pearls, I saw mother's eyes fill with happy tears.

The Kurus had used Khandavaprastha for their occasional hunting expeditions; there were four lodges there that we moved into. Yudhishtira and Draupadi moved into the biggest one, a luxurious lodge meant for the king. Mother, Nakula and Sahadeva were settled in the second biggest one, which was traditionally used by the princes and womenfolk. Arjuna took the third largest and I moved into the smallest lodge, the one used by the servants accompanying the hunting party.

Yudhishtira hardly ever came out of his palace. He had laid down the rules before we left the Panchala kingdom. Draupadi was to spend one year in turn with each of us brothers in order of seniority, starting with the eldest. If it was unfair that Arjuna, who had won her with his skill, would have to wait two years before he could spend time with the woman who had chosen him as her husband, nobody said a word – "The *rishis* and wise men have decided this is in the best interests of all of us," my elder brother had announced. And after that late-night conversation with mother, I had given up arguing – in fact, I had given

up thinking about it, for fear of unearthing hidden desires I dared not acknowledge, let alone voice.

It was forbidden – this was mother's addition, though I suspected at the time that she was merely voicing something Yudhishtira had thought of – for the other four to approach the house of the brother with whom Draupadi was staying at the time. A breach of this rule entailed a year's exile for the offender, and the loss of his turn with Draupadi.

The first year was coming to an end. In just three weeks, Draupadi would enter my home as my wife—and in the interim, time had slowed to an insufferable crawl. I tried to fill each day with activity, to take my mind off what I increasingly dreamt about. It wasn't easy – Nakula and Sahadeva were so totally immersed in the job of building a city, a kingdom, and seemed so much in control of it that I did not think it fitting to intrude, even had I known what to do.

I ended up spending most of my time with the army we were gradually building – training with them, taking part in their drills, teaching them the skills we had learnt under Kripa and Shukra and Drona. And when that was done, I invariably wound up at the elephant paddock, working with my own elephant that I had brought over from Hastinapura and with the others in the paddock, and helping the mahouts bathe them and groom them.

I was working with my elephant late one evening, covered in muck and dressed in nothing more than a loin-cloth, when I was startled by a voice just behind me.

"They say you can fight a fully grown elephant in its *musth*."

It was the first time I had seen Draupadi outside the palace she shared with Yudhishtira, and it struck me that the slender young girl I had first seen in the *swayamvara mandap* and who had during the wedding celebrations smiled up at me as she put a garland around my neck had grown into a woman in the space of less than a year.

She still wore white – a very sheer, very fine silk robe that clung to her body. A garland of jasmine had been threaded into her long hair; a single strand of pearls highlighted her slender neck and the finest of gold threads circled a waist I could span with my fingers.

With a start, I realized that she was looking at me as openly as I had been staring at her, her eyes roving over every inch of my almost-naked body.

She caught my eyes and smiled, her eyes alight with mischief – and with something else I wasn't sure if I saw or merely hoped for.

Episode 30

"I heard that your battle with Bakan lasted an entire day!"

I looked around for my robe, hastily knotted it at my waist and looked up to catch a knowing smile in Draupadi's eyes.

"These court singers will exaggerate anything," I shrugged. "He was fat, dulled by alcohol and in no shape to fight; it took a few minutes, that's all."

"And Hidimban? They talk of how you split his head and a river of blood flowed all the way to the Ganga..."

"I broke his neck. There was no blood."

Mentally, I kicked myself. Women love stories of heroic battles – why was I belittling my own stories when I could spin them out and keep her for that much longer beside me?

"It was because of the strength of your arm that Arjuna and I were able to get away that day at the *swayamvara mandap*. I think of that, often." She laughed. "I thought I'd get to see a really good battle, but all those heroes who came to win me could only talk – when it came to action, they ran away!"

She walked away from the elephant paddock. I adjusted the robe I had hastily draped around myself, brushed some of the mud and sweat off my face, and caught up with her just as we neared the garden outside my house.

Visokan was supervising half a dozen sculptors who were working on decorating the garden with statues, little stone fountains and carved stone benches in little nooks shrouded by flowers. I wondered if Draupadi would notice, if she would realize that all this work and, in fact, all the improvements I had carried out inside the house over the past several months to make it attractive was in anticipation of the year I would spend with her.

"The Yuvaraj has planned a big *yaga* tonight – the *putrakameshti yaga*, to get a son and heir," Draupadi said, her gaze fixed on the sculptors.

Why now, when his time was almost up? I kept the thought to myself, not wanting her to think I had been counting the days.

Draupadi reached up to pick a hibiscus flower from a nearby bush. I bent the branch to make it easier for her.

"So... is Subhadra very pretty? Have you seen her? Is her skin dark, like Krishna's and mine?"

I noticed she was shredding the flower between her fingers, the torn petals fluttering to the ground at her feet. "I've never heard that Yadava women are famed for their beauty..."

Three days earlier, we had received a summons to the main palace. Nakula, Sahadeva and mother were already there, waiting in the front courtyard, when I walked over from my house.

Yudhishtira walked out from the inner hall, leaving the door open. "Arjuna has married Subhadra, Krishna's sister," he said. "A messenger came to me this morning with the news. Krishna was delighted but brother Balarama was not.

"It seems Subhadra threatened to run away with our brother, and Krishna said he would help her."

I noticed that Yudhishtira was talking unusually loudly. Was Draupadi just behind the door listening, I wondered.

"They will be here in two or three days," he told us. There are two weeks left of his exile, but Krishna decided to visit us, and he is bringing his sister and Arjuna with him."

It was not the first time in these last eleven months that a messenger had come with news that my brother had married some princess or the other. We first heard that he had married one Chitrangadha, daughter of the king of Manipura. "I wonder if they are *kshatriyas*," Yudhishtira said when the news came.

Then there was a strange story of a Naga princess, Ulupi, who was we heard was so enamored by Arjuna that she drugged him and took him

away to her own kingdom. Knowing how stories get exaggerated, I discounted most of it and figured only that yet another damsel had fallen in love with my handsome brother.

All of it was not exactly what life in exile was supposed to be, but what of that? The very nature of his going into exile was itself stupid, and so totally unnecessary.

A little over a week after we had settled in Khandavaprastha, a man came up to tell us that a band of dacoits had driven away his cattle. "They need to be taught that we are here now, that this is our land and no one can loot and kill with impunity," Arjuna fumed, and ran off to get his weapons.

He came back armed with his bow and a full quiver, looking sheepish. "You know how we had stored our arms in Yudhishtira's home for the time being? Without thinking, I ran in – and saw our brother and Draupadi together..."

Never mind, I told him – go chase away the dacoits and come back, we'll see.

Later that evening, I argued that the duty of a *kshatriya* to protect anyone who came to him for succor superseded all else. But Yudhishtira was adamant in that 'reasonable' way he had when he wanted to get his way about something, and mother backed him up. "It is not that I mind, personally," our brother said. "But there is a rule, and if we make one excuse now, we will make some other excuse tomorrow when Draupadi is with someone else, and the whole system will break down."

We were assembled in the outer courtyard of Yudhishtira's home. Without a word, Arjuna stormed out. "I had been meaning to go away anyway," he told me that night. "A year of knowing that Draupadi is... Anyway. If this hadn't happened, I would have found some other excuse to get away—I've been wanting to visit other lands, see if there is something I can learn."

He left early the next morning. I was the only one to see him go.

"Did no one tell you the Yuvaraja has decided that Arjuna's lost turn as my husband reverts to him?" Draupadi's voice cut into my reverie and left me stunned.

Almost without conscious thought, I glanced back at the sculptors at work in my garden, readying my home for a honeymoon that was not to be. Draupadi's eyes followed mine; when she looked at me again, there was something in her eyes I couldn't decipher. Sympathy? A promise?

The clatter of horses' hooves broke the spell. Three chariots raced into the square and pulled up before Arjuna's house. My brother jumped down from the first one, held out his hand, and helped a girl down.

It must be Subhadra, I thought as I watched Krishna get down from the second chariot. She was dressed in a silk robe of flaming red. A golden diadem circled her hair, the diamonds studded in it flashing in the evening sun.

Abruptly, Draupadi left my side and walked away – past my home, past Arjuna's, and into the one she shared with Yudhishtira.

That evening, Nakula oversaw the grand *puthrakameshti yaga* at Yudhishtira's house, while Sahadeva organized a great feast at Arjuna's. I wandered from one to the other, conscious of a sudden restlessness. I wanted to talk to Arjuna. I wanted to hear of the lands he had seen and the people he had met and all he had learnt, but he was busy celebrating with Krishna over pots of Sura.

I walked back to my house. Visokan had kept some meat and a big earthen jug of Sura for me. "The *yaga* went very well," he said.

I pushed the food aside, picked up the jug and emptied it without pause.

"More."

"You should eat."

I looked at him. He went out, came back moments later with another jug. I drank.

"Keep a chariot ready for me first thing tomorrow morning. Four horses."

"Isn't it best to wait till Krishna has left?"

"Tomorrow morning, before dawn. Pack all my arms into it. Some meat. A dozen pots of Sura."

I picked up the jug, finished what was left in one long gulp and, unable to sit still, unable to sleep, wandered out into the garden.

Arjuna's home still blazed with lights; I heard the sounds of loud laughter. I looked across at my elder brother's home, where the lights were going out one by one. One honeymoon was about to begin; another was about to enter its second year. Somewhere far away in a forest my wife would be sleeping, with my son at her breast.

Feeling heartsick, I sank down on one of the stone benches the sculptors had so lovingly created for Draupadi, and looked up at the stars.

The alcohol, the lack of food, all began to hit me at once. My head swam. The stars fell out of the heavens, plunging towards me – and inside my head, they exploded in a shower of light.

Episode 31

I sat for a long time beside the lake, listening for the sound of footsteps in the rain-drenched grass.

I hadn't really noticed before that the lake beside which I first met Hidimbi, and which in time became our favorite place to be together, was shaped like a lotus leaf.

I hoped Hidimbi would come; I hoped she would bring our son with her. Whenever I thought of our child, it was always a son I pictured in my mind—a son who would grow up stronger, braver, and luckier than his father.

I watched Visokan feeding and watering the horses and washing out the chariot. If he was curious about why I had decided to while away an entire day beside this lake, he didn't ask – and I didn't tell.

In his view, women were merely a convenience for the *kshatriya*, to be used when the urge was felt, to be impregnated when policy dictated, and otherwise to be relegated to the background. More than anyone else, he was the one I shared my thoughts with and looked to for timely advice, but he would never understand my constant ache for this girl of the forest I had known and loved so long ago.

As dusk fell, I walked towards the chariot.

"Where now?"

"To the west."

We rode on through the night through forests and up hills, in a journey without a purpose, a destination, a point. Towards afternoon of the next day the hills began to level out; we raced across a broad, lush plain and in the distance I saw the glint of sunlight on water.

"The Ganga, again," Visokan said. "We must be near Kashi."

We pulled up in the shade of a cluster of trees by the river bank. I stripped down to the skin and jumped in, letting the cool waters of the river wash away the fatigue of a night and day of non-stop travel. When I finally climbed out of the water, I noticed that Visokan had unpacked and laid out a robe of bright red silk, with a yellow sash for the waist and a 12-strand necklace of pearls strung on gold.

Visokan caught me staring, and laughed. "I had packed a few things before we set out – who knew where we were going and what you might need? You are Bheema, the Pandava prince of Khandavaprastha – you cannot ride into Kasi looking like a wandering beggar."

As kingdoms go, Kashi was a quarter the size of Panchala or Hastinapura – not much more, really, than a collection of fairly large villages. We rode through the gates, and into a riot of colour that took the breath away.

Street after street was filled with bright-hued silks airing in the sun; everywhere, we saw weavers at work on their looms while their women worked beside them, dyeing large swathes of fabric in every imaginable color and stretching them out to dry.

"Before we leave, remind me to buy some of this silk to take back to Khandavaprastha," I told Visokhan. For Draupadi, I thought, but I left that thought unvoiced.

"Actually, you should invite some of these workers to move to Khandavaprastha," Visokan said, surprising me yet again with his astuteness. "They can start this business there; it will flourish in no time."

As we drove through the city square and towards the palace gates, we saw increasing signs of festivity. Buntings and decorated arches were everywhere; happy people in their festive best moved in the direction of the palace that loomed ahead of us. The crowds slowed our chariot to a crawl.

Visokan stopped the chariot and jumped out, crossing to a group of people who were gathered under a peepul tree drinking something out of little mud cups. "There is a *swayamvara* in the palace today," he told me as he flicked his whip at the horses to get them moving again. "The king here is one Seneshan; the *swayamvara* is for his sister Balandhara."

An unexpected interlude in what I had thought would be a routine passage through the kingdom, moving right through and travelling onwards till Kamarupa, at least, before returning to Khandavaprastha.

Seneshan's palace was about half the size of Drupada's palace at Panchala. The walls were made of mud bricks hardened by fire – a novelty for us, who were used to the wooden structures of Hastinapura and Panchala.

The courtyard of the palace teemed with chariots flying flags I was not familiar with. Drums and trumpets sounded with festive vigor; servitors waited by the palace doors to welcome the guests and dozens of women in bright-colored silk robes stood in two rows beside the gates, garlanding each guest as he walked up and applying the auspicious *tilak* on his forehead.

"This is Bheema, the Pandava prince from Khandavaprastha," Visokan told the dignified old man who stood at the head of the welcoming group. He showed no sign that the name meant anything to him. Strange, I thought – the Pandavas were closely related to the Kashis through our nominal grandfather, Vichitravirya; this was the kingdom of my grandmother.

It was one of the stories we had heard while growing up: Chitrangada, the elder son of King Shantanu and Queen Satyawati, had died when young and his younger brother Vichitravirya had succeeded him while still a child. Grandfather Bhishma had ruled as regent in his place, and when he heard that the king of Kashi was holding a *swayamvara* for his three daughters, he rode over and won them by force of arms and carried them back to Hastinapura as brides for the young prince.

The eldest, Amba, was in love with someone else, so Ambika and Ambalika were married to Vichitravirya. The prince was sickly, the story went, and died of some disease shortly after the marriage. Satyawati summoned her other son Krishna Dwaipayana, born of the sage Parashara, to impregnate Vichitravirya's two wives.

If the balladeers were to be believed, Dwaipayana, a wandering mendicant, was so ugly that Ambika closed her eyes tight when she saw him in her bedchamber – and in time, bore a blind son named Dhritarashtra. And Ambalika in her turn turned pale when she set eyes on Dwaipayana, and ended up with the pale, consumptive Pandu as a result of that night.

I told Hidimbi this story when we were together by our lake. "Our son will be born blind, like Dhritarashtra," I told her once, looking down at her flushed face and tight-shut eyes. "Oh? And if I keep my eyes open, will our son be born with eyes that will never shut even in sleep?" she laughed at me then.

A young man, a prince of some sort judging by his dress and ornaments, came up to us. "Khandavaprastha? Where is that?" he asked when Visokan introduced me.

"Near Hastinapura."

"I've heard of a Yudhishtira of Hastinapura..."

"Yudhishtira is now king of Khandavaprastha," Visokan said, though my brother had not yet assumed the crown. "Bhima is his younger brother, the Yuvaraja, and elder brother of Arjuna."

The young man's air of indifference vanished; he bent low to touch my feet. "I am Seneshan. My kingdom is blessed that you have come."

He led me away from the throng of spectators where I was hoping to find a seat, and ushered me to a prominent place in the front row, amidst the many kings and princes who had come seeking his sister's hand.

The news spread; many came up for a closer look at 'Arjuna's brother'. For the first time, I got a real sense of how far my brother's fame had spread. I noticed a small crowd gathering around Visokan, who was standing in one corner of the hall – people, no doubt, wanting to know more about who I was and where I was from.

A flourish of trumpets announced the start of the festivities. A dozen priests sat around the sacrificial fire, offering ghee and grain to the sound of *shlokas*. Setting aside his crown, Seneshan gave them gifts of gold and silk, and prostrated before them.

From the whispered conversations around me, I understood that there was to be no contest – this was a *swayamvara* where the bride would pick her husband of choice on her own. A bustle in one corner of the hall attracted my attention; I saw a group of women come into the hall from an inner part of the palace.

In the midst of them was a young girl in bright yellow robes, with jasmine flowers braided into her long, lustrous hair and a diamond-encrusted belt at her waist. She was taller than Draupadi, almost as tall as Hidimbi but much more slender. Her head was down, a fringe of her robe dropping over her forehead and hiding her face.

Balandhara left the group of women and walked into the hall, heading towards the sacrificial fire. In her turn, she gave gifts of gold, grain and silks to the priests and prostrated for their blessings. As the court singers sang of her charms and described her as a special gift from the gods to the kingdom of Kashi, the head priest handed her a garland. She moved to the end of the hall and, very slowly and deliberately, walked down its length.

As she paused before each king or prince, the balladeers named them in songs that told of their heroic deeds. If I didn't know of the propensity of court singers to exaggerate, I would have imagined I was seated in the presence of the greatest kings of the age, not mere satraps from neighboring provinces.

She stopped in front of me. I looked around for Seneshan to tell him that I was not an aspirant to his sister's hand, but by then the court singers had launched into their song.

Lo and behold the younger brother of Yudhishtira the son of Yama Dharma himself, and elder brother of the heroic Arjuna who had in battle defeated the Nagas and the Yadavas and snatched away the beauteous Subhadra, sister of the divine Krishna. Behold the mighty Bheema, who had set out on in a single chariot on a voyage of world conquest...

I heard of my battles with Hidimban and Bakan and of heroic encounters with a horde of humans and *rakshasas* and *asuras* I hadn't even heard of before. And just when I thought they were finally done, they launched into a colorful tale of my titanic struggle against *rakshasas* descended from the demon king Ravana.

I squirmed with embarrassment, my eyes fixed firmly on the floor. The singers were in full flight when, suddenly, I sensed Balandhara step closer and a garland go around my neck.

As Seneshan hurried towards me with a delighted smile on his face, the assembled kings and princes and spectators burst into applause.

I raised my head and looked into the smiling eyes of this bride I had acquired while running away from the proximity of the one who was my sister-in-law today and would be my bride at some point in the future.

Episode 32

"What will Draupadi say when you return to Khandavaprastha with a bride?"

Balandhara had her back turned to me, and was seemingly intent on lowering the wicks in the giant brass lamp.

"It is normal for *kshatriyas* to have more than one wife," I said, with an unconcern I didn't feel.

She turned to me with laughter in her eyes. "My maids were teasing me just now. They said I was luckier than Draupadi – I get you all to myself for four years out of five."

I felt a sudden surge of anger. Why must everyone remind me of Draupadi? When I retired to the bedroom a little while ago after an evening of celebration with Seneshan and his court, Visokan was waiting. "This marriage is a good thing," he said. "The Kashis have blood ties to both Pandavas and Kauravas – thanks to this marriage, they are now firmly tied to us. And anyway, how long are you going to spend in that house, alone with those sculptures you commissioned to make Draupadi happy?"

I pulled Balandhara towards me, my hand grasping her robe and pulling it aside. It was anger, not the desire of a man towards a beautiful bride, that drove me as I took her that night.

The chariots were waiting for us when we went into the courtyard at dawn. Mine had been loaded down with Seneshan's gifts – chests of gold and jewels; beautifully carved gold and silver plates and bundles of the purest silks.

Balandhara and four of her maids got into a second chariot, ornately carved in gleaming teak and drawn by four horses of the purest white. Her uncle joined half a dozen servitors in a third chariot. "24 families of weavers will follow you to Khandavaprastha," Seneshan told me as I took his leave. "Please pay my respects to your mother; I will come to greet King Yudhishtira and your other brothers as soon as I have attended to a few things here."

We were in no hurry to return to Khandavaprastha. For days we drove along the banks of the Ganga, stopping when the mood took us. When food ran out, I hunted; late in the evenings, we made camp and Balandhara and I wandered off by ourselves to find some secluded nook where we swam and lazed on the banks and, in the dark of the night, made love under the stars.

We neared Khandavaprastha late one evening. What, when I left, had been a vast forest was now reduced now to an enormous tract of open land. We drove past a cluster of charred huts, and Visokan pulled up in the courtyard of my home.

Sahadevan came running up. "Couldn't you have sent a messenger ahead to tell us when you would arrive?" Without waiting for a reply, he rattled off the news: hundreds of families had come from Hastinapura; several hundred soldiers had left Dhritarashtra's service and brought their families with them. Construction was going on everywhere; the army missed me; a brand new palace was being planned...

I gazed out at what had once been a forest. "Arjuna and Krishna cleared it out," Sahadevan told me. "They made it into a picnic. The tribals resisted at first, but when a few died before Arjuna's arrows and Krishna began setting the huts on fire, the rest fled."

Sahadeva took Balandhara's uncle with him, promising to care for his comfort. Visokan went off to attend to the maids and servitors who had come with us from Kashi.

Mother had moved into a spacious new home. She welcomed Balandhara with an easy affection she had never shown Hidimbi. "From now on she will spend her days with me," mother said. "I moved into this house because it is more spacious and comfortable – who knows how many more brides my sons will bring home?"

It was mother who told me that just last week a son had been born to Arjuna. I went to his home, and found him with a tall, thin, dark man whom he introduced as Mayan. "He is an architect from the south," my brother said. "We decided to build a grand central hall in the open space in the middle of our homes. Mayan is the best architect in the country; some of the temples he has built in the south are magical."

I told them about the homes in Kashi, built with mud bricks baked hard by fire. "Oh, but that is not particularly strong," Mayan scoffed.

"After a few seasons of sun and rain, the bricks begin to crack." He described a method of making bricks of varying sizes, dyeing them in various shades and baking them in coal-fired kilns that he said he had perfected.

"We will build the hall using this technique," he said. "I am experimenting with some colors just now and when I get all the right shades I need, we'll start the work of construction."

I went inside to see the child. Subhadra bent to touch my feet, took the infant from her maid and held it out to me. I kissed the child on the forehead. "Krishna was the one who picked his name," Arjuna, who had walked in behind me, said. "Abhimanyu."

"He will grow up into a greater hero than his father," I blessed the child, and walked over to Yudhishtira's home. I sat on a bench in the outer courtyard, and asked a maid to tell my brother I was there to see him.

"Come... come inside," Yudhishtira invited me. It was the first time I was stepping into my brother's home after we had moved to Khandavaprastha. "Draupadi is pregnant," he said as he walked in ahead of me.

A maid brought me a jug of Sura. "I met Balandhara's uncle. He is coming here tonight for a game of dice. It is good, your marriage – the king of Kashi is a good ally to have." We talked for a while of how the kingdom was slowly taking shape, and of his plans for a grand Rajasuya Yagna. "We haven't decided anything yet; we were waiting for you to return."

I wandered around, looking at all the new homes being constructed, stopping to talk to people who had come over from Hastinapura and who, on seeing me, came up to welcome me back and to tell me how happy they were to be part of our kingdom. It was late when I returned home. Balandhara was waiting for me.

"I met Draupadi today," she said. Mother had taken her to Yudhishtira's home so she could pay her respects. "She is beautiful, far more even than I had imagined. I can understand a man waiting four years for her."

Had Draupadi asked her about me, I wondered. "What did you talk about?"

"Talk? I don't know if she even saw me properly – she barely glanced at me once, and then ignored me and talked to mother."

I pulled her into my arms, not so much because I wanted her just then as to stop her from saying anything else that I wouldn't enjoy hearing.

The next morning, I headed off towards the new armory Sahadeva told me had been built near the elephant paddock. In the yard outside, men were working on a war chariot far larger than any I had ever seen. "It is Mayan's design; seven horses will draw it," Nakula told me. "Mayan designed it for Arjuna."

We went inside the armory. The floor was a vast gymnasium; arms of varying types were stored in the upper levels. Around the armory were the homes and workshops of the weapons-makers; experts who had been sent by Drupada and Krishna.

Nakula and I practiced for a while with short and long swords; a crowd of new recruits gathered around us to watch.

Mayan was examining my maces. "I will make you a brand new mace, entirely of metal," he said. "The trick is in the design – it has to be powerful enough to kill an elephant at a blow, but light enough so you can swing it one-handed."

Kneeling on the floor of the gymnasium, he sketched pictures of some weapons he was creating – arrows with crescent heads that could slice an enemy's head off; arrows and spears containing hollow tips into which snake venom could be infused so the enemy would die from the merest scratch; a flexible sword several feet long that would coil like a belt when not in use, and with which the warrior could strike at an enemy before he could get close; an arrow tipped with some strange chemical he knew of, that when it struck sparks off metal would burst into flame...

He had names for all of them—the Nagaastra, the Agneyastra... His extensive knowledge of the weapons in use in other lands astonished me. He was beginning to tell me of a curved club that, when thrown, would come back to hand if it missed the target when an elderly maid came up to us with a message: Draupadi wanted to see me.

I walked over to Yudhishtira's home. He was engaged in a game of dice with Balandhara's uncle and didn't even glance up as I walked through the main hall. Passing through the inner courtyard, I waited at

the door of Draupadi's room while a maid scurried in to tell her I was here.

She came out, heavy with the weight of child. "May you be blessed with a heroic son," I said in ritual blessing. Pregnancy suited her; her face glowed and even through her robes I could sense that her body had grown more shapely – the slender damsel of nearly two years ago was now a very desirable woman. I had to remind myself that I was in the presence of my elder brother's wife, someone who stood to me in the position of a mother. It was not a comfortable thought.

"So what has been decided about the Rajasuya?" she asked me without preamble. I knew nothing, I told her, beyond what my brother had said the previous evening.

"Krishna says that no Rajasuya is possible without defeating the Magadha king, Jarasandha. Your brother agrees. He thinks war can be avoided if one of you brothers challenges Jarasandha to personal combat."

She went back into her room, and returned with a 24-strand pearl necklace in her hand. "A wedding gift," she said as she held it out to me. I took it from her and toyed with the pearls – anything to keep from staring at her.

"Neither the Kurus nor the Panchalas have any enmity with Magadha and its ruler," she said. "Krishna is using your brothers to settle his personal score with Jarasandha – and there is at least one Pandava who is always ready to do whatever Krishna suggests. It seems Arjuna wants to challenge the Magadha king..."

It felt uncomfortable discussing such subjects with a woman. "I will see that Arjuna comes to no harm," I said.

"If it is you who faces Jarasandha in combat, then the outcome will be different – you are the only one who can defeat him."

"Let me think about it," I said. "In any case, Yudhishtira hasn't discussed anything with me yet."

I took leave of her. "My time with your brother ends on the full moon night of Karthika." Her voice was pitched low. I hurriedly walked away.

That night I lay beside Balandhara, my thoughts in a whirl. Why had Draupadi summoned me? To give me a wedding gift, after having ignored my bride? To warn me that the Pandavas should not challenge Jarasandha? Or to tell me that we should?

If Jarasandha was killed in personal combat, Yudhishtira could perform the Rajasuya; no other ruler, not even the Kauravas, would gainsay him. He would then rightfully assume the title of Emperor; Draupadi would become Empress. For all this to happen, I had to challenge the king of Magadha and kill him in combat – no one else could. And my reward would be Draupadi herself, on the first full moon night of Karthika.

It was all clear to me now. An involuntary shiver shook me. Revulsion and lust warred in my mind and lust won—I knew I would challenge Jarasandha, and I would kill him.

Beside me, Balandhara slept on. Around her neck gleamed the pearl necklace Draupadi had given me as our wedding gift.

Episode 33

He removed his crown and set it aside, tied his long hair up in a knot and stepped into the ring. Slapping his chest and thighs with hands the size of little babies, he readied for combat. Jarasandha was a man who enjoyed the thrill of combat – I felt a surge of respect for him, for the fearless, joyous way he prepared to face me.

“Don’t stop,” Draupadi said. “Tell me the whole story, all the details. I am listening...”

I glanced at her as she lay on the bed, eyes closed, robes carelessly draped around her full form. It was her first night as my bride, and from the moment she came into my home she had avoided my touch. When I took her in my arms, she pulled free and went to sit on the edge of the bed.

I rose, picked up a jug of Sura Visokan had left for me, and walked over to a wooden stool in a corner of the room.

“Tell me about your battle with Jarasandha,” she said.

The kingdom of Magadha nestles in between five hills. When you enter the main gate of the fortress, you find rows of shops selling everything from silks and ornaments to food – lots of shops, a very busy marketplace...

I paused. The wicks in the brass lamp had begun to smoke. It had never occurred to me that we would need to keep the big lamp burning that night, so there was no spare stock of ghee. I opened the window and let the moonlight stream into the room, washing over me as I stood there. The light of the full moon in Karthika – a light I had waited 24 months to see.

“I am blessed,” she said earlier that evening when she first came to my room. She bent low to touch my feet, then waved her maids away and shut the door.

“It is a night to hear stories,” she said. “Tell me how you escaped from the hunting lodge at Varanavatha...”

"Tell me about your battle with Hidimban..."

"How did you kill Bakan? No, don't tell me he was fat and it only took two minutes... tell me the details..."

And so on to Magadha, and Jarasandha. There were three huge drums made of elephant hide just outside the palace gates. I banged on them to announce our presence. Krishna told me what to do; he told me that Jarasandha was famous for his hospitality towards anyone who came to the palace and beat on the drums, challenging him to personal combat.

The story was that when he defeated someone, Jarasandha had him imprisoned in the nearby caves that he had turned into prisons. They were kept there in chains until the time came for one of his regular *yagas*, when they were brought out and offered up as sacrifices.

A group of soldiers marched towards us. "We have heard that this kingdom is ruled by a *kshatriya* who gives up other *kshatriyas* as sacrifice," Krishna told them. "We have come to challenge him to personal combat."

They looked at us with pity in their eyes, and led us to a vast pavilion dominated by a blazing fire in the middle. It was Jarasandha's *yagna shala*, the place where he carried out his ritual sacrifices. The soldiers ushered us to seats; servitors hurried up bearing plates of food and drink.

We came to fight, not feast, I told them.

"This is where our guests have their last meal," an old servitor who was directing the others said. A few of the maids giggled.

It was late evening when Jarasandha finally came to the pavilion. He was an inch or so taller than me and almost as big as King Dhritarashtra. He saluted us. "I am always happy to accept a challenge," he said. "But I don't know who you are; I am not conscious of having given offense to any of you."

"You are a *kshatriya*, yet you sacrifice your own kind – that itself is an offense," Krishna said.

The Magadha king was clearly confident of his own powers. He had dismissed the guards at his entrance; he now stood in the centre of

the pavilion, facing us with total composure. "And who are you? Warriors introduce themselves before challenging someone to combat."

Krishna first introduced Arjuna. Then he spoke of me, and made it sound as if I had single-handedly defeated the dozens of kings who came to your *swayamvara*...

"I still remember how you looked then," Draupadi said. "You were standing there alone, in the middle of the room with that tall pillar raised over your head, and none of those cowards dared come near you..."

Finally, Krishna introduced himself. "I am Krishna, of the Yadavas, younger brother of Balarama..."

Jarasandha laughed out loud. "Forgive me, I didn't recognize you. But then, you were young when we last met – and since you were running away, all I saw was your back..."

Turning to his minister, the Magadhan king said, "Let the trumpets sound and drums beat to announce the combat. Have the usual *pūjas* performed, and prepare food and drink for all who come to watch."

He asked which one of us would fight him first. It is your choice, Krishna told him.

"My people like a good show, and neither Arjuna nor you can match me in the ring," Jarasandha told Krishna. He looked at me. "This young man has the body of a wrestler – let it be Bheema, then."

That night, we rested in the pavilion. Jarasandha returned at dawn, his body covered with sandal paste and with a garland of fresh flowers around his neck. The priests lit the sacrificial fire and began their chants; the king prostrated before the fire, gave the priests alms and sought their blessings.

He removed his crown and set it aside, tied his long hair up in a knot and stepped into the ring...

Draupadi got up from the bed and walked towards me. The air of indolence she had worn like a cloak had vanished; her eyes shone, her face was flushed as she sat at the foot of the stool, resting her hand on my thigh.

"Tell me," she said. "Tell me everything – I will tell the court singer to compose this story into a song, I will give him a plateful of gold and have him go around the kingdom, singing this. Tell me!"

We met in the center of the ring and formally bowed to each other. Then, slowly at first and then faster, we circled each other, reaching out with our hands, now high, now low, looking for an opening. Without warning, he rushed at me; I met him with lowered head and arms raised in defense. He began to back away – and that was when I realized what I was up against. I had misread his move, thought he was backing off, and that relaxed me just enough that when he suddenly kicked out at my knee, I was taken totally by surprise.

I lost my balance and stumbled backwards. He attacked—coming at me with a rush, he aimed a blow with his bent arm at my throat. It is a move we practice in wrestling – we use a strike with the point of the elbow to crush the enemy's windpipe.

The correct block for that is with hands bent at the elbows, one palm supporting the other, but I hadn't recovered my balance yet. I ducked. His blow missed its mark and crashed against the side of my neck, and even so, it had enough force to hurt me badly.

"Is there a bruise? Wait, let me look..." Draupadi jumped to her feet, pushed my head to one side with her palm, and ran the fingers of her other hand along my neck. Her touch, soft as a breath, sent fire through my veins; I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her down into my lap.

"Wait," she said, nestling in my arms. "Not now. Tell me... you were hurt, and then...?"

I reeled sideways, staggering more than I needed to and pretending to be more hurt than I was. Jarasandha followed with fists raised. I staggered another step and, timing my move for just when he was taking a step towards me, I locked my hands together and crashed my clubbed fists into his side, aiming for the floating ribs that are the most vulnerable.

He roared in anger. I roared even louder, in triumph.

He came towards me again, arms extended in front of him. I realized his aim was to try and catch me off balance, get his arms around me. Then he could either crush the breath out of me or use one of the

many moves we wrestlers use from that position to break my neck, or my spine.

I kept moving away from him, concentrating on blocking his blows and evading his grasp. He was stronger than me, but I knew I was faster; I had more energy and could outlast him. I began counter-attacking whenever opportunity offered, concentrating on hitting him with my clenched fists, aiming for his ribs, his stomach and chest, trying to drive the wind out of him.

The spectators, who were used to Jarasandha winning each bout with ease, went quiet; in the silence, the yells of encouragement from Arjuna and Krishna sounded louder.

It seemed to me that he was not as confident as before – but still, my respect for his strength and ability only grew as we fought on. He was at least three times my age, but just when I thought he was nearing exhaustion he seemed to find fresh vigor, a new angle of attack.

I realized that Jarasandha was attacking with a purpose: he was trying to corner me against one of the iron pillars of the pavilion. I took a step back, then another. Out of the corner of my eye I sensed that the pillar was just a couple of paces behind me now.

Jarasandha hurled himself head first at me. I slipped to one knee, my left hand hitting the floor, palm down, for balance. It was too late for him to stop his headlong rush. As he stuck his hand out to keep from crashing headlong into the pillar, I wrapped my right arm around his legs just under the knee, and with one heave that took all my strength, straightened off my crouch, lifting him off the floor.

Half-turning on my toes, I used the momentum and all my strength to dash his head and upper body against the pillar. Before he could recover, I spun around and flung him to the floor face first and jumped on his back, driving for his spine with both my knees.

I heard the crack of bone breaking. As I grabbed his head with both my hands and twisted his neck, a great gout of blood burst out of his mouth and splashed onto my hands.

There is a smell to fresh blood – an intoxicating smell I cannot describe, or compare to anything else I know.

I don't remember anything after that. Krishna told me later that I roared so loud the spectators in the front rank turned and fled; that long after Jarasandha stopped struggling I was still trying to twist his head off his neck; that when he and Arjuna rushed up to pull me away from Jarasandha's body I was roaring still, roaring as if I wouldn't stop—and when they tried to pull me to my feet I knocked them aside and walked out of the pavilion, my arms and face and chest covered in Jarasandha's blood...

I roared in sudden pain as Draupadi buried her face in my shoulder and bit, deep. I felt another sharp, searing pain as her nails raked down my back. I struggled to free myself. We toppled off the stool.

As I ripped her robe off her body and crushed her under my weight, the last thing I saw was her parted lips, stained red with blood. My blood.

Episode 34

The splash of blood stood out in stark relief against the pristine purity of white marble. It was auspicious and should be left untouched for a few days, the priests decreed, so the servants were carefully cleaning around it.

I sat alone in a corner of the great hall, watching them at work as they cleared the debris of an eventful day. The marble felt cool against the back of my legs, heightening the illusion that I was sitting on water.

The hall was Mayan's greatest triumph; all those who had come for the Rajasuya said it rivaled the palaces of the gods. From the outside, the hall seemed round, with a great dome reaching for the skies. It had no walls in the conventional sense; instead, Mayan had created a network of ornately carved pillars that gave the illusion of a continuous wall.

"Walls block light and air," he once told me in the midst of construction. "This way, light and air will filter through, but the arrangement of pillars will still create the illusion of a wall, of privacy."

If the outside was unusual, the inside was magic. Mayan had refused to allow us to watch the final phase of construction; when it was all done, he invited us to enter the hall and basked in our looks of absolute amazement.

The hall seemed to shift shape as you walked around—now oval, now round, now a perfect square, a rectangle. "Walls define the shape of a room," he explained to me. By arranging pillars in irregular patterns on the inside – just two deep in some places, several deep in other places, all of it unobtrusively designed so you never noticed just how many pillars were in each point – he had created the illusion of a room that changes shape depending on where you stood.

If that was astonishing, the real masterpiece was the floor. Using the process he had once explained to me, he had fashioned bricks in various shades of blue, from very pale with flecks of white to very deep. Using these bricks in combination, he created the illusion that the inside of the hall was a great body of water with a square island of white marble in the center. The way he used light blue bricks with

stains of white was so precise you thought you were seeing little waves running across the floor towards the center.

It was in this hall that the Rajasuya was to be held. Grandfather Bheesma was the sole representative from Hastinapura. The Kauravas, he told us, had decided not to come; Duryodhana was livid that the forest he had compelled his father to palm off on us as our inheritance was transforming into a flourishing kingdom.

Kings and princes came from every other kingdom of any size, however, to participate in the ceremony that would crown Yudhishtira king of kings, and Draupadi as the Maharani. Though the ceremony starts with a grand *yaga*, the main ritual is the *pattabhishekam*, the ritual coronation – and preparations for this had taken months. Hundreds of pots were arrayed near the sacrificial fire, filled with water from every imaginable source: from all the rivers and from the two seas; two pots full of dew that had been meticulously collected over weeks; rain water; even the liquid from the womb of a pregnant cow.

A *yagnadhipan*, master of the *yaga*, had to be installed before the coronation ceremony could begin. It would be he who formally represented the assembled kings. His acceptance of the honor signaled that all kingdoms represented there had accepted Yudhishtira as their suzerain; if there was a challenge, it was he who would lead the armed response.

Grandfather Bheesma named Krishna for the honor.

Bheesma had discussed this with us before the ceremony, and none of us had anticipated any opposition—least of all from the Chedi king Shishupala, a cousin of Krishna's and ours. "What right does the Yadava Krishna have to the honor of being named our representative? There are many in this assembly more deserving – even you. Let Bheesma be named; we will accept him."

Some at least in the audience seemed to think Shishupala had a point. In an attempt to soothe tempers, Bheesma launched into a long speech about Krishna's many good qualities and his fitness for the high honor, but Shishupala interrupted again. "I am not surprised – this old man has made a habit of interceding on behalf of others and being shamed. After all, this is the man who for the sake of the consumptive Vichitravirya went to Kashi to kidnap Amba and her sisters by force. That poor woman ended up unwanted, with nowhere to go – the man

she loved rejected her, Hastinapura turned her away, her own kingdom shut its doors on her, and she ended up committing suicide.”

The Chedi king was speaking no less than the truth – but this was neither the time nor occasion for it. I wondered whether to intervene, but Yudhishtira sat stone-faced and Krishna was calm, unmoved, as if none of this was happening.

Shishupala wasn’t done yet.

“And then what did this venerable old man do? When Vichitravirya died as everyone knew he would, he summoned the dead king’s step brother to the bedchamber of his widows. Kidnap, rape – wonderful occupations for this lifelong bachelor to indulge in!”

Arjuna hurried up to where I sat. “This is not about Krishna,” he whispered in my ear. “He is a friend of Duryodhana’s; the motivation is to disrupt the Rajasuya. Shall we intervene?”

Even before I could respond, Sahadeva rose from his seat and walked up to Krishna. “It is the right of the youngest brother to anoint the *yagnadhipan*. Grandfather Bheesma named Krishna, and for me that is a command. I am going to anoint Krishna now – if anyone has a problem with that, pick up your weapon and step up now.”

Arjuna and I shared our concern with a glance. Sahadeva was yet to take up arms in anger. He had been sent to make the rounds of all major kingdoms to announce the Rajasuya. Wherever he went, he was welcomed and showered with gifts; every king he met had willingly, even gladly acknowledged Yudhishtira’s right to crown himself emperor.

Bheesma went up to Shishupala, apparently trying to reason with him. The Chedi king brushed him aside and addressed Krishna directly. “Because Jarasandha is dead, these other kings have come rushing here like cowards to surrender their rights to the Pandavas. If I say that you and the Pandavas disguised yourself as Brahmins and killed Jarasandha by trickery, can you deny it?”

I’d had enough. I shook off Arjuna’s restraining hand and marched up to Shishupala. “I am the one who fought Jarasandha and killed him in fair combat. If you need to be convinced, come discuss it with me, I am ready.”

"Talk to you?" Shishupala sneered. "You are a lackey, a puppet of this fellow here," Shishupala pointed at Krishna. "I hereby challenge this cowherd's right to be honored above kings."

Shishupala brushed past me, hand on sword hilt, and moved towards Krishna. From that point everything was a blur. Krishna rose, his favorite weapon seemed to leap to his hand and in a flash, the *chakra* spun across space, slicing through Shishupala's neck.

As the Chedi king fell, a great gout of blood gushed out of his neck, splattering into the dozens of *kumbhas* filled with water meant for the *pattabhisheka*.

Krishna strode to the center of the hall, the *chakra* spinning on his finger, seeking other challengers. No one moved.

Episode 35

It was uncle Vidura who had come as Hastinapura's envoy.

"King Dhritarashtra has asked me to say it has been many years since he had the pleasure of greeting his nephews. He invites you to Hastinapura for a grand feast in your honor," he said, when we were all assembled in mother's home. "And Yuvaraj Duryodhana has asked me to inform you that a new pleasure hall has been erected, and he would be pleased if King Yudhishtira inaugurates it with a game of dice against him."

The words were formal, the tone was bland, neutral; it gave no hint of his thoughts.

"That is so kind," Yudhishtira replied in the same formal fashion. "When they extend such courtesy, we must not be remiss. Please inform King Dhritarashtra that we gladly accept, and tell my cousin Yuvaraj Duryodhana it will give me great pleasure to play a game against him."

I caught the swift glance mother and Vidura exchanged. "King Yudhishtira, I volunteered to come so I would get an opportunity to warn you against accepting. By all means go meet the old king, but avoid the game of dice. Duryodhana has been in a rage ever since he visited you to inspect the great hall; he and Shakuni have planned some trickery."

The Kauravas had visited Khandavaprastha – which the people had started calling Indraprastha, saying it rivalled the kingdom of Indra, Lord of Gods – a year after the Rajasuya. Nakula and Sahadeva were deputed to take them around the kingdom, and they told us later that night that our cousins could barely conceal their jealousy when they saw how it was flourishing.

Finally they came to the great hall, where we had arranged a feast for them. Duryodhana was the first to enter – and he was totally taken in by Mayan's trickery. Thinking that water flowed across the floor, Duryodhana raised his robes knee high and gingerly stepped forward;

the look on his face when he realized that he was walking on solid floor was priceless.

We all laughed; Draupadi laughed the loudest of all. There was no malice in our laughter, only an amusement we thought the Kauravas would share – after all, we too had made the same mistake when we first entered the hall. But Duryodhana was livid – he stood rooted to the spot for a long moment, glaring at Draupadi, and then he turned and stormed out, calling for his chariot. There had been no word from Hastinapura since that day nearly three years ago, until uncle Vidura had arrived with this invitation.

My brother laughed. “Uncle, what can they do? They cannot kill us – the people will cause too great an uproar and besides, we now have very powerful friends and allies. Anyway, it is not *kshatriya dharma* to refuse a challenge to combat, or to a game.”

That was so typical of Yudhishtira, I remember thinking at the time – when he wanted to do something, he would find some reason in ‘*dharma*’ to justify it – even if the man advising him against it was the one who had taught him all he knew of the concept of *dharma*.

Mother, who had spent considerable time talking to Vidura before we were summoned, seemed about to say something. Yudhishtira quickly forestalled her – very clever, I thought, because if mother forbade him to play then he would have to obey, after making all that fuss about the sacredness of a mother’s word on the question of Draupadi’s marriage to all of us.

“I will not request a game, but if one is offered I will not decline. In any case, Duryodhana cannot defeat me at dice, mother, so don’t worry.”

Visoka interrupted my recollections to tell me the others were waiting. “Should I pack your arms?” Arjuna had told me that morning we would not be carrying any – apparently Yudhishtira wanted to make sure no act of ours could be misinterpreted by our cousins or be cause for offense. “No.”

As I walked out, I saw Draupadi climbing into Yudhishtira’s chariot. It was over five years since she had first come here as a young bride. In this time, she had already given birth to five children – Pratibimbh, Shatanik, Shudharma and the twins Sutsoum and Sutsein. Many more brides had followed her to Indraprastha: Subhadra, Balandhara,

Devika, the Kekaya princess Yudhishtira had married; Vijaya, daughter of Dyutimat the king of Magadha who was married to Sahadeva and Karenmayi, the Chedi princess married to Nakula – and yet Draupadi still seemed the youngest, the most desirable, her beauty glowing with the purity of a ghee-fed flame.

Vidura and Sanjaya were waiting to receive us at the gates of Hastinapura. We were taken straight to the audience chamber, where uncle Dhritarashtra and *valiyamma* Gandhari awaited us. As we paid obeisance in turn, the king took each of us into his arms and blessed us with a few whispered words. When it was my turn, he ran his fingers over my arms, my chest and shoulders. "Good. You have grown into a mighty warrior, my son. God bless you."

There was no sign of Duryodhana and the other Kauravas. I wandered off in the direction of the arsenal, and the homes of the gurus. Drona and Kripa were sleeping, I was told. Shukra was no longer in the home he had occupied when he was our guru. I tracked him down to a small hovel right next to the elephant paddocks.

I found him grown old, and seemingly enfeebled. He was in bed all alone; there was no one in that hut to see to his needs, to help him. I pushed open the door and walked up to where he lay. His eyes lit up; even as I paid my respects, he sat up in bed and hugged me tight.

"I am glad you came – no one comes here now except a few old mahouts, but I still get all the news. An old student of mine who left here to join your army visited me the other day, and he told me of how well Indraprastha has developed. I am happy..."

I looked around the dismal room, trying not to wince at the pervading stench of urine and dung, and invited him to come and make his home with us in Indraprastha. He smiled. "Don't worry about me – this is all I need. Tell me, have you been to Duryodhana's palace yet?"

No, I said. Shukra laughed, interrupting his amusement with a hacking cough. "They tell me he got a visiting sculptor to make a magical iron statue. If you turn a wheel, its arms and legs move. Every day, Duryodhana practices with his mace against that statue."

There was mischief in his eyes. "They tell me the statue looks like you. They tell me Duryodhana calls it Bheema, and abuses it as he fights it." <>P>I laughed out loud. Bending to touch his feet, I walked out of that hovel and wandered over to the elephant paddock. Hastipan, the

old mahout who had taken me under his wing when I was young was dead; other veterans who knew me from then crowded around, happy I had remembered them. I took off the ornaments I was wearing and gave it to their chief, asking that he share with everyone.

The feast was everything I knew it would be – the king's favorite cook had not lost his touch. When it was over, I went to my old room in the small palace to sleep. It was late evening when a maid entered to tell me we were awaited in the new pleasure hall. I bathed and dressed at leisure, thinking Yudhishtira and Duryodhana would get together for a few games of dice, so what was the need to rush?

The grand hall was fully packed when I finally got there. Clearly this was to be no ordinary event. King Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhari sat on thrones at the far side of the hall. Behind them stood Sanjaya, ready as always to whisper the details of all that was happening in their ears. Bheesma, Drona and Kripa sat on golden stools at a slightly lower level. Around them were arrayed a dozen kings and princes, all friends and allies of the Kauravas, with Karna occupying a seat of honor in their midst.

A giant golden game board had been laid out on the raised dais in the center of the hall; next to it rested a pair of ivory dice.

At one end of the board sat Duryodhana, with Dushasana behind him. At the other end sat Yudhishtira, my brothers arrayed behind. As I walked up to join them, Shakuni left the group of Kauravas and, limping onto the dais, sat at Duryodhana's side.

"The rules of the game are familiar to all, so let the game begin," Duryodhana said. "We will play until one of us concedes defeat and bows to the other. I will place the bets, and uncle Shakuni will play in my stead."

"It is against *dharma* for one *kshatriya* to issue the challenge and for another to represent him, in combat or in play," Yudhishtira said.

"It is only a game, after all." There was an undercurrent of mockery in Duryodhana's voice, pitched loud enough so all could hear. "I have heard that you practice every day; that you are counted one of the finest players in the world. Are you afraid to lose?"

I saw my brother flush red. "I will play," he said.

I realized that a trap had been laid for us. I knew we had had fallen right into it – and I still had no idea what it was.

Episode 36

"I win again!"

Shakuni's announcement was matter of fact. My brother removed the rings he was wearing, one on each finger, all of them solid gold bands embedded with priceless stones, and handed them over.

He seemed as unmoved as when, a minute earlier, he had removed from around his neck the 24-strand kasimala, the necklace strung with gold coins that he had pledged as his first bet in the game.

From the moment he sat down to play, Yudhishtira had seemed calm, confident. I couldn't fathom what lay behind his desire, eagerness even, for a game everyone had warned him against. Maybe he wanted to defeat Duryodhana, humiliate him in front of his own court. Or maybe he wanted to show us that all those hours he had spent playing dice were not a total waste of time.

"I now pledge these bracelets," my brother announced. They were shaped like snakes, with diamond eyes and bodies studded with rhinestones.

He picked up the dice. Duryodhana laughed, a laugh that was more like a sneer. "We both have more jewels than we can count, Yudhishtira," he said. "If we play for each little trinket, we'll be here for the next 30 days and it will make no difference to either of us. Are you so scared of defeat that you are content to stake such trifles?"

An angry flush suffused my brother's face. "I wager 250 chests of gold," he said.

Arjuna and I glanced at each other, startled. Our brother had just wagered all the tribute we had earned during the Rajasuya; if he lost, it would virtually empty our treasury.

I got up and walked out of the room. As I passed through the massive doors and out into the courtyard, I heard a subdued hum go up from

the watching spectators. Who had won? Who lost? I realized I didn't care enough to turn around and go back.

Two people throw the dice. The person who throws the bigger number wins. Where was the sport in this thing? What was the science, the skill my brother kept talking about? Why had he agreed to such a format? What was the point of all those god knows how many hours he spent playing with whoever he could find and, when he couldn't find a willing partner, playing left hand against right?

A roar that was almost an explosion rocked the hall, its echoes assailing me as I sat on the steps outside, my back against one of the enormous marble pillars. Sahadeva came running out of the hall, fury on his face. "Come inside now! You have to do something, our brother has gone mad," he said. "In 12 throws of the dice we have lost everything: our treasury, our cattle, our army, horses, elephants, farm lands, palaces, the great hall – everything gone. And now he has pledged Nakula!"

I realized the trap we had fallen into. For the *kshatriya*, a pledge was sacred; when I was young, I had heard the balladeers sing of a king, Nala, who lost everything in a crooked game of dice, and had to serve as cook in the palace of the winner.

As we walked back into the hall, the crowd roared again. "There he is," a spectator pointed. "Sahadeva. He too is now Duryodhana's slave."

"This is not fair play," my brother was saying as we hurried up to where he sat. "I suspect you are using some sort of trick with the dice to win."

Shakuni only smiled. Duryodhana said, in a voice loud enough for all to hear: "We don't compel you to play, king. Admit you have lost, bow to me, and leave."

"In any case," Shakuni said, "there is no point in continuing the game – he is a beggar now, he has nothing more to lose."

Duryodhana's laugh cut cruelly into the silence. "That's right. He thought nothing of pledging Madri's two sons, but how can he stake his own blood brothers? You are right, let's end the game now."

Yudhishtira's voice rose, matching Duryodhana in volume. "My wealth is endless," he said. "Behold Arjuna, a warrior without peer in the three worlds. I pledge him on the next throw."

I don't know what prompted me, but I glanced across at Dhritarashtra then. The old king was leaning forward on his throne, those sightless white orbs focused intently in the direction of the players – you could have been fooled into thinking he could see. And as I looked at him, he smiled – a smile that, more than everything that had happened in that hall till then, chilled me to the bone.

"I win! Again!" Shakuni's voice cut into my thoughts.

"O King, this game will cause the extinction of the Kuru race." Vidura's voice cut through the crowd, which was now in a state of constant ferment.

I sat down on the dais behind my brother, leaned over to whisper in his ear. I have no idea what I wanted to say – something, anything, to end this madness. Shakuni's eyes found and held mine; his words were addressed to my brother. "You still have a brother – the most powerful warrior in the world, the one they say is born to destroy the Kuru clan..."

In the din, I did not hear my brother's voice, but he must have agreed, for an instant later I heard the clatter of dice hitting the game board. "I have won!" This time, Shakuni's announcement was a roar of triumph.

"Is that it? Does the great Emperor Yudhishtira have nothing to pledge?" Duryodhana mocked my brother as he sat there, ashen, staring at the dice. "One throw – if you win, everything you lost is yours again."

My brother pledged himself. He threw. Shakuni threw. I didn't need to see the dice; I didn't need to hear Shakuni's triumphant cry. I knew my brother had lost, again.

He swayed where he sat, then crumpled in a faint. The silence in the hall was deafening; an awful weight that seemed to press down on my head.

So after all this strife, after all the hard work, this was to be our fate: to return to Hastinapura shorn of all we had won over the years, to

serve in the palace as Duryodhana's bonded slaves. I bowed my head, accepting my fate. There was nothing I could do, no protest I could make without undermining the authority of one who was both my elder brother and my king.

Yudhishtira had recovered from his faint. He sat there, slumped, head down. I caught the glint of tears in the corner of his eye.

Duryodhana and Shakuni had their heads close together, whispering. "Aren't you forgetting your greatest treasure?" Duryodhana's voice was neutral; carefully so, I thought. "Play one more hand. If you win, all you have lost is yours and the crown of Hastinapura besides. Stake the princess of Panchala, wife to the five Pandavas, Draupadi the peerless."

The crowd erupted. In my state of helpless stupor, I didn't catch the words but the tone was clear – anger blazed hot as Duryodhana made his suggestion.

"I will not turn back now," Yudhishtira said, his voice a low-pitched tremor of defeat, helplessness, shame. "Draupadi, equal to Mahalaxmi herself – I pledge her, may she restore my lost fortune to me."

The sound of rolling dice sounded like a drumbeat in the sudden silence. Then a muted rattle, as Shakuni picked them up and rolled them around in his hands. He threw.

I shut my eyes. The silence assailed my ears. I waited for Shakuni's roar of triumph, but it was Duryodhana's voice that pierced the silence.

"Where is Draupadi? The Maharani of Indraprastha – where is she? Let that son of a servant girl, Vidura, be sent to fetch her. She can wash my clothes, clean my rooms. And in the nights..." His voice trailed off into mocking laughter.

I jumped to my feet and strode towards him.

Episode 37

My eyes remained riveted on the drops of blood that stood out stark against the gleaming white marble of the floor.

The great hall was enveloped in a hush; every eye on the tableau in the center where Dushasana stood, holding Draupadi by her hair. When the servitor returned without her it was Karna, not Duryodhana, who ordered Dushasana to go into the inner chamber and bring her to the assembly, by force if he had to.

Draupadi stood in his grasp, scantily covered by a light robe the lower half of which was stained with her blood. And yet, even so she held her head up, proud like a queen even in despite of her shame.

"Why have I been dragged to this assembly of men, in my state?" Her voice was loud and clear, without the slightest throb of fear. "I see Bhishma here, and Drona, and Kripa, and Vidura and other wise men – tell me, do you in your wisdom endorse this? Will you suffer this outrage in silence?"

Her eyes roamed over the assembly – the elders on their thrones, the gloating Kauravas, the people of Hastinapura who stood there, stunned into silence by the events. She looked at Yudhishtira, sitting there on the dais with his head hanging low in shame, and contempt flamed in her eyes.

And then her eyes sought mine, and held.

"We have no option but to suffer this – for Yudhishtira, his word is bigger than all else. We are all slaves now," I said. And then, the anger I had been fighting to control boiled over.

"Even in the colony of prostitutes there are men who drink and gamble and who live off their women – but even those men will never pawn their women, stake them on a throw of the dice and hand them over to another..."

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned, to see Arjuna beside me. He caught my eye and shook his head. Just then, from the midst of the Kauravas, a young man stepped out. "The question is whether Queen Draupadi is my brother's slave," Vikarna, the youngest of the Kauravas, said. "I say she is not. A slave owns no property, has no rights over anything else. When Yudhishtira pledged and lost himself, he became a slave – what right did he have to then pledge Draupadi?"

Karna pointed a finger at Vikarna. "Duryodhana is your elder brother – how dare you question his actions in public? Learn from the Pandavas – see how they stand, those so-called warriors, captive to their elder brother's word!"

Vikarna looked at Karna, contempt in his eyes. I had never taken much note of him before, but I did so now – a tall, strong young man, standing erect and fearless in the face of Karna's anger. "This is my family, my clan, not yours – and I will not see it destroyed to feed your lust," Vikarna shot back. "To drag a woman – any woman, let alone a queen of royal lineage – into an assembly of men and to display her there, stained in her menstrual blood, is a crime that defiles this assembly and all in it. It is a great wrong that has been done, and it will destroy this family, this kingdom!"

Karna ignored him, turned to Duryodhana. "What right do your slaves have to wear robes of silk and ornaments of gold? Order them to remove their royal robes..."

Yudhishtira rose to his feet, silently removed the sash from round his waist and the silk robe draped over his shoulders, and threw them down on the floor. One by one, without waiting to be asked, the rest of us took off our sashes, our robes and ornaments and threw them on the pile.

At a nod from Karna, Dushasana let go of Draupadi's hand and caught hold of her robe where it was tied just below the navel. I surged forward, arm raised; with a hand on the hilt of his sword, Karna came between us.

I pushed him aside. "I say this for all of you to hear," I roared, anger and sorrow driving me over the edge. "One day I will crack this fellow's chest open and I will drink his blood – this I swear!"

In the sudden hush, a voice rang out from the assembled spectators. "The question of whether Yudhishtira had any right to stake Queen

Draupadi has not been cleared up. Let the wise ones, Bhisma and Vidura, respond..."

All eyes turned to Vidura.

"There is a point to what Vikarna said," our uncle responded. "But there are two ways of looking at this. Long ago, when an argument broke out between Prahalada and Kashyapa..."

An angry hum erupted from the spectators – they seemed in no mood for ancient tales. "Let Bhismacharya decide." It was the same voice as before.

"The only person who can answer this is Yudhishtira himself," Bhisma said, his voice subdued, his eyes on the floor.

Karna looked impatient, but Duryodhana was clearly enjoying the byplay. "Let Bheema and Arjuna and Nakula and Sahadeva and Draupadi proclaim here that Yudhishtira has no rights over them, and I will free them now," he said, and it was me he was looking at.

I knew what answer I wanted to make but I felt trapped, left without a choice—our future was uncertain; this was no time for dissension in the family. "Yudhishtira is our elder brother; he is our guru and our sovereign. When he lost, we lost too. If he is a slave, then we are slaves as well. But..."

My anger boiled over again; I raised my clenched fists in the air. "Today these arms are helpless – but my time will come and on that day, I will personally kill you, Duryodhana, and every single one of your brothers. I swear this in the name of my ancestors."

"What is this nonsense?" Karna strode over to Duryodhana. "These arguments are futile – it is the law of the land that the property of a slave belongs to his master. When Yudhishtira lost and became your slave, his property became yours – this woman is his property, and she is now yours to do with as you will."

Duryodhana was clearly enjoying his cat and mouse game. "Can you say in this open assembly that Draupadi is not your wife?" he challenged Yudhishtira. "Forget these ancient tales and arguments – answer, just yes, or no! If you disown her, she is free to go. Else, she is my property, my slave, to do with as I like." Glancing at Draupadi, he bared his left thigh, slapped it with his hand in lascivious invitation.

All of a sudden, Draupadi broke free of Dushasana's grip, ran over to where Dhritarashtra sat on his throne, and fell at his feet. The blind king raised her up; she said something to him in a voice that did not carry to the rest of us.

"Draupadi is like my daughter, she is as dear to me as the wives of my own sons. I order her freed!"

A collective sigh of relief enveloped the hall. Draupadi spoke again to the king. "At her request, I order her husbands, the sons of my brother Pandu, freed," the old king announced. "The lands and treasures that Yudhishtira lost will remain the property of my son Duryodhana."

Karna went up to Duryodhana, arguing heatedly; together, the two of them strode over to where Dhritarashtra sat. Draupadi bent to touch the old king's feet, ignored Duryodhana and, head held high and proud, walked in her blood-stained robe through the hall and towards the door, seemingly oblivious of the staring multitudes. One by one, we followed.

Outside, Vikarna was organizing chariots for us. Draupadi was already seated in one, her face carved of stone, her eyes set on the distant horizon. Mother lay beside her, head in Draupadi's lap. She seemed crushed, broken, immeasurably aged in the space of these few hours.

One by one, we climbed on board the chariots. Yudhishtira was the last; he walked past our chariot and the one mother and Draupadi were in, and took his seat, alone, in a third.

Just then, a servitor came running out of the hall. "You have been invited for one more game of dice," he said, addressing all of us.

Sahadeva jumped off the chariot and ran up to where Yudhishtira sat. "Don't go! You cannot win against Sakuni – you said yourself, he is cheating..."

Nakula looked at me. I shrugged, no longer caring what happened.

"Who invited us?" Yudhishtira asked.

"King Dhritarashtra said I should tell you, this is his personal invitation."

Yudhishtira got down from the chariot and walked back into the hall. Nakula and Sahadeva followed.

I turned to one of the servitors. "Get me Sura, bring me a full skin," I ordered.

Minutes passed. Nakula and Sahadeva came running out of the hall. "It's all over," Nakula said. "We lost again. One throw of the dice, and we've lost our lives. We are to be exiled to the forest for 12 years, then we have to live incognito for another year. If we are discovered, it is back to the forest for 12 more years."

I grabbed the skin of Sura from the servitor and drank, deep.

"The forest is not a bad place," I shrugged. "We will survive – and then our time will come."

Episode 38

It was long past the monsoon season, and yet the rain came down in torrents. Our wooden huts with their thatched roofs became too sodden for comfort; we took to gathering in the largest hut, where Draupadi lived and where the cooking fires kept the insides dry and warm.

Mother had decided to live with uncle Vidura during the term of our exile. Our other wives had gone back to their own homes, and the children had been sent to King Drupada's palace, where Dhristadyumna had taken charge of their upbringing.

Draupadi could have gone with her brother since the exile only applied to us, but she refused. As I watched her walk towards the river for her evening bath, clad only in deerskin, I couldn't help thinking she had reconciled to life in exile far better than the rest of us.

We started our exile in the forests of Kamyaka, and at first it was no hardship. Our maids and servitors had voluntarily joined us in exile, and a constant stream of relatives and friends came visiting, staying with us in the forest for days at a time and helping us ease the pain of exile.

Uncle Vidura had come away with us when we left Hastinapura for the last time—the result of a fierce quarrel with Dhritarashtra when the king, at Duryodhana's urging, invited Yudhishtira for that last game of dice. It was only after Sanjaya came as emissary from Hastinapura to say the king was sorry for all he had said and had requested Vidura to return that he consented to go back, taking our mother with him.

Through it all, Draupadi maintained a stoic calm—a facade she shed when Dhristadyumna came to visit us. When she saw her brother, she broke down and for the first time since I had known her, I saw her cry. Dhristadyumna took her up in his chariot and they drove off deep into the forest; it was late in the evening before they returned.

"I spoke to her," he told me later that night. "I told her that our time will come; that you and Arjuna and I will be avenged on the Kauravas for all they made her suffer."

And then Krishna came—and it was Draupadi he sought out first. “I don’t expect anything, any more, from these five husbands of mine,” she told Krishna. “My only consolation is my brother, and you – it is from you that I expect justice.”

Krishna was unaware of our visit to Hastinapura, of the game of dice and our exile. He and Balarama had led the Yadavas in battle against Shalya; it was during a chance visit to Drupada after the battle that he learnt of our plight.

“I would never have permitted you to play at dice,” Krishna told Yudhishtira, who sat with his head bowed, struggling to hide his chagrin. “For all your learning, how could you make such a mistake, how could you give your enemies a chance to undo all your hard work at Indraprastha?”

“Oh, he is Dharmaraja, didn’t you know? His word is sacred above all else – even his wife.” Draupadi’s words were laced with venom. “Dharma is the shield behind which he hides – to play at dice is *dharma*, to lose all that his brothers had earned through their hard work is *dharma*, to stake his brothers and his own wife like so much cattle is *dharma*, to watch with arms folded while his wife is dragged by her hair...”

Grief and rage combined to choke her; her voice trailed off into a sob that broke my hear.

Krishna drew her aside, his hand caressing her head, soothing her like a child. “By insulting you, the Kauravas have paved the way for their own doom,” he told her. “That race will pay in blood for the humiliation you endured; you will rule Hastinapura as its queen – this is my promise.”

Draupadi shook her head in disbelief, tears streaming down her face. “Listen to me and know that it is, Krishna, that says this,” he said to her. “The mountains can crumble into dust, the seas can dry up, the heavens can come crashing down to earth but my words will never prove false. I can see the past, the present, the future – and I tell you today, Draupadi, that you whose blood stained the marble halls of Hastinapura will one day walk in the blood of your enemies.”

It sounded insufferably pompous to me, but Draupadi’s face cleared as if by magic. That was always Krishna’s strength – he knew how to use words, and Draupadi trusted him in a way she never trusted us.

Something changed in Draupadi that day. The next morning, she called all the servants and maids to her, and told them to return to their homes in Indraprastha. Even Visokan, who showed a willingness to hang around, was dismissed. When Yudhishtira objected, and pointed out that she had no need to take on herself the burden of cooking and caring for us, her response was terse: "If exile is the fate we choose to invite on ourselves, then let us learn to live the life of exiles."

Later that evening, I found her alone, laboring over the fire as she cooked our evening meal, and tried to convince her of the folly of taking on such hardship.

"Our king, your brother, forgets too easily," she told me.

"His willful insistence on doing things his own way cost you your place in Hastinapura, nearly led to your death in the house of lac, led to you wandering through the forest in fear of your lives. But once he got Indraprastha to lord over, thanks to the hard work of Nakula and Sahadeva, all that was forgotten."

She was changing before my eyes. The softness that could suffuse her face and make you want to reach out in a caress, the tiny little quirk at the corner of her lips, the sudden blaze of passion in her eyes – those things about her that could set my pulse pounding seemed like figments of a fevered imagination. It was as if she had deliberately set out to erase all that was gentle, all that was feminine about her – and what was left behind was a shell of the woman I loved above all else: hard, cold, implacable.

"The night before the game of dice, he had come to talk to me. I cried, I begged, I pleaded with him not to play, I told him it was a trap, I told him we would end up losing all we had, maybe even our lives. But no, he would not listen; as he always does, he was determined to do exactly as he pleased, and what I got was a lecture on *kshatriya dharma*.

"Give him time, give him a few servants to see to his comfort and someone to play dice with and discuss *dharma* with and he will forget the humiliation of Hastinapura, too. He will forget how I, stained in my menstrual blood, was dragged into that assembly of men, taunted, invited to share the bed of our enemies.

"Not this time – this time, I will not let him forget. Let him suffer hardship and privation for twelve years, let him live with no one around to distract him from the memories of his own folly. If I do nothing else I will do this – I will keep the memory of that day alive in his heart, and mine. I will not let him forget – not until I wash away my humiliation in a river of blood."

Episode 39

The food was good: deer meat cooked in pig fat, washed down with wine made of fermented sugarcane. I ate with an appetite heightened by the sudden release of tension: it was a battle I had set out for that morning, not a feast.

Our little camp in the Kamyaka forest was in an uproar when I returned from a hunt the previous evening. Yudhishtira saw me first and gave me the news. A 'rakshasa', which is how he contemptuously referred to all tribals, had stormed into camp earlier in the evening and given an ultimatum: he was going to kill me in battle, and would wait for me next morning in the clearing by the river. If I didn't meet him, he would return and kill everyone.

"He is evil," Yudhishtira said. "He kills the saints and *sadhus* who make their home in this forest – in all this time, we haven't been able to find a single holy man to help us with our rituals. Kill him – we cannot live in fear while we are here."

I set off for the river next morning, and found Kirmiran waiting for me in the clearing. I learnt that he was a Nishada, a brother of Bakan. He had heard of our battle in Ekachakra from some of Bakan's people who were there at the time, and knew that I had killed his brother in fair fight. It was not because of Bakan that he was here, he said, but for the sake of Hidimbi.

"You abandoned her and her baby, and for that you must die," he said. I stood there, stunned.

Kirmiran and Hidimban were friends, I learnt, and he had long had his eye on Hidimbi, who he wanted to marry. He was away near the Himalayas at the time, and it was only much later that he heard Hidimban had been killed. He rushed to offer Hidimbi his protection and found her wandering in the forest, pregnant and alone. He had looked after her and the son born to her since then – and when he heard that I was in the forest, he had determined to kill me in revenge for all that I had made her suffer.

"I will not fight you," I said. "You are the only support my wife has, and I cannot deprive her of that."

"Why did you abandon her?" he demanded. "When you built your kingdom in Indraprastha, why did you not send for her? In all this time, you never once returned to the forest to seek her out, to find out how she was doing..."

I explained my helplessness; I told him that Hidimbi, the first woman I had loved and taken to bed, was still constantly in my thoughts. "You have a son now, Ghatotkacha," he told me. "He is growing into a strong young man; one day he will make you proud."

Ghatotkacha—I smiled to myself at the mental vision the name conjured up, of a young lad with a hairless, pot-shaped head. "Where are they now?" Kirmiran told me that he had taken them to the foothills of the Himalayas, where a group of Nishadas had given them shelter.

"We have been banished to the forest for 12 years," I told Kirmiran. "I'll seek them out; I will make it a point to find my wife and son."

We went to his camp, where he prepared a meal for me. "I heard of what happened to you in Hastinapura," Kirmiran told me as we ate and drank. "You should have gone to war with the Kauravas – why did you accept exile?"

I explained. We talked, late into the afternoon. When your time comes, Kirmiran told me, send word to me. "We have people all over – we will raise an army and come to fight on your side. And your son, Ghatotkacha, will lead that army into battle."

It was very late when I returned to our camp. Yudhishtira came up to me as soon as I entered the clearing. "What happened?" he asked. "Is he dead?"

"He won't cause any more trouble," I told him and, without going into detail, went off to my hut.

Arjuna came to see me late that night. "I'm leaving camp early tomorrow, brother," he said. "I just cannot take it here any more."

While I was away, a heated argument had broken out between my brothers. It started innocently enough: Yudhishtira had started one of

his inevitable lectures on *dharma*, and Sahadeva had challenged him. "Under what law of *dharma* does a man stake his wife on a game of dice?" he had demanded. "Does your *dharma* teach you that your brothers and your wife are your possessions, just like your cattle?"

"I did what I thought was right at the time," Yudhishtira responded. "If you thought I was wrong, why did you not repudiate me in the assembly, as Duryodhana asked you to do? You could have said I was wrong, and he would have set you free. You could have fought them—I would have done nothing to stop you. All of you stayed quiet then, and now you blame me for everything!"

"He is our elder brother and I owe him my respect," Arjuna told me that night. "But when he said that, I couldn't take it – how can he hide his own wrong-doing under the excuse that we should have repudiated him? I told him that the fact that we had values could not be used as a cover for his own lack of values. We argued; it became very ugly."

"I agree, Arjuna," I told him. "But what is done is done; what is the point of arguing about it endlessly? The last time we were in exile, we did not know when or how it would end. This time, our exile is not limitless – it will end and our time for revenge will come. We cannot afford to be a house divided – mother is right, our unity is our biggest strength. Duryodhana knows that – that is why he tried to get us to repudiate our brother that day in the assembly, and that is why I refused, that is why I supported him."

"Brother, you have more patience than I. In any case, I can't stay here any more – I feel suffocated. I'll use this time to prepare for the battle that will come – I've heard of far off lands where they have developed new weapons, new techniques of battle. I want to visit those lands, learn all that I can. I leave early tomorrow morning – I wanted your blessings; that is why I waited for you to return."

See Yudhishtira before you go, I advised him. "Don't go without telling him. Seek his blessings, explain to him why you have to go – and whatever you do, don't quarrel with him again."

Next morning, I picked up my spear and hunting knife and set off to hunt. Yudhishtira was waiting outside his hut. "Arjuna has gone. All this while, we slept in peace because he was around," he sighed. "But he is right – war will come, and he is wise to use this time to prepare himself."

That day, I picked up the sign of a full-grown stag. Judging by the length of its stride, it was a giant. It had been a while since I had a chance to use the skills I had learnt from the Nagas, and perfected during my time with Hidimbi. I threw myself into the hunt, tracking the stag patiently for hours before I glimpsed him, moving with easy majesty up the slope of a small hill.

Hunting for food was necessary, but I took no pleasure in it. Where was the skill in hiding downwind near some body of water and killing a deer that had come to drink? This was different – the stag was the size of a young foal, tall and proud; the sweep and spread of its antlers proclaiming its age.

Carefully testing the wind, I crawled through the bushes downwind of him till I got within range. I stood tense, immobile, with the short spear poised and ready – and just when he turned his head to one side to sniff the air, hurled it with all my strength. I held my breath as it flashed through the air, its point taking the beast just under the jaw, and driving through into its brain.

It leaped high in the air, once, and thudded back to earth.

I ran up, grabbed the shaft of the spear and yanked it out. A great gush of blood spouted from its neck; I waited for it to ebb and then, holding its hooves in my hands, swung it onto my shoulder and began walking towards camp.

It was a magnificent specimen, and I had taken great care with my aim so as not to spoil the hide. The skin will make a nice dress for Draupadi, I thought. There was enough meat on it to last us for a few days; I could spend that time curing the skin and dyeing it with colors strained from the flowers that grew profusely along the river bank.

On a whim I decided to go to the river first for a bath. I swung the stag off my shoulders and set it down on the bank, threw down my spear and knife and pulled off my robe.

“Magnificent! What a splendid creature!”

I spun around, startled by the sound of a voice where I had thought myself alone, and saw Draupadi walking down the path towards me. It had not occurred to me that this was that time of evening when she routinely went for her bath – or maybe deep inside I knew, and that was why I had decided to come to the river.

I grabbed my robe and held it up in front of me. Draupadi laughed and came closer, her hand reaching out, palm rubbing lightly over my shoulder. She turned it over and looked at it, now stained red with the blood of the stag that had spilt over my skin.

"So why didn't you fight him?"

"Who?"

"Kirmiran. I thought you would come back with the story of a battle to tell."

"No – I didn't need to fight. He was a friend of Hidimban's; he brought me word of my wife and son."

"Ah yes – the jungle woman. Your first love... you still think of her, don't you?"

"It's you I think about – especially at night." I put my arm around her waist, pulled her hard against me.

She pushed me away, her hands against my chest – but there was no strength in that push, no conviction. "Have you forgotten it is the maharaj's turn?"

I hastily let her go. She laughed. "Rules! He has broken so many of them – do you think he'll really mind if we break one?"

She tugged the robe out of my hands, threw it aside and sank down to the soft grass of the river bank, pulling me down with her.

It was very late when we walked back to the camp. Yudhishtira was sitting outside his hut, his back against the doorpost, staring off into space. If he thought anything of us coming back together, he gave no sign.

Episode 40

Time had very little meaning for me. At Yudhishtira's urging, we were trekking from one holy site to the next. "We have 12 years to spend; we might as well spend it in pilgrimage," he said.

I could think of far better ways of spending that time – practicing our war craft, refining strategies and tactics, for instance. But after that showdown that ended with Arjuna leaving us, I had promised myself I wouldn't argue with my brother.

So I trudged along in their wake, miserable and not knowing what I could do about it. Nakula and Sahadeva were happy enough: they spent their time immersed in discussions of their favorite topics, the science of horse-craft and of civic administration. Draupadi was an automaton, focused on organizing our supplies and meals.

Yudhishtira, who had seemed morose in camp, was the happiest among us: at each holy place, he had his fill of the company of priests and saints. They all knew him or at least knew of him – when you are a king, especially one who is prone to conducting religious ceremonies and is open-handed and generous in doling out alms, your reputation spreads among the priestly class. He was in no position now to be generous but they all flocked to him anyway – partly in remembrance of favors past, partly in hope of favors to come.

So we travelled endlessly, and weeks and months lost all meaning; only the changing seasons mattered. In summers, I had to figure out how to conserve our energies, find shady places to rest up in during the day and lead the way when we marched at night. When the rains came, I went further ahead, on the lookout for caves and other forms of shelter.

It was while we were camped on the banks of the Ganga, near Prabhasa *thirtha*, that Krishna came visiting with Balarama and their good friend, the Vrishni Satyaki.

Mother was fine, Krishna said; he had visited her at uncle Vidura's place. Subhadra and Abhimanyu were happy at Dwaraka; he would be

visiting King Drupada next, and would pass on word about us to Dhristadyumna.

Our talk inevitably turned to the end of our exile, and the war that would follow. Balarama wandered off – he was emotionally attached to both camps and preferred to stay neutral, even though he continued to instruct Duryodhana in the art of the mace. “We have to plan, to make preparations for war, but that can wait till Arjuna returns,” Krishna said.

He spent a considerable amount of time talking with Draupadi; Balaram and Yudhishtira were engrossed in discussing the politics of the time and the petty wars that broke out from time to time among neighboring kingdoms.

I found Satyaki a man after my own heart. He even looked a lot like me physically: tall, very broad-chested, with muscular arms and legs. We engaged in wrestling bouts and went hunting in his chariot; I discovered that his fondness for good food and liquor was the equal of mine—and he had thoughtfully brought several bags of good Soma in his chariot.

A day later, a wandering mendicant brought news of Arjuna. He was traveling in the south, visiting various kingdoms there and learning of new weapons, new arts of war, the mendicant said, and planned to end his travels at the Gandhamadana mountain.

I had heard of the place; it was supposed to be located in the extreme southern tip of the country. The balladeers sang of it often; they said that it was the mountain Ram, the king of Ayodhya, had stood on and looked across the sea at Lanka, where his wife Sita was being held captive; the mountain on which Hanuman – who, in the songs of the balladeers was the son of Vaayu the god of wind and therefore my elder brother – had rested his foot on before launching his titanic jump across the ocean to the kingdom of Ravana.

“You should travel south and meet up with Arjuna there,” Krishna advised. A day later, we parted – Krishna, Balarama and Satyaki traveling east to visit with King Drupada and Yuvraj Dhristadyumna, while we set off south, with the Gandhamadhana as our goal.

Seasons came and went; we crossed rivers and mountain ranges, vast forests and great plains until we finally arrived at the foot of Gandhamadhana. The songs hadn’t prepared me for how big the

mountain was: if it was not as tall as some of the mountains in the Himalayas, it was impossibly steep, rising up like a giant needle pointing straight at the sky.

I realized it was going to be a very difficult climb; making it doubly difficult was the dense forest that shrouded its sides. It was the height of the monsoons; though the thick canopy of leaves kept most of the rain out, water dripped down on us constantly, making us wet and miserable while the ground was slippery with wet mud.

Every step we took needed extreme care: plant a foot in front, test it to see that the ground was firm, then take the next step... progress was painfully slow.

I walked ahead with an axe, cutting down branches and the dense brambles to clear a path and gouging footholds in the rock where needed. Nakula and Sahadeva came after, clearing the branches I had cut down and helping Draupadi negotiate the tougher portions of the climb, while Yudhishtira brought up the rear.

I was battling with a particularly difficult stretch when I heard Yudhishtira cry out. I turned, and a little way down saw my brothers clustered around Draupadi. "She fell," Nakula told me.

Draupadi looked up at me, helplessness in her eyes. "My foot hurts. I cannot climb."

We were still less than halfway up the mountain. Even if I could carry her the rest of the way, there was no way I could manage her weight while simultaneously clearing a path for us through vegetation that was growing denser as we climbed.

I glanced up, and saw a sign of movement under the trees behind us. "Who's there?" I hefted my axe in one hand and pulled my hunting knife with the other, wishing my mace and bow were not wrapped in the bundle Sahadeva was carrying.

A group of tribals, some 20 or so, stepped out from the shelter of the trees and came towards us. I stood in their way, covering Draupadi and my brothers. "I am Bhima, the Pandava from Hastinapura. Who are you?"

The tribals talked to one another in a language I couldn't understand. A young lad stepped out from their midst, walked past me and stood looking down at Draupadi as she lay prostrate on the ground.

He had a boyish, almost childish, face but in all other respects he was a man. He was clad only in a loin cloth; muscles like thick ropes stood out on his legs and arms. Slung on his back were three spears; a knife hung at his waist.

"We have to get to the top of Gandhamadhana," I told the boy.

"This is not a good time to climb the mountain," he said. "It is the rainy season and there is a very big storm coming; you can get trapped in landslides, under falling trees..."

We looked at one another, unsure what to do. The boy watched us for a while, then turned to his companions and spoke sharply in their strange-sounding language. He was easily the youngest in the group, yet he spoke with an air of command. His companions ran away into the forest, and returned a short time later carrying thick branches and armloads of jungle vine.

As we watched, the tribals worked with remarkable skill, fashioning in short order a throne mounted on two thick poles. With their knives, they pared away the rough bark of the branches, smoothing them out while others braided the vine to form the seat. Two others were busy grinding some leaves and roots, using a flat stone as base and the butt end of their spears as pestles. The boy took the paste they had made, and very gently applied it on Draupadi's swollen ankle.

"The lady can sit in this," he said. "We will carry her up the mountain and the rest of you can follow."

Draupadi hesitated. "Come," the boy said, with an air authority far beyond his years. He helped Draupadi into the palanquin his fellows had fashioned; four of them picked up the ends of the poles and hoisted it on their shoulders. The boy set out in front with a few others, clearing the way for us.

The tribals set a frantic pace. When Yudhishtira showed signs of slowing down, the boy stopped in his tracks. "We need to hurry; we have to get to the top of the mountain before the storm breaks." He barked out an order in his language; two of his fellows ran down to

Yudhishtira and, taking his arms around their shoulders, hustled him along.

Gradually, the trees began thinning; we saw the first signs of fruit trees and flowering bushes. Almost without warning, we broke out of the forest and into a clearing; in the distance we could see a cluster of huts, smoke and other signs of human habitation.

We had reached the top of Gandhamadhana.

The tribals set the palanquin down.

"Over there is an ashram," he said. "You will find shelter there, and food." His companions had already begun walking back the way they had come; the boy turned to follow.

"I am Yudhishtira, king of Indraprastha. I have nothing to give you in return for your help—we are away from our kingdom just now. But when you hear that we are back, come to us – I will reward you for your help."

"I didn't help you in hope of reward, king. There is nothing we need from you," the boy said, as if he were talking to an equal.

And then he turned to where I stood, and smiled. Walking up to me, he bent low to touch my feet. "My name is Ghatotkacha," he said. "I am the son of Hidimbi. Your son."

He rose and swiftly slipped away into the forest while I stood there, too stunned to react.

Episode 41

The full moon hung improbably low just above the tree tops, washing our camp in a pale, cool light. I sat with my back against the door of my hut and watched Draupadi as she walked back to camp after her bath and prayers.

The wet clothes clinging tight to the body, the freshly washed, lustrous hair hanging free down her back, the pale golden glow of sandal paste on her forehead and her arms – after all these years, she still stirred lust.

Looking and lusting was all I could do for now. The old rules were back, now that we were established in a semi-permanent camp amidst the natural beauty of Gandhamadhan. It was calculated that it was my elder brother's turn to play husband, and now that the dangers of the forest were behind us and he was surrounded by the sadhus and saints who had made the mountain top their home, Yudhishtira was feeling sufficiently himself again; ready once more to assert his authority in all the things that he thought mattered.

He was in his elements – the days were filled with endless philosophical discussions, and at night he had Draupadi. There was no news of Arjuna. The twins spent their time together, leaving the camp early in the morning and returning late in the evening just in time for the communal dinner that Draupadi supervised. None of us knew where they were going and what they were up to all day – we didn't ask, and they didn't say.

I was bored – and boredom more than anything else was responsible for an incident that in later years was considerably distorted by the balladeers, whose imagination conjured up a great battle between the combined forces of Kubera on the one hand and me alone on the other.

It started one evening when Draupadi came up to me, a small blue lotus-shaped flower cupped in her hands. 'Look, the Saugandhika,' she said, holding it out. I bent over, burying my nose in the flower she held in her cupped palms – not because I cared a hoot for such things,

but because I loved to touch her, and had made it my private game to devise seemingly innocent ways of doing that.

When I straightened, mumbling something about the smell being nice, Draupadi gave me one of those up-from-under looks that are part of a woman's arsenal of seduction. There was a knowing smile lurking in her eyes, but her words were innocent enough.

"One of the hermits told me that this must be from a lake owned by the king Kubera," she said. "It seems the whole lake is filled with these flowers, and Kubera has an army standing guard to keep anyone from plucking them."

Un-hunh? So?

"Can you get me some? Please? Even after plucking they last for a long time, I'm told – it would be lovely to have this fragrance in my room all the time..."

You mean Yudhishtira's room, I thought to myself, then shrugged. What else was there to do anyway? Early next morning, I set out in the direction the hermits had pointed out.

I walked for hours, deep into the forest. At some point, I set a little trap, caught myself a rabbit and cooked it over a small fire. Meal over, I dozed for a while and then set out again – and as dusk fell, realized I was nearing my destination.

At first imperceptibly, then overpoweringly, the air all around was filled with the fragrance of the Sougandhika. The trees thinned, and I suddenly found myself in a clearing, staring at a scene of surpassing beauty.

An enormous pool fed by a mountain stream stretched out before me, its surface entirely covered with the lovely blue flowers. A small marble pavilion had been erected at one end; nearby, three soldiers lolled around on the grass.

When they saw me they jumped up and came towards me, making threatening gestures with the points of their spears. As they surrounded me, I mentally worked out my moves: the sole of my right foot hard onto the knee of the soldier on that side; simultaneously lean to the left, grab the spear of the soldier on that side and wrest it out of his grasp, use the blunt end in a hard thrust at his groin, then

drive the point at the throat of the man in front of me. Three quick moves, each an extension of the other, and it would be over.

I stood there, unmoving. To plan how I would take those men out was second nature, but I had no reason to engage these men, to kill them.

I'm a pilgrim, I told them, just wandering around; I came upon this place by accident. Can I drink some water from the stream, maybe have a swim? They shrugged and walked back towards the pavilion where, I now saw, they had a half-filled goatskin of alcohol to keep them company.

I stripped off and jumped in the lake, gasping at the unexpected cold and then reveling in the tingling feeling all over my body as the blood rushed to nerve endings numbed by the sudden shock. Our camp at Gandhamadhana had more than its share of places to swim in – there was a river flowing nearby and at least two large ponds, but nothing compared to the crisply cold feeling of this water on my skin, or its purity and sweetness.

I dived deep, holding my breath for as long as I could before kicking back up towards the surface – and found I now had company. A tall man in the robes and headdress of an important official stood at the end of the pond and, when I surfaced, beckoned me to come out.

"Who are you?"

"I am Bhima, the Pandava."

"From Hastinapura?"

"Yes, but my brothers and I are living in a camp with the hermits of Gandhamadhana."

"I've heard something of your story," the official said. "Will you wait here till I come back?"

I nodded and, wrapping my robe around me, settled down with my back against the cool marble of the pavilion. The official asked the three soldiers to keep an eye on me, and walked off into the forest.

As night deepened and the air got cold, I vaguely thought of overpowering the soldiers and heading back to camp, but the official

had asked politely, and I had given my word. So I stayed, coping with the cold as best I could.

Morning came, and then afternoon. I assuaged my hunger pangs with drinks of water, and waited patiently. It was early evening when I heard voices in the distance.

I wasn't prepared for the group that walked out of the forest and came towards me: the official I had expected, but with him came Yudhishtira and Sahadeva; Draupadi a few paces behind them and by her side, very attentive, Ghatotkacha.

"Yes," Yudhishtira told the official, "this is my brother Bhima."

"Sorry to put you to all this trouble," the official told my brother. "Our king is at his hunting lodge, just a day's march from here; may I invite all of you to visit with him? He will be pleased to extend his hospitality to the famed Pandavas – you can stay there in far more comfort..."

Yudhishtira, in the regal style that was almost like his second skin, thanked the official for his kindness but said he was returning to his camp. "I am expecting word from my brother Arjuna," he said, "and need to be there when his messenger comes."

While he exchanged polite nothings with the official, I walked over to the edge of the pond, reached down and plucked a double handful of the flowers. Walking over to where Draupadi stood, I held them out for her; she took them from me with an indifferent shrug, while Sahadeva smirked.

"Because of the madness of some people, I have had to walk all this way for nothing," Yudhishtira muttered as, with Draupadi at his side, he set off on the route back to camp. As we walked, Ghatotkacha told me that my brother had become worried when I didn't return to camp for the evening meal.

Draupadi told him that I had gone in search of the Saugandhika; the hermits filled his head with stories of how Kubera's army guarded the pond and killed anyone who went there. So my brother sent Nakula and Sahadeva off to look for me; Ghatotkacha came upon Sahadeva in the forest and offered to show him the way to the pond and just then, Kubera's official arrived in the camp, making inquiries.

My son bent to touch my feet, and vanished into the forest.

A little further on, I came across a bunch of fragrant blue flowers lying beside the path. I stood looking down at them for a bit, then I shrugged, and walked on.

Episode 42

The sounds of strife came to me as I was walking back towards camp after a routine hunt: people yelling in panic, a woman's screams – unexpected sounds in our quiet corner of the Gandhamadhana forest, peopled mostly by hermits.

A man – big, broad-shouldered, dark-complexioned and dressed only in a loincloth—stood in the clearing in front of our huts. He had Draupadi slung over one shoulder; in the other, he held a short spear with which he kept my brothers at bay.

Nakula was trying to attack him from the side. Even as I ran into the clearing, the intruder swung his spear around, the haft catching my brother on the side of the head and tumbling him to the ground.

Sahadeva lay on the ground in front of him; from the way he was holding his ribs, I realized the stranger must have caught him with a kick.

"If you are a man, give me a weapon and then fight me one on one," Yudhishtira was saying as I came up. Despite the seriousness of the situation, I almost laughed out loud: that was so typical of my brother, expecting fair play and *dharma* in every situation.

"Let her go, or die!" I roared. Jadan – I learnt his name later – turned towards me, and appeared to realize that I was more serious opposition than my brothers. He set Draupadi on her feet; with a small scream, she ran to the edge of the clearing where the area hermits were gathered in a cluster, all yelling their heads off.

Jadan advanced towards me; I waited for him with a sense of joy. It had been a long time since I had fought with someone; I welcomed this opportunity to test my strength and skills against an opponent worth my while, and to make sure I hadn't turned rusty in these long years of exile.

Later, the hermits told me Jadan was the bane of their lives. His stamping ground was on the lower slopes of the mountains, they said, and mostly he preyed on travelers passing through. But every so often

he would come up the slopes, attacking their camp, stealing their food, and abducting any woman he found – though women were admittedly rare in this encampment of hermits.

He was tall, and very strong, but I thought I had the edge on him on both counts. I tossed my hunting spear aside, having decided to indulge my liking for unarmed combat. Jadan roared in defiance, threw his own spear aside, and came at me, arms swinging.

I took his first strike high up on my shoulder; he swung again and this time, I swung sideways, letting his bunched fist hit me on the back. He kept swinging; I took his blows on my body, shielding my ribs and face from his assault and absorbing the force of his strikes.

Clubbing his fists together, Jadan swung at me like a woodsman with his axe. Again, I twisted and let me hit me high on my back, but this time the weight and force of the clubbed hands sent me staggering back a few steps.

Draupadi screamed; a despairing wail.

I decided I had seen enough. I had let Jadan land a few blows to test his strength and skill. Strength he had in plenty – the blows he had landed on me stung. But judging by his roundhouse swings and the way he got off balance after each swing, he was clearly untrained in the arts of hand to hand combat.

Seeing me staggering, Jadan must have thought he had me. He charged up, grunting as he swung hard at my face. I deflected his strike with my open palm, pushing him off balance; as he stumbled, I stepped forward, my bent elbow smashing into his throat.

As he staggered back, I smashed the heel of my right foot into his ribcage, putting the weight of my body behind the kick that sent him crashing to the ground.

I could have toyed with him for a while longer if I wanted to, but I knew it was all over save for the killing move – I could twist his neck or flip him around and break his spine. I moved in to finish it off – and out of the corner of my eye, caught sight of Draupadi.

She had moved several steps forward from that sheltering group of hermits and was watching me, mouth open, chest heaving in her excitement.

"Kill him!" Yudhishtira yelled at me. "The man who touched Draupadi has no right to live!"

A sudden sense of revulsion swept over me. My brother had thought nothing of pledging our wife on a throw of the dice, then watching with head hung low as our enemies dishonored her in public. When Arjuna and I wanted to go to war, however, his notions of dharma had gotten in the way. And then there was my sometimes wife, for whom I was someone to send on fool's errands, or to stoke her lust with tales of the blood I had shed.

I grabbed a handful of Jadan's hair and pulled him to his feet. "If I ever see you again, I'll kill you!", I yelled as I slapped him hard. He turned to run; I sped him on his way with a kick and turning, walked away towards my hut.

As I walked past my elder brother, I heard him say "Here comes another one, god knows what he will become when he grows up!"

I turned around, and saw that Ghatotkacha had come into camp, and Sahadeva was telling him about Jadan's attack on our camp.

"He is an Asura, not a Naga," Ghatotkacha told Yudhishtira. "They are different, they love to plunder and to kill..."

"It's all the same," Yudhishtira said as he walked away. "All these jungle tribes – can't trust a single one of them."

Ghatotkacha's eyes blazed with sudden anger. I wanted to take him aside, to tell him that my brother was angry with me for letting Jadan go, and was taking it out on him. But without a word to anyone, without even his ritual obeisance to me, my son spun on his heel and walked away.

Two days later, we were sitting down to dinner when Ghatotkacha walked into the clearing. Walking up to where Yudhishtira sat, he tossed a parcel wrapped in palm leaf in front of him, turned, and walked out of camp without even a glance at the rest of us.

My brother opened the parcel – and recoiled in shock as the severed head of Jadan fell into his lap, blood still oozing from the neck.

Episode 43

Our new camp was at the foot of a fairly large hill, well away from human habitation.

It was Yudhishtira's idea to move from Gandhamadhana: at some point during our exile, uncle Vidura had warned of the dangers of staying in any one place too long. So my brother suggested the move, but wasn't best pleased with the result since he was now deprived of the daytime company of sages and such.

It was also not an ideal location for hunting, but I went out every day anyway because what else was there to do? One evening I came back to camp with just two rabbits to show for a day spent in the foothills, and found Draupadi with Nakula and Sahadeva in the communal hut.

We no longer had individual huts and the privacy that came with it. That was my idea. Yudhishtira had told us we wouldn't be here long, so I saw no point in doing all the donkey work of cutting down logs and building huts for each of us. Instead, we had one large communal hut that three of us shared, and another one for Yudhishtira and Draupadi.

When I walked in, Nakula and Sahadeva looked at each other, laughed at some private joke Draupadi was evidently in on judging by her smile, and walked out. Pretending not to notice, I walked over to dump the rabbits next to the cooking area.

When I walked out of the hut for a wash, Draupadi followed. "Smell the fragrance in the air, it's divine," she said.

"Draupadi must be sweating," I replied. She seemed to like that. "No, seriously – do you know what is on top of the hill?"

"Another pool full of Saugandhika flowers? I've had enough of those."

"No!" she protested, laughing. "A wandering hermit had come here this morning while you were away. He told me Panchavarna flowers grow in profusion on the upper slopes of this hill – it seems they are

brilliant to look at, five colors, and the fragrance is even better than the Saugandhika..."

"So now you want me to climb that hill and get you those flowers so you can throw it away?"

Draupadi bit her lip, glanced away and then back at me. Moving closer to my side, she turned so she was looking up into my face; I was feverishly aware of the invitation in her eyes and the light press of her breast against my arm. "No. I was thinking... didn't you know that tomorrow is the last day of my time with the Yuvraj? I thought the day after, we could go up the hill together, enjoy our reunion amidst those flowers..."

"We'll see," I said, with an off-handedness I was far from feeling. Draupadi gave me a look, and walked away.

Next morning, I picked up my spear and bow and arrow, and walked off into the forest as usual, not wanting the others to know what I was up to. Once I was out of sight of the camp, I doubled back and began to climb the hill – a hard, torturous climb over a largely rocky path. Near the top, I came upon the ashes of a campfire. The ashes were still warm – clearly, there was someone nearby.

"I come as a friend," I called out.

A small group emerged from between the trees. Their leader came up to me and introduced himself as Manimaan; they were a tribal band owing allegiance to Kubera, he told me.

"I am Bhima, the Pandava. We are camped at the bottom of the hill; I would be grateful if you and your band could move away from here for three or four days – we want to perform some sacrifices and would like the privacy."

Manimaan shook his head no; his band grouped tightly behind him, spear points out and aimed in my direction.

"I do not want to use force; Kubera is our friend and I have no wish to hurt any of his followers. But if you do not go away, I will be forced to," I told them. "You know my name, you have heard of the people I have killed in combat..."

They talked among themselves for a bit, then Manimaan came up to me and said he and his men would go away and leave us alone for a week.

"Before you go, will you help me? I want to make a hut on top of the hill, to rest in, and cut a path so my brothers and wife can climb up easily."

They were willing, even eager to help now that they had shed their initial hostility. Together, we walked to the top of the hill. I saw no signs of flowers, Panchavarna or otherwise, but the view was spectacular. We went to work, cutting down logs and erecting a small pavilion situated so you could get the best view. We lined the floor with soft, fresh cut grass and then retraced our steps down the hill, chopping steps into the rock as we went to facilitate the climb.

As we worked, I planned for the day, and the year, ahead and wondered to myself what battles I could tell Draupadi of, with detail and even exaggeration, so I could see her transform before my eyes into that picture of bloodthirsty lust I knew so well, so intimately, from four years ago and from that one stolen night in the forest.

It was very late at night when I got back to our camp. "You look tired," Nakula said when I walked into the hut. "A full day's hunt and nothing to show for it?" Sahadeva asked. I shrugged.

Next day I hunted with a vim, returning to camp early with half a dozen rabbits and as many birds, then spent the evening cooking the meat in different ways.

Early next morning, I was packing the food when I glanced up and saw Draupadi hurrying towards me. Her delighted smile made me absurdly pleased; she is, I thought, so happy it is the start of our year together.

I was mentally promising myself that I would do everything I could to make it the best year she ever had when she reached me and breathlessly announced: "He is back, didn't you know?! Arjuna is back!"

It was only then that she seemed to notice what I was doing. "Not today," she told me, her hand on my arm. "Let's listen to Arjuna's stories; we can go up the hill another day."

Without a word, I turned and dumped the food back in the pot. Arjuna came hurrying up just then, Nakula and Sahadeva close beside him. Bending, my brother touched my feet; I pulled him into a tight hug, then held him at arm's length and looked at him.

Three years of travel had done him good – he had been burnt almost black by the sun and looked wiry, muscular, with not an ounce of fat on him. I was most interested in his arms – judging by the calluses, he must have been practicing to shoot with either hand. He noticed the direction my glance and smiled. "We'll talk later; I have much to discuss with you," he said, and went away, Nakula and Sahadeva beside him and Draupadi trailing behind.

That evening, we gathered around the campfire, sharing the food I had prepared for my honeymoon and listening to Arjuna's stories of strange lands and stranger customs. His main objective had been to familiarize himself with new weapons and new ways of waging war, and it was of this that he spoke the most.

He had come across amazing new engines of war – engines that could batter down walls and fortifications from a distance, others that could shoot dozens of arrows at one time, still others to employ against elephants, or horses. He had collected detailed sketches of these war machines from the engineers of various lands; Mayan can construct them for us based on the sketches, he told us.

At Nakula's prodding, he showed off the new weapons he had personally acquired: arrows tipped with snake venom that killed with the merest scratch; a peculiarly shaped weapon he could hurl at a target and which would return to his hand if it missed.

He took an arrow and smeared some kind of strange substance on its tip, then shot it high into the air. As the arrow soared it caught fire, the tip burning with a searing, blindingly brilliant flame. I imagined what it could do to human flesh if it struck; Arjuna told us he had seen bowmen in the south toss huge balls of rope smeared with oil into the middle of opposing forces, then fire these flaming arrows onto those balls and create conflagrations.

In later years, I would hear the balladeers sing of how my brother had ascended to the heavens in human form, of how he had fought great battles against the demons on behalf of the gods and how, in gratitude, Indra and Vayu and the snake gods and Varuna and Agni had blessed him and given him their most secret weapons.

That's what balladeers do – they exaggerate, they amplify, they embellish our doings and elevate them to mythical status. But in doing that, it always seemed to me, they take the credit away from us for what we actually do. My brother had travelled ceaselessly for years, enduring god knows what privations and taking who knew what risks, to study and acquire these weapons. To sing that they came to him as gifts was, I used to think as I listened to those songs, to diminish the nature of his accomplishments.

"I didn't have too many battles to fight," Arjuna said when Sahadeva pressed him. "Actually, just once – a clan chieftain called Kalakeyan and his band waylaid me as I was heading down south. I killed him, his band fled."

"Tell us about that battle," Draupadi said, shifting hurriedly to a spot closer to where Arjuna sat.

"Oh, there is nothing to tell, really – they were not trained warriors, I took the leader out with an arrow to the heart and that was that."

He then began telling us of strange customs he had encountered: tribes that did not worship Indra or Vayu or Surya, but instead worshipped the Lingam and the Yoni; of another tribe where the Swayamvara was a matter of blind luck, with the girl sitting in a darkened grass hut while aspirants to her hand thrust spears through the walls and the owner of the spear she touched marrying her.

"What? Even the blind and the lame could try?" Draupadi wanted to know.

Yudhishtira said he was tired, and went away to the communal hut to sleep. "The rest of you get some rest too," he said. "Tomorrow we'll move back to Kamyaka."

"Why?" I protested. "What's the hurry?" I was thinking of that pavilion I had constructed up on the hill, of the steps I had so painstakingly carved for Draupadi to climb, of the time I had planned for us together.

"Now that Arjuna is back and we are nearing the critical phase of our exile, we need to start making plans. It is not easy for our allies to come here; Kamyaka is more central for both Krishna and King Drupada and there are good paths for their chariots, so we'll base ourselves there," my brother decreed, and went off to sleep.

Once he was gone, Arjuna began talking of other conquests – clearly the women had not left him alone during his travels and as clearly, he hadn't wanted them to.

Draupadi got up and, making an obvious mime show of her indifference, walked away in the direction of the smaller hut – which, from today, was mine to share with her. Nakula watched her walk away and smirked at me; perversely, though I wanted to follow her I remained where I was, listening to my brother's stories till long after the campfire had died down and we had exhausted the goatskins of sura Arjuna had brought with him.

I entered my hut, and by the light of a lamp turned low, I saw Draupadi stretched out on the bed of grass in the center of the room.

She was smiling. I sat beside her, and only then realized that she was fast asleep. As I stretched out beside her, I saw her lips move.

"Tell me about Kalakeyan," she murmured in her sleep. "Tell me how you fought him... tell me about the blood when you killed him..."

I rose hurriedly and walked out of the hut, moving away from the camp. With my back against a tree, I spent that night staring up at the sky and trying not to think of the woman who was now my wife again, and who was even now lying in my bed with a smile on her lips, dreaming of my younger brother... dreaming of blood.

Episode 44

Kamyaka's relative proximity to Hastinapura played constantly on my mind. What with Draupadi, now installed in my hut as wife in residence, and with worrying about what Duryodhana could be planning, I wasn't getting much sleep at night, and had taken to going away to secluded spots in the forest for daytime naps.

In other ways the move made sense, as envoys from friendly kingdoms began arriving on an almost daily basis to check on our well-being, and to discuss our plans for when the period of exile was over.

We were almost at the end of our forest life; looming immediately ahead was the one year we had to spend in hiding – and Arjuna and I were both uneasy at the prospect. We knew Duryodhana would send out an army of spies to discover our whereabouts. If we were identified, our exile would begin all over again. In such a case, we would lose almost all our allies, for no one would wait forever.

"Why do we have to spend a year in hiding?" Arjuna asked one evening, during one of our routine discussions. "We have honored our bargain so far; we have used the time to build up our strength again. We should be preparing for war, not for a life in hiding."

I didn't expect Yudhishtira to agree – and he didn't disappoint me, with a long speech on dharma, on how we have always walked the path of righteousness, and how in the final analysis our actions would work to our advantage.

"An astrologer uncle Vidura sent told me that the tide was turning; that the stars were in our favor now, and our time was rapidly approaching," he said.

"And if we manage to spend a year in hiding and don't get discovered, and if Sakuni then challenges you to another game of dice, what then? Did the stars say anything about that?" Sahadeva asked. Yudhishtira got up and walked away without a word.

It took a visit from Krishna to convince Arjuna that we needed to stick to the terms of the deal –not because of some vague notions about

dharma that neither Arjuna nor I cared too much about, but in our own strategic interests.

Krishna brought Satyabhama along, which pleased Draupadi. The two women spent all their time together while Krishna, after paying ritual obeisance to Yudhishtira and visiting with me in my hut, took Arjuna away into the forest in his chariot.

They returned late the next afternoon, and it was clear that the two friends, who were meeting after a long while, had spent considerable time carousing.

"I've explained everything to Arjuna," Krishna told me next day as he was preparing to leave. "You will spend the year in the Matsya kingdom of King Virat. He is growing in power; over the last few years, he has been building up a considerable army. By the time your year in hiding is over, he will become your ally, trust me."

Yudhishtira meanwhile was occupied with Dhroumya, the purohit, and the many messengers who came from uncle Vidura on an almost daily basis.

Through them, we learnt that mother was doing well; we also learnt that Duryodhana was keen to perform the Rajasuiya but was being dissuaded by grandfather Bhishma and other advisers.

"Their argument is that unless the Kauravas defeat us in battle, no major king will accept the Rajasuiya and their right as overlords," Yudhishtira told us.

"Duryodhana is not too pleased, but with even his generals giving him the same advice, he has given up on that idea. We need to be doubly careful now – uncle Vidura thinks he is planning something to cause us more grief."

Arjuna and I took to spending long hours in the forest, scouting the area around our camp, and paying particular attention to that part that buffered us from Hastinapura. Even so, when trouble came it caught us off guard.

We were about to sit down to dinner one evening when a group of some half dozen soldiers in Duryodhana's livery came rushing into camp. Arjuna and I grabbed up our weapons and confronted them, but it was soon clear that they had come not to hurt us, but to beg for our help.

Duryodhana, Dushasana, Karna and a few others of the Kauravas had decided to go on a picnic in Kamyaka, they said. Under Yudhishtira's questioning, they admitted that the Kauravas had brought with them a band of hand-picked troops, and were hoping to provoke a clash with us. The plan was for them to 'accidentally' stumble on us, and the soldiers had been ordered to be alert to any pretext to pick a fight.

On the way they chanced upon some local king who was out for a hunt, and thought it would be good sport to capture him. The king, who they identified as one Chitrasena, had a large force camped nearby – before they knew it, the Kauravas had been surrounded and taken prisoner. Chitrasena was planning to take his captives back to his kingdom next morning, and hold them to ransom.

Please help, we have no one else to turn to, the soldiers said. Our Yuvraj, your cousin, is in trouble.

Yudhishtira looked at me. "Bhima, son, you and Arjuna should go and rescue our cousins."

Arjuna laughed out loud. "Uncle Vidura had warned you that the Kauravas were planning some mischief against us," he told Yudhishtira. "They cheated us out of our kingdom; they insulted Draupadi in open court and not content with forcing us to lead this miserable life of exile, they came here to do us more harm. They must have reckoned that since there are only five of us, they could somehow provoke a fight, kill us all, and then go back and claim that we had attacked them. Help them?! Brother, you are mad!"

"Arjuna is right," Nakula said. "You told us we should honor our bargain and not go to war with the Kauravas – okay, that is your decision and we honor it. But why should you risk the lives of our brothers by sending them against an army capable of capturing Duryodhana and Karna and their forces?"

"Child," Yudhishtira said, in his usual patient way, "we have our own quarrel with our cousins, but we should never forget that both Kauravas and Pandavas are part of the Kuru clan. For some unknown tribal chief to take Hastinapura's Yuvraj captive is an insult to our clan that we cannot ignore and it is Hastinapura, our kingdom by right, that is diminished."

"I think I know who this Chitrasena is and if it is the person I am thinking of, then he is no unknown tribal," Arjuna said. "I think he is the nephew of Chitravahana, king of Manipur."

"Oh – your wife Chitrangadha's cousin?" Yudhishtira nodded, thoughtful for a moment. "Think about this for a moment from the point of view of statecraft. If Chitrasena is related to Arjuna by marriage, then he and Bhima are in no real danger. If we rescue Duryodhana and the others, think of the message that will send out: that the Kauravas with all their might needed the exiled Pandavas to come to their rescue."

"Our time of exile is nearing its end, and we will soon begin looking for allies for the war against the Kauravas that will follow. There are many kings who are not committed to either camp, kings who will jump on the side of whoever they think is stronger – when they hear of this incident, they will think twice before aligning themselves with the Kauravas, and many of them will come to our side."

Valuing personal strength as I do and not being inclined to clutter my thinking with all kinds of vague notions of *dharma*, my attitude towards Yudhishtira was invariably one of mild contempt. Once in a while, though, my brother demonstrates why it takes more than physical courage to be a king, and earns my grudging respect.

This was one of those times. "Yudhishtira is right," I told Arjuna. "This is the right thing to do; you and I need to go there now and free Duryodhana and the others before Chitrasena marches them off to his kingdom."

"If you say so, brother," said Arjuna, who made no secret of the fact that after Krishna, it was my opinion that mattered to him, even above Yudhishtira's. "I'll go, it doesn't need both of us," he said and, picking up his bow and quiver, strode off into the forest.

It was late next evening before he returned, with Chitrasena for company. Behind them, their hands tied behind their backs and pushed and prodded by a group of soldiers, walked Duryodhana, Dushasana and Karna.

"I wanted to release them in your presence," Chitrasena told Yudhishtira, after bending to touch his feet. Turning, he gestured to his men to cut the prisoners free. "I've already asked my people to free their troops."

Yudhishtira went up to Duryodhana and embraced him. "Go, my child – don't let your anger goad you into doing foolish things," my brother said.

Without a word, Duryodhana turned around and walked away, followed by his brother. Karna paused for a moment at the edge of the clearing; he glanced across at Draupadi, who was watching from the doorway of my hut and then at Arjuna. His eyes blazed with a hatred he didn't bother to hide; abruptly, he turned and walked off down the path Duryodhana and Dushasana had taken.

Chitrasena waved at a group of his men who were waiting at a distance; at his signal, they marched into camp, bearing large platters heaped with food and several dozen goatskins of sura. At Yudhishtira's invitation, the Manipur prince sat down with us for the evening meal.

"My uncle had heard from his spies that Duryodhana was planning to attack you," Chitrasena told us. "He asked me to take my troops and hide out in the area, and to be ready to intervene if you were threatened. It just happened that Duryodhana found me first."

We ate and drank and talked late into the night. Long after the others were done, I sat near the campfire, sipping from a goatskin. And when I finally went off to my hut, I found Draupadi awake and waiting...

Episode 45

Yudhishtira spent all morning with the latest hermit to wander into our camp.

I had long gotten used to my brother's ways – but we were rapidly nearing the end of our 12th year, and with so much planning to do and preparations to make, the thought of my brother whiling away his time in endless discussions of dharma and karma was beginning to irritate me.

The time for action was near, and here was my brother seated cross-legged under a tree, fingers stroking his long beard, murmuring about god knows what with every mendicant who chose to wander into our camp in hope of a free meal.

As soon as this latest specimen left, I walked over to where Yudhishtira sat.

"Duryodhana has performed a grand *yaga*," my brother said, forestalling the protest I was about to make. "Several kings attended, and they have all promised him support. Now he has sent Karna as his emissary, to tour the country drumming up support – it is almost like a Digvijaya, though they are not calling it that."

As I listened in growing astonishment, my brother listed the names of the kings who had attended the *yaga* in Hastinapura, the ones who had promised support, and the ones who had not.

"The man who was here is a paid spy I employ," my brother said, with a sly laugh as he caught the look on my face.

"These saints and hermits make the best spies – no one stops them, they are welcomed every where, they can mingle with the people and with courtiers and kings with equal ease, and when they come visiting us no one thinks anything of it, because I'm supposed to be this weakling, always immersed in matters of philosophy."

I was taken aback by the far-sightedness of this man who was born to be king. Apparently he had, over the years, built a far-flung network of spies in the guise of religious men, all of them paid for by Krishna as per an arrangement Yudhishtira had worked out with our cousin.

"Krishna paid a casual visit to King Virat and requested him to give employment to some old retainers of Yudhishtira who, after the Pandavas were driven into exile, have fallen on hard times," my brother told me. "He sent me a message about what jobs each of us should apply for, we'll discuss all that later, at dinner."

"But if five of us and one woman land up at the king's court the day our year of hiding begins, surely it will be easy for Duryodhana's spies to spot us?"

"That is why it won't be five of us, but 20. Some of Krishna's people will also get there at the same time, asking for jobs," my brother said. "Don't worry, it has all been planned out well."

My brother set off early next morning saying he was going to visit a nearby hermitage. "Is that all he thinks about?", a clearly irritated Arjuna asked.

"Let him go," I told my younger brother. "He knows what he is doing."

The two of us walked off together. Since his return, Arjuna had taken to spending long hours by himself in some remote part of the forest, perfecting his mastery of the newly acquired weapons. For my part, some days I hunted for food, but increasingly, I preferred to leave that to Nakula and Sahadeva, and spend time building my strength and speed, and practicing with my mace.

That day, I decided to run down rabbits, as Hidimbi had taught me to do so long ago—there was no better way to build stamina than chasing these agile creatures through the twisted paths of the forest.

I almost missed the first faint scream. The second made me abandon my chase and hastily clamber up a tall tree, seeking a vantage point from where I could see all around.

What I saw made me tremble in rage. A chariot stood in a small clearing a little way away from our camp. As I watched, a man in royal robes was dragging Draupadi onto the chariot, while her maid ran screaming towards our camp.

I stayed where I was, watching as he manhandled Draupadi onto his chariot and then jumped in, holding her hands in one hand and grabbing the reins with the other.

The chariot took off, and once I was sure of its direction, I skimmed down from the tree top and hit the ground running, racing along the forest paths on a course to intercept the abductor. From my long hours spent hunting and running down rabbits, I knew these trails better than anyone – and in this dense forest, there was no chance a chariot drawn by four horses could get up enough speed to outrun me.

I took up a stand at a bend in the trail and as the chariot took the corner, I jumped into the middle of the path, roaring out a war cry with all my pent-up fury. The horses took fright and checked in their rush; as the man fought to control them, I jumped onto the chariot and in one motion, picked him up and hurled him out onto the forest floor.

Draupadi seemed terrified, but unhurt. I grabbed the reins and fought to control the horses; when I had them back under control, I looked up and saw Arjuna at the other end of the trail, bow drawn and arrow aimed at the abductor.

“Wait,” I told my brother. “Don’t kill him yet – he seems to be a king of some sort, let’s find out who he is.” To this day, I have no idea why I checked Arjuna’s arrow, and on many a night, as grief and rage kept me awake, I have cursed myself for that folly – and for the bigger folly my elder brother was to commit.

I tied the abductor’s hands behind his back with a length of jungle vine and bundled him into the chariot. We drove back to camp, and came upon Nakula and Sahadeva who, hearing the screams of the maid, had come running back to camp and were about to set out in search of Draupadi.

Yudhishtira returned late in the afternoon. “Jayadratha!” he exclaimed, when he caught sight of our captive. “What is he doing here? Why have you tied him up?”

Jayadratha! So this was the king of Sindhu – and husband of Duryodhana’s only sister, Dusshala.

Draupadi, still simmering with anger, told our brother of how she and her maid had gone off into the forest to look for fresh flowers for the

daily puja. Jayadratha had apparently mistaken them for tribal women, and sent a servitor to summon them to his presence.

When Draupadi abused the man and sent him away, Jayadratha had driven up in his chariot. On learning who Draupadi was, the Sindhu king only laughed. "So much the better, you have had five men, what is one more?" he had taunted her as he dragged her into his chariot.

"He deserves to die," Arjuna said. "I was only waiting for you to return."

"No, child, let him go – we cannot be responsible for making a widow of our only sister," Yudhishtira said.

My brother's notions of justice are strange, I thought to myself – when a Jadan tried to abduct Draupadi, he was angry with me for letting him go; now he was the one recommending mercy. Clearly, justice depended on who you were – death for a tribal, mercy for a royal committing the identical crime.

I bit back my anger, and stayed silent. Nakula, however, was in no mood to listen. "He cannot be let off scot free," he told Yudhishtira.

Nakula and Sahadeva forced Jayadratha onto his knees. While Sahadeva pulled his head back, Nakula took out his hunting knife and brutally, with no regard to the pain he was causing and the blood that trickled from his bruised scalp, chopped away Jayadratha's hair, leaving just a tuft in the center.

"Enough!" Yudhishtira commanded. Going up to Jayadratha, he raised him to his feet and removed his bindings. "Go!" my brother told the king of Sindhu. "Tell Dusshala we enquired about her well being."

Jayadratha stood in the center of the clearing for a long moment, staring at each of us in turn. Without a word, he climbed onto his chariot and with a lash of the whip, sent the startled horses plunging down the forest trail.

I was drifting off to sleep that night when an image came to mind, sending an involuntary shiver down my spine: the vision of Jayadratha's eyes as they fixed on us that afternoon in the clearing.

Flat, cold eyes, like those of a snake poised to strike.

At that instant I knew, with absolute conviction, that we had made a fatal mistake; that one day we would pay a terrible price.

Episode 46

It was as Vallabha, the one-time chief cook in Yudhishtira's kitchen at Indraprastha, that I sought a job with the king of Matsya.

We had gone in ones and twos to Virat's kingdom over the last week of our 12th year, mingling with the people Krishna had sent to seek employment.

Nakula had parlayed his skill with horses into a job at the royal stables; Sahadeva, who had no particular skills outside of his talent for organization, found work in the vast cattle sheds belonging to the king, who ran a 45,000-head herd.

Arjuna came to the court two days after me, in the guise of the eunuch Brihannalla, and was hired to teach Princess Uttara the arts of song and dance.

His choice of disguise provided the rest of us considerable amusement during our last days in exile. He argued that he had to find a disguise that could hide his arms, which all too clearly bore the markings of the ambidextrous archer he was. No matter what position he occupied, those signs would mark him out and would be too visible to such of Duryodhana's spies who came looking for us in Matsya.

Draupadi taught him how to dress in female attire; she also tutored him on how to walk like a woman, with that roll of the hips that on her was seductive but which, when he tried it out, convulsed us with laughter.

"Exaggerate it," Draupadi advised him, demonstrating as she spoke. "For us women, it comes naturally, but when a eunuch walks it is a more deliberate roll."

Draupadi had transformed herself into Malini, the one-time *sairandhri*, maid-servant, to Draupadi, queen of Indraprastha, and was taken on as maid-companion to Queen Sudeshna.

It was Yudhishtira who had the best job of all: he became Kanka, a man learned in the Vedas and skilled in the game of dice. Krishna had suggested this ploy after discovering that Virat was a compulsive gambler.

"I hope he doesn't stake us when he runs out of things to pledge," Draupadi sniffed when she heard of the plan.

In the black robes of the palace cook, covered head to foot in soot and dust, I was reasonably sure of escaping scrutiny. Though the palace kitchens operate almost non-stop, I still managed to find enough free time to sneak out for accidental meetings with Nakula and Sahadeva, and even to go into the inner chambers on the pretext of delivering something or the other, so I could snatch a few moments with Draupadi and check on her well-being.

At first, she seemed reasonably content with her lot. The queen had grown fond of her, she told me during one of our meetings, and increasingly treated her more as a favored companion and friend than a maid. But one evening some seven months into our stay, she sought me out in a mood of considerable perturbation.

"The queen's brother has been visiting her a lot these last few weeks," Draupadi told me. "I don't like the way he looks at me."

"Nothing remarkable in that," I told her. "Beautiful maidservants have always been fair game for princes – in fact, I know that Duryodhana and some of our other cousins installed their favorites as Dusshala's maids."

"I'm not surprised by anything the Kuru men do," she sniffed. "Such things never happened in the kingdom of Drupada, though."

That's not what Dhristadyumna told me, I thought, and just managed to stop myself from voicing my thoughts out loud.

"Since the queen is so fond of you, why not drop a word in her ear?"

"Sudeshna is very fond of her brother and more than that, she is scared of him and won't deny him anything," Draupadi said. "When he comes visiting, it is she who insists that I be the one to serve him – what is the point of complaining to her?"

It's not for much longer now, I consoled her. "Anyway, what can he do to you? You are always with the queen and with other maids—it is not as if you are alone with him."

"Luckily, he travels most of the time," she shrugged. "Anyway, what news of the gambler?"

"It is not quite so easy for a lowly cook to meet the king's favorite confidante," I told her. "But Kanka seems to be using his time well – over these past few months he has won a considerable amount from the king, he told me."

"Yes, well, if the king were to wager his kingdom and lose, that would solve a lot of our problems," Draupadi laughed, as she slipped away down the corridor to rejoin the queen.

The work in the royal kitchens was heavy, and the food not as great as you would think – it was the chief cook who decided who ate what and how much, and he seemed to go out of his way to be rude to me. It was easy enough to understand: Matsya was not as big a kingdom as Indraprastha had been, and he must have been worried that my reputation as Yudhishtira's former chief cook might lead to his ouster.

Relief from boredom came in the form of a group of wrestlers from a neighboring kingdom, who came to challenge the men of Matsya. Their arrival was the excuse for a festival of sorts, with much drinking and wagering; no one really seemed to mind that the local wrestlers were proving to be no match for the visitors.

One alone among the visitors refused to take part in the contests. He stood aloof, watching the various bouts with a contemptuous expression; he hadn't, he told anyone who would listen, found anyone among the Matsya warriors to match him in strength and skill, and he didn't want to accidentally kill someone.

When word of his thinly veiled taunts spread through the crowd, some of the cooks in our group laughingly suggested that I should challenge him. Jimuthan – that was the name of the visiting wrestler – was some five fingers taller than me, but I thought we were otherwise well-matched. I had no intention of challenging him, though – if I won, word would spread quickly as it always does when noted champions are defeated and new ones are created. And from there to being discovered by Duryodhana's men was a short step.

I hadn't reckoned with the chief cook, who that evening boasted to the king that he had someone who could fight Jimuthan. I suppose he must have thought this was a simple way to get me killed, or at least make me lose favor.

Next morning, I received a summons to the royal presence. "I learnt some wrestling when I was young, but after becoming a cook, I haven't been able to practice the art," I told the king in response to his question.

"Never mind," he said. "Just get in the ring with him. You can grapple with him for a bit and then admit defeat – he is after all a noted champion, there can be no shame in your losing to him."

With no excuse to offer and nowhere to hide, I entered the ring and challenged Jimuthan to a bout. He stepped into the ring and looked me up and down. "At least this fellow can give me a few minutes of exercise," he told his comrades, all of whom dutifully laughed uproariously.

As wrestlers will, he then began boasting to me of all the champions he had downed in combat. I had nothing to say for myself – at least, nothing I could say without giving away my identity.

When he was done boasting, he stalked up to me and swung an open-handed slap at my face. We wrestlers sometimes use such blows at the start of a bout to test the opponent's speed of reaction; I deliberately slowed my responses, allowing him to hit me a few times before we closed.

Spectators love the thrill of the locks and throws and punches and kicks, but for us wrestlers, this is the point where the excitement is highest. The moment when you are locked head to head, shoulder to shoulder, arm to arm, chest to chest, with your legs splayed for balance and your strength focused in your upper body, testing the opponent's strength and skill before the actual combat begins: that is when you learn all about the man you are facing, and decide on your own strategies.

Sometimes a wrestler will meet you with his legs spread sideways and his entire strength concentrated in his upper body as he strains towards you. At such times you know that his preferred mode of attack will be to try and force you back, or get your neck in a lock, or any one of a dozen other attacks that depend on upper body strength.

Jimuthan stood with his right foot advanced and bent at the knee, while his left foot was stretched back. Subtly, I shifted my own use of force; where I was straining outwards to meet his shoulders and chest, I adjusted my own position to gain a little height and pushed down. I realized from the way he reacted that his right foot was just touching the ground for balance – it was the left that was taking all the strain.

I smiled to myself. He clearly was readying to use his right foot in a sweeping blow to my ankle, designed to cripple me and leave me at his mercy – one of the oldest moves in the game, and one I have used many times in practice and combat. I would have dearly loved to prolong the bout: in the eight months or more of my time in Virat's kitchens, I had no opportunity to practice. But I decided I had to end this quick—the less I revealed of my real strength and skill, the better for our chances of remaining undiscovered.

I waited for the precise moment when I felt his weight shift as his right leg left the ground for the blow and, disengaging my right arm, I brought my elbow up into his face, smashing up into his nose from below. If used with full force, the blow would drive the bone in the nose back into the skull and kill the opponent on the spot—but killing was not part of my plan.

Even at considerably reduced force, the blow jolted his head back and broke the bone in his nose; in continuation of the same move, I clenched my fist and crashed the knuckles into his throat. Used well, the combination is almost impossible to resist – the pain as the bone in the nose shatters blurs the opponent's senses, and the blow to the throat cuts off his air.

My right hand shot out to grasp the cloth knotted at his waist; with my left I grabbed him by the throat and bending at the knee, hoisted him overhead. Rising up on my toes, I spun round in a circle and, flexing my arms, flung him several feet away. He hit the ground with a crash; I hit his back with my knee, got his neck in the crook of my arm, and gradually tightened the choke-hold till he drummed his hands and feet on the ground in a gesture of surrender.

A huge roar rose from the stands. The men of Matsya were tired of seeing their warriors defeated; I had felled the champion of the visitors and had become an instant hero. My fellow cooks came rushing out and swarmed over me, trying to lift me onto their shoulders and collapsing under my weight.

At his summons, I walked over to the royal stand and bent my knee to the king. "I got lucky, my elbow hit his nose when I was trying to change position," I told him, when King Virat complemented me on my skill. One of his servitors presented me with a bag of 100 silver coins.

From that day, life in the royal kitchens became considerably easier. The chief cook reversed his earlier hostile attitude, and took to heaping extra helpings of food on my plate and sharing with me his private stock of sura; and neither he nor the others protested when I sneaked away to meet with Nakula and Sahadeva, or with Draupadi.

Various maids took to visiting me late at night, ostensibly to ask about my welfare. After I turned the third one away untouched, word spread that Vallabha the wrestler-cook was impotent.

Draupadi laughed as she told me of this rumor. "One of the maids was telling me just the other day, what is the use of that fellow's big body and all that strength if he can't please a woman?", she said, running her fingers over my chest.

I smiled and shook my head when she asked why I had turned into a monk. How could I tell her that the reason I left the maids alone was because I knew they would gossip about it afterwards, and she would come to hear? It is not that I hadn't had women before, or that she hadn't known about them – but somehow it didn't feel right to indulge myself with the maids just now, when she was immured in the quarters of the queen with no solace from us, her five husbands.

Some weeks later, a soldier came to the kitchens with a summons. I was required to present myself before Keechaka, commander of the Matsya army and brother to Queen Sudeshna. I knew from Draupadi that he had been away for some weeks, visiting some kingdoms in the south, and had missed the wrestling bouts.

He was a big man, black as coal, with long, shaggy hair and the beady red eyes and hanging jowls of the debauch. He kept me waiting while he drank his fill from a flagon held by a pretty serving maid, then looked me up and down once and gestured that I could go.

"He will do," I heard him tell his men as I left. "Bring him to me when I next feel like a bout."

I walked away hoping that day would never come. To defeat a visiting wrestler is one thing, but to do harm even in sanctioned combat to the brother of the queen could create for me an enemy I didn't need.

I went to the stables, looking for Nakula. "He has gone off into the forest and won't be back for some time," one of the stable hands smirked. I wasn't surprised – a war of sorts had broken out, Draupadi had told me, among the many maids vying for the favors of my handsome brother. I strolled over to the cattle pens where I spent some time chatting with Sahadeva, and then wandered back in the direction of the kitchens.

The sound of running footsteps made me turn around. It was Draupadi. Her hair was in disarray, her clothes were disheveled, and she was crying as she ran towards me.

Episode 47

It was dark when I slipped out of the kitchens and, keeping to the shadows, made my way to the dance pavilion some distance away from the main palace.

It was here that in the early morning hours, Arjuna taught Princess Uttara and the other young palace girls the arts of song and dance. I pushed open the door and, by the dim light of a single lamp Draupadi had lit earlier in the evening, surveyed the hall.

Near the far wall was a luxurious couch for the guru to rest on; flanking in were two shelves laded with musical instruments of all kinds. Otherwise, the marble floor was bare, creating lots of space for the dancers.

I lowered the wick and, in the dim glow, made my way over to the couch to await the battle that would come.

I felt calm, ready for what was to follow. It had been a long time since I had fought, and longer still since I fought to kill. I welcomed the chance to test my readiness, to see if nearly a year of soft living in the kitchens of Matsya had blunted my edge. The opponent I awaited was strong and tough; the battle, I knew, would be fierce.

The soft creak of the door was my cue – I hastily stretched out on the couch and covered myself with a robe I had brought with me. The door creaked shut. I listened to the soft pad of footsteps coming into the hall.

“Malini?”

It was Keechaka’s voice. As I waited for him to come towards the couch I felt again, on the skin of my chest, the scalding heat of Draupadi’s tears as she told me of her abuse at his hands.

Queen Sudeshna had given her a silver jug of fine wine, and asked her to take it to Keechaka as a present from her. As she reluctantly made her way to his palace, she passed King Virat and his now inseparable

companion, my brother, sitting under a peepul tree, discussing god knows what.

Crying bitterly, Draupadi had told me of how she found Keechaka alone. Clearly, she said, he had been waiting for her – the plan must have been worked out with Sudeshna. When she went up to him with the flagon of wine, he slipped his hand around her waist and pulled her close.

"I fought – but he is so strong," Draupadi cried. "My robe came off; as I grabbed for it, he forced me onto his lap and started kissing me. The feel of his hands on my body..."

It was sometime before Draupadi could speak again. "I must have passed out from fear and rage. When I came to my senses, I was stretched out on the couch, naked, and he was lowering himself on top of me. I screamed out loud in my panic; he slapped me hard, laughed in my face and told me, this was his palace, there was no one to hear, no one to come to my aid.

"I managed to bring one hand up and rip my fingernails across his face. He roared in pain; I rolled off the couch, grabbed my robe and ran from the hall and down the steps. I was trying to wrap my robe around me as I ran – I tripped and fell down the steps."

As Draupadi lay there in the dust, Keechaka came storming down the steps. Grabbing her by the hair, he slapped her hard, uncaring of her screams.

"The king came up to where we were. He told Keechaka to stop making a public spectacle of his activities. Keechaka kicked me hard in the stomach, and walked back up the steps while I lay there in the dust, trying to cover myself. Your brother... the gambler... he just stood there beside the king, not saying anything, not making a move to help me..."

There was nothing Yudhishtira could have done, I tried to point out, without our real identity being exposed.

"So I am to be raped by anyone who feels like it?" Trembling with anger and grief, she broke free of my arms. "I don't care if people find out who we are, I don't care if we have to go into exile for another 12 years – I want him dead! Your elder brother will do nothing; your

younger brother is a eunuch, amusing himself with the young palace girls.

"If you don't do anything, if Keechaka is not dead by tomorrow, I swear I will kill myself in the palace courtyard – and before I die, I will announce to the world that I am Draupadi, daughter of a king and wife to the Pandavas. My brother will avenge me, if no one else will!"

It took me a long time to calm her down.

"Seek Keechaka out tomorrow morning," I told her. "Tell him you are scared that people will know and your reputation will be ruined. Ask him to meet you in secret, late at night, in the dance pavilion."

"Malini?"

Keechaka had come up to the couch.

"Mmm-mmm." I kept my voice as soft as I could.

He laughed softly. "I wasn't sure you'd come." He sat down on the couch beside me, and pulled away the robe I had covered myself with. His hand reached out and brushed my shoulder.

"Who are you?!" There was surprise in his voice, but no fear.

"Bheema. I am Bheema, the Pandava. The *sairandhri* you abused is my wife Draupadi. And for that, you die."

I jumped off the couch and stood waiting for him. I could have waited till he lay down beside me and with one quick move, snapped his neck – but I wanted him to know who he was facing; I wanted him to die knowing why.

Keechaka laughed. "I came here for enjoyment of one kind, but never mind – killing you will be fun enough for now and when I am done, I will go to my sister's palace and find that wife of yours—she will be mine, to do with as I please."

As he spoke he abruptly charged me, looking to take me by surprise. My bunched fist crashed into his jaw, halting his charge; before he could recover, I braced myself and smashed the heel of my right foot into his ribs.

He crashed to the floor, roaring in rage and pain. I charged him and, on the run, kicked him again, hard, in the ribs. He rolled away from me; I followed, landing on his chest with my knees, driving the air out of him as I grabbed at his hands.

A sudden, sharp burst of pain brought me to my senses. Keechaka had raised his head and clamped his teeth on the outside of my thigh, biting deep. Even as I felt the blood spurt, I shook off the waves of pain and, grabbing his right wrist with one hand and his elbow with the other, cracked it like a twig.

He screamed. I jumped to my feet, grabbing a fistful of his hair and pulling him up with me. I realized I couldn't afford to play with him, to take my time as I had wanted to – his death would lead to questions, and if I was found with visible marks of injury...

I pulled his left hand out and back and with a quick jerk, snapped it at the shoulder. With my right foot, I swept his legs out from under him and as he crashed to the floor on his face, I dropped down with him and, bracing myself with a knee in his spine, grabbed his shoulders and bent him back, ignoring the frantic thrashing of his feet on the floor.

His spine snapped. Blood gushed from his mouth; I wrinkled my nose at the sudden sharp smell as his bowels voided.

I walked over and opened the door.

"Draupadi?"

She slipped out of the shadows where she had been hiding and, gliding past me, moved into the room. Going up to the lamp, she raised the wick and in the light of the flame, stood looking down at the body of her enemy.

She turned to me. "You are bleeding!" She pushed me down on the couch and, tearing a strip of cloth off her robe, she worked to stanch the flow of blood.

"Tell me about the battle," she said as she stretched out beside me. "Tell me what he said when he came here, tell me what he did. Tell me how you fought him."

I told her.

"What happened when you broke his arm? Did he scream? Was he in pain? Tell me..."

The wick, starved of oil, guttered and died. Draupadi's inner flame had just begun to burn, and that night it burnt bright, insatiable.

Episode 48

The balladeers sang of a titanic midnight battle between Keechaka and a Gandharva whose wife the Matsya army commander had coveted during his travels.

It doesn't take much to spread such stories: a few coins slipped into the palm of a court singer, a few whispered words in his ear, and a new – and for us, convenient – fable was born.

Such fables then take on a life of their own. Within days, Matsya was full of people who had actually seen the Gandharva that night: a tall man, they said, handsome as all Gandharvas are known to be, whom they spotted that night stalking the streets, his eyes glowing red with fiery rage.

"It will serve to fool the townspeople," Yudhishtira pointed out during a few snatched moments. "But for our cousins, news that a warrior as notable as Keechaka was killed will come as a clear signal that you are in the vicinity. We need to keep an eye out for Duryodhana's spies."

As the days passed with no sign of strangers showing up and asking untoward questions, our vigilance slackened. And when trouble finally arrived at our doorstep, we saw no reason to connect it with our cousin.

A soldier came to the kitchens with an urgent summons from the king. I hurried to court, pushing a way through soldiers who seemed to be streaming in from all directions, all heading to the palace courtyard.

"We have been attacked from the north," King Virat said, adding to my surprise, "We will accompany you, but you will lead the army into battle."

It turned out that this was Kanka's idea – as the aging king mourned the loss of his commander in chief, Kanka suggested my name, and said I had trained with the armies of King Yudhishtira.

The raiding party, I learnt, had come in the night. It was led by Trigartha, a minor prince whose territory lay near the northern borders of Matsya. "Keechaka's death must have emboldened him," Virat said. "He has never dared interfere with our people before this."

They had driven away some 10,000 cattle housed in one of Virat's outlying sheds. When the stable hands protested, they had been cut down. Only two had escaped and one of them, bleeding from a sword cut, had rushed to court to inform the king. "There were nearly 200 of them, all armed," he told us.

I hurried to the arsenal and picked out a large cowhide shield, a sword and a bow, wishing I had time to go to where we had hidden our own weapons in the forest, and recover my mace.

By the time I reached the courtyard, Nakula was readying a chariot for my use, yoking four horses he had personally handpicked.

As I mounted the chariot and unfurled the war banner of Matsya, the soldiers gathered around me. From spending time in their camp, I knew them to be fierce fighters who tended to chafe at their inaction – Matsya was not a warlike kingdom, neither was it a target for external attacks, so the soldiers spent their days training and staging mock battles, all the while thirsting for the real thing.

"We don't have the facilities to house a lot of prisoners and in any case, I can't be bothered cooking for them," I told them, raising my voice to carry over the din. Such talk appealed to their instincts; I was rewarded with a huge roar of approval. "Our task is to recover our cattle, that is all – anyone who comes in our way, dies."

Nakula and I worked quickly to organize our forces and mount them on the huge war chariots, six archers and four spearmen to each. It was a much larger force than we needed to deal with 200 men, but it was no part of my plan to get drawn into a prolonged battle.

I picked out a veteran I knew the soldiers respected, and asked him to take charge of half the force. "The cows will slow them down," I said. "Take your men through the forest, circle around and come out in front of Trigartha's band, to cut off their escape. We'll hit them from the rear."

We drove out of the courtyard and built up speed as we left the town behind, but it was quite a while before we first spotted the huge dust

cloud raised by the cattle. Trigartha, who I identified by the standard flying on his chariot, and his men had formed a loose half circle behind the milling cows, and were driving them on.

Alerted by the sound of our chariots, the raiders turned, organizing themselves into a tight defensive formation. I signaled my men into an arrowhead formation behind me, and slowed down the pace of our advance, keeping just out of arrow range.

A blast of trumpets ahead of us indicated that the second group had circled around and were closing in from the front.. Their sudden appearance seemed to cause panic in the raiding party; I saw them trying to regroup, adjusting to the two-pronged threat.

I gave the signal; my charioteer whipped the horses into a flat run, driving the chariot straight at the center of Trigartha's group. Behind me the Matsya soldiers accelerated, roaring out their battle cry.

Balancing on the racing chariot, I notched arrow to string and pulling it back as far as the bow would allow, aiming for a soldier in the front rank of the raiding party who, from the way he was marshaling his men, was clearly a senior leader in Trigartha's army. The arrow took him in his throat where I had aimed for the chest; I realized that the bow, unfamiliar in my hands, threw high.

Dropping it, I grabbed up my sword and, as we crashed into the massed raiders, jumped off the racing chariot at a dead run and hacked left and right, felling people and horses as they scrambled to get out of the way of my chariot.

My men were right behind me, spears and swords out. The raiding party, hugely outnumbered, was in disarray. A few threw their weapons aside and were ruthlessly chopped down; the rest realized that surrender was not an option and banded tightly together, looking to go down fighting.

From where I fought in the midst of the melee, I saw Trigartha's chariot slip away, circling the milling cows and looking to escape into the forest. Forcing my way through the fight, I jumped onto my chariot and gave chase.

Nakula knows horses as few men do; the ones he had picked out for me looked unprepossessing, but under the charioteer's whip they showed an exceptional turn of speed. As my chariot caught up with the

fleeing Trigartha, I caught up my bow and, compensating for the higher throw by shifting my grip some four fingers lower, sent an arrow through the neck of his charioteer. Another arrow brought down the lead horse; the rest plunged and reared in confusion. As Trigartha fought to control them, I jumped off my chariot and onto his, the point of my sword at his neck.

"Let him go," Virat ordered, when I rejoined the main forces with my captive. "His men are all dead, and we have our cattle back."

The men were busy stripping the dead of their weapons and ornaments. Leaving a few soldiers behind to round up the cattle and return them to their sheds, we drove back to the palace in merry mood. The troops, happy at finally having seen some form of action, were roaring with glee and anticipating a long evening of drinking and telling tall tales of the way they had fought and the men they had killed; by the time they got done, today's brief skirmish would become a major war with thousands of soldiers opposing them, and each soldier personally accounting for dozens of the enemy.

We drove into the palace courtyard. I stopped my chariot and, rallying the men around me, praised them for their bravery. It was really just a little encounter; we had the enemy outnumbered nearly twenty to one – but soldiers thrive on praise and can never get enough of it. In any case, though I had trained rigorously at the head of the Indraprastha army, this was the first time I was leading troops into a battle of any kind, and I too wanted to revel in the moment of victory.

The men listened to me and cheered me to the rafters, and invited me to join them over a few skins of *sura*. They seemed to have forgotten that I was just the palace cook; I had led them and they had won, so they couldn't get enough of me.

"Let me wash the blood off; I'll come to the camp in just a bit," I told them, and was about to walk off towards the kitchens when one of the palace guards came running up.

"King Virat summons you," the guard said. "Kanka told me to tell you that the Kauravas have attacked."

Episode 49

The dust cloud approached rapidly, but at this distance it was impossible to tell if it was friend or foe. I halted the Matsya troops and quickly organized them into a defensive formation.

"It is the Matsya banner—this must be Prince Uttara returning," my charioteer, who was standing up in the chariot and peering into the distance, announced suddenly; at my signal, he whipped the horses and raced the chariot forward towards the advancing troops.

I was apprehensive – had been ever since I had learnt from King Virat that while we were off recovering our cattle from Trigarthan's raiders, Prince Uttara had led a section of the Matsya army against the attacking Kauravas.

"He has never fought a battle—he is just a boy," King Virat lamented, while ordering me to take our troops and rush to help. "And they tell me he has taken that eunuch, Brihannala, as his charioteer!"

That was at the insistence of Draupadi, who in her guise as Malini told Queen Sudeshna that Brihannala had served for a time as charioteer to no less than Arjuna himself.

I couldn't help laughing out loud at the sight: holding the reins of the lead chariot sat Arjuna, still dressed in the garb of a woman. The flowers braided into his hair, and the soft colors of his robe, presented an incongruous sight in tandem with the breastplate and arm protectors of the warrior. I noticed he had Gandiva, his favorite bow, slung across his shoulder.

"I have told them not to breathe a word of my part in the battle," Arjuna said, as my charioteer took over Prince Uttara's reins and Arjuna jumped into my chariot. "The Kauravas will have known it was me even with this disguise, but I thought it best for now to let Uttara pretend he had won the battle."

It was, Arjuna told me as we drove at a leisurely pace back towards the palace, a surprisingly easy affair. "Uttara was brash and boastful

when we set out, but once we left the palace he panicked, like I thought he would.”

Arjuna had driven the chariot to the grove in the forest where, before entering Matsya, we had hidden our weapons. They were tied neatly in individual bundles; I had climbed the tallest tree I could find and stashed them in the forks of branches.

I found a skeleton in the forest and with a rope, tied it to one of the lower branches so passers-by would see it. I learned later that locals had spread the story that the tree was haunted by the ghost of the person who had committed suicide – the story spread and so did the fear, to the point where no one would go near the place.

Armed with his favorite bow, and with his quiver packed with the weapons he had acquired during his travels, Arjuna handed over the reins to the young prince and directed him to drive towards the enemy.

“It wasn’t a very large army,” Arjuna told me. “Some 400 soldiers – they must have planned a quick raid to try and uncover us. But all the main warriors were there—Duryodhana leading, Karna, Kripa, Drona...” Bhishma was there too but he stayed in his chariot off to one side, watching but taking no active part in the battle.

“I wasn’t sure about the quality of the Matsya army, and whether they would take orders from me, so I decided to take the Kauravas by surprise. They were drawn up in battle array, clearly waiting for us to get within arrow range. I stopped just short, and shot a stream of fire arrows, the Agneyastra, and built a wall of fire just ahead of the Kaurava army. Their horses panicked; there was much confusion.”

Under cover of the flames Arjuna attacked the leaders, cutting down Duryodhana’s horses, then Drona’s. “The one who gave me the most trouble was Kripa,” Arjuna said. “The others proved easy to handle, but Kripa fought back and he was good – I had to kill his horses and charioteer with poisoned arrows, the Nagastras, and render him helpless before he gave up.”

It was the first opportunity my brother had to try out his newly acquired skills and weapons, and he was ecstatic at the outcome. “The Nagastra is okay, but the Agneyastra is key – just fantastic,” Arjuna said with the enthusiasm he reserves for talk of war.

"I hadn't realized it before, but it's not the fire alone that makes the arrows so deadly, it's the accompanying smoke. The powder you coat on the arrowheads produces clouds of thick black smoke – it hangs over the opposing army, confusing them, and lets you get closer and attack."

But it was his newly developed ambidextrous skill, Arjuna said, that paid the richest dividends. "You know how when skilled archers face each other, we organize our own defenses to counter the style of the opponent. All those hours of practice I put in during my wanderings paid off – I kept switching the bow from right hand to left, changing the angles of attack and breaching their defenses with ease. Duryodhana and Drona had no clue how to handle my attacks; they were among the first to retreat."

His duel with Karna, brief but intense, was what pleased Arjuna the most. "The *suta putra* ran from the field, bleeding," my brother laughed. "I was battling Kripa when he attacked me. I shot an Agneyastra between his horses. They panicked and before they could recover, I cut down the lead horses with poisoned arrows. He jumped off the chariot and fought on foot; I switched hands, cut down his bow, pierced his armor, wounded him high on the shoulder with that other arrow I showed you, remember, the one with a crescent head? I was getting ready to kill him with a Nagastra, when he turned and ran, like the coward he is."

We drove through the gates of Matsya and went our separate ways. Arjuna, who had removed his breastplate and armguards and given me his bow and quiver to hide, went back to his room in the ladies' quarters and I, suddenly assailed by the hunger pangs I had been denying in course of a very long day, slipped into the kitchens to see what I could find to eat.

Over the next three days, Matsya celebrated the triumph of its young prince. The king and courtiers fawned over Uttara and made him repeat endlessly the details of the battle; the ladies in waiting dimpled at him and fought each other for his favors.

To his credit, Uttara seemed embarrassed by all the unmerited attention. Arjuna later told me that the prince had sought him out, protested that he didn't deserve the honors being heaped on him and said he was going to tell the king the truth. At my brother's urging, the young prince reluctantly agreed to keep up the pretense for a few more days, and personally ensured that none of the soldiers who had

gone with him to fight the Kauravas spoke of what had actually happened.

On the afternoon of the fifth day, I was part of group serving a sumptuous celebratory lunch for the royal family and close retainers, when a messenger came rushing up with news that a half dozen chariots flying unfamiliar insignia had been spotted racing towards Matsya.

"Be ready to meet whoever it is with force, if need be," the king said to me.

"O King, I suspect you won't need force –if my guess is right, you will accord these visitors royal honors and make them welcome," Kanka, who was seated among the favored courtiers, said.

Minutes later, the royal herald entered the chamber to announce the arrival of Krishna of Dwaraka and his retinue. King Virat hastily rose to do the honors; to his surprise, Krishna went straight to Kanka and bent to touch his feet. He then accepted Virat's obeisance, and said, "Where is Brihannala?" Krishna asked. "Have your herald lead me to him!"

Satyaki, meanwhile, had also paid his respects to Kanka. Perfunctorily saluting King Virat, he ran up to where I stood among the other cooks and helpers. We embraced.

Episode 50

After 12 years of deprivation and a year spent in the soiled black robes of a palace cook, it felt good to have maids waking me up in the morning with hot water for my bath and fresh, clean silk robes to change into.

We had been installed in the palace of King Virat, who insisted that till our future course of action was decided, we would remain in Matsya as his guests. I thought it proper to let him know that I had killed Keechaka.

He took the news with surprising calm – in fact, I thought I even detected a sense of relief. “Keechaka was a hedonist, the bane of my life but he was my wife’s brother, there was little I could do,” he told me. “With him in charge, my army has had neither proper training nor a good leader. The men are loyal, and fierce fighters, but they need someone like you to teach them the arts and strategies of war. Now that you no longer need to hide who you are, it will please me if you could take charge of the army.”

We were seated in the king’s main audience chamber, waiting for Krishna, Yudhishtira and the others. The talk, once they took their places, revolved around whether the Kauravas had managed to uncover our identity before the stipulated period of exile was over. Would we need to start the whole twelve plus one cycle all over again?

“Don’t worry,” Krishna assured us. “I did all these calculations even before I left Dwaraka. You started your exile on the eighth day of the Sarvadhari Shravana’s dark phase of the moon, and your 13th year ended on the 7th day of the dark phase of the Plava Shravan – the night before the Kauravas attacked Matsya and were defeated by Arjuna.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, and I didn’t care much either. Even if we had been discovered before the end of our stipulated period, there was no way I would willingly accept another cycle of exile. Yudhishtira could talk of dharma all he liked, but I was done hiding and running – here on, it would be war, for revenge and to

recover what was rightfully ours. And I knew that if it came to that, Arjuna, and my two youngest brothers would be with me – and that is all I needed anyway.

The court astrologer confirmed that Krishna was right. “Duryodhana can argue that according to the solar calendar, he uncovered your identity one day before the 13th year ended – but it is the lunar calendar that we follow across the land, and Bhishma and the other acharyas will have done their own calculations, and they will know we are right,” he told the king.

At the king’s behest, Matsya celebrated the return from exile of the Pandavas. Our own celebrations were enhanced by an unexpected marriage proposal – and that was Krishna’s doing.

“King Virat has been a good friend to the Pandavas,” he told the five of us that evening. “We need to bind him to our side, and there is no better way than through marriage. I’ve seen Princess Uttara – she is beautiful, and just the right age to be married.”

Arjuna caught my eye and smiled – I should say smirked. He seemed sure that he was about to add one more to his collection of beauties.

“Uttara will be just right for Abhimanyu,” Krishna said, pretending not to notice Arjuna’s smile. “He will be here soon; I have already sent word to Dwaraka. He has grown into a fine young man – and without exaggeration, I can say that in the arts of war he is more skilled than his father, and both his uncles. You,” he said, addressing Arjuna directly, “were Uttara’s guru; it would be inappropriate for you to then accept her as your wife.”

Two days later, Drupada and Dhristadyumna arrived from Panchala. Yudhishtira, Krishna, Virat and Drupada immersed themselves in their discussions; Dhristadyumna joined Satyaki and me in working with the Matsya army, teaching them the arts of moving into the various formations, shifting at a signal from one formation to the other, and similar skills they were deficient in.

In these 13 years, Dhristadyumna had grown into the most impressive warrior I have ever seen – in physical stature he was my equal, and in all but hand to hand combat and wrestling, the young man was clearly my superior.

"They are thinking of sending a messenger to the Kauravas, asking that they give you half the kingdom as your share," Dhristadyumna told us the next morning. "It's a waste of time – Duryodhana will never give up an inch of the territory he has cheated you out of, but my father thinks this is the right thing to do."

Yudhishtira too believed that peaceful means had to be tried first. "War is always the last option," he told us that afternoon, when we met for a meal. "And besides, we have no certainty of victory in a war where the opposing forces are led by Bhishma, Drona and Kripa."

Draupadi seemed about to say something, but Dhristadyumna beat her to it. "Not going to war is even less of an option," he told my brother, not bothering to hide his disgust. "Everyone knows how you were treated. Even if you established another kingdom someplace, not one of the kings of this land will respect you if you do not face the Kauravas on the battlefield."

"And as for those gurus – this war will not be won by them," the Panchala prince said. "This war is our generation's, and we are the ones who will win it – Bhima and Satyaki and Arjuna and I."

Yudhishtira did not contest the assertion, but next day an envoy set out for Hastinapura with a message to Dhritarashtra from Drupada. "Messengers will go from here, they will come from there – these things have to be done, so no one can say tomorrow that the Pandavas did not explore all the options," Drupada told me, taking me aside as I was heading off after the usual morning conclave.

"But that does not mean that your preparations must wait. I have sent a messenger to Panchala; within days, a contingent of our most seasoned troops will be here, and they will help you and my son train the Matsya army."

Drupada had aged in these last 13 years – but he was still unmistakably regal, his authority unchallenged even by the Yadavas who deferred to him, while King Virat almost seemed a guest in his own palace, content to let Drupada do all the talking and even installing him on a throne placed next to his own.

When the messenger returned, we all gathered in the audience chamber. This was a professional – such men don't just carry messages, they act it out, infusing their words with all the authority of the sender.

"I went to Hastinapura and was received by King Dhritarashtra in the great hall," he told us. "This is what I told them, as coming from King Drupada:

"O Dhritarashtra, you know that you and Pandu are sons of the same father; your respective sons merit an equal share in the kingdom. And yet, you and your sons have systematically cheated the Pandavas out of what is rightfully theirs. You fobbed them off with wasteland; when they built a kingdom on it, you cheated them out of it with a crooked game of dice. In their name I ask – no, I demand – that you give the Pandavas their due, if you wish to avoid a conflagration that will consume your tribe."

Reverting to his normal tone, the messenger said, "As soon as I finished my words, the venerable Bhishma said you were right, and advised Dhritarashtra to offer you half the kingdom. But uproar then broke out; Karna shouted the loudest and with the Kauravas backing him, refused to permit Bhishma to speak. Finally, Dhritarashtra said he would send his reply in a few days; I was given food, and silk robes, and a purse of a hundred gold coins, and told to return."

It was a week before the messenger from Hastinapura arrived – and it proved to be none other than Sanjaya, Dhritarashtra's 'eyes' and his closest confidante. Virat welcomed him and had his retainers take him to a private chamber so he could rest after his journey. Sanjaya joined us for the evening meal, but it was in the audience chamber the next morning that he officially delivered his message.

"O Drupada," Sanjaya said, speaking as Dhritarashtra's voice, in the manner of skilled messengers, "my brother Pandu's children are my own, and I am happy beyond measure that they have survived their exile and are under your protection, and that of King Virat.

"I have no quarrel with you, Drupada. It is not to you but to my son Yudhishtira – for he is, and he knows he is, my eldest son – that I now speak. He knows that he lost all he had in a game of dice he voluntarily played; he was given the choice to accept defeat and withdraw with all his possessions intact – it was his decision to stake all, and having staked it all and lost it all, he knows no longer has the right to claim any part of it. He is the embodiment of dharma, of all that is right and good, and he will know this better than anyone.

"The forces of Drupada and Virat and Dwaraka and others, led by Bhima and Arjuna and Krishna and Dhristadyumna, can never be

defeated. But equally, a war against the forces of Hastinapura and our friends, led by Bhishma and Drona and Kripa and Karna and my second son Duryodhana will be disastrous for anyone who dares oppose them.

"My son Yudhishtira, I ask that you be patient, that you be tolerant, that you adhere to the principles of dharma that you have held dear all your life. I ask, my son, that you do nothing that will pave the way for the destruction of our tribe."

That was the message Sanjaya delivered in a ringing voice that reverberated around the audience hall – and at the end of it all, I had no idea what our situation was. Had Dhritarashtra accepted our demand for half the kingdom, or no? Was he counseling patience while he worked out the details?

"The message is simple enough," Dhristadyumna, seated beside me, said. "The old king is completely in the control of Duryodhana and his evil genius, Karna. They have no intention of giving you anything, of giving up anything they tricked you out of. Didn't you hear – Sanjaya said, in Dhritarashtra's words, that the Pandavas lost in a fair game and now have no right to claim anything."

Affecting the courtly manners he could assume at will, Yudhishtira thanked Sanjaya for his message and asked about the wellbeing of the king, and valiyamma Gandhari and our cousins. "We will discuss your message, and give you our answer tomorrow," Yudhishtira told Sanjaya, signaling to a retainer to guide him to his quarters.

A tinkle of anklets distracted me. I turned around, and saw that Draupadi had slipped into the audience chamber through a side door. She must have heard all that had transpired. Catching my eye, she looked at me long and hard, then abruptly turned and walked away.

I was not conscious of having come to my feet. "There is no need to wait," I heard my voice say. "We have nothing to discuss, our answer is simply this: Prepare for war, we come to claim what is ours by right, and to be avenged for all the wrongs that have been done to us."

Sanjaya stopped in his tracks; the hall fell silent. I felt the heat of Yudhishtira's stare, and I knew my brother would be angry. I had breached protocol; I had given an answer that was not mine to give, but his.

For once, I did not care for protocol, for my brother's anger, or even for what Drupada, Virat and Krishna thought of me. I had given my answer – and as far as I was concerned, it was final.

It would be war – and even the gods wouldn't be able to keep our cousins safe from me.

Episode 51

Drupada and Virat, heads together in rapt discussion, walked out of the assembly hall. As the rest of us began to leave, Yudhishtira caught my eye and signaled me to wait.

"We must try for peace at all costs," my brother told me when we had the place to ourselves. "I'm planning to send an envoy to Hastinapura with the message that war can be avoided if the Kauravas give us five villages – with that, we can start all over again, build a second Indraprastha."

Anger for me starts as a throb in the soles of my feet; I felt it burn its way through my senses to the point where I had to clasp my hands tight behind my back to keep from hitting something, someone.

"Who took that decision?"

I meant the question to come out calm, reasonable – but it emerged as a roar of disgust.

"I did," my brother said, with the control I had failed to find. "And if you intend to dispute it, then the war you threatened will start right here, right now."

I took a long, shuddering breath and fought back the bile-filled words that rose to the tip of my tongue – they were none of them the kind that could appropriately be spoken to an elder brother who was also my king.

I spun on my heel and stormed out of the room. The Matsya army would be in training; they would be looking to me to arrive and take my place at their head, but I was in no mood for farce. I headed straight back to my chambers, threw myself on the bed and called for *sura*.

The maid carrying a silver jug of alcohol arrived at the same time as a visibly pleased Dhristadyumna; it was he who took the jug from her and had a long drink.

"My spy just returned from Hastinapura," he told me. "Things are not going well there."

Dhritarashtra and Vidura had been engaged in an ongoing, and very acrimonious, argument ever since Sanjaya returned to Hastinapura, the spy had reported. Bhishma and Gandhari were on Vidura's side; they had both tried to persuade Dhritarashtra to overrule Duryodhana and to give us half the kingdom, including Indraprastha.

"When Bhishma argued in our favor, Karna in open assembly said something a bunch of old men who had attached themselves to Hastinapura, and were living well at the expense of the Kauravas while secretly espousing the Pandava cause."

There was immediate uproar, the spy reported. Drona and Kripa had taken offense at Karna's words; while Duryodhana struggled to pacify the two acharyas, Karna challenged Bhishma to a duel.

"Bhishma said Hastinapura had been his by right; that he had ruled as regent through the time of Duryodhana's grandfather, had defended it during the regency of Dhritarashtra and Pandu—it was beneath him to take up arms against the upstart son of the palace charioteer who had attached himself to a gullible prince, and who had been thrown a crown like you throw a dog a bone.

"God," Dhristadyumna chortled as he narrated the story, "I wish I had been there to see the scene. Apparently Karna stormed out of the hall, shut himself up in his chambers in Duryodhana's palace and has since refused to attend the assembly."

The Panchala prince had been spoiling for war ever since he arrived in Matsya; he clearly was pleased at the thought of dissension in the Kaurava camp at this critical moment. It seemed hardly the time to tell him that his sister would in all likelihood end up living in a mud hut in a small village somewhere. Besides, that was between me and my brother – I couldn't speak about it to an outsider, even one as close to me as this young man was.

"Oh, and guess who Dhritarashtra is most frightened of, even as he takes his sons' part?"

"Arjuna." That was an easy guess for me to make – my younger brother had just single-handedly routed the cream of the Kaurava

army; it didn't take a great leap of imagination to anticipate what he would do when backed by the full strength of the Pandavas and allies.

"No," laughed Dhristadyumna. "It's you. The blind king has been repeatedly saying that he is unable to sleep nights because in his dreams he sees visions of you picking out his sons, one by one, and killing them. Duryodhana has been trying to convince him that he can win with the mace against you – Bhima has been living the life of a hermit in the forest while he has been practicing under Balarama's tutelage, Duryodhana repeatedly reminds his father, but Dhritarashtra is not convinced. The other day, my spy told me, the old king wept in open court as he recounted the umpteenth recurrence of this dream."

I sighed. Only one person in the world apparently didn't trust my strength and Arjuna's skill and the loyalty of our allies – unfortunately for us, that happened to be the brother who led us.

Finding me in no mood to share his exhilaration, Dhristadyumna took one last swig at the jug and went off to find Satyaki. I lay on my couch, my eyes on the ceiling and my mind endlessly replaying the many difficulties and dangers, the serial humiliations that had been our lot ever since our father died in the forest and we entered Hastinapura as young children all unknowing of what the future held for us.

I was woken up by a messenger with a summons to come immediately to the audience hall. Yudhishtira was there, seated on the throne in the absence of Virat and Drupada. Krishna and Satyaki were present, as were my three younger brothers. Dhristadyumna walked in just as I entered.

"I have decided to make one last bid for peace," Yudhishtira said once we were all settled in our seats. "And instead of sending a regular messenger, I have asked Krishna to go to Hastinapura and speak on our behalf – he will tell the Kauravas war can be avoided if they give us five villages for our own."

Krishna looked grim; from his expression, I deduced that this was not a task he welcomed.

"I want to hear your opinions," Yudhishtira said, his eyes fixed on me.

"I have no opinion," I said, and this time I was calm — judging by the expressions of the others as they listened to me, perhaps too much so.

"You are the eldest, it is your decision to make. Since your objective is the preservation of the race and not the avenging of our numerous wrongs, what is there for me to say? I am willing to work as Duryodhana's slave, if that is what you in your wisdom think will avoid war."

Krishna jumped up from his seat. "As war nears, the great warrior has second thoughts? Those are the words of a eunuch, not what I expected from the mighty Bhimsen!"

"If you expected anything better from the son of the impotent Pandu it was your fault, Krishna," I said, my voice even softer. "I am done – I have nothing further to say."

Krishna seemed about to say something more, but he must have spotted something in my face – something that hinted at things he was not aware of. He subsided.

"I agree with Yudhishtira," Arjuna said as our brother turned to him. "I am not worried about the Kauravas or by Karna – I know their caliber. But the thought of taking up arms against our gurus and our great grandsire – that has been troubling me no end."

Nakula never had an opinion about anything and even if he did, rarely voiced it in public. It was Sahadeva who strode out into the middle of the hall, his slender frame shaking with an anger he made no attempt to control.

"What manner of men are we that we sit here and talk of bargaining for peace with those who dragged our wife, the woman we had sworn to protect, into open assembly and in our presence, invited her to join Duryodhana's harem? She has lived for 13 years in the hope that when our exile was over, we would finally avenge that insult – and now the best you can offer her is the prospect of sharing our lives in some mud hut in a village?!"

"I have heard your thoughts," Yudhishtira cut in. "But I haven't heard anything to convince me to revoke my decision. Krishna will go to Hastinapura as our final envoy."

"The Kurus are not known for consulting their women or even for considering them!" Draupadi's voice, drenched in tears, cut into the strained atmosphere in the hall. I turned around and spotted her

standing behind a pillar – she must have been there all along, listening to our discussion.

As she walked into the hall, her eyes were fixed on me, a strange pity in her expression that made me wonder, and cringe. Ignoring Yudhishtira, she walked straight up to Krishna.

“So finally it is you, Krishna, who will go to the home of my enemies and ask for five villages as the price of my honor! You – who once told me that you would not rest content until the day I wash my hair with the blood of my enemies.

“This hair!”

With a flick of her hand, Draupadi tossed her long, luxurious tresses over her right shoulder so they hung in front of her, a curtain of the sheerest black. The hair I loved to run my fingers through, to weave flowers into during those moments when she was mine; hair she covered me with, like night itself, when she lay on top of me...

“It is this hair Dushasana grabbed that day as I sat in my chambers; it is by this hair that he dragged me into the midst of everyone. Since that day, I haven’t braided it to remind you – not my husbands, from whom I expect nothing, but you – of the insult I suffered. For 13 long years I haven’t shed a tear, because I did not want my tears to drown the fire of my anger...”

None moved, no one spoke as Draupadi, with a long shudder of sorrow, sank to the floor of the hall, her sobs like so many knives piercing our hearts.

Krishna lifted her up like a baby and, carrying her off to one corner of the hall, sat with her in his lap, wiping away her tears and speaking to her in a soft voice. Gradually, her face cleared; I even thought, though it could have been a trick of the light, that at the end I caught a slight smile on her face.

With a final word to him, Draupadi walked away without a glance for any of us. Dhristadyumna jumped up and ran out after his sister; Satyaki hurried to catch up with his friend and in passing, gave me a look of such unbridled contempt I did not know whether to shrink into myself or fell him with a blow.

"Since this is what you want, king, I go to Hastinapura now," Krishna said in a voice cold with fury.

I sat in the hall for a long, long time – long after the others had gone. It was the sound of considerable commotion in the courtyard outside that woke me from my reverie.

An elephant, trumpeting in rage, dominated the courtyard while several dozen soldiers and mahouts ringed it, striving futilely to bring it under control. I knew this one – it was one of the most ferocious in the Matsya stables, and the one I used when we trained with the army.

It was in masth; it took just one glance to spot what had triggered its frenzy. On its forehead, close to its right eye was a huge boil, its eye glowing red in the surrounding whiteness of the pus that strained to break out.

The old mahout who had been my instructor in the paddock of Hastinapura had told me that it mostly occurred when an elephant's sex drive was at its peak and it was denied; I used to think sometimes that it was a wonder I did not break out in masth during the four years when Draupadi lived with one or other of my brothers, and I waited my turn with growing impatience.

I ran down the steps and through the ring of soldiers surrounding the maddened beast. Some tried to stop me; I brushed them aside brutally and, grabbing a spear from the hands of one of the soldiers as he stumbled out of my way, tossed it in the air and caught it with the point facing down.

Seeing my approach, the elephant threw its trunk up and trumpeted in rage; its ears flattened and front knees bent slightly in the characteristic sign of an animal about to charge.

I roared, accumulated anger at my brother's meekness, at this latest humiliation piled on top of the dozens of others powering my voice. My arm went back; with the full strength of my shoulders, I threw the spear. It flew true, the brass knob at the blunt end striking the inflamed boil.

The elephant screamed in an explosion of pain and rage; its head lowered, its twin tusks pointed at me. In my own private frenzy, I ran

towards it, roaring my own defiance as I went. "You want to fight? You too think I am a eunuch born to a neuter? Come – try me!"

Animals have an extraordinarily sharp sense for fear – they can smell it on you even before you sense it in yourselves. But they also have the ability to sense killing rage, berserker violence and today, the elephant must have smelt it on me.

Its trunk came down; the tusks gradually rose as it swayed about where it stood, confused. Mahouts swarmed around it, hastily attaching chains to its feet while one distracted it with a huge bunch of bananas.

I turned and strode away, the roiling anger within me still seeking an outlet – and saw Dhristadyumna, Satyaki and Draupadi standing off to one corner, watching.

"So who was that anger really directed at?" Dhristadyumna smiled. I ignored him and brushed past; they turned and came behind me as I strode away.

"So it really is true." It was Draupadi's voice. "Bhima can battle a masth-maddened elephant bare-handed. I thought it was one of those tales court singers invent."

I turned to face them, and saw the laughter in her face. "It is a good thing you didn't take up your brother's challenge this morning in the assembly hall," she said, laughing openly now while Dhristadyumna and Satyaki smiled broadly.

I hadn't reckoned with Draupadi's knack of slipping behind pillars and listening in on our conclaves.

Stepping up close, she laid a hand on my arm, stroking softly, gentling me till I felt my feverish rage subside. "Hush! It is going to be okay – Krishna will take your brother's message, but he will deliver it in a way that will invite refusal. He told me what he was going to do – don't worry, when he returns, war will be inevitable."

It was a little over a week before Krishna returned. A messenger came with an urgent summons to where I was, working with the beast I had tamed that day.

Everyone was already assembled when I ran in, still covered in the muck of the paddock – Drupada, Virat, Yudhishtira, my brothers and Dhristadyumna, Satyaki even Prince Uttara.

Draupadi, for once, was seated in the hall and not hiding behind a pillar – I learnt later that Krishna had expressly demanded her presence when he delivered his message.

“O king,” Krishna addressed Yudhishitra, once I was seated. “I have no intention of going at length into all that transpired in the assembly hall at Hastinapura. I will not talk of the insults I personally endured at the hands of Duryodhana and others — that is my affair, and I will deal with it in my own way.

“Here in sum is Duryodhana’s message for you: Forget five villages, he will not even give you five houses to call your own. You want to hear his exact words? ‘I will not give up to Yudhishtira and the Pandavas as much land as can be covered by the head of a pin,’ he told me in open court, in front of his father and the assembled acharyas.”

It seemed to me Krishna had fulfilled his mission – only, not in the way Yudhishtira had expected. Later that evening, I took him aside and asked him how he had been so sure his mission would have only one outcome.

“Because I know the ways of the arrogant,” Krishna laughed. “I delivered the message Yudhishtira entrusted me with in his exact words, but my tone was that of a beggar. It was the tone of one speaking on behalf of cowards who would accept something, anything, rather than risk war – not for a statesman who seeks to avoid widespread devastation out of a sense of humanity, not fear. Someone as arrogant as Duryodhana would respond only one way to what he thought was a message born of fear.”

All eyes were on Yudhishitira, who sat there with his chin in his cupped palm. He sighed, and stayed silent.

Krishna stood in the middle of the hall, hands on hips, letting the silence build. By some strange trick of the imagination, he seemed to grow in size and heft to the point where he towered above us all – a dominant, daunting presence.

"I met your mother," Krishna said, breaking the silence as it stretched to unbearable lengths. She has a message for you, and I will give it to you in her own words.

"She says to you, Yudhishtira: 'My son, I will forgive, even forget, how the Kauravas poisoned my second son, your brother, and threw him, hands and feet tied beyond possibility of escape, into the river. I will forget how they tried to burn us in our beds, and I will pray to all the gods to forgive me the crime I was forced to commit that day, when I caused the death of an innocent woman and her five children. I will forgive the years of privation they forced you to endure; the 13 years that I have spent without sight of my children.

'But there is one thing I can neither forget, nor forgive. I will never, ever, forget the sight of Draupadi, my first and most beloved daughter, being dragged by her hair into the great hall at Hastinapura. I will never forget the sight of her standing there, clad only in one flimsy robe, and I will never forgive those who inflicted on her the humiliation of being exposed to the gaze of the multitude while her menstrual blood ran down her legs and puddled at her feet. The task of a king, Yudhishtira, is to protect his people – a king who could not even protect his wife, or avenge her humiliation, has no right to his name, even to his life'."

Krishna stared at Yudhishtira for a long moment before turning to where we sat. "Your mother entrusted me with a message to you, Bhima, and to you, Arjuna. To the two of you she says, 'My sons, it is your duty, your destiny, to put your elder brother on the throne of Hastinapura. I will not permit you in my presence until you have fulfilled that duty – no matter who tries to oppose you, friend or foe. You have my blessings.'

"And finally," Krishna said, "I have a message for Draupadi." Turning to her, he said, "Your mother tells you this: 'My child, my life is nearing its end. I will spend the rest of what remains counting the days till the day I can stand at the gates of Hastinapura and welcome you, its queen, and see you installed on its throne in the very hall where you endured what no woman can ever endure'."

"Those are the messages I bring with me," Krishna told Yudhishtira. "So, king, what is your decision?"

Yudhishtira sat in silence for long moments. "Abhimanyu's wedding..." he muttered, almost beneath his breath.

The silence dragged on. And then he stood, facing us all. His face was clear, his voice calm and even as he gave his decision in one word:

“War!”

Episode 52

The first order of business when preparing for war is to set up the cremation ground. Its location determines so much else – you don't want to site the army's tents too close, nor can it be located so far that the process of mourning the day's dead and attending to their last rites becomes too time consuming, keeping soldiers from their rest.

Our cremation area was located on the banks of a small river that branched off from the Yamuna. On the other side, adjoining the borders of Matsya, a series of wooden lodges were being constructed for the womenfolk. Draupadi, who had travelled to Kurukshetra with us, was already installed in one of Virat's hunting lodges near the border.

On our side of the river, a huge *yaga mandap* had already come up, with Yudhishtira's lodge situated right next to it. The priests, sages and hermits who would do the daily sacrifices and *pujas* were the first to arrive, and had already settled down in little grass cottages on the periphery of the *mandap*. A swarm of workers from Matsya, augmented by a contingent sent from Panchala, were engaged in putting up lodges for the main warriors and tents for the army.

A series of large warehouses had been constructed near the tree-line to stock our arsenal. Maces, swords and spears, cowhide shields, hundreds of bows and thousands of arrows were ferried on enormous ox carts from Dwaraka and Panchala where, under orders from Krishna and Drupada, metal workers had been engaged in building an armory for the entire year that we had spent in exile.

A day after our arrival at Kurukshetra, the five of us gathered at the *mandap* at Krishna's behest to discuss the central question that would impact on all our preparations. Assembling to fight on our behalf were soldiers from Kasi, Kekaya, Matsya, Panchala, Chedi, Pandya and Mathura – armies that had fought under different flags and different commanders, and must now learn to fight as a unit under one single leader.

The question was, who was best fitted to lead?

Sahadeva proposed that Virat should lead us. The Matsya monarch had treated us on par with himself from the moment our identities were revealed, he pointed out, and had supported us with men and materials.

I agreed with all of that, but did not think that these constituted good reasons to name Virat as commander in chief – he was, all said and done, king of a land that lived on fairly amicable terms with its neighbors and, as a consequence, did not have much experience of large wars.

Nakula, in his deliberate fashion, thought long before advancing the name of King Drupada. The Kaurava forces, he argued, would be led by patriarchs like Bhisma and *acharyas* like Drona and Kripa; only Drupada among us had the stature and the gravitas to lead against such venerable men, he argued.

A good suggestion but again, I didn't agree. From our spies we already knew we would be outnumbered by the Kaurava forces. What was needed was not measured majesty, I said with all due respect to Drupada, but a young leader schooled in the arts of war, one who would attack ferociously at every opportunity, and who was no respecter of persons and reputations.

"So who do you suggest?" Yudhishtira asked.

"Shikandi."

It was during Abhimanyu's wedding celebrations that I had first seen this eldest son of Drupada. Our celebrations were wild, all the more unfettered for knowledge of the war to follow. Shikandi alone was unmoved, untouched by the general revelry. I found myself strangely drawn to this tall, lean, bronzed warrior who carried his weapons even in the wedding hall and who stood aloof, removed from the rest of the revelers.

In the days following the wedding, I observed him at practice and recognized him for a master of all weapons, all forms. But above all, it was his eyes that struck me: cold, dead, unblinking eyes of one to whom killing was both passion and joy. He had, Dhristadyumna told me, wandered the earth as a mercenary hiring himself out to any king who needed his services, and had returned to Panchala only because he wanted to be a part in what he knew would be the ultimate battle.

"All the three names have merit," said Krishna. "But I have another name to propose. I agree with Bhima – against an army led by Bhishma, Drona and Kripa, we need a leader who is young, someone who has mastered the strategies of war, who knows when to hold and when to attack, and is skilled to spot opportunities and switch strategies at an instant's notice.

"Shikandi is eminently qualified, but I have seen something of him on the field. He is a loner who is most effective when left unencumbered, to roam where he will and cause devastation as he sees fit. The person I propose is his younger brother and, to my mind, the finest warrior of us all: Dhristadyumna."

None of us had considered the Panchala prince as a possible commander, but when Krishna named him, we broke out in spontaneous acclamation. Yudhishtira summoned the priests, an auspicious time was picked and next morning, Dhristadyumna was formally installed as commander in chief of the Pandava forces.

Soldiers continued to pour in from all corners. Nakula and Sahadeva busied themselves with the task of settling them down, organizing them in units, identifying their leaders, setting up meetings between them and Dhristadyumna.

Arjuna engaged himself with the arsenal, examining the weapons as they came in and paying particular attention to the ones he had studied on his travels, the designs for which he had passed on to Mayan before we went into hiding.

My concern was with the chariots and the elephants. A group of iron workers in Dwarka had, on my urging, been working to create hubs that would fit over the chariot wheels. These hubs were fitted with large-bladed, two-edged swords; driven at speed into the massed ranks of the enemy, the swords would churn through flesh and cause enormous havoc, but care had to be taken to make sure the hubs, when fitted, didn't affect the maneuverability of the chariot and hinder the warrior's ability to fight from its platform.

When I got back to my little lodge, I found an unexpected visitor waiting for me. "You look older at 35 than I do at 45," Visokan said with his usual mixture of insolence and respect, and it did my heart good to see him. I expected to fight mostly from a chariot; even if I was mounted on elephant-back I wanted my chariot close, so I could switch at will. A skilled charioteer adds immeasurably to your ability in

battle, and Visokan alone among all the charioteers I knew had the uncanny ability to anticipate the movements of the enemy and my own needs, and could operate without commands from me.

Krishna, no less, was going to drive Arjuna's war chariot – which had already arrived from Dwaraka, yoked to six horses of a pristine, blinding whiteness.

It was during his visit to Hastinapura that Krishna by default became Arjuna's charioteer. Duryodhana argued, cleverly I thought, that Krishna's role as mediator implicitly suggested neutrality. It was not thus seemly for him to then take sides in the conflict, Duryodhana argued, and when Dhritarashtra and Drona both added their voice to the argument, Krishna in open assembly swore he would not take up arms in the event of war.

By then, Duryodhana had already approached Balarama and got from him a pledge that the Yadava army would fight on the Kaurava side. Balarama however wanted no personal part in the conflict, and had decided to go on a pilgrimage once the war began. When Krishna returned to Matsya and told Arjuna of what had transpired, my brother co-opted Krishna's services as charioteer.

"There is someone waiting to see you," Visokan said.

For some reason I couldn't immediately pinpoint, the young man in princely raiment seemed very familiar. Even as I tried to recall where I could have seen him before, he came up to me and kneeling, touched my feet in obeisance.

"I am Sarvaga," the young prince said as I raised him to his feet.
"Your son. My mother is Balandhara."

I hugged him to me, tight – and mentally cursed myself. Even when Visokan told me he was coming from Kasi, it had never occurred to me to ask how Balandhara was, how my son was doing. We had wandered around the world, meeting and mating with women in various kingdoms and then promptly forgotten all about them.

It was as we travelled from Matsya to Kurukshetra that I had met Suthasoman, the son I had through Draupadi, for only the second time in my life. And Arjuna had failed to recognize Abhimanyu when he arrived for his marriage to Uttara.

Sarvagan was a boy, still, and yet here he was, my son, evidently come to do battle on my behalf. Kasi was so close, yet during our time in exile and even during the one year we spent in hiding and the weeks after we revealed our identity, it had never occurred to me to go there, to see the girl who had taken me as husband, and who had let me go with a smile on her face.

She walked into my lodge now with that same gentle smile – and the sight of her pierced my heart. We kshatriyas cannot afford to be blinded by affection; that is why we are so indifferent to those who love us, I told myself – but I knew I was lying to myself. There was something about me, some quirk that did not let me see beyond my constant obsession with Draupadi, and all the excuses I made for my neglect of Hidimbi and Balandhara were just that: self-serving excuses.

“I wanted you to meet your son first,” Balandhara said as she came up to me and touched my feet. She stepped away from me, looking from me to our son and back again, and I saw those laughing eyes dim with tears.

I invited mother and son into the inner room. “No,” Balandhara said. “You cannot be bothered with me now, you are here to fight a war. Our son will stay with the Kasi army.”

“And you?”

“I have a place to stay, in a lodge on the other side of the river,” Balandhara said, in the gentle voice that had captivated me all those years ago. “I am staying with Vidura – and your mother.”

“Mother is here?”

“Yes. Her sons and grandchildren are going to war for the sake of the family name and honor – where else would she be?”

“I will come with you back to your lodge. I can see you safe, and also pay respects to mother,” I said, calling on Visokan to bring a chariot around.

“No,” my wife said, with the gentle firmness that was so much a part of her. “Your mother thought you would say that. She said to tell you that she would see you and your brothers the day you win the war and install Yudhishtira on the throne of Hastinapura – not before.”

She nodded at Visokan, who hurried out to bring a chariot for her. I summoned a soldier from the group that guarded our lodgings, and ordered him to take Sarvaga to the lodge where Suthasoman and the other sons of Draupadi were staying.

Sarvagan touched my feet, and went out. Balandhara stood looking after him, then unwrapped a small package she was carrying. "Before a war, we of Kasi do a *yaga* for Durga, offer up sacrifices," she said. "I had a *yaga* done for you and for our son."

She took a pinch of blood-stained ash and applied a *tilak* to my forehead. "Every morning, as you go to do battle, apply this," she said. "Victory will be yours. And maybe, afterwards..."

Her voice broke; her face crumpled in tears. I tried to take her in my arms; she pushed me aside and hurried out without a backward glance.

Visokan helped her onto the chariot, took up the reins and cracked his whip. The horses jumped forward, but it was on my skin that I felt the sting of that lash.

Episode 53

The muted roar of an armed camp washed over me as I lay in the dark, yet I felt a strange sense of peace.

Tomorrow morning, the war would begin. Earlier in the evening, while doing one final check of my chariot and weapons, I had felt the crushing weight of the burden Dhristadyumna and Arjuna had placed on me.

Ever since taking charge as commander in chief, the young Panchala prince seemed to be everywhere at once. There was something about the ceaseless energy with which he moved from camp to camp, the commands and instructions he conveyed in the soft tone that was so much more effective than a raised voice, which marked him out as a born leader.

During the long hours of training, he had taken the measure of the various armies that had come to fight on our behalf, organized them in seven divisions and placed Drupada, Virat, Shikandi, Satyaki, the Kekaya king Chekitana and me in charge of each. He would personally lead the seventh division.

That morning, he summoned us to a final council of war – the six commanders, Yudhishtira and Arjuna. “The fighting on the first day will be tentative,” he said. “Both armies will be looking to feel each other out, to test each other’s strength. Our goal has to be to minimize damage, take the measure of the Kaurava army and learn all we can of their various commanders and battle strategies.”

Arjuna would, he announced, be in charge of deciding the daily battle formations. “He has traveled widely and has more experience than any of us,” Dhristadyumna reasoned.

On the first day, Arjuna said, we would fight in the crescent formation. With a fingertip, he sketched the formation in the sand, explaining the need to place the faster cavalry on the two curved sides of the crescent where they could use their speed to circle the enemy and

attack the flanks, while the elephants formed the solid center that would hold the enemy at bay.

"I will lead from the left side tip of the crescent, with Shikandi and Chekitana," Dhristadyumna said. "Arjuna will take the right side tip, and the forces led by my father, King Virat and Satyaki will support him. Yudhishtira, along with Abhimanyu and the other princes, will protect the rear from attack and press forward in support of the main armies as required."

The key to the formation, Arjuna explained, was the center. "As the armies on the crescent swing out on the sides, the pressure will fall on the center. I have spent enough time discussing war-craft with Bhismacharya to know how he thinks – he will create a formation with the main warriors in some form of massed center, using it as a ram to hammer the opposition, to overwhelm us. If our spies are right, the Kauravas have at least four divisions more than we do; the acharya will want to achieve an early advantage, so we can expect a fierce surge. The man who leads our center has to be able to withstand this concentrated assault, and create opportunities for us to attack from the flanks."

"Who will hold up the center, then," Yudhishtira asked, "if you and Dhristadyumna and the other commanders are off to the sides?"

Arjuna glanced at Dhristadyumna before replying. "Bhima. Who else is capable of resisting the combined might of the Kauravas?"

For the rest of the day, the knowledge of my role – and the confidence my brother and Dhristadyumna had in me — weighed like a stone even as I went about the business of stocking up on arrows, bows and strings, spare maces and swords and, with Visokan to help, organizing my arsenal efficiently in my chariot.

For all the pride I had in my strength and abilities, this was not personal combat or even a skirmish against a neighborhood raiding party. This was war against a far superior opposing force, and our chances for success depended on my ability to withstand its might.

I felt the first stirrings of doubt.

"Kesavan," Visokan interrupted my thoughts. "He will be your war elephant."

I knew the beast he had named – a fierce tusker that had come along with the contingent from the Pandyas in the south, not as large as some others in our stable but very quick and responsive. “I have organized two mahouts for your use; the elephant will be alongside our chariot at all times so you can switch at will.”

He left me with a small jug of *sura*. I lay on the grass mattress in the middle of the room, sipping from the jug and trying not to think of what I had to do, the burden I had to bear, when the next day dawned.

I did not fear death; I never had since that day in the forest so long ago, when I had stood paralyzed in the path of the charging boar. What frightened me now – and I realized fear was the right word – was the prospect of letting my brothers, my sons, my friends down.

An image spread unbidden to mind. The great hall of Hastinapura; Dushasana strutting around in the center, dragging Draupadi around by her hair; Duryodhana seated on his throne, slapping his thigh in lecherous invitation while Karna laughed and egged him on.

I felt a sudden, deep sense of calm descend on me. I slept.

Episode 54

The chest protector Visokan had procured for me from a supply the Pandya kingdom had sent over was unlike anything I had ever used before.

Made of specially treated cowhide and supple as a second skin, it moulded itself to the shape of my body. Though it permitted unfettered movement, it was tough enough to withstand spears and arrows except when the range was really close.

I strapped on the protector and arm guards made of the same material, and after applying the *tilak* of sandal-paste and blood-drenched *kumkum*, walked out of my lodge just as Yudhishtira drove up in his chariot, unarmed and heading towards the Kaurava camp to seek the blessings of the elders.

"It is Krishna's suggestion," he said, when I pointed out that Duryodhana's capacity for treachery was endless.

The priests had already performed their *yagas* to the gods. I walked over to the *mandap* and stood for a long moment in prayer. Maybe I was imagining it, but I felt the light caress of a breeze, and hoped the 'father' I had revered through my childhood, Vaayu, had come to be with his son in the war to follow.

Arjuna was also engaged in prayer. Though we didn't talk, I got the sense that all was not well, and the puffiness around his eyes suggested a sleepless night.

Visokan was waiting for me beside the war chariot I would be using – a massive vehicle drawn by six gray horses and flying my battle standard: a rampant lion with emerald green eyes. We drove towards Dhristadyumna's lodge, where the designated commanders were already assembled.

"I paid my respects to them all — Bhismacharya first, then Kripa, Drona, Shalya," said Yudhishtira, who arrived shortly after me. "They

all said the same thing — that if I had not come to seek their blessings they would have cursed me.”

Krishna smiled in satisfaction.

“They blessed me, said victory would be ours.” As Yudhishtira spoke, helpers busied themselves installing on his war chariot the ornate white umbrella that signified the presence of the king.

The army had begun to form up in the crescent prescribed by Arjuna. Visokan drove me to my appointed spot at the center of the formation. I jumped off the chariot and walked over to give final instructions to the *mahout* leading Kesavan my war elephant, and to the various captains of the division under my command.

As the first faint rays of the rising sun lit up the eastern horizon, conches blared and the big war drums boomed. I listened carefully to the beat, to the varying patterns that send signals across the line from commander to commander.

To the blare of trumpets, our armies marched forward onto the plain. As the massed ranks of the Kauravas came into view, a single conch blared from the extreme left of the field. Dhristadyumna had signalled the charge; the drumbeat picked up pace, acquired a sudden urgency.

As our forces raced across the plain, Visokan spotted Duryodhana’s chariot with the royal standard and white umbrella of the king and drove towards it.

A section of the Kalinga army charged forward to intercept me. Visokan accelerated, the horses responding instantly to his whip. The giant swords attached to the hubs of my chariot wheels churned through the flesh of opposing troops; the screams of the wounded drowned out the blare of conches and the beat of the drums.

The pungent smell of fresh blood swamped my senses; firing arrows from the deck of my chariot seemed too impersonal to slake the sudden killing rage that welled up inside me.

Hopping down from my chariot with mace in hand I plunged into the middle of the opposing forces, uncaring if my men were with me. The thump of mace on skull, the sharp sounds of bones cracking under my onslaught fuelled my frenzy. When I felt my arms tire, I spun around and forced a way back to my elephant; mounted, I guided him into the

middle of the Kalingas and realized that Visokan had chosen well — Kesavan responded with a berserker fury that matched my own, trampling everything that came before him as I stood on his back and rained arrows down on the opposing troops.

Time lost all meaning. Somewhere in the periphery of my mind, I sensed that all was not well with our right flank. When a formation is holding, the pressure created by the opposing forces is spread evenly across the line; when you feel pressure intensifying from any particular direction, you know that out there somewhere on that flank, there is a problem.

All the strategies and tactics I had learnt under Kripa and Drona seemed so pointless now. From where I stood, I had no sense of how the larger battle was unfolding – before me, in the here and now, there was only the next throat to pierce with an arrow, the next head to crush with my mace.

A sudden blare of trumpets, starting on a high note and descending into a thin wail, woke me from the trancelike state of close combat. It was dusk; by the rules of engagement worked out by both sides, it was time for the day's fighting to end.

Our forces reversed direction and marched back in the direction of the camp; as we hurried to where food and rest awaited us, wagons rushed past into the field of battle to carry the wounded back to camp and the day's dead to the cemetery.

I headed for Dhristadyumna's lodge. Krishna, Arjuna, Shikandi, Drupada and Satyaki had already gathered there. Arjuna sat by himself in a corner, looking downcast.

"Uttara is dead," he told me.

The Matsya prince had engaged Shalya's forces in a terrific battle. "He fought with rare courage," Yudhishtira said.

I remembered a day soon after we had revealed our identity. I finished training with the Matsya army and returned to my chambers to find Uttara waiting for me.

Pacing around the chamber, he told me at length about the battle 'Brihannala' had fought; of how amazed he was that one man could

defeat a massed force led by some of the most reputed warriors of the time.

"I was frightened that day, when I first saw the Kauravas," he told me. "I wanted to turn and run, but Arjuna taught me what courage was. I'll grow up into a warrior like him; I too will make my name one day," he said that day.

And now he lay dead, in a war not of his making, to avenge an insult to those who, till just the other day, were strangers to him.

It had taken a warrior of consummate skill and experience to kill the boy. Shalya was our uncle, king of Madradesa and brother to Madri *cheriyamma* – and yet he and his formidable forces, on whom we had built so much of our hopes, were fighting on the side of the Kauravas.

We had left the palace of Virat for Kurukshetra, and were camped in Upaplavya on the outskirts of the Matsya kingdom, when our uncle set out with a large force and a considerable arsenal to join up with us.

All along the route, he found well-appointed guest houses ready for him to rest in; armies of servants waited at each post to cater to his needs and those of his army. It was only when Duryodhana appeared before him at his final halt before Upaplavya that Shalya realized who was responsible for the lavish hospitality.

"Having accepted all that he had provided, I could not refuse Duryodhana when he asked me to fight on his behalf," Shalya told Yudhishtira through a messenger. "My blessings will always be with you," he had added.

In the thick of battle, Shalya had managed to cut through our troops and launched a ferocious attack on Yudhishtira. Seeing our brother hard-pressed, Uttara had charged up on the back of an elephant and engaged Shalya. "His bravery in battle put me to shame," Yudhishtira said, speaking of how the prince had smashed Shalya's chariot and stampeded his horses, then jumped down from his elephant to meet the seasoned warrior with sword in hand.

"We are in a war," Dhristadyumna broke in, his demeanour grim. "And the sooner some of us realize this, the better."

I sensed discomfort in the sudden silence that followed. Something had happened that I did not know of, and this didn't seem the right time to ask.

"We had a bad day today," Dhristadyumna said, addressing no one in particular. "Another day or two like this, and it will all be over – the hardships you suffered all these years, and the sacrifices so many people are making on your behalf, will all be wasted.

"When we take the field tomorrow, every one of us will have to be fully committed to do whatever it takes to win."

Abruptly, he turned and walked out of the room. One by one, the rest of us drifted off to our respective lodges.

A masseur was working on my body, his skilled fingers working the aches and pains out of my joints and the stiffness from my limbs when Visokan walked in.

"Your brother nearly brought the war to an end before it had even begun," he told me.

As the two armies approached each other, Arjuna had caught sight of Bhishma, Kripa and Drona in the front rank. Throwing aside his bow, he had jumped down from his chariot and told Krishna that he could not continue – he would not commit the sin of turning his arms against his *gurus*.

"It was Drupada's charioteer who told me what happened," Visokan said. "Krishna spoke to him at considerable length. The charioteer, Sumedhu, heard only little and understood even less – he told me Krishna said something about life and death being only an illusion; that it was the soul shedding its worn out clothes and changing into fresh ones."

The two armies had met, and war was waging all around as Krishna spoke to Arjuna. "Something he said stuck in Sumedhu's memory," Visokan said. "Bhishma, Krishna said, knew that right was on the side of the Pandavas. He had argued with Dhritarashtra, pleaded with him to avoid war, to give Pandavas their due share of the kingdom.

"But once war was declared, Bhishma had only one duty – to protect the kingdom he had sworn his allegiance to, and if in the process of doing that duty he had to kill the Pandavas, then that is what he would

do. Every man has a duty, Krishna said, and yours just now is to fight those who have deprived you of what is your due, and offered your wife the kind of insult no man, much less a warrior, can forgive or forget.”

Arjuna had finally taken up his arms and joined the battle, but his efforts on the right flank were half-hearted – and it was on that side that we had taken the greatest losses.

As he was coming here, Visokan said, he saw Dhristadyumna entering the lodge Arjuna was sharing with Krishna.

I stood at the doorway of the lodge, looking out into the night.

Off to one side, the sky glowed bright red from the flames of the cremation ground.

War Reporting

Comments appended to the previous [episode](#) of Bhimsen, sent in mail and posted on Twitter indicate a fair degree of ambivalence among readers. Exemplars:

[Prahlad Rao](#): Honestly, I was a tad disappointed with the latest Bhim. May be my expectation was too much. I was expecting more details of the war on Day 1.

[Aarushi Chakravarti](#): You have not yet mentioned anything about sanjay's role in "live commentary". I was sort of hoping that there would be some demystifying explanation would come from you.

Those are not the only comments by a long way, but they are typical: What the reader looked for and failed to find [Suresh Anchal wrote in to say he had been "impatiently waiting" for the war to begin, so he could read the descriptors] is detail.

I'd earlier planned on doing an extensive post at the end of the series, addressing a whole heap of issues, but I now reckon a couple of points need to be made if the upcoming episodes are not to invite a similar sense of disappointment in you.

The first, and most obvious, point is about the detailing of the war. When I got to this bit [and I'll admit to dragging my feet a bit, and making two episodes out of one, simply to postpone the moment when I had to get into 'war reporting'], I had two directions to go.

Clearly, there is a difference between a fly-on-the-wall narrative that assumes omniscience on the part of the narrator, and permits him to be everywhere, see everything and describe it all in the round, and an individualistic, point of view-driven narrative where the focus would be narrower and events outside the narrator's experience would not form part of the narrative, no matter how crucial such events were.

There is, for instance, no way Bhim would have had the faintest notion what Krishna was telling Arjuna ahead of the battle, so unlike the

many Vyasas who together composed the Mahabharat as we know it today, there was no room for me to get into an extended treatise based on the Gita.

When Bhim fights, what he sees is the enemy immediately ahead and, at best, what is happening in his immediate vicinity — he couldn't tell you how Arjuna fought Bhishma, or how Drona repeatedly cut the bow of Dhristadyumna, or any of the other incidents that highlight the traditional narrative. The story here is POV-driven, so the trick for me is to keep the narrative limited to what Bhim could have known about or been part of.

I toyed initially with the idea of using the daily evening strategy meetings as a device to talk of the war outside of Bhim's own immediate experience. In those meetings, I could have the others narrate what they had seen and heard, and thus fill in the blanks.

I blocked out a couple of episodes that way and then jettisoned them. MT Vasudevan Nair, whose novel *Randaamoozham* provides the source material for this recreation, apparently came to the same decision — he too skims lightly over the details of the larger war, and throughout keeps the narration in tight focus.

The reason — and I hope that will become apparent in future episodes — is because unlike the Mahabharat, *Randaamoozham* [and its loose recreation here] is not so much the story of a war as it is of a family.

In an extensive footnote appended to his book, MT says he is merely “giving voice to the many silences” in the original.

“Giving voice to the silences” is a speaking phrase; it is the thought I've kept in front of me while writing successive episodes. The exhaustive details of the war are, for those who want them, easily available in print and on the net. I didn't go there in the episode in question, and I'll be going there even less in the episodes to come.

What is missing from the existing narrative is the sense of what happened behind the scenes. Forget the traditional trope of this being a battle between good and evil — what it is, when stripped down to its essence, is the story of a family fighting for survival.

Bound tight by ties of blood and of shared suffering, such a family would come together against the perceived enemy, yes. But even so,

as the pressures mount and stress escalates, there will be disagreements — even violent, bitter quarrels, recriminations.

The popular version of the Mahabharat occasionally glances at such; this version will focus more closely on these, at times in extreme close-up. It will, in that sense, “give voice to the silences” and, in the process, paint a picture not of children of god on a divinely ordained mission where the outcome is a given, but of a group of human beings with their own unique strengths and weaknesses, united by a shared mission yet occasionally divided by their own personalities, their world views.

Long story short, what you won’t find in the episodes going forward is exhaustive detail of who fought who how; what you will find — I hope — is a narrative that slips into the silences that lurk beneath the sounds of war.

Episode 55

We are faced with a vastly superior force, Dhristadyumna pointed out when we met before dawn on the second day to decide on strategy.

The accepted strategy in war is to concentrate on the main commanders, to kill or capture them at the earliest opportunity and thus render the opposing army leaderless.

That will not work for us here, Dhristadyumna said. The first day's fighting had given him a good idea of Bhisma's strategy. Each of the Kaurava generals had been protected by large segments of troops; the harder we tried to get to the leaders, the more losses we sustained against the numerically superior opposing forces.

Starting today, Dhristadyumna said, we had only one goal – to kill indiscriminately, to inflict maximum casualties on the opposing army. We would exert all our energies to stop the Kaurava generals when they looked like causing havoc in our ranks, but outside of that we would ignore the generals and focus our energies on decimating the opposition troops.

Arjuna decreed an eagle in flight as our battle formation for the day.

I would, from the position of the eagle's beak, lead the formation. Yudhishtira and Virat would be positioned at the throat; Dhristadyumna would be stationed at the left wingtip with Abhimanyu and Sarvadhan, while Arjuna controlled from the right wingtip with Satyaki and Drupada in support. At the feet of the eagle, protecting our rear from surprise attacks, would be Nakula and Sahadeva with the sons of Draupadi, and Rukmi in support.

The Vidharbha king was an unexpected addition to our army. Years ago, Rukmi had planned to marry his sister off to the Chedi king Shishupala, but Rukmini was enamored of Krishna with whom, Arjuna had once told me, she had been carrying on a clandestine correspondence through messengers and pigeons.

When time came for the marriage, Krishna arrived in Vidharbha in the guise of a guest and carried Rukmini off in his chariot. Rukmi gave chase with a band of select troops, but was routed by Krishna and Balarama.

Rukmini's earnest pleadings saved her brother's life then, but before letting him go Krishna forced him to shave off half his hair — the ultimate insult for a warrior. He had since made friends with Krishna and, when war was declared, offered his services. "Use him in a defensive role," Krishna had advised us. "As a warrior, he is not good enough to be in the front rank, but he and his men will help swell our numbers."

As our army arrayed for battle, I had reason yet again to bless Arjuna for the long years he had spent wandering the country learning strategies and tactics from different lands. The formation he had suggested was the perfect answer to our requirement: it massed our troops in the eagle's 'body', giving me enough backing as I sought to batter my way through the opposition while out on the two wingtips, our leading warriors were able to range free, causing mayhem where and how they could.

This was my kind of battle. Yesterday, I had spent a good part of time and energy trying to break through and get to Duryodhana. Today I didn't bother with any specific target; at my direction, Visokan drove my chariot straight at the center of the Kaurava army, arrayed for the day in half moon formation. Fighting occasionally from my chariot, often on foot and, when faced with massed troops, from the back of Kesavan the elephant, I gloried in the task of killing all who came before me.

At some point in the midst of my frenzy, I became aware of signs of trouble to my left. I headed in that direction and, from my vantage point on Kesavan's back, I saw our commander engaged in a terrific struggle against Drona.

Dhristadyumna's chariot lay shattered around him; as I watched, he rushed forward with his mace only for Drona to cut it to pieces with his arrows. Dhristadyumna continued to advance, swinging his drawn sword to clear a path through the opposing foot soldiers and get at his tormentor, but he was clearly at a disadvantage.

I jumped down onto my chariot and had Visokan charge straight at Drona. The large cutting swords attached to the axle of my chariot

churned through the opposing foot soldiers as I concentrated my fury on Drona.

With my first salvo I cut down his flagpole, which is the archer's first line of defence; even as he turned his attention towards me, I cut his bow in half with another volley of arrows.

Years ago, when we studied war craft under him in Hastinapura, he had contemptuously rejected my skills as an archer and publicly said I was only fit to wrestle for the amusement of the public – today was my opportunity to pay him back.

'Fat fool!'

That long ago taunt rang in my ears. As Drona hurriedly strung his spare bow, I cut it into pieces; before he could re-arm himself I sent a volley of arrows between the shafts of his chariot, cutting the bindings. Freed of their traces, his horses bolted, overturning the chariot as they broke free.

As the old man tumbled out of the chariot and scrambled in the dust, I laughed out loud in triumph.

I flung aside my bow, grabbed my mace and was about to leap out of the chariot and close with him when Visokan warned of danger approaching from my right. The Kalinga king Srutayu, mounted on a mammoth tusker and leading a large force of elephants and men, was rushing to Drona's aid.

Visokan told me later that he had never been as alarmed as when he saw me leap off the chariot and, mace in hand, run straight at Srutayu's elephant.

Years ago, in the paddocks of Hastinapura, the old mahout who was my mentor had taught me of this one fatal weakness of the elephant: between the two masses of bone on its forehead there is a very small, unprotected gap where its nerve endings are clustered, and where it is most vulnerable to pain.

Approaching the elephant at a dead run, I timed my jump and grabbed its tusk with my left hand. In the same motion, using the momentum to augment my strength, I swung the mace at that precise spot on its forehead I had been taught so long ago.

Maddened by the pain, Srutayu's elephant reared on its hind legs while I hung on for dear life. As his front feet hit the earth I swung again, smashing the mace repeatedly onto that spot. Squealing in pain and rage, the beast swung around in a circle, shaking its head violently to dislodge me; the other elephants panicked at the sight of the enraged tusker and stampeded straight into the midst of their own troops.

Srutayu jumped off the back of his elephant and straight into my path; before he could recover his balance, I swung my mace in a crushing blow at his skull and roared in triumph as I felt the splatter of his blood on my face and arms.

The Kalinga forces, already scattered by the berserk fury of the elephants and now leaderless, turned tail and ran; I raced back to my chariot and set off in pursuit, slaughtering at will till the sudden blare of trumpets sounded the onset of dusk and the end of the day's battle.

Dhristadyumna hugged me as I walked into his lodge for our evening review. "We had a good day today," he said. "The battle went exactly as I had hoped; we inflicted heavy losses on their troops and took few losses of our own. I don't think they've understood what we are trying to accomplish – they kept throwing their soldiers at us, which is exactly what I hoped they would do."

Dhristadyumna had once told me that the war would be won not by the seasoned generals and the acharyas, but by the young – and it was increasingly easy to see why. He was breaking away from established strategies and tactics, adapting to the fact that we were outnumbered and finding his own solution to the problem while Bhishma, the most experienced warrior on either side, continued to operate within the confines of convention.

To my surprise, I saw Krishna stretched out on a plank bed on the floor of Dhristadyumna's lodge, with attendants applying herbal salves to multiple wounds on his arms and chest. Arjuna was pacing the floor furiously; Abhimanyu walked beside him, talking earnestly to his father.

Noticing my look of surprise, Dhristadyumna pulled me aside. "That is the other thing I hoped would happen today," he said when we were out of earshot. "For all Krishna's advice, Arjuna has been reluctant to fight. He is fine when facing the troops, but the minute he catches sight of one of the gurus he loses his will."

My brother was ranging free on the right, slaughtering soldiers in their dozens when Bhishma charged up in his chariot to oppose him. Arjuna lost his fervor; the grandsire however held nothing back in a ferocious attack.

"Arjuna would have turned his chariot about rather than fight, but by then some of Bhishma's arrows wounded Krishna," Dhristadyumna told me. "The sight of Krishna bleeding drove your brother into a fury; he forgot who he was fighting, and my father tells me Arjuna fought so brilliantly, many on both sides nearby stopped to watch. The old man was forced to turn his chariot about and race away from the field, they tell me."

Abhimanyu walked with me as I returned to my lodge that night. "*Valiyacha* [father's elder brother]," he said as we walked, "your son Sarvadhan is amazing! Trigarta and his men attacked us today while uncle Dhristadyumna was battling Drona – you should have seen Sarvadhan fight, oof! He routed them all on his own, and I saw Trigarta fall wounded in his chariot. You must tell my uncle to put Sarvadhan with *cheriyachan* [father's younger brother] Nakula – we are somewhat weak in that section."

I stood still for long moments, bemused by the self-confidence of this boy who was yet to turn 16. His deeds today were, I was told, so prodigious Dhristadyumna had decided to invite him to represent the younger generation in our daily council of war.

Abhimanyu, Sarvadhan, Sutasoma, Prativindhya... young boys of fifteen and sixteen who should by rights be enjoying their youth, basking in the attentions of the palace maids and who instead were fighting beside us as equals, and making us proud with their deeds.

They were, I realized at that moment, the real future of our race. In time to come, perhaps, our chief claim to fame would be that we were their fathers; when they spoke of me it would be as the father of Sarvadhan, as Abhimanyu's uncle...

We sat down to our meal. Like the boy he really was, he spoke with enthusiasm of all that he had seen that day – but I noticed that even in the full flight of his excitement, he never once spoke of his own part in the day's battle.

A terrific clamor interrupted our meal. Visoka came running in. "A new group has come to join us," he announced, smiling broadly. "The

whole army has turned out to watch the fun – soldiers in carts drawn by bulls bigger than you have ever seen... dozens and dozens of wild horses... and they've even brought their own food – pigs, cows... come, see, it's a big tamasha..."

Visokan darted out again. Moments later, a tall young man stepped through the door and prostrated at my feet.

"News travels slowly to us who live in the forest," Ghatotkachan said as I raised him to his feet and looked at him in wonder – not least because I had to look up at him.

He had grown considerably since that last time I saw him, when he had with casual indifference gifted Yudhishtira Jatan's head wrapped in a leaf and walked off into the forest without a word. His voice, when he spoke, was that of a man full grown.

"I am here to fight on your side, father – and I have brought an army with me."

"I'll take our brother to the lodge where we are staying," Abhimanyu said, touching Ghatotkachan's feet.

"No, no one needs to worry about us – we are most at home sleeping on the ground, under the stars, and we have brought our food with us," Ghatotkachan smiled. "Father, I'll see you in the morning – tell me what you expect of me, and it will be done."

He turned and strode out without a glance, while Abhimanyu and I looked at each other in bemusement.

Episode 56

Beneath the belly of a maddened war elephant is the safest place to be. It is also the scariest.

At that moment in time I was caught between the overwhelming relief that comes from having narrowly escaped certain death and the paralyzing fear that my time had come, that I would end up as a red smear beneath the feet of the most fearsome war elephant I had ever encountered.

Cowering for life underneath an elephant was not how I had imagined the day would go when Dhristadyumna, during our council of war early in the morning of the fifth day, instructed us to slip the leash.

"We've killed many of their troops these last two days," he said. "It is time for a change in plan – from today, we go after their leaders. Each of us will pick one general in the Kaurava ranks and make him our primary target. With their troop numbers reduced, they don't have as many men to protect the leaders."

There was no question about who I would pick. Since that moment in the great hall of Hastinapura when he had slapped his thigh and invited Draupadi to share his bed, I knew the day would come when I would face Duryodhana in battle — and there would be no let up, no escape until one of us was dead.

Dhristadyumna picked Drona; Arjuna said he would seek out Bhishma and engage him in mortal combat.

"No," Dhristadyumna said. "Not you – I don't think you are ready. We cannot afford to have you hesitate when confronted by the grandsire – and god forbid, if Bhishma takes advantage of your hesitation and you end up wounded or worse, it will cripple us."

My brother looked as if he was about to protest. Dhristadyumna quelled him with a glance. Krishna had chosen well – the Panchala prince may be young in years, but he was no respecter of persons or

reputations and, when it came to fulfilling his role as commander in chief, he brooked no opposition.

"It is your job to harass Bhisma," he told his brother Sikhandi. "With Karna still sulking in his tent, it frees Arjuna to range at will – we have reduced their troop strength, but they still have the edge. We need Arjuna's skill with the bow and the special weapons he commands to wreck havoc among their armies. Ghatotkacha and his men will back Arjuna up."

In keeping with our changed tactics, Arjuna arrayed the army in the shape of a trident with a large, thick haft. Dhristadyumna took the lead on the left prong and Shikandi the right, while I led the central prong. Arjuna stationed himself at the junction of the three prongs, while Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva took position along the haft.

Arjuna decreed that only fast moving cavalry backed by war elephants would comprise the three prongs; archers were arrayed in a wide curve linking the three prongs to the center while the slowest movers, the sword and spear-wielding foot soldiers, made up the haft. That way, he explained, the three prongs could hurtle into combat with great speed; the archers would be able to cover all three prongs, while the foot soldiers would come up in support at need.

The formation dictated our tactics for the day: at the first note of Dhristadyumna's conch we would charge hard, hitting the Kaurava formation at three points along its length and looking to break through. From his vantage point in the center, Arjuna would come up to support whichever of us met the greatest resistance.

As dawn broke over the killing fields of Kurukshetra, our armies clashed to the hypnotic thump of the big drums and blare of battle conches. Ahead of me, buffered by an array of sword-wielding foot soldiers, I spotted the white umbrella signaling the presence of Duryodhana. Visokan needed no orders – his whip cracked, the chariot lunged through the protective buffer and headed straight at Duryodhana.

We were greeted with a shower of arrows. Rage surged within me when I realized he was deliberately aiming at Visokan and at the horses. The day before the battle began, representatives of both sides had agreed on the rules of combat, and one of the most crucial was that charioteers and messengers were inviolate.

Visokan winced as he pulled out an arrow that had struck him in the shoulder, high to the left. "It is a small wound, don't worry about me," he said.

At my signal he picked up the pace, racing the chariot in tight circles around Duryodhana. My rival was forced to turn in place, struggling to keep me in his sights as we raced from his right to left. I used my shield to deflect his volleys and waited for my moment; when I sensed that he was not turning as quickly to keep me in his sights, I fired a stream of arrows aimed at his leading shoulder, the left.

My salvo cut the bindings that linked his arm guards with his chest protector. The arm guard flapped free, distracting him and impeding his movements. I sent two arrows into his shoulder; with a third, I cut his bow string in half.

He was now at my mercy, but killing Duryodhana with bow and arrow was no part of my plan. The accumulated memory of his insults, the wrongs he had inflicted on us, his mortal insult to Draupadi – all of it festered in my mind and soul, a suppurating sore that called for the immediacy of personal combat. I needed to get in close with mace in hand; I needed him to look into my eyes and see his death there long before I delivered the killing blow.

His charioteer sensed that his master was in danger and, spinning the chariot around at speed, drove Duryodhana away from the field. Visokan whipped the horses and gave chase; I tossed my bow aside and was bending to pick up my mace when a terrific shock flung me out of the chariot and onto the ground.

I scrambled to my feet and found myself confronting a beast I had heard of in the songs of the balladeers. Supratika the elephant was, if anything, more famous than his master Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyothishpura and a one-time friend of our father Pandu, who had opted to fight on the Kaurava side and who, at an opportune moment, had come to Duryodhana's rescue.

Supratika was massive, far larger than any elephant I had ever seen. His forehead and trunk were covered in a seamless sheet of pliant metal studded with wickedly pointed spikes; there was no discernible weakness I could target. As the charging elephant lowered his tusks, lifted his trunk and screamed his challenge, I dodged to the left and dived under him, coming up on my feet under his belly.

The elephant stopped in mid charge and began moving sideways, seeking his prey. I watched his feet carefully to gauge his changes in direction, and moved when he moved. It was stalemate, but it couldn't last – I heard Bhagadatta yelling orders for archers to surround the elephant and fire at me.

I needed to do something before I was surrounded and flushed out. I was looking for some small opening in the opposing ranks so I could dash out from under the beast and look for safety in the midst of my own people, when I heard the ululating war cry I had already learnt to identify even amidst the din of battle.

Supratika staggered sideways as another, smaller elephant crashed into his side at full tilt.

"Father! Here!"

Ghatotkacha stood on the back of his elephant, holding out a spear with its blunt end towards me. I took a running jump, grabbed hold of the haft and scrambled up behind him.

Waiting till he was sure I had found a firm seat on the beast, my son tossed his bow and quiver at me and, drawn sword in hand, jumped into the midst of Bhagadatta's massed troops.

His sword flashed; a head went flying through the air. Again I heard that full throated scream with which my son marked his kills – a sound that had, in the space of just two days, become a source of encouragement to us and of paralyzing dread in the Kaurava ranks.

Smarting under the humiliation of having had to hide under the belly of his beast, I turned on Bhagadatta. Supratika was massive – a mountain of flesh it was impossible to overwhelm in a direct charge. But now that I was mounted on an elephant of my own, I turned that size to my advantage. Ghatotkacha's elephant was a barely tamed beast of the jungle – swift on its feet and totally without fear. At the promptings of my goad it danced away from Supratika's charge, then crashed again into its side as I fired a stream of arrows at the ageing king.

Visokan drove up in my chariot. "Bhisma!" he yelled.

I glanced off to one side and spotted the grandsire's chariot charging at speed in my direction, two others protecting its flanks. I leapt onto

the ground, and from there onto the racing chariot, grabbing up my own bow and quiver as the chariot turned to confront Bhishma's charge.

His first volley smashed my flagpole. I found myself marveling at the grandsire's eye and hand speed; even at the age of 95, he was so quick it felt as though I was being enveloped in a cloud of arrows. Visokan danced the chariot away to one side; as Bhishma turned to keep me in his sights, I felt the lash of accumulated memory.

For all his moral authority and undisputed stature, Bhishma had at no point sought to actively intervene to spare us the many humiliations we had been subjected to. He had vowed to be impartial, but at every point in our tortured history he had sided with the Kauravas, at least through his studied silences and his refusal to intervene.

He did not protest when Duryodhana plotted to burn us alive; he did not stand up for us when we were fobbed off with a barren patch of land at Indraprastha; he did not intervene when Yudhishtira was tricked by Sakuni's loaded dice; he sat silent while Draupadi was humiliated in open court, and even when Krishna at my brother's urging had sought to avoid war by accepting five villages as our share, he never interceded on our behalf.

Anger lent me strength and speed; my bow hummed as I shot volley after volley at the old man. I saw one of my arrows striking home in the soft flesh on the inside of his right elbow. Arjuna might revere Bhishma, he might find his will sapped when confronted by the grandsire, but I only saw our hurts, our grievances, our many wrongs – and an old man who had stood by passively and let our enemies do what they wanted to us.

Bhishma's flagpole fell, cut in pieces by a sudden volley of arrows. I glanced to my left, seeking the source, and saw Shikandi driving up at speed. The elder Panchala prince stood tall in his chariot, hands working with marvelous speed to send arrows flying in an unbroken stream towards the embattled grandsire.

Visokan, whose tactical sense was finely honed, promptly angled my chariot off to the right. Bhishma was now trapped in a pincer; master warrior though he was, he was hard-pressed as we attacked him from either flank.

His charioteer broke free from our trap and drove the grandsire away from the field of battle; when I attempted to give chase, I found my

way blocked by sections of the Kalinga army that had hurried up to protect the Kaurava commander. Abandoning all thought of pursuit, I vented my anger on the hapless troops, jumping into their midst with sword in hand while Shikandi covered me with his bow.

When the conches blew to signal the end of the day's battle, Shikandi and I rode over to Dhristadyumna's lodge together – and were met by an angry Yudhishtira.

"You had Bhishma at your mercy today and let him escape," he said, addressing us equally. "As long as the grandsire is alive, we have no hope of victory — and you of all people should have known that."

It was easy enough for him to talk – his position as king of the Pandavas meant that he was always positioned in the middle of our armies, protected on all sides by massed troops and insulated from all danger. I was the one who was always out in front, a target for all our enemies; I had narrowly escaped death that day; I had forced the grandsire, whom everyone thought to be invincible, to retreat – I didn't need criticism from my brother on this of all nights.

I was about to voice my thoughts when I caught sight of Shikandi. The Panchala prince had moved to within inches of my brother; his eyes – flat, cold, lifeless – fixed on Yudhishtira in an unblinking stare that sent a sudden chill down my spine.

Episode 57

"I came to check if you are well, Valiyachcha," Abhimanyu said as he walked into my lodge. "When you didn't come for our meeting, I wondered if you were injured."

I took another long swig from the goatskin of *sura* a disapproving Visokan had procured at my insistence. The fiery liquor, part of a stock Ghatotkacha's band had brought with them, burnt a furrow down my throat but did nothing to erase the frustrations of the past two days.

Day eight had for all practical purposes been a stalemate. The cremation pyres on either side burnt bright with the bodies of countless dead, but neither side had achieved any quantifiable advantage. And that was prelude to today, when I watched another of our children die and missed yet another chance to kill Duryodhana and end this seemingly endless carnage.

Iravan, Arjuna's son by the Naga princess Ulupi, had been our sole bright spot on the eighth day. A messenger had come to me with word that the youngster, who was protecting our left flank, was being hard-pressed by a band led by Shakuni's brothers.

By the time Visokan maneuvered the chariot over to the left quadrant of the field, I had nothing to do but admire the youngster's skill with the sword – at his feet lay the bodies of Gaya, Gavaksha, Chamavat and Arjava; even as we approached, I saw him send Suka's sword flying and, in a reverse stroke almost too quick for the eye to follow, behead this last of Shakuni's brothers.

Iravan was beside me as, on the ninth morning, we crashed headlong into the Kalinga army that had been deputed to protect Duryodhana. Seeing that the boy was more than holding his own, I concentrated on cutting a path through the opposing forces.

The first hint I had of trouble was a roar of rage from my right. Ghatotkacha, bloodied sword cutting ruthlessly through flesh, was racing in our direction. I spun around to see what had attracted his attention and, to my left, saw that Alambusha, the renegade tribal who

was fighting on the Kaurava side, had jumped onto Iravan's chariot and attacked him from behind, in violation of the conventions of warfare.

Before I could do anything to stop him, the son of Rishyasringa had thrust his sword deep into Iravan's side; as the Naga prince staggered under the unexpected assault, Alambusha's sword cut deep into Iravan's neck.

The boy died as I watched; an instant later, Ghatotkacha had leapt onto Iravan's chariot and engaged Alambusha in direct combat. The two were seemingly well-matched, but Alambusha wilted before my son's berserk fury; a brisk flurry of swordplay ended with Ghatotkacha slamming into his enemy's body with his shoulder and tumbling him off the chariot. Before Alambusha could recover, Ghatotkacha had jumped down, grabbed him by the hair and with one stroke, cut off his head.

Roaring in rage and triumph and holding the bloody head aloft, he marched through the field. The Kalinga forces, paralyzed by the spectacle, made way before him and I drove through the breach, heading straight for Duryodhana.

Mayan had made for me a set of special javelins. Unlike the conventional spear with its triangular point and wooden haft, these were extremely heavy and made entirely of iron, with a thick stock that tapered seamlessly to an elongated point. I had conceived it as the perfect weapon against an elephant; it was Visokan who had once suggested an alternate use.

Grabbing up one of the javelins, I tensed for the effort and hurled it as hard as I could at the rear wheel of Duryodhana's chariot. I had looked to shatter the hub, but by sheer luck it slipped between the spokes; the tip embedded in the ground and the haft smashed the spokes of the moving chariot, bringing it to an abrupt halt.

I vaulted onto the ground and raced towards Duryodhana, mace held in front to ward off his arrows. Even so, one pierced the leather guard on my chest; I felt its tip pierce the flesh between my ribs. Shrugging off the pain, I crashed the mace into the damaged chariot wheel; the wood splintered, the chariot listed to one side as Duryodhana fought for balance.

He grabbed his mace one handed and tried to block my swing; I shifted aim and slammed my mace onto the handle of his, very near his fingers. The shock of the blow tore the mace out of his hand; he was at my mercy and my mace was raised for the killing blow when a sudden searing pain forced me to drop it.

I spun around, and found Bhishma confronting me with arrow poised on drawn bow string. His first arrow had ripped across the back of my hand; I was now unarmed and convention dictated that he could not fire on me. Having effected the rescue, he turned to deal with Shikandi who was driving up on his left; I looked for Duryodhana, meaning to finish what we had started, and found him riding hastily off the field of battle on a horse he had apparently commandeered from one of his troops.

It was not these cumulative frustrations that kept me from the meeting, but the fear that I might end up voicing a thought that loomed larger with each passing day: our real problem was Arjuna.

There was no question that my favorite brother was, more than any of us, responsible for the fearsome carnage in the Kaurava rank and file – the fire arrows, the poisoned darts and other weapons he had taken such pains to acquire and master were proving to be irresistible.

But it was not to kill common foot soldiers that we needed him – and in any event, ever since Ghatotkacha had joined us with his little band of tribals, he had proved to be a one-man scourge among the Kaurava armies.

When during our long years in exile we anticipated the war to follow, it was always with the comforting thought that in Arjuna we had our trump card against the master warriors who would be ranged against us. That feeling had been reinforced when he single-handedly routed the Kaurava raiding party that had attacked Matsya in an attempt to flush us out of hiding.

Now that the time had come, our presumptive strength was proving to be our biggest weakness. It was not that he was refusing to meet Bhishma, Drona and Kripa in combat – but when he did find himself confronting one of the gurus he tended to pull his punches, fighting at less than his best and allowing the senior warriors considerable freedom of movement.

His hesitation was beginning to cost us. The Kauravas, who had taken considerable losses in the early days of the fighting, had begun over the last two or three days to turn our own tactics against us. Bhishma and Drona had launched a wave of attacks that was rapidly eroding our own numbers.

We were an increasingly tense lot as a result; tempers were fraying, and Yudhishtira's snapping at Shikandi and me the other day had gone from being the exception to being the rule when we met for our strategy sessions. Krishna had on that occasion narrowly averted a showdown; he backed Shikandi down just when it seemed the Panchala was on the verge of stuffing my brother's ill-judged criticism down his throat.

Krishna had a point when he said we needed to rediscover our unity of purpose – but for that to happen, we needed a major breakthrough. Brilliantly though Dhristadyumna was leading us, we seemed to have hit an impasse, and the longer this went on the more certain it was that we would lose.

To blame Arjuna in open meeting was not going to serve any purpose other than to heighten tensions; there was also no way I could discuss all this with a young man who idolized his father.

"I'm tired, that is all," I told Abhimanyu. "I just thought I'd get some rest."

"It is about my father, isn't it?"

I looked at him, startled yet again by perspicacity unusual in one so young.

Abhimanyu smiled. He had Subhadra's eyes – large, limpid, fringed with the long, delicate lashes of a young maiden. In repose he looked absurdly young, like a boy playing with his father's weapons. In battle, though, he had already earned a reputation as one of the most brilliant warriors of our time; even the balladeers on the Kaurava side were singing his praises.

"Something happened today that is good for our cause," Abhimanyu said. Arjuna, with Abhimanyu, Sarvagan, Suthasoman and others in support, had clashed with a large segment of the Kaurava forces led by Bhagadatta and Shakuni.

Yet again, it was Bhishma who had come to the rescue just when it seemed the Kaurava commanders would be overwhelmed and killed. Arjuna fought back, but his efforts were defensive, aimed at limiting the damage Bhishma could do rather than directly attacking the grandsire.

Angered beyond measure by his friend's actions, Krishna had tossed aside the reins and confronted Bhishma, armed only with a horsewhip. Arjuna had pleaded with him, reminding Krishna of his promise that he wouldn't take up arms in this war.

"A horsewhip is not a weapon, my uncle told father."

Krishna had bitterly upbraided Arjuna for neglecting his duty, and swore that the next time he backed off when confronted by one of the acharyas, Krishna would renege on his promise and take up arms.

"This evening for the first time, I saw determination in my father's eyes as we were discussing strategy," Abhimanyu told me. "One of our spies told us that Duryodhana is worried the grandsire could tire and be overwhelmed; he has deputed Dushasana to guard Bhishma at all times.

"Tomorrow, my father and Shikandi will fight together. Shikandi will confront Bhishma and my father will target Dushasana. Then, at the opportune moment, they'll switch targets; my father will attack Bhishma when he is most vulnerable.

"Valiyachcha, mark my words – tomorrow, Bhishma will die at my father's hands."

Episode 58

Since that day so long ago when I first stood outside the gates of Hastinapura, I'd been hearing that I was born to destroy the Kauravas. This tenth day of the war, it began to look as if the wolves that howled in the streets of Hastinapura to mark my birth may have been prophetic.

Both sides seemed determined to end the war that day. If our plan was to take down Bhishma, the ferocity of the attacks I faced from the first blast of the battle conches made me think the Kauravas had decided the key to their victory lay in my death.

In the midst of the fiercest fighting of the war thus far, I found myself under attack by a band of the younger Kauravas.



Arjuna in Bali

Visokan was brilliant. He manipulated the movements of the chariot to create the impression that I was in trouble, and drifted away to a relatively isolated part of the field. The Kaurava brothers, whooping in celebration of what they imagined was imminent triumph, charged headlong after me.

Way out on the right side of the field there was no one to notice, to interfere; no one to come to their rescue. This was the chance I had been waiting for. As Visokan abruptly pulled up in the midst of his seeming headlong retreat, I spun around on the deck of the chariot and hurled one of my iron javelins straight at the onrushing Jalasandha.

One down, I thought as the missile crashed through his breastplate; even at this distance I could hear the crack as the massive iron spear broke through his ribs and smashed him to the floor of his chariot.

Before they could adjust to going from hunters to the hunted, I felled Ugra, Viravahu and Bhima, one of two cousins who bore the same name as I, in quick succession with well placed arrows. Now they were just three – the kind of odds I liked. Grabbing up my mace, lusting for the feel of it cracking against Kaurava skulls, I hopped off the chariot and awaited them.

Senapati, Bhimarata and Sulochana were young and, unlike Duryodhana and Dushasana, relatively unskilled in the intricacies of hand to hand combat. They made the mistake of thinking to overwhelm me in close combat. As they rushed me, I ducked and swung my mace hard at Senapati's knee and in a continuation of that move, crashed it into Sulochana's rib cage. Both fell; a flurry of blows and parries ended with Bhimarata crumpling to the ground with a crushed skull.

Killing had through the course of this war become for me a job to be done with clinical efficiency – but for once, I gloried in what I had to do as I finished off the two wounded Kauravas, yanked my javelin from Jalasandha's chest and tossed it, still dripping Kaurava blood, onto the floor of my chariot.

I had carried with me the memories of serial insults and injuries; I had spent many sleepless nights dreaming of the day I would have my revenge. Now was the time, and I luxuriated in the knowledge that seven of Duryodhana's brothers had fallen to me in the space of mere moments.

I drove back into the thick of battle, and into a trap. Bhagadatta rode up on his elephant, his conch blowing out a challenge. As I readied to confront him, I found myself surrounded: Kripa, Shalya, Duryodhana's son Laxman, and Krishna's distant cousin Kritavarma, who had chosen to lead the Yadava forces against us. As Visokan maneuvered to find a

way out of the trap, Jayadratha rode up from behind to cut off my retreat.

The terms of engagement the two sides had mutually engaged to honor mandated one on one battles between the major warriors – but as the fighting intensified over these last ten days, those rules were being gradually ignored. With my life at stake, I saw no reason to abide by rules my enemies were flouting – as Visokan took the chariot away from the line of Bhagadatta's attack, I cut down Jayadratha's horses, bringing his chariot to a halt and opening up a line of retreat. As he jumped down from his chariot and hopped into Kritavarma's, I turned again to confront Bhagadatta who I had identified as the greatest danger.

The sudden blast of a conch from the rear made me glance around. A chariot drawn by six jet black horses and flying the flag of an eagle in flight was racing towards me; on its deck stood Abhimanyu, blaring out a challenge on his conch.

I had heard tales of my young nephew's prowess from Visokan and others; I had seen brief glimpses of his skill on the field, but this was the first time I was watching him from close quarters. War for us was duty, a task to be accomplished in order to achieve a greater goal; for him it seemed to be entertainment, an exciting game to indulge his youthful energy in.

Abhimanyu's first sally was against Kripa; he effortlessly parried the initial attack and, almost playfully and with incredible dexterity, fired a salvo high into the air. I marvelled as his arrows fell in an almost perfect circle around the old acharya's chariot. "You are too old, sir," Abhimanyu mocked. "Please leave the field – I don't want to have to kill you, the guru of my father and uncles!"

I smiled to myself at the youngster's audacity as Visokan drove the chariot headlong at Bhagadatta's elephant Supratika. Sensing what he was about to do, I grabbed up one of my javelins. At the last split second, he swerved the chariot to one side. As we flashed past the flank of the massive elephant, I hurled my javelin at the Pragjyotisha king. The chariot's headlong rush spoilt my aim, but there was still enough power in the throw to make the king reel; as he fought to keep his seat on the back of the elephant, I fired a volley and saw two arrows pierce his unprotected side.

As the mahout urged the elephant off the field to protect the injured Bhagadatta, I turned to battle the others and saw that Abhimanyu was already engaged in battle with Duryodhana's son.

The two were the same age but in terms of skill, there was no comparison. I had seen Arjuna fight and observed him at practice; watching Abhimanyu at close quarters, I realized that in dexterity and speed, this boy of sixteen had already surpassed his father.

Abhimanyu cut Lakshman's bow in half and with bewildering speed, switched his bow to his left hand, picked up a javelin with his right and before his enemy could straighten with spare bow in hand, hurled it with unerring aim at Lakshman's chest.

Together we turned on Shalya and Kritavarma. The latter, already hampered by Jayadratha who had sheltered in his chariot, turned tail in the face of our combined volleys and raced away from the field of battle. Finding himself outnumbered, Shalya whipped his horses and dashed off in Kritavarma's wake.

I finally had a moment to catch my breath. Abhimanyu brought his chariot alongside mine. "Valiyachcha," he said, with the smile that already, in the short time of knowing him, had the power to light up my heart, "can I tell you something?"

"When uncle Krishna and uncle Balarama told me of my father and uncles, they always spoke of my father as the greatest archer in the world and of you as one of the best with the mace. I never realized that with the bow you are as good as my father! Oof! Alone against six great warriors – who do we have in our ranks that is your equal?!"

I had always been impervious to praise, to what others thought of my skill. Growing up with my brothers and cousins, I received little enough from the gurus. Even with the mace, I was at best deemed the equal of Duryodhana – the likes of Drona and Balarama even rated him my better. At first I pretended indifference; as time passed, I no longer needed to pretend.

Abhimanyu's words lit up my heart. I fought back the desire to jump down from my chariot and hug him to me, and shrugged. "Oh well, there is your father – and now there's you," I said. Abhimanyu shook his head and smiled; the affectionate pride in his eyes made me feel ten feet tall.

A sudden blare of trumpets and conches and the frantic thump of war drums jolted us out of this quiet interlude in the midst of the madness.

The sounds were coming from way off to the left of the field. "My father!" Abhimanyu exclaimed; an instant later, his chariot was charging ahead in the direction of the noise. Visokan used his whip mercilessly as we raced along in the youngster's wake.

The din rose in volume as we neared that part of the field where a large crowd had gathered; in the center, we could see through a cloud of dust the rapid movements of war chariots.

Visokan weaved through the crowd in the wake of Abhimanyu's chariot. I saw Arjuna standing tall on the deck of his chariot with the signature white horses, his favorite Gandiva in hand. Facing him, in a chariot that struggled to keep Arjuna in frontal view, was Bhishma. Off to the side, at the head of the crowd, I spotted Shikandi and Dushasna in their chariots — like dozens of others around them, they appeared to have suspended their own battle to watch the duel of two of the most celebrated warriors of our time.

Bhishma's flagpole had been cut to pieces. His chest guard, its ribbons cut, dangled uselessly at his waist. Arrows pierced him everywhere; blood flowed freely from a dozen wounds. As my chariot came to a halt, I saw Bhishma recoil as his bowstring was cut. As the grandsire, his movements slowed by age and injuries, struggled to fix another, Arjuna cut his bow in two with a crescent-headed arrow.

I had always admired Visokan's ability with the reins, but Krishna was clearly the real master. Good charioteers are instantly responsive to the needs of their masters; the very best go beyond that and, with their ability to bend a team of high spirited horses to their will, create opportunities.

Showing skills that seemed scarcely human, Krishna checked his horses in full flight, spun them around and whipped them back into a dead gallop on a course that cut in front of the enemy. Bhishma's charioteer was forced to pull up to avoid a headlong collision; in that split second when the grandsire was immobile, Arjuna's arrow flew true and took Bhishma in the center of his unprotected chest.

The wound was fatal; Bhishma collapsed to the floor of his chariot to the accompaniment of a loud, triumphant flourish of conches and trumpets from our ranks.

The commander in chief had fallen; from the Kaurava ranks came the descending notes of a trumpet signalling the cessation of combat.

Arjuna flung his bow aside, vaulted out of his chariot and jumped into Bhishma's. He emerged with the grandsire cradled in his arms, and gently laid him on the ground.

Grievously wounded though he clearly was, Bhishma still breathed. As my brother stood before him with bowed head and folded hands, I saw him lift an arm, palm outward, in a sign of benediction.

The chariots of the Kaurava generals were racing towards the spot. In the distance I saw Yudhishtira's chariot, marked with the white umbrella of royalty, coming in our direction.

The leaders on both sides were gathering to mourn the passing of the patriarch, but I felt no desire to join them. For ten days we had plotted and strategized to bring about his death. And now we had achieved what we set out to do — my brother had shrugged off the doubts that tortured him and dealt a crippling blow to the Kaurava cause.

What was there to mourn?

At my signal, Visokan turned the chariot around, and drove away from the field.

Episode 59

A jackal howled in triumph as it found some overlooked scrap of human flesh; its fellows joined in the demoniac chorus, while vultures wheeled and circled overhead.

Abhimanyu is dead.

The thought echoed in my head as I walked on through the pitch black night, looking for some sign of where it had happened.

Abhimanyu is dead.

Never again would he walk into my lodge late in the evening, still fresh after a day of performing prodigies on the battle field. Never more would I hear that call I had grown to love:

Valiyachcha...

Over the course of the saddest day of my life, we had pieced together details of how he had been killed, but I still felt the urge to visit the scene, to see for myself where that boy, so dear to me, had breathed his last.

Drona had taken over command of the Kaurava army. Bhisma was still clinging to life; the Kauravas had laid him out in state in one corner of the battlefield, surrounded by an honor guard. Karna had given up his sulks and joined the Kaurava ranks; his presence in the field had given a fillip, a fresh impetus, to the enemy.

The 13th day of the war was very nearly fatal for us. The army that confronted us that dawn was arranged in a defensive quarter moon formation but once battle was fully joined, it swiftly rearranged itself in the concentric circles of the Chakravyuh, that legend said was impenetrable, with Drona and Karna at its center.

Drona, our spies warned us, had promised Duryodhana he would end the war that day by killing or capturing Yudhishtira. Engrossed in the immediacy of combat, I hadn't realized the change in Kaurava tactics;

it was when a messenger came up to warn me that our center was in danger of buckling that I rushed over in support. Nakula, Sahadeva, Drupada and others were also riding up to help contain the Kaurava charge.

There was no sign of Arjuna, but I had no time to worry about that. The Kauravas in their circular formation pressed us hard. The battle raged with an intensity I had never seen before, and when it looked like we might be overwhelmed, I persuaded Yudhishtira to withdraw from the field.

When you are in the thick of battle, it is difficult to get a sense of what is happening across the field – there is just you and the next person to kill, or to be killed by. Even so, I got the feeling that something had happened to change the dynamic. The Kaurava charge seemed to lessen in intensity. I saw no sign of their main warriors in our immediate vicinity – I wondered if they were facing their own problems elsewhere on the field.

I thought to seize this opportunity, get a sizeable troop together and launch a counter-offensive. Just then, a stray arrow pierced deep into my right forearm. Rather than fight on, I signalled Visokan to drive off the field so I could get the attendants to clean and bind my wound.

“Something bad must have happened,” Visokan said as we drove into camp, pointing his whip at the chariots drawn up in front of Yudhishtira’s lodge. I hurried inside.

“Abhimanyu is dead!”

Krishna’s face was ashen; for all the philosophies he had spouted about life and death being an illusion, the loss of the nephew he had brought up as his own son appeared to have hit him hard.

Arjuna was slumped in a corner, staring fixedly into the fire and seemingly oblivious of the tears that streamed down his face. A grim-faced Sahadeva sat beside him, a hand on my stricken brother’s shoulder.

Through the rest of that awful day, we waited in Yudhishtira’s lodge as a succession of spies passed through with details of what had happened.

Drona had waited until Arjuna was busy coping with a challenge by Bhagadatta, backed by a large force of Samsaptakas. From our spies, we had heard about this group of mercenaries who had been formed with the sole intention of harassing and containing Arjuna.

Once Arjuna was fully occupied in dealing with the challenge, Drona switched formations and launched his own attack. Abhimanyu, who was at point in our own formation, realized what was happening and decided the best counter was to break the Chakravyuh and take the attack to Drona himself.

"We told him to wait, we told him we would send messengers to Arjuna to warn of the danger and bring him to the front line," Satyaki said, his voice hoarse with grief. "The boy wouldn't listen. He mocked us for being cowards; he said if we waited it would be too late; he said if we didn't back him, he would go in there alone..."

It takes considerable skill to break the Chakravyuh — I think Arjuna was the only one of us who had perfected that skill. Abhimanyu managed to smash through the outer wall of the Kaurava formation. The plan was for Drupada and Satyaki to follow in his wake, backed by the rest of our cavalry. Once inside the enemy formation, Abhimanyu would lead the charge to smash through the concentric rings that comprised the formation, and attack Drona and Karna directly.

"It was Jayadratha who blocked us," Satyaki said, tears streaming down his face. "Abhimanyu had penetrated inside and I was following immediately behind when the Sindhu king drove into the breach, crippled his own horses and overturned his chariot. He sealed the breach before Drupada and I could break through, and then he escaped into the melee."

Jayadratha!

"The man you pardoned," I reminded Yudhishtira. This was perhaps not the best time to upbraid my brother, but I didn't care — I had just lost a boy I cared for more deeply than anyone else, even my own sons.

"His crime merited death, but you ordered us to let him go. You said we could not be responsible for making our cousin Dushshala a widow! Thanks to your generosity, Abhimanyu is dead and now Uttara is a widow — who among us has the courage to tell her that her husband of four months is dead?"

My brother kept his eyes fixed on the floor; if he heard my recriminations, he gave no sign, he didn't say a word.

What was there to say? Abhimanyu was dead.

Over the past 12 days, the boy had already done enough to overshadow the reputations of the great warriors on either side – the deeds of Bhishma, Drona, even Arjuna himself had paled in comparison. But on this day, trapped in the midst of the massed Kaurava forces, he excelled himself.

"There is no celebration in the Kaurava camp," one of our spies reported. "Even their own balladeers are praising Abhimanyu. The very gods came down to watch, they are singing..."

For once, I thought, the balladeers didn't exaggerate – even the gods would have wanted to watch this boy. Having seen him in action, I knew that even overwhelmed as he was, he would have fought with joy, with the exuberance that was so uniquely his, without a shadow of fear or doubt.

Shalya and his brother Rukmaratha had tried to stop his progress; Abhimanyu killed Rukmaratha and forced Shalya to retreat.

Dushasana engaged him and, overwhelmed by the supreme skill of the youngster, fell fainting on the deck of his chariot. Karna drove out to check him and, wounded in combat, was forced to scurry back into the safety of the center.

Abhimanyu then did what no one believed was possible – alone, surrounded on all sides by hostile troops, he smashed through the supposedly impregnable formation and penetrated to its heart.

Each time a spy came to us with some fresh narrative, we grieved anew – but at no point did sorrow threaten to completely overwhelm me as at this moment. It must have been Abhimanyu's audacious assault that blunted the edge of the Kaurava attack – preoccupied with trying to stop the boy from winning the war single-handed, the Kauravas didn't have the space to push their own attack through.

I had sensed that diminished intensity, I had realized that the Kauravas had been blunted. Yet it never occurred to me to wonder why – instead, I had driven off the field to rest. Had I only known...

had I thought to ask, to check... had Satyaki or one of the others thought to send messengers...

Unable to contain his brilliance, the Kauravas were forced to try and overwhelm Abhimanyu through sheer weight of numbers.

Drona, Kripa, Shalya, Ashwatthama, Duryodhana, Karna – vaunted warriors all – surrounded him. A revived Dushasana and his son came up in support.

Even so, Abhimanyu held his own, until an increasingly desperate Drona, seeing his carefully planned strategy reduced to ruin, signalled to Karna to attack from the rear.

While Drona and Ashwatthama drew Abhimanyu's fire, Karna slipped behind him and cut down his bow. Dushasana and Duryodhana, mounted on elephants, combined in a flanking attack to smash his chariot.

Abhimanyu fought on with his sword until he was disarmed; bleeding from a thousand cuts, he picked up the wheel of the shattered chariot and fought on while the Kauravas fired at him from all sides.

When the boy finally collapsed under the weight of his injuries, Dushasana's son had slipped in behind him, and crushed his head in with a mace.

Unable to sit still under the burden of grief, I wandered out into the now deserted battle field, seeking some sign of where it had all happened. The *chandalas* had done their job well – there was nothing: no smashed chariot, no shattered arms, no chariot wheel with which he had fought his last fight.

Nothing, except the memories that pierced my heart.

Abhimanyu's smile.

Abhimanyu's eyes on me, shining with pride at my skill.

Abhimanyu's voice, in the timbre of which man and boy met so nicely, calling out to me.

Valiyachcha.

Had he, I wondered, in those final moments called for help? Had he longed for his father? He had once come to my aid unasked – did he, as he fell before those cowards, wonder why I wasn't at his side when he most needed help?

"I was looking for you," Dhristadyumna's voice interrupted my thoughts as I walked past the door of his lodge. His eyes were bloodshot with alcohol and with grief; he was sitting on the step, drawing aimless patterns in the dust with the tip of his spear.

"Challenge Karna to a duel tomorrow – he will not refuse a direct challenge," Dhristadyumna said. "Drona is my problem and I'll deal with him – but if we are to win this war then one of us needs to take out Karna before he can do too much damage, and the only one who can is you."

"Arjuna has vowed to kill Karna," I reminded him.

"Vows are cheap – there are far too many of them already. And besides, where does he have the time? He is preoccupied with other things – he has vowed that he will kill Jayadratha by dusk tomorrow."

"Who?!"

"Your brother, who else?! In full hearing of our soldiers, Arjuna swore that he would kill Jayadratha before dusk, and only after that will he perform Abhimanyu's last rites. Failing that, he said, he will immolate himself on the funeral pyre of his son.

"How could he have been so criminally stupid?" Dhristadyumna said, after a long pause. "Drona is no fool. He will put Jayadratha at the center of his army, surround him on all sides with his best warriors and keep him safe through a day's fighting – and we will use our best warrior to his own stupidity."

"Where is Krishna? Why didn't he stop Arjuna from making such an impossible vow?"

Dhristadyumna snorted with impatience, took a long swig of sura and passed the goatskin to me. "Oh, Krishna—he is busy. He is consulting priests and astrologers."

"What?! Why?"

"How would I know? He didn't take me into his confidence – he summoned the priests and our astrologers, and has been meeting with them in Arjuna's lodge. What a time to consult omens!"

I walked away, too disturbed in mind and restless in body to seek the comfort of my bed. As I neared the river, I saw etched against the night sky the silhouette of a single chariot drawn up on the bank. Someone was perched on its shaft, staring out across the river.

"Abhimanyu is dead," Ghatotkacha said as I walked up.

"No one – not your brothers, not your other sons, not Dhristadyumna or Krishna or any of the great kings who have come to fight for you, have ever treated me and my men like human beings," he said, jumping down from his perch and standing there, staring off into space.

"For all of you, we are just tribals. What does that king, your brother for whom we are shedding our blood, call us? Rakshasas?! We are fit only to kill for you, but not to be treated as one of you. Abhimanyu alone..."

His voice broke; he fought for control while I stood there, feeling the truth in my eldest son's words scour me like a whip.

"Abhimanyu alone, from that first day we met in your lodge, treated me like an equal, like a brother. He sought me out each day, he asked about my comfort, he mingled with my men, he praised my skills, he told me he had never seen a greater fighter and how proud he was that I was his brother..."

I had never known any of this. In the 11 days since he had come to join us, I had never thought to seek out my own son, to find out how he was doing. He had once rescued me from dire peril; even then, I had never looked for him after the day's battle to utter a word of praise, of thanks.

How many lessons did I still have to learn? In how many more ways would Abhimanyu continue to prove that he was better than all of us combined?

"And now he is dead! Abhimanyu is dead! They surrounded him like jackals and brought him down – all those great warriors, those acharyas, behaving in a fashion we tribals would scorn..."

In the darkness, his sword flashed fire – a world of pain and anger powered his arm as the sword bit deep into the shaft of the chariot.

He looked down at his weapon as if he had never seen it before.

“My spy in the Kaurava camp tells me that Drona is planning to fight at night – the fool! That is just what we like, us tribals. *Rakshasas!*” The way he spat out that last word was an insult to us.

“Night is our time – they will not see us come, they will not see their death till it is too late.”

His laugh rang out, a sound more blood-curdling than the howls of the jackals that occasionally pierced the stillness of the night.

“From now on when I kill, it is for him, for Abhimanyu. I will write the story of my brother in the blood of the cowards who brought him down!”

Episode 60

I returned to my lodge after offering prayers at the *yagna shala* and found Visokan waiting for me with the kind of metal body armor I hate to wear.

People always speak of my strength but in my own mind, it was speed that was my greatest asset — and going to war in a bulky metal breastplate and arm guards was not conducive to the kind of quick movement that gave me my edge.

“What happened to my usual armor, the one of cowhide?”

“Have you heard anything of Karna’s secret weapon?” Visokan asked seemingly at a tangent. “Some say it was gifted to him by Indra, king of the gods.”

Not for the first time, I marveled internally at his ability to keep abreast of all that was going on. There was no one in the vicinity when Dhristadyumna had asked me to challenge Karna, and yet here was my charioteer discreetly hinting that he knew what was in the wind.

I shrugged. They also say Arjuna had weapons gifted by Indra, by Shiva, by Agni and Vaayu and other gods – stories that we had carefully spread through our own balladeers and spies as part of the tactic of demoralizing the enemy.

It was, I knew, perfectly possible that Karna had some kind of special weapon — the best warriors always save such for special enemies, or for those dire situations when they find themselves in trouble.

I had the iron javelins made to my specifications; Arjuna had several special arrows that I knew of. It would have been surprising if Karna, who had been preparing for this war for a long time, didn’t have some secrets up his sleeve as well.

“The story is it was actually created for him by a master engineer in Anga,” Visokan told me. “I haven’t been able to get much detail yet, but from what I hear I think it is a javelin, fired from some sort of

mechanical contraption anchored in his chariot. Those who speak of it call it the Shakti.”

Possibly, I thought, a version of Arjuna’s Pasupathasthra — which, we had got the balladeers to sing, was gifted to him by Shiva himself. In actual fact, Mayan had fashioned for my brother a special arrow with a diamond tip capable of penetrating any armor. Just below the detachable tip, the wood was carved in the shape of a hollow bulge into which snake venom was filled before the head was screwed back on. The arrowhead was fashioned in such a way as to break off inside the body — you couldn’t pull it out, and the venom would do the rest.

“Very effective, but you can only prepare so many of these,” Arjuna once explained while showing off the weapons he had acquired on his travels. “The venom loses its potency within hours, so you need to fill it afresh each time – and you can’t go around with a basket of snakes in your chariot to draw venom from!”

Karna’s weapon was likely a spear, a larger weapon built on the same lines. In any case it was all speculation, and I didn’t see much sense in getting worked up about it.

“I was just thinking that maybe he will have to use that weapon today,” Visokan said. “I heard you are going to challenge Karna to battle...”

Ignoring his circuitous hints, I strapped on my favorite cowhide breastplate and arm guards and went out to supervise how my weapons were arranged on the deck of the chariot.

Dhristadyumna’s guess proved correct: Drona arrayed the Kauravas in the ultra-defensive Kamalavyuh, with each petal of the lotus formation led by a master warrior and comprising all three wings of the army. Jayadratha had been secreted in the center of the formation, the bud. The advantage was that no matter which point Arjuna attacked, the other petals would instantly close, creating a tight defensive shield around the target.

In the event I didn’t have to challenge Karna — it was he who found me as I drove diagonally across the field, heading towards where Arjuna was battling mightily to break through. An arrow flecked with peacock feathers embedded itself deep in my flagpole as a sign of his challenge; as I turned to confront him, two crescent-headed arrows pierced my breastplate.

To the acharyas, I did not rate as an archer on the same scale as Arjuna and Karna, but I had one thing going for me: power. And importantly, Visokan knew my strengths as well as I did. He needed no prompting; swiftly, he backed up the horses and drove away at a diagonal, putting distance between us.

"Coward," Karna's voice cut across the din. "Stand and fight!"

An instant later he was staring down at his bow, which I had cut in two. From this greater distance, the power of my arms and shoulders gave me the edge — I could shoot arrows further, and with greater force, than Karna.

I had a stock of specially prepared arrows — longer and stronger than the conventional ones, these were much harder to draw and release, but their heft gave them additional range and power the conventional arrows Karna was shooting at me did not have.

Realizing the danger, he kept trying to close the distance; with effortless skill, Visokan danced our chariot out of the way, maintaining the distance and constantly maneuvering so I had a clear view of my target.

I wanted to tire Karna out before I closed with him. My arrows thudded repeatedly into his breastplate and onto the wheels of his chariot; his armor was strong, but the repeated impact of the arrows created an additional physical hardship for him.

Thrice in succession, I cut his bow in half. As he bent to pick up a fourth, I noticed the first signs that he was tiring, and pressed my attack harder. A lucky shot took him dead center in the chest; he reeled, and grabbed hastily at his flagpole for support.

My time, I realized, had come. I picked up the arrow I had been saving — a long, extra thick one fitted with a crescent-shaped head and flecked with pigeon feathers — and carefully fitted it to the string.

Karna fired a volley at me; I shrugged them off and, as he bent to replenish his quiver, gave the word: "Now!"

I expected Visokan to spring the horses forward at speed to reduce the distance; I was poised to send the arrow straight at Karna's throat. To my surprise, Visokan did the exact opposite — he drove diagonally away, putting even greater distance between us.

The moment was lost, and I was furious.

"You cannot kill him — it would be a huge sin," Visokan said.

"He is your brother!"

The bow fell from my suddenly nerveless fingers; my limbs felt paralyzed. I willed myself to bend and pick up my bow again, but collapsed instead to the deck of the chariot, reeling under a shock far harder to absorb than the worst Karna had thrown at me.

"Karna is your mother's eldest son." Visokan's words came to me as if from a great distance. I pulled myself back onto to my feet — and recoiled as Karna, who seemed to have gotten a second wind, drove his chariot close to mine and poked me in the chest with the tip of his bow.

"Fat fool!" he sneered. "You are only fit to wrestle in the mud with people like you — don't ever make the mistake of thinking you are an archer."

Words were always Karna's sharpest weapons. He appeared to have forgotten that he had been just an instant away from death — or perhaps he hadn't realized the extent of the danger he was in.

"I promised your mother I would kill only one of her sons, and you are not him. Get out of my sight before I change my mind." With indescribable contempt, he flicked me in the face with the disengaged string of his bow and drove away without a backward glance.

Around me the battle surged, but my senses refused to take any of it in.

Visokan drove away to the edge of the field and, finding a quiet corner, stopped the chariot.

"It was when I was coming from Kasi to join you," he said. "Since Queen Balandhara and your son Sarvadhan were with us, our force was travelling in slow stages and at one point, we made camp on the banks of the Ganga.

"I never meant to eavesdrop," he said. "It was early morning and I was heading to the river for a bath. I saw your mother by the river bank and went towards her, meaning to pay my respects. It was when

I got closer that I saw the man who was seated, in *padmasan*, before her.

'I was unmarried, my child — what else could I do?', Visokan heard my mother say.

"Karna laughed, and there was a wealth of bitterness in his laugh, a world of hurt," Visokan told me.

'I was brought up by a charioteer and his wife, and I always was, and always will be, their son,' Karna had told my mother. 'I will not now give up the identity I have lived under all these years, I will not give up those who were my friends when your sons taunted me as an outcast and you stood silently by, never once giving me the protection of your name.

'But for you, I will do this — I will only kill one of your sons. Whatever happens, Queen — I wish I could call you mother but I just cannot think of you that way — whatever happens, you will have five sons.'

My mind whirled with the possibilities. Karna the eldest Pandava — rightful heir to the throne of Hastinapura?! How vastly different things could have been...

Every trick, every stratagem Duryodhana had launched against us had been with the knowledge of Karna's backing — if Karna, Arjuna and I stood together, would our cousins ever have dared treat us the way they did?

Would they have dared deny us our due, knowing that the three of us in alliance could have annihilated them in an instant?

The fatal game of dice that had led to this disastrous war — would it have happened? Karna, not Yudhishtira, would as the eldest have received the challenge, and by no stretch of the imagination did I see him accepting, and falling into Sakuni's trap as Yudhishtira had done.

And the Swayamvar? There was no doubt in my mind, as I recalled the events of that day, that Karna would have hit the target — I still recalled vividly the skill with which he had strung the bow, before Draupadi contemptuously rejected him as a candidate for her hand. If only my mother had spoken out, if only she had told us the truth, it would have been Karna who won her hand...

"Not now!" Visokan said, jolting me out of my reverie. "Dusk is approaching... Arjuna will need help..."

He raced the chariot across the field and through the massed Kaurava forces, the swords attached to the hubs of my chariot cutting brutally through flesh as we dashed headlong towards Arjuna. I grabbed my mace and vaulted out of the chariot, needing the bloody immediacy of hand to hand combat to overcome the demons of the mind.

Karna — the eldest Pandava. My brother and my king...

Ranging ahead of Arjuna's chariot, I killed mindlessly, brutally, my mace mechanically rising and falling, breaking limbs, crushing skulls as I fought to clear a path for my brother. And yet, I thought, it was all going to be too late — the sky was darkening around us; any minute now the bugle would blow to signal dusk, and the end of hostilities.

Ahead of us, buffered by a massed array of archers and swordsmen, I could make out the chariots of Karna, Duryodhana, Sakuni, Dushasana and Drona. Somewhere in their midst would be Jayadratha, totally insulated from Arjuna's revenge.

My brother would lose — there was no way we could bridge the distance in time. Arjuna would die on Abhimanyu's funeral pyre – and with that, our hopes of winning the war would go up in flames.

The sky went dark.

A massive roar went up from the Kaurava ranks. The rank and file threw their swords and bows and arrows up in the air; ahead of me I saw Drona, Duryodhana and Karna join the cheering throngs.

I glanced over my shoulder at Arjuna. Krishna had let the reins drop; on the deck of the chariot I saw Arjuna, head hanging in despair, slowly unbuckle his quiver and throw it down.

"Get in!" Visokan's voice in my ear startled me out of my stupor.

"It is not over yet," he said as I vaulted into the chariot. "Look up — it is the *surya grahan*, the eclipse..."

Realization hit me like a jolt — so that was why Krishna had spent the night closeted with the astrologers. Krishna bringing the chariot to a

halt... Arjuna's seeming despair... it was all part of a plan, and I didn't need anyone to tell me it had originated in Krishna's fertile brain.

I grabbed up my bow and quiver; even as I straightened, Visokan yelled "Now!"

I fought to balance myself as the chariot jumped ahead, smashing through the celebrating Kaurava hordes. But quick though Visokan was, Krishna was unimaginably quicker. The white horses of my brother's chariot passed me in a blur; Krishna manipulated the team with extraordinary skill as he cut right across the field, towards the celebrating generals who were crowding around the triumphant Jayadratha.

Visokan accelerated, staying close to Arjuna's flank. I trained my bow on the Kaurava generals — it would be cruel irony if Arjuna managed to fulfill his vow only to be cut down by the others.

The sky cleared.

Just ahead of me and to my right, Arjuna stood tall on the deck of his chariot, the light glinting off the diamond tip of his arrow. The *twanggg* of his release sounded above the din of the as-yet unsuspecting Kauravas; I watched the flight of the arrow as it shot across space and, with unerring aim, smashed deep into Jayadratha's throat.

I heard the triumphant notes of Devadutt, Arjuna's conch; an instant later, Krishna's Panchajanya joined in.

Dusk fell. The trumpets of the heralds blared out, a high note dropping off in a diminuendo to signal the cessation of hostilities.

As the flames of Abhimanyu's pyre burnt bright against the sky, I stood looking out across the river into the darkness beyond. Somewhere out there, in one of the lodges reserved for the womenfolk, sat my mother.

I wondered what she was doing, what she was thinking. She would, I knew, be calm, tranquil even in the face of the news of death and devastation ferried over by our messengers.

Maybe she was talking to Draupadi, or to Balandhara who she had invited to stay with her. Or maybe she was with Uttara, consoling the

young princess even as the flames consumed her husband's body on the other side of the river.

My mother — who, married when young to an impotent man, had managed to produce three children.

My mother — who, even before her marriage, had managed to have a son she had told no one about.

Who knew how many more secrets lay buried in her heart?

Episode 61

The mist rolling in off the river added a layer to the darkness of the night.

It was Drona's decision to continue the battle beyond dusk. The Kaurava commander was under increasing pressure from Duryodhana who, our spies told us, had accused the *acharya* of pulling his punches, of not attacking flat out against his favorite disciples.

The heralds had signaled a cessation of hostilities when Jayadratha fell, but there was barely time to replenish our quivers and tend to our wounds before the blare of trumpets summoned us back onto the field.

A sudden, blinding ball of flame exploded in the air a little ahead of me. Close on its heels came the unmistakable sound of Ghatotkacha marking another kill – a shrill, ululating cry that pierced the ear and paralyzed the mind.

My son hadn't exaggerated: he owned the night and already, an hour or so into the fighting, there was enough indication that Drona had blundered badly.

For once, Ghatotkacha was fighting in formation. His chariot was in the lead, flanked by two others on either side. Around them were ranged his small but highly effective band, fighting on foot the way they liked to.

I had gone up in support, but I really had very little to do. The men slipped in and out of the shadows at will, dealing death with sword and bow and spear and melting away before the enemy could react to their presence. But even this silent, deadly assault paled in comparison with what Ghatotkacha and his four companions were doing.

Every so often, one of them would toss a ball of pitch high in the air; another hit it with a flaming arrow and as the pitch exploded in flames, they went to work, brutally massacring the stunned, blinded Kaurava forces.

It was a scene straight out of hell: the screams of the dying mingled with the panic-stricken yells of their fellows who found fire raining down on them from above.

A messenger arrived from Krishna to put me on guard. Drona, Krishna warned, might use the cover of night to try to kill or capture Yudhishtira.

Visokan drove headlong towards that part of the field where my brother was stationed. We arrived just as Ashwathama launched a ferocious assault on Yudhishtira's position. Satyaki and Nakula had already come up in support; as I slipped into a defensive position in front and covered my brother, Drona and Kritavarma drove up to join Ashwathama.

Fighting in the dark of the night was, despite the massive torches both sides had deployed, nightmarish. Without a clear view of the field, it was difficult to assess the situation tactically and deploy counter measures. We surrounded Yudhishtira on all sides in a defensive formation, but it seemed to me that we were vulnerable to a flat out assault from any one point.

Visokan brought my chariot up close beside my brother's; amidst the din of combat I argued for discretion, and finally persuaded Yudhishtira to leave the field.

It was not that my brother was lacking in courage. Though not as skilled as Arjuna and I, he was in fact a better warrior than either Nakula or Sahadeva, especially when fighting from a chariot. But it would serve no purpose for him to be felled by a stray arrow, or to be captured, I pointed out.

With the immediate danger averted, I ranged the field looking to inflict damage where I could, and came upon Sahadeva staggering around in the dark. His armor had been shattered; he was bleeding from multiple wounds, and seemed on the verge of collapse.

"Karna!" Sahadeva told me, once I had lifted him onto the deck of my chariot and settled him down. "He destroyed my chariot, broke my bows, cut my sword to pieces... he humiliated me, he had me completely at his mercy – and when I was disarmed and defenseless, he flicked me in the face with his whip and told me to go tell our mother that he had sent her another gift. And then he drove off!

"What did he mean?"

"Who knows!" I pretended disinterest as Visokan drove back at speed towards our camp. "Never mind that – we have to get your wounds tended."

We pulled up outside Yudhishtira's lodge, and I carried Sahadeva inside. Visokan changed to a single-horse chariot, and drove back onto the battlefield to see what was going on. I called for some Sura and, with Yudhishtira for company, sat awaiting the reports of our messengers and spies.

"Tonight is good for us," Yudhishtira said. "Satyaki killed Somadatta, hadn't you heard? But it is your son who is winning us this war. Duryodhana sent the *rakshasa* Alayudha at the head of a large force to attack Ghatotkacha – your son and his men slaughtered them all; Ghatotkacha cut off Alayudha's head and in the dark, drove up to Duryodhana's chariot and threw it at him! He is fearless, that boy..."

Visokan walked in just then – and it seemed that he, too, couldn't stop talking of Ghatotkacha's deeds this night. "If this goes on for much longer, the war will be over tonight," Visokan said. Drona had sent his son, supported by a force of about one thousand troops, against Ghatotkacha.

"It was something to see! Ghatotkacha had his men with him – some two hundred of them, I think. The way they fight, oof! They slip through the shadows, and the only sign of their presence is the bodies they leave behind. The Kaurava troops were slaughtered; Ashwathama has been wounded, badly I think – I saw him in headlong retreat."

Messengers came in with fresh reports. Out on the eastern side of the field Drona and Dhristadyumna were locked in fierce combat; Karna had joined in, a messenger reported.

Krishna walked in just then with Arjuna. "Where is Ghatotkacha?" Krishna asked. "Send a messenger to him – let him go in support of Dhristadyumna. Ghatotkacha is a peerless warrior, even more so at night – if anyone can stop Karna, it is him."

Visokan drove off to deliver the message.

I decided to return to my lodge – it was nearing midnight; the fighting wouldn't last much longer before the trumpets called a halt and before

you knew it, it would be dawn and the killing would begin all over again.

For how much longer could this war go on, I thought as I walked. Already both sides had taken grievous losses – the Kauravas far more than us. But the major warriors remained undefeated – Duryodhana, Drona, Karna and Ashwathama on the Kaurava side; Arjuna, Dhristadyumna and I on our side. And until the leaders fell, the killing would go on...

I sat on the little stoop outside my lodge, taking occasional sips of the goatskin of sura I had provided myself with.

A blaze of light caught my attention. I jumped up and looked out in the direction of the field. An enormous fireball lit the night sky; over the din of battle I heard the voice of my son — fierce, triumphant.

And then, suddenly, silence – punctured a few moments later by the trilling call of the trumpets crying truce for the day.

I stretched out on the bed, trying to ease the aches and pains of a long day. Outside, I heard the clatter of hooves. Visokan came running into the room.

"Karna almost died today," he said. "He was forced to use the Shakti to save himself. Ghatotkacha is dead."

I ran towards Yudhishtira's lodge, where the lights still burnt bright. My brother rushed up and hugged me tight.

"I am overwhelmed with grief," he said. "First Abhimanyu. Now Ghatotkacha. I still remember the respectful boy who came to our help at Gandhamadhana... the eldest of our sons... our heir..."

Nakula and Sahadeva came up to hug me, their faces, like Yudhishtira's, etched in grief.

I slumped to the floor in a corner of the room. Moments later, Krishna rushed in.

"What is this?! Why the long faces? Karna had one weapon, one chance, against Arjuna and now that too is gone. We should be celebrating. Where are the balladeers – why are they silent, the fools? Have them strike up the music!"

Did Krishna see me in the shadows? I suppose not. I slipped out without a word, but Krishna's voice followed me, adding fuel to the anger I felt burning deep inside of me, anger I did not know how to vent and on whom.

"He may be Bhima's son but Ghatotkacha is a tribal, a rakshasa. Which of us kings could rule in peace, knowing he and his men were out there somewhere – a renegade band of tribals who come in out of the forests and raid us at will, and against whom all our war craft is useless? Balarama and I had long had it in mind to go after him, to find and kill him and his men — it was only because of this war that I spared him."

I heard Yudhishtira say something, but the words were low pitched, indistinct. And then Krishna laughed – a harsh, cruel, triumphant sound.

"Do you take me for a fool? It was not for nothing that I sent that message asking him to attack Karna. I knew no one could stand up to Ghatotkacha; it followed that when faced with the prospect of his death, Karna would be forced to use his Shakti.

Now Arjuna is safe – what is the life of a tribal compared to that?!"

I fought down the surging anger that threatened to overwhelm me and headed in the direction of the field. The *chandalas* were hard at work, piling the bodies of the dead onto their ox-wagons. I walked towards where I had seen that last fireball, and finally I found him.

My first born – sent to die so my brother could live.

My son – born to the woman who one magical evening in the forest had stilled my doubts, who had proved to me that I was not impotent like my father.

Hidimbi — the first woman I had ever had; the first woman I had ever loved...

Loved?!

A sense of shame engulfed me. I had enjoyed my time with her, but when my brother decided it was time to move on and my mother said I had to leave her behind, I had turned my back on her and walked away without a backward glance. In all these years it had never

occurred to me, obsessed as I was with Draupadi, to go looking for her.

Even when Ghatotkacha came to me that evening eleven days ago to tell me he had come to fight for me, I never once thought to ask after his mother...

And now he lay there at my feet, this child born to a woman I had loved and left, his chest split open by an enormous iron javelin the likes of which I had never seen before. Around us, head bowed, faces streaked with tears, stood the few dozen members of his tribe that had survived this night.

Vultures wheeled high overhead; in the shadows surrounding us I sensed the gathering presence of jackals sensing a feast.

I had thought, as I stood beside Arjuna earlier that evening, the most heart-breaking thing a man could do was perform the funeral rites for his son. I now knew a greater sorrow — here I stood, a father looking down at the slain body of his son, knowing that he did not even merit a proper funeral.

Ghatotkacha was a Nishada; a tribal. The rules that governed us prohibited cremation for such as him – *rakshasas* were just so much fodder for the scavenging beasts that roamed the battlefield.

A sudden revulsion swept over me – revulsion for a war that would win us a kingdom in return for the lives of our young.

I pulled the javelin from his chest and hurled it far into the night. Lifting Ghatotkacha's lifeless body in my arms, I strode through the blood-soaked field and headed for the cremation ghat.

I would not leave my son for the jackals and vultures to prey on. He would get a proper funeral, even if I had to build his pyre with my own hands.

Episode 62

"Drona has to die today," Dhristadyumna said at dawn on the fifteenth day, as he took up position at the head of the Panchala army.

I began the day on my chariot, leading our surviving force of elephants on a single-minded mission.

Thanks largely to Ghatotkacha and his band, one wing of the Kaurava army had been almost entirely destroyed. It was up to me now to do to their chariots what my son had done to the foot soldiers.

It went well in our part of the field – with Bhagadatta dead and the bulk of his elephant force destroyed by Arjuna, our own elephants had the space to range free, wrecking havoc among the Kaurava chariots. I had given the mahouts their orders: it wasn't enough to defeat the warriors; the chariots had to be totally destroyed.

The messages that came from other parts of the field were, however, dire. Drona, backed by Karna and Ashwathama, had launched a ferocious assault on our position from the northern side – first Drupada, then Virat, had failed in their bid to halt him and fallen to his arrows.

The Kaurava forces had been decimated, but Drona's mastery of war craft was unparalleled. Even with hugely reduced numbers, they were inflicting tremendous damage on our forces. Drona led brilliantly, grouping his forces tight, picking weak spots in our defenses as they opened up and gutting us with unexpected tactical moves and his own mastery of weapons.

In the distance I saw two chariots rushing in our direction, the distinctive white horses of the first and the royal white umbrella on the second identifying them as those of my brothers.

"Drona is invincible," Krishna said as they drew near. "The only way to defeat him is to break his spirit, his will. We must announce that Ashwathama is dead... Drona should see us celebrating."

Will Drona believe us, I wondered.

"No. Not unless Yudhishtira tells him his son is dead," Krishna said.

"You want me to lie?" Yudhishtira was disturbed. "Thus far I have tried to do everything that is consistent with truth, with dharma... how can I now give up the principles of a lifetime?"

With a visible effort, Krishna fought down his anger. "This is war, Yudhishtira – not a game of dice. Too many people have died so you can have your chance to rule in Hastinapura... it's a bit too late to stand on scruples."

My brother looked unconvinced.

Krishna pointed at the massive bulk of an elephant I had killed just minutes earlier. "I say the name of that beast is Ashwathama," he said. "I say Ashwathama is dead – where is the lie in that?"

At his urging we drove rapidly towards the northern part of the field, where Dhristadyumna was now locked in battle with Drona.

"Ashwathama is dead!" I proclaimed as we neared. The Panchala soldiers nearby picked up on the cry and soon, to the blare of trumpets, the entire force was celebrating wildly.

Yudhishtira threw a hand up in triumph. "Ashwathama is dead," he proclaimed. "Ashwathama, the elephant..."

Krishna must have anticipated what my brother would do – with a triumphant blast on his conch, he drowned out my brother's final words.

The next few moments rushed past in a confused blur. I saw Drona, his eyes fixed on Yudhishtira's face, lower his bow. Dhristadyumna's horses plunged forward; when the dust settled, I saw him standing on the deck of Drona's chariot, holding the acharya by his tuft of hair.

His sword flashed. Drona's head, severed clean at the neck, flew through the air and landed in the dust.

Showing no emotion whatever, Dhristadyumna vaulted back onto his chariot and drove away from the field, his bloodied sword held high.

Heralds signaled the fall of the Kaurava commander. As the fighting came to a halt, the rest of us drove off the field and in the direction of Yudhishtira's lodge.

I was taken aback when Satyaki rushed up to Dhristadyumna. "Coward! For all your big talk, you couldn't defeat him in battle – and then to cut his head off when he was laying down his arms... Drona... a Brahmin... an *acharya*...!"

"This is war," Dhristadyumna said with unruffled calm. "I haven't learnt to make all these fine distinctions about 'honorable' killing and dishonorable killing."

"Even if he was an enemy, even if he had to die, he was a Brahmin," Satyaki persisted. "He was an *acharya*, a *guru*... but then what would you, and that amoral brother of yours, know about honor, about ethics? You are a shame on all *kshatriyas*!"

"True." Dhristadyumna's laugh was suffused with scorn. "What do we Panchalas know? We need you to set us all an example, Satyaki – like you did when you killed Burisravas.

"How did that happen? You — an example for *kshatriyas* everywhere — were on your knees begging him to spare your life. And when Arjuna saved your life by cutting off Burisravas' arm with an arrow, you showed the bravery you upbraid me for lacking when you chopped his head off from behind! And now," Dhristadyumna snorted, "I get lessons in honor, in ethics, from this pillar of the Vrishnis!"

Satyaki's hand flashed to his sword hilt.

Krishna interposed himself between him and Dhristadyumna – but just when I thought the tension would be defused, Arjuna added unnecessary fuel to the fire.

"I agree with Satyaki. Drona was our *guru*, our *acharya* – it is not the same as when Satyaki killed Burisravas."

"He was a Brahmin, hence doubly sacred," Yudhishtira chipped in.

Dhristadyumna had remained calm through Satyaki's attacks, but this proved more than he could take.

"Brahmin! *Acharya*! *Guru*! What respect, what praise, for the man who ordered his generals to surround a 16 year old boy who was on his own – or have you forgotten how Abhimanyu was killed, Arjuna? Where was that famous *Brahmanyam* when he, this man you revere as your *guru*, ordered Karna to attack Abhimanyu from behind?!"

"Cowards will always find a way to justify their actions," Satyaki muttered.

"Enough!" I roared. I had finally come to the end of my patience. To win this war we had killed our own flesh and blood; we had lied, we had cheated, we had broken every rule, violated every code – must we now add hypocrisy to the list of our sins?

"Have we lost our minds? We, all of us, wanted to see Drona dead – it didn't matter to us that he was our *acharya*. We knew none of us could kill him in direct combat – isn't that why Krishna asked us to lie, to pretend Ashwathama was dead? You lied," I swung around to confront my brother. "Where was *dharma* then? Honor? Ethics? You wanted to win, you wanted the *acharya* dead, and for that you were prepared to lie, if necessary — or are you fooling yourself that by mumbling about an elephant your lie had somehow become the truth?

"So what were we thinking? That Drona would drop dead on his own when he heard his son was dead? We knew someone had to kill him — and the fact is, none of us had the courage to do what all of us wanted done — none except Dhristadyumna. And now that we have got what we wanted, you want to lessen your own guilt by rounding on him? What kind of men are we that we have sunk to this?"

It was rare for me to speak out in public, rarer still to speak at any length — but the accumulated hurts and griefs of the past two days finally proved too much for me to bear.

"This *acharya* of yours, Arjuna — what did he teach you? To cut down the arm of a warrior who was engaged with another? Oh, I forget — Satyaki is a friend, so anything you do, any rule you break, to save him is okay?

"And you, Satyaki? So you think it was a grievous crime to cut off Drona's head? Would it have been better, would it have somehow been consonant with your notions of honor and ethics, if one of us had killed him with an arrow shot from a distance? Or were you waiting for Drona to die a natural death?!"

This was war, not some game we were playing. Dharma, honor, rules, ethics – nice notions all, every one of which had died the day Bhishma fell. Since then, the Kauravas had broken the rules repeatedly — and so had we. “If we are not prepared to face the consequences of a war we sought then let’s admit it now,” I told Yudhishtira. “Go to Duryodhana, tell him it is all over, and let’s head back into the forest!”

An inoffensive water pot stood in my way. I smashed it in with a single kick and stormed out into the night, not caring what my brother made of my words.

Episode 63

Krishna was waiting for me when I returned to my lodge that night. He needed to talk to me, he said.

In all these years of knowing him, Krishna was invariably punctilious in doing what he saw as his duty. Whenever he visited us, he made it a point to go first to see Yudhishtira and then, as inevitably, he would seek me out, touch my feet and ask after my well-being before going off to find his friend.

But never once had he sought me out for a private conversation, never once asked for my advice, my help, as he was doing now.

"You must talk to Yudhishtira," he told me. "You are the only one who can. It is not good for him and Arjuna to quarrel."

When Karna led the Kaurava troops out at dawn on that 16th day of the war with Shalya as his charioteer, I'd guessed there would be trouble.

My brother – ever since the day Visokan had told me who he really was, I often caught myself thinking of Karna as my brother and even feeling a momentary twinge of anger when others referred to him as the *suta putra* – had wanted this command; it was this desire that had led to his quarrel with Bhishma.

From the moment the heralds signaled the start of combat, Karna hit us with the force of a whirlwind. If Bhishma and Drona had deployed strategies and tactics based on the principles of war craft we had been taught since we were young, Karna's tactics were more free-flowing, and considerably more dangerous.

He led the Kaurava troops in a series of raids, swinging from one end of the field to the other, catching us off balance and hitting us hard, causing immense losses to our foot soldiers and cavalry.

Nakula was the first among us to face the full force of his fury. Karna caught him at an unsupported moment in his defensive position on the

right side of our formation and engaged him in combat. While his forces decimated the troops Nakula led, Karna toyed with my brother, destroying his weapons one by one, cutting his armor to shreds, wounding him in a dozen places and finally, in a supreme act of contempt, jumping onto Nakula's chariot, grappling with him and throwing him out into the dust.

I spotted him as he was leaving the field to seek treatment for his many injuries. "That *suta putra* told me to tell mother Kunti that he remembered his promise, and would spare even the sons of Madri," a bewildered Nakula told me. "What promise? What did he mean? And why did he let me go? When he jumped onto my chariot, I thought the end had come..."

I had no time to explain, even if I could – Ashwathama's peculiar war cry rang out just then, and I turned to confront this challenge.

Drona's son had a voice unlike any other – more the shrill neigh of a horse in rage than anything human. The story I heard was that when the startled wet nurses first heard his cry at birth, they gave him the name 'Ashwathama' – the one with a horse's voice.

I looked to use the same tactics that had worked so well against Karna – with Visokan keeping a distance from Ashwathama's chariot, I tried to use my remaining stock of larger arrows and my superior shoulder strength to hurt him, tire him out before closing with him.

Ashwathama's skill as an archer was without parallel – and I was now finding out that he was considerably shrewder. Where Karna had felt insulted at being bested by me and repeatedly tried to close the distance, Ashwathama increased it and, staying just out of ideal range, effortlessly cut down the arrows I aimed at him.

My stock of special arrows was rapidly running out; the danger for me would come when they were all gone, and Ashwathama could close the distance and use his greater skill to good effect.

"Save one or two of those," Visokan, as aware of the danger as I was, said over his shoulder. "Let him think they are all used up – when he looks to attack, you might get a chance to use them."

It was a desperate ploy; I thought afterwards that only the skill of Visokan and the timely arrival of Satyaki saved me from humiliation or worse.

The prolonged combat had drained me; besides, I needed to replenish my stock of arrows. I signaled to Visokan to drive off the field, but we were cut off by a band of Duryodhana's brothers attacking in formation.

For this I needed no strategies, no tactics – just the deep, burning anger that surged up within me whenever I caught sight of any of my cousins. The skill level of the younger ones in the group was rudimentary – in a few moments of furious combat, with Visokan weaving the chariot in and out of their ranks, six of them fell to a combination of my arrows and spears.

With only Chitrasena and Vikarna left standing, I vaulted out of my chariot, sword in hand. Chitrasena fancied himself as something of a swordsman – back when we all trained together, he loved to show off his skills.

It was with drawn sword that I met him. He was good, no question – fast on his feet and lightning quick at switching the angles of his attack. Against him I used my sword like a bludgeon; instead of merely deflecting his attacks, I repeatedly smashed my sword against his on the blocks, using my superior strength to drain him.

From the diminished power of his strikes and the time he took to bring his sword back in line after each thrust, I sensed that he was tiring fast. There is a trick that I had learnt during my time with the Nagas – they use it with spears, but I had practiced it with the sword whenever Arjuna and I trained together.

Instead of repelling his thrust, I caught Chitrasena's sword on the blade of my own and rapidly twirled it around in quick circles. The pressure of holding on to the sword began to tell on Chitrasena's already weakened wrists; I judged my moment and, when our swords were at the lowest point on the circle, suddenly disengaged and with a reverse sweep, cut deep into his neck.

Vikarna ran to where his brother lay in the dust, his life blood gushing out through the cut in his neck. I had no intention of killing this youngest of my cousins; I had never forgotten that when Duryodhana, Dushasana and others insulted Draupadi that day at Hastinapura, Vikarna was the only one in the Kaurava ranks to brave Duryodhana's anger and to protest the wrong that was being done.

I was walking back to my chariot when his challenge stopped me in my tracks. "I don't want to fight you," I told him.

His answer was to rush at me with his sword raised high. I decided to finish this fast – it was the only thing I could do for him. I blocked his downward cut with my elbow against his forearm, knocking his sword out of line; before he could recover, I buried my sword in his chest all the way to the hilt.

Catching him as he fell, I lowered Vikarna gently to the ground and pulled my sword out. For a long moment I stood looking down at this most honorable of my cousins, wishing things had been different, wishing I could have befriended him, wishing his decency had prevailed with his own brothers...

I strode back to my chariot and ordered Visokan to drive me back to my lodge, wanting space, needing some time to myself. The last thing I expected was to find Krishna waiting for me.

"Yudhishtira and Arjuna had a huge quarrel today," he told me.

Alarmed by the havoc Karna was creating, my brother had foolishly challenged him. Karna toyed with Yudhishtira, destroying his chariot and disarming him with ease. He then threw aside his own weapons and attacked Yudhishtira with his fists, battering him into submission. Yudhishtira fell; Karna stood over him, mocking, taunting, then left him lying there in the dust with a parting word and a kick.

My brother retreated to his lodge, and found Arjuna there.

"That set him off," Krishna told me. "He called Arjuna all sorts of names, upbraided him bitterly for leaving you alone on the battlefield..."

Krishna had tried to pacify Yudhishtira, but that only goaded my brother more. "I've been listening to his boasts for thirteen years," Yudhishtira said, "I've been hearing him talk endlessly about how he will deal with Karna – but now that the time has come, he hides here while Karna destroys our forces!"

"Coward!," he said. "If you can't do it, give your Gandiva to Krishna – maybe, like that *suta putra* you are so afraid to face, driving a chariot is what suits you best!"

Seeing Arjuna's hand tighten on the hilt of his sword, Krishna had hastily come between my brothers, looking to make peace. But Yudhishtira's words had pushed Arjuna over the edge.

"This fellow – what has he ever done but live off the fruits of others?" Arjuna lashed out. "From the moment he saw her he wanted Draupadi, and he managed to trick mother into getting her married to all five of us!

"He talks of cowardice, this man who has always stayed a mile away from any actual fighting, hiding in the middle of our troops and letting others kill and die so he can be king. If Bhima calls me a coward, I'll take it – but not this..."

Krishna had somehow managed to push Arjuna outside before either of them could say something irrevocable. "But now Arjuna has shut himself up in his lodge; he says if Yudhishtira wants a kingdom let him shed his own blood, win the war if he can.

"You are the only one they will listen to," Krishna said.

As I walked over to Yudhishtira's lodge, I couldn't help thinking that our real problem was not the Kauravas but the bitterness each of us had accumulated over the years.

Episode 64

War is all consuming – every minute of your time, every corner of your mind, is filled with the enemy who comes at you in endless waves. The days pass by not in minutes and hours but in the blood of the enemy you just killed so you can move beyond him to the enemy you must kill next.

It was as I took position at the head of our formation on the morning of the 17th day that I realized just what all those many moments added up to. Sixteen days ago when I had stood in this identical position and looked ahead, it had seemed as if we were confronting an enemy without end. The Kaurava forces had stretched out in front of us, as far as the eye could see and then beyond.

I realized with a start that today, from that identical position, I could see where the Kaurava troops began – and where it ended; beyond the last enemy I could see the expanse of the Kurukshetra battlefield, now shorn of so many of the soldiers that had once covered it.

The view brought home to me with great clarity that the war was effectively over — we had the greater troop numbers left standing, and there was no question that we would prevail if only through sheer numbers. Yet the killing would not stop — not until Karna, Duryodhana and Dushasana lay dead on the field.

Those deaths had to happen, and of them I would regret only Karna's — but that wasn't something I could tell my brothers, even during that endless night I had just spent with Yudhishtira and Arjuna.

Of the two, Yudhishtira was the easier to convince — when I left Krishna and went to his lodge, I found him already regretting his ill-considered words.

"I wish I could take it all back," he told me even before I could sit down. "I don't know why I said what I did — the humiliation of defeat at that *suta putra's* hands, added to finding Arjuna here in the lodge and not on the battlefield facing Karna — I must have hurt our brother grievously..."

"Ask Arjuna to come," Yudhishtira told me. "I must tell him how sorry I am, I must take back my words...."

"Why?" Arjuna demanded when I went to his lodge with the message.

"He insulted me, abused me without cause — and now because he has had a change of heart, I have to go to him so he can be magnanimous and tell me how sorry he is?"

"Go to him, don't go — I'm beyond caring," I said and stormed out of the lodge, knowing even as I put on that display of calculated anger that it was the one thing most likely to force my brother, in his present mood, to listen to me.

I wasn't wrong — Arjuna came running up as I strode through the empty lane. "Brother, if it had been you who said those things I would not have reacted as I did — but this man who hides behind our army, behind the strength of your arms — he had no right to accuse me of cowardice. How can I now go to him?"

"Because he is your elder brother," I told him. "Because he is your king — and the reason you are fighting this war. You could die tomorrow and so could I — and it won't matter because as long as Yudhishtira lives, the throne of Hastinapura remains at stake."

Words tumbled out of him then — hot, bitter, angry. So many years had passed, so much blood had been shed since the day he had, in Drupada's court, bent his bow and hit the target — yet even today, it was the one thing that rankled above all others.

"Yudhishtira lusted after Draupadi from the moment he set eyes on her, yet he didn't lift a finger to try and win her; instead he tricked our mother, he manipulated us all just so he could enjoy her... What kind of elder brother is he that he could do that, what kind of king is this we are hell bent on making, who can subvert justice for his own pleasure?!"

I listened in silence, fighting down my rising impatience — an impatience exacerbated by the fact that I felt the justice in at least some of his criticism. This was my kid brother, the one person closest to me. Clearly he needed to vent; as clearly, I was the only one he could say all this to — knowing him as I did, I knew that loyalty to family would prevent him from speaking in such terms even to Krishna, his dearest friend.

I had no choice but to stand and to listen as years of accumulated angst poured out of him in a tidal rush.

And then he stopped, all talked out and looking drained, spent. He had nothing more to say, and now he did not know what to do.

What could I say to him? It was not, I realized, in me to suggest that he should seek out our brother – while I understood the deference due to the eldest, I couldn't help thinking that as the older brother, it was Yudhishtira's responsibility to care for the feelings of his brothers – and besides, he was clearly the one at fault.

"Brother, I agree with much that you say; times without number during these last few years I have felt that our brother was wrong to do what he did or to say what he had. I cannot ask you to go to him now, to make peace when the quarrel was not of your seeking."

"But this much I know – I cannot now abandon this war. Before it began, I made two promises. I promised mother that I would see our brother on the throne of Hastinapura or die in the attempt. And I promised myself that I would kill every one of those who that day insulted Draupadi in open assembly. I will not live with the knowledge that I went back on my promises – so if you withdraw and I have to face Karna at dawn, to kill him before I can get to Duryodhana, then so be it – I will kill Karna, or die trying."

I walked away.

When I reached my lodge, I glanced back over my shoulder – and saw Arjuna walking slowly, painfully, in the direction of our brother's lodge.

Filled with a sense of portent, we moved into formation even before dawn. As they passed my position, Krishna stopped the chariot.

"Brother," Arjuna said to me, "today only one of us, Karna or I, will leave the field alive." He jumped onto the deck of my chariot, hugged me with a sudden fierceness, and was back in his chariot before I could react.

The heralds sounded their trumpets. Arjuna's chariot darted forward, heading straight to the focal point of the Kaurava formation where Karna had taken position, with Dushasana protecting his left flank and Ashwathama his right.

With the field denuded as it was, I found it easier to sense what was going on across the two formations. I saw Satyaki dashing up to challenge Dushasana and ordered Visokan to drive at an angle, cutting across his path. "Help Dhristadyumna against Ashwathama," I yelled as we crossed. "Dushasana is mine."

Visokan was at his best – weaving the chariot deftly through the Kaurava lines, he cut in at an angle that separated Dushasana from Karna.

Finally, I exulted as I roared out my own challenge – finally, a chance to fulfil a vow I had made so many years ago.

There is something impersonal about fighting from a chariot – you fire your arrows, the enemy fires his, the charioteers manipulate the horses, and all you can do is wait for the enemy to make a false move, to expose some chink you can exploit.

The rage I had nursed deep inside of me for close to 14 years needed more – I needed the immediacy, the physicality of hand to hand combat.

Dushasana had a weakness he was not aware of – he was always just that little bit jealous of his elder brother. The world acclaimed Duryodhana as peerless with the mace; deep inside, Dushasana always thought he was as good or better.

I threw aside my bow and quiver, picked up my mace and vaulted onto the ground, roaring a challenge I knew he would be unable to resist.

I knew I could defeat him – he was not half the fighter he thought he was. But I wanted more – I had to humiliate him, I needed to confront him with the fact of his own death before I dealt the killing blow.

He swung his mace, a powerful overhead swing at my head, trusting to his strength to somehow smash through. It was a blow of anger, not sense, and easy enough to block. But instead of blocking his blow overhead, I skipped out of line and, as the mace whistled past me, swung my own mace in a short, hard stroke powered by every ounce of muscle in my shoulders and arms. My mace smashed into his. He fought to control it and swung at my ribs; again I hit him with the double strike, the first one a defensive tap to push his mace out of line and the second a powerful crash of my mace on his, forcing him to

exert all his strength to keep the mace from being wrenched from his grasp.

I saw the sweat break out on his brow as Dushasana backed up, looking bewildered. He charged headlong, mace held in front of him. Exulting in my knowledge that he was finished, I sidestepped and again, smashed his mace with mine; this time, I followed up that blow by pressing my attack, aiming not for his body but for his mace, which I bludgeoned in short, hard strikes.

Dushasana backed away, gasping for breath; I noticed him flexing his arms, where the strain had begun to tell. I threw my mace away. "Bare hands, Dushasana," I roared. "Your hands were strong enough to drag Draupadi to the assembly – now show me what you can do to me!"

He ran at me, more desperation than skill in the charge. It was a lesson I had learnt a long time ago – when fear swamps your senses, the techniques you had learnt are always the first casualty. With clenched fists, he struck at me – blows that were badly timed, lacking in any real power.

I absorbed his blows, taking them on the body and on my shoulders – and laughed loudly, deliberately, in his face. I saw the first hint of fear dawn in his eyes – and switched from defense to attack.

In continuation of a block, I smashed the heel of my palm up under his chin, jolting his head back in time for my left elbow to crash into his exposed throat. As he fought desperately for breath and balance, I hammered my open palms into his ears. He reeled back; I turned sideways and drove the heel of my foot hard into his stomach.

He stumbled, staggered backwards – and fell. In an instant I was on him, my knee on his throat, bearing down while my hands hammered down at his ribs. My hands splayed, fingers curved to hook into his ribcage, I gradually brought all my strength to bear on his lower ribs.

I took my time, increasing the pressure gradually and ignoring his feeble struggles. I waited to see the realization of death in his eyes – and bore down hard.

It was as if the world around us didn't exist anymore – my whole being was consumed with the lust for a revenge I had long dreamt of.

With a sudden crack, his ribs gave way. I pushed down harder, driving the broken bones into his lungs, his heart.

A great gout of blood gushed up from his shattered chest, drenching my face.

Involuntarily, I licked my lips.

The metallic, slightly sour taste of warm blood reminded me of that day in Hastinapura. I will drink your blood, I had vowed then as I watched Dushasana dragging Draupadi to the center of the assembly, the blood dripping down her legs.

I licked my lips again – this time slowly, deliberately, lingering on the taste of revenge.

In a daze, I walked towards my chariot, my thoughts on a woman waiting somewhere on the other side of the river – a woman with skin of gold, with hair that hung down her back like a black waterfall... a woman who loved to hear of battles, whose lips would part and breasts heave as she listened to stories of killing, of blood.

“Go,” I told Visokan. “Go to Draupadi. Tell her Dushasana is dead... tell her I’ve killed him and drunk his blood. Tell her from me that she can tie her hair up again...”

Episode 65

Sounds of unbridled revelry came to me as I lay in my bed late that night, trying without success to shut out thoughts of all that had happened that day.

Drums thumped and trumpets pealed; balladeers – with an enthusiasm fuelled in equal parts by sura and silver coins – sang incessantly of the greatest archer the world had ever seen. And from the lane outside came the sounds of soldiers celebrating the knowledge that their war was over, that they had escaped death.

Noise is good, I thought as I lay in the dark, staring into the blackness – it anaesthetizes the senses and inhibits thought.

The prevailing mood appeared to have seized even Visokan. When he asked me for the third time in less than an hour if I needed something, I snapped at him. “Go join in the celebrations, get yourself drunk,” I told him. “I don’t need you — I don’t need anyone around me tonight.”

He gave me a strange look, and wandered off into the night. Moments later Arjuna and Dhristadyumna rushed in, and it was hard to tell which was the more boisterous, the more drunk.

“Why are you here by yourself?” Arjuna demanded, grabbing an arm and trying to pull me to my feet. “Come join the fun – Yudhishtira is actually singing and dancing, you must see this!”

What could I say? “You killed our eldest brother today – what is there to celebrate in that?”

I bit down on the thought before it found voice.

The thought had first come to me when, after Visokan left me beside Dushasana’s body, I commandeered an elephant and from its back, surveyed the field.

Off in the distance, I could see the distinctive white horses of Arjuna's chariot and the golden chestnut ones of Karna's, whirling in and out of a swirling dust cloud.

Either way, I thought to myself as I guided the elephant in that direction, a brother will die today. Strangely, it didn't really matter which one it was — I knew I would feel equally devastated.

From my vantage point the duel seemed to be as much about Krishna and Shalya as it was about my brothers — the two demonstrated unbelievable skill, piloting their chariots in a dazzling series of moves and countermoves, each striving to gain some little advantage over the other.

Karna and Arjuna were evenly matched in strength and, as far as I could see, in skill. As I neared the combat zone, I saw Karna in a brilliant move fire a stream of arrows high up in the air. As they curved through the air and came down towards Arjuna, Karna fired a series of arrows in a straighter line, forcing Arjuna to defend at two levels — the ones coming down from above and the ones coming at him straight.

All those years ago, when we were still young boys learning the art and craft of war and Drona had called for a trial of strength, Arjuna had dazzled the spectators with a trick. At blinding speed, he had shot a stream of arrows high into the air; as they came down, he fired a series of white-painted arrows into their midst to conjure the effect of lightning flashes amidst rain.

What was the point, I thought at the time, of endless hours spent practicing such tricks? After each attempt he had to painstakingly gather up his arrows, re-pack his quiver, and then do it all over again — for what? To amuse people with nothing better to do? What I practiced with the mace, the bow and arrow and in the wrestling pit, had a point to it — the skills I was practicing to perfection were the ones I would some day use in actual combat...

Now I saw the point — the "tricks" that amused crowds at a martial arts exhibition were the very ones that, used in deadly combat as Karna was doing now, could force the enemy to confront different challenges.

As I urged my elephant closer to the scene of the duel, I saw Arjuna do something I had never seen before — firing continuously with his

right hand and establishing a line of attack, he switched suddenly, seamlessly to his left and used what seemed to me some special arrows. These must be poison tipped, I thought; they were so thin, almost like needles, that he was able to notch five, six of these arrows onto the string at the same time and fire them simultaneously, multiplying the danger to the enemy.

Around them, the fighting had come to a standstill as everyone in the vicinity gathered to watch the duel of the master archers. With each side cheering on their champion and jeering the opponent, the atmosphere was incongruously festive.

Their battle must have been going on for a long time — Arjuna and Karna were both bathed in sweat and streaked with the dust raised by their chariots.

There was no way I could make a path for my elephant through the milling crowd. I jumped down, hoping to push a way through the crowd — and even as I straightened, a groan of despair went up from the Kaurava ranks.

Over the heads of the crowd, I saw the white horses standing stock still. Arjuna stood on the chariot deck, face grim, bowstring drawn taut. I could see the chestnut horses and the head of Shalya in the charioteer's seat, but there was no sign of Karna.

Using my arms and lowered shoulders to smash a way through the crowd, I got to the front — and saw Karna down on one knee, desperately trying to lift the wheel of his chariot out of a rut it appeared to have gotten caught in. Shalya was furiously whipping his horses but strain as they would, the wheel refused to budge.

"I am unarmed," I heard Karna say. "Wait till I free the wheel — *kshatriya dharma* demands that you allow me that..."

Arjuna looked confused; eyes fixed on Karna, he gradually lowered his bow.

"*Kshatriya dharma!*" Krishna's voice cut through the hubbub, dripping scorn in every syllable. "This from the man who sneaked behind a sixteen year old boy and cut his bow string from the back!"

"Since when did Adhirata's son, this *suta putra*, have the right to rank himself with *kshatriyas* and to invoke our *dharma*?!" Krishna demanded, turning to Arjuna.

"What are you waiting for? The sworn enemy of the Pandavas, the killer of your son, stands before you – do your duty!"

Just then, a passing cloud obscured the sun, throwing the scene in gloom.

His head tilted to one side and his eye fixed on Arjuna, Karna put his shoulder to the wheel and his hands on the hub, and strained mightily.

I saw despair in his eyes and took a hasty step forward, not quite knowing what it was I intended to do. Help Karna free the wheel of his chariot? Stop Arjuna from killing his eldest brother?

It was all too late – Arjuna's bow flashed up, an arrow thudded into Karna's shoulder and, as he turned under the impact, another burst through his breastplate. I saw the sudden gush of blood as the arrow drove deep; an instant later, Karna slumped backwards against the wheel, a third arrow impaling his throat.

A blast from Krishna's conch was drowned by Arjuna's triumphant roar; an instant later, Yudhishtira jumped down from his chariot and rushed forward. "Karna is dead," he yelled, hands thrown up in triumph. "There he lies, the *suta putra* who caused this war.

"Where are the musicians, the singers?! Let them sing to my beloved brother, to the peerless archer, Arjuna, the equal of Indra himself!"

Arjuna spotted me and rushed up, arms spread wide. "Brother," he shouted as he folded me in a hug, "I did it – I've killed Karna like I promised I would!"

He danced away into Krishna's embrace; Dhristadyumna, Nakula and Satyaki all ran forward to add to the acclaim.

The heralds had blown the end of combat. My brothers got in their chariots and drove towards our camp, in a hurry to celebrate; Dhristadyumna, Satyaki, Nakula and others raced to catch up. In their excitement, no one noticed me standing off to one side, eyes fixed on Karna's lifeless form.

Around me, the dejected Kauravas gradually drifted away, leaving my brother's body there for the *chandalas*.

I stood there, not moving, not thinking, not feeling – just waiting until, finally, I was all alone. And then I walked up to where Karna lay.

As gently as I could, I pulled out the arrows that had impaled his shoulder, his chest, his throat. Responding to the promptings of some inner need, I arranged him so he was comfortable — his legs stretched in front of him, the wheel of his chariot supporting his back. With my robe, I wiped the sweat and the blood off his face.

And then I bent low and touched his feet — seeking from him in death the blessings I had never been able to get in life. And even as I did, I cringed at the cowardice that made me glance hastily around to make sure I was alone, that no one had seen this act of mine.

Episode 66

"They saw three men standing by the lake, talking," Visokan told us with the air of having penetrated some deep mystery.

Dhristadyumna and I were resting in my lodge, talking desultorily of all that we had been through. The war was over – it had officially ended the moment Shalya, the latest commander in chief of the Kauravas, fell to Yudhishtira's arrows.

When our uncle led the tattered remnants of the Kaurava troops out onto the field that dawn with only Shakuni among the major warriors for company, it was obvious he was prompted not by any expectation of victory as by his own notions of *kshatriya dharma*, the belief that a *kshatriya* who once sets foot on the field of battle cannot turn back until the war is won or he is killed.

Arjuna and Dhristadyumna, exhausted from their revelry of the previous night, did not bother to take the field. Sahadeva replaced me at the head of our forces and, as soon as the bugles sounded, headed straight for Sakuni's position.

I saw no sign of Ashwathama and Duryodhana in the Kaurava ranks, and decided to stick close to Yudhishtira, to guard against some last minute surprise.

A messenger came with news that Shakuni had fallen. So many years ago, while waiting for the final throw of dice that would send us into exile, Sahadeva had told me he would one day seek out and kill Shakuni – another promise fulfilled and one more left, looming ever larger in my mind.

Off to one side of the field, Nakula had engaged Shalya. Yudhishtira headed in that direction, seemingly intent on battle. Over the last 17 days he had never once been part of any decisive battle involving a major warrior on the Kaurava side; he alone among us had no deeds the balladeers could praise in song.

My brother seemed bent on redressing that. Racing his chariot past Nakula's, he challenged Shalya to direct combat. I maintained position to his left and a little behind, from where I could keep an eye on the field and intervene if necessary.

Yudhishtira seemed to be managing well enough against our uncle. My brother was fairly skilled in fighting from the chariot, but Shalya was his equal or better – and unlike Yudhishtira, our uncle had a lifetime of experience to draw on.

Discreetly, without giving my brother reason to suspect I had taken a hand, I used a few cleverly placed arrows to cut the traces of Shalya's chariot. The suddenly freed horses bolted, bringing the Madra king to a standstill. I fell back to await the inevitable outcome; sure enough, Shalya soon fell before Yudhishtira's arrows.

Our troops roared in celebration as the Kaurava army, now bereft of leaders, turned tail and ran. The war was, finally, over.

"Duryodhana still lives," I reminded Yudhishtira as we headed back to camp.

"I saw him fleeing from the field, heading in the direction of the river," Visokan interrupted. "He was alone and on foot."

When we reached camp, Yudhishtira summoned Yuyutsu and charged him with rounding up a few boats and conveying our womenfolk to Hastinapura. Born to Dhritarashtra through a serving maid, Yuyutsu had abandoned the Kaurava side after the events in the assembly hall and, once our term of exile was over, joined our camp.

With Nakula and Sahadeva to help, Yudhishtira immersed himself in the task of breaking up the camp and preparing for our return. I left them to it and went back to my lodge; Dhristadyumna found me there a few minutes later, and it was as we were sipping from a skin of sura, talking of all that we had been through, that Visokan entered the lodge with two tribals in tow.

"These are hunters who live in the forest here," Visokan told us. "They saw three men standing by the river bank, talking."

Three men talking by the riverbank – what, I wondered, was Visokan fussing about?

"They say these three were talking to a fourth person who couldn't be seen..."

"Duryodhana!" Even as the realization dawned in me, Dhristadyumna raced out of the lodge, yelling instructions to the soldiers.

Within minutes, a force mounted on horseback raced in the direction of the river with instructions to flush out the fugitive.

"We'll go see if we can pick up his trail," Visokan said, running towards my chariot with the two tribals in tow.

The hubbub had alerted everyone in our camp. I climbed into Dhristadyumna's chariot and we set off after Visokan; Arjuna, Krishna, Yudhishtira and the others followed in our wake.

A tribal was waiting at the river bank to guide us; at his direction, we moved away from the river and through the woods until we came upon an immense lake that, the tribal told us, was known locally as Dwaipayana.

Visokan was waiting for us. "He is hiding in there," he told me. "We tracked him from the riverbank to this place. These men are sure he is in there somewhere – they think he could be hiding in one of the subterranean caves."

The lake stretched in front of us, calm, placid. Amidst the rushes near the bank, a few boats bobbed about.

"It is not possible to find him – we don't know where to start looking. The only thing to do is shame him into showing himself," Krishna suggested.

Yudhishtira approached the bank of the lake. "Duryodhana! Coward! You wanted this war – you wanted the kingdom for your own, so come out and fight for it like a man!"

"Is it manly for so many of you to surround someone who is exhausted, and defenseless?" The voice came to us from amidst the rushes. Duryodhana was hiding in their midst, sheltered from sight by the boats.

I toyed with the idea of diving in, and going after him.

"I have had enough of this war, enough of Hastinapura," Duryodhana's disembodied voice floated out to us. "My brothers are dead, my friends are dead, what is there left for me? Of what use to me is a kingdom of widows? I give it all up — let me go, I will retire to the forest and do penance for the rest of my life..."

"Have you no shame?" My brother seemed inspired by a rage he was no longer in control of. "You send your brothers, your friends and relatives to die for the sake of your greed, your selfishness — and all you care about now that they are dead is saving your own skin?!"

"I will not take the kingdom without defeating you. Come on out and fight — it is the least you owe those who died for you. Pick any one of us — single combat, your choice of weapons... if you win, Hastinapura is yours!"

I chanced to glance at Krishna, and saw his face crumple in dismay at these words. "Are you mad!" he muttered in disgust. "What if he picks you or Nakula or Sahadeva — and chooses to fight with the mace?"

"Apparently the sons of Pandu are destined to spend their entire lives in some forest or other, because this man is at heart a gambler!" Krishna walked off, muttering to himself.

I noticed movement among the reeds. Duryodhana emerged, caked in mud from head to toe, his favorite mace with the golden handle in his hand.

"I accept!" I saw the glimmer of hope in his eyes as he walked towards Yudhishtira.

My brother stood there crestfallen, unable to take back the words he had spoken in a moment of unthinking arrogance.

I stepped forward.

"We have a history between us, Duryodhana — and many, many debts to settle," I said, eyes locked on his. "Let's settle it all right here, right now. Maces — and only one of us walks out of here alive."

"The man who can defeat me with the mace is yet to be born, you fool!" His voice was harsh with contempt.

I laughed in his face. "That's right — I remember now. The first time we met, during the trial of strength, Drona had to stop me from killing you. And the last time we met, on the field of battle, you ran like the coward you are!"

He hesitated; it seemed to me that for that one instant in time, he was contemplating the escape route Yudhishtira had so carelessly offered him. And then something snapped; his arrogance — and the contempt he always had for me — kicked in, as I had hoped it would.

"Come!" he said. "Our battle will be one for the gods — and when I am done with you, your brothers can wander in the forest for the rest of their lives, knowing you died in vain."

My trick had worked, just when all seemed lost. I had him now.

Episode 67

Duryodhana leapt high. I bent at the knee, going low in a counter.

In a move I had never seen before, his left hand came off the mace. The right hand slid down the handle till his fingers held it by the tip, and then he flicked it at my face like a whip.

I blocked it with ease – and realized too late that the move was meant to distract, not hurt. Even as I moved to defend, Duryodhana lashed out with his leg, smashing his heel against my shoulder and sending me staggering backwards.

We had been fighting for a long time. Or maybe it just felt that way. Early into our bout, I realized that Duryodhana's mace – his favorite one with the gold-plated handle and the wickedly sharp spikes along the head – was considerably lighter than mine. Whatever it lost in power, it more than made up in the speed with which he could wield the lighter weapon.

All those years ago, when we fought for the first time during the trial of strength, I had won by using my strength, hammering my mace repeatedly against his to tire his wrists and arms.

Thinking to repeat that tactic, I went at him hard from the moment Balarama finished his little speech. "Just in time to watch your two disciples in battle," Krishna had said as Balarama's chariot rolled into the glade.

Balarama always spoke of impartiality, of how the Pandavas and Kauravas were equally dear to him and how he wanted no part of our quarrels – but for all that, he had over the years favored Duryodhana, taking him under his wing and teaching him the tricks of the mace.

When war seemed inevitable, Balarama had gone off on an extended pilgrimage to avoid taking sides – but only after he made sure the bulk of the Dwaraka army would fight under the Kaurava flag.

I had listened to his little speech about fair play, about the rules of combat and about making him proud of us, with growing disbelief – did he think this was some contest got up for his amusement?

Duryodhana swung at me – a powerful, underarm swing aimed at the right side of my chest; as my mace met his in a block he disengaged, spun in reverse with startling speed, and swung at my left.

There was no time to bring my mace around. I smothered the impact by stepping into the blow and blocking the handle with my body – but even so it stung, driving the breath out of me and forcing me to one knee.

Duryodhana roared in triumph and charged, swinging; I parried and, still on my knee, spun around with a sweeping strike at his legs that forced him to jump back, giving me room to recover.

What had started off as a contest of speed and strength was slowly turning into a battle of skill and wits. My arms were beginning to feel the strain; I was gasping for breath and struggling with the sweat that poured down my face and into my eyes – and by the look of him, he was as drained as I was.

I sensed desperation in him as our battle dragged on. There was an increased frenzy to his attacks. He must have known his best chance was to finish me off quickly, before my strength and endurance began to wear him down.

I realized I had to change my tactics, find his weakness and figure out how to exploit it.

Duryodhana jumped high, as he had repeatedly done since our battle began, using his lighter mace and his agility to advantage. What made his tactic dangerous was that he kept changing the angle of attack – sometimes he jumped high and swung down at my head; at other times he feinted, forced me into a defensive posture, then waited till he was on the way down to attack me from an angle lower than I was prepared for.

With sudden clarity, I saw the flaw in his tactics – and what I had to do.

I breathed deep to center myself, and settled down to a calculated defense, blocking his attacks without launching any of my own, conserving my strength and waiting for my opportunity.

I had to make him think I was more tired than I was, that my reflexes were slowing down, that it was all I could do to defend — and that he had no reason to fear a sudden counterattack.

Duryodhana changed tack and launched a series of swift attacks, swinging the mace to the left and right with great dexterity and putting all his power into each strike. I countered with force; our maces struck sparks off each other.

Seemingly hard-pressed, I staggered back, letting one hand come off the handle and taking one of his strikes on my body.

Dimly, I heard my brothers yelling encouragement. I shut it all out — their shouts, my rage, the memories of all the insults Duryodhana had visited on us...

It was only a matter of time, I knew, before Duryodhana would go airborne again. This time, as he reached the apex of his jump he swung from the right, aiming for my shoulders and chest. I made as if to block, waited till he was committed and then pulled out of the feint.

To exploit the weakness I had spotted, I knew I had to take a serious blow — and this was it. I did the best I could to minimize the impact, but even so his mace landed on my side with a thud that drove the breath out of me. I bit down hard on the searing pain, spun around and using the momentum of my turn and the full strength of my arms, I smashed my mace against his momentarily unprotected ribs.

The crack of breaking bones as the head of my mace smacked into his side told me all I needed to know. Duryodhana crashed to the ground, the mace flying out of his hand.

Vaguely through the percussive pounding of blood in my head, I heard the voices:

“No.”

“Bhima, he is unarmed, you have won ...”

“NO!”

Almost as if it had a will of my own, my mace rose high overhead. Duryodhana raised his legs in a desperate attempt to block. I adjusted and smashed the mace down against Duryodhana's thigh, just below his waist.

"What have you done?!" Yudhishtira rushed up to me. "He was unarmed – to hit him then... it was wrong!"

I stared at my brother in disbelief, amazed –not for the first time – at a sense of wrong and right that he seemed able to switch on and off at will.

Just yesterday, he had danced with glee when Arjuna felled Karna.

Karna had voluntarily put down his weapons; Duryodhana had lost his in a battle that had not yet ended – that was right, this was wrong?!

I looked away and caught Balarama's eye. His face contorted with rage, he was straining to get away from Krishna and Satyaki, who struggled to hold him back.

"Coward!" he screamed. "Duryodhana was the better fighter — you tricked him and then, when he was unarmed, defenseless and hurt you hit him! Your act was against *dharma*, against the laws of combat! Coward!"

Deep inside of me, something snapped. Duryodhana was finished – I knew that he would die of his wounds even if I didn't lay another finger on him. But this – this was more than I had the fortitude to bear.

"Let him go!" I roared at Krishna. "I vowed to kill Duryodhana – and kill him I will, right here, right now. I know no *kshatriya dharma* greater than that!"

I raised my mace high overhead.

"Anyone who thinks to stop me can step forward now and try!"

I waited, mace poised, as Krishna and Satyaki let Balarama go and stepped back. He took a step towards me, then another, his eyes locked on mine.

And then he stopped.

I held his eyes with mine as my mace came down with all my strength, crashing into the side of Duryodhana's head. Almost in continuation of that blow, I flung my mace away. I had no further use for it – my war was over.

For long moments I stood there, mentally and physically drained by the toughest battle I had ever fought in my life.

I felt their eyes... my brothers', my kinsmen's, my friends'... eyes that looked down on my dying enemy with pity... eyes that lacerated me with a scorn I had done nothing to deserve...

I walked over to where Visokan waited with the chariot, and painfully hauled myself in. On the deck, I saw my blood spattered mace.

"It is a good weapon," Visokan said gently, as he held out a cloth for me to dry the sweat that poured off me in an unending stream. "What does it know of *dharma* and *adharma*? What does it care?"

He drove slowly towards the river. I threw away my robes – and felt the soothing, healing caress of a gentle breeze. My 'father', Vaayu – where were you when I was all alone, when my enemies covered me with their arrows and my friends with their contempt?

As I dived into the river, I heard the sound of Visokan driving away.

I floated in the water, letting the gentle eddies rock me like a baby in its cradle, and thought back to what I once was – the little boy who, every evening, would come to the riverbank looking for his father... the boy who, on feeling that first gentle touch of breeze on skin, would pray with all his heart to become the strongest, the bravest, the best warrior of all time.

That prayer had come true. I had grown big and strong – there was in my world no warrior to equal me, no one who had ever bested me in combat. I had fulfilled my vows, every last one of them; my last remaining enemy lay breathing his last in the dust, the thigh he had slapped in a lascivious invitation to my wife a bloodied, broken mess.

I had become what I wanted to be, done all that I vowed to do — and yet, what did I have? A wife I shared with four others... two other wives whose faces I couldn't remember... a son who had given up his life for those who had delighted in his dying, two other sons who I did

not know... and brothers who could never appreciate the depth of feeling I had for them...

Evening gave way to the pitch black of night, matching the darkness that swamped my mind, my heart.

I sat there for a long, long time. At some point, I thought I smelt smoke...

The urgent clatter of horses' hooves woke me from my reverie. I looked around for my robe as Visokan drove up at reckless speed.

He jumped down before the chariot had come to a halt and ran towards me, sobbing.

"They are dead... Ashwathama... he came in the night, like a thief... he set fire to our camp... he killed them all while they slept..."

He collapsed to the ground, sobs wracking his frame.

From the depths of a heart grown suddenly cold, a question welled up and lodged in my throat: who?

My brothers had gone off into the forest to celebrate the victory, with them went Krishna and Satyaki. Dhristadyumna broke away from the party – I want to celebrate with the first good night's sleep I have had since this started, he told them.

Ashwathama came in the middle of the night. With him was Kritavarma, and Kripa – the guru of our race. They set the camp on fire – that must have been the smoke I sensed, and ignored... as our people woke to this conflagration and rushed out in panic, Ashwathama cut them down one by one in the dark.

Dhristadyumna... our children, Draupadi's sons... Prativindhya, Suthasoma, Shrutakirti, Shatanika, Shrutakarma... my son Sarvadha, who had become inseparable from his cousins...

Young men... boys, really – the future of the Kuru race, for whom we had slaughtered our kin and won a kingdom...

All dead.

I looked down at hands that seemed suddenly drained of their strength.

The war was over, but the enemy still lived.

The enemy never dies...

Episode 68

I stood beside my brothers, in water that came up to our chest.

Ganga's embrace was warm, soothing — and yet, as we watched the long line of people walking towards us, a chill worked its way up from the soles of my feet to freeze my heart and numb the mind.

The brides of our sons came first, heads down, walking in single file towards the river bank – absurdly young girls in the white robes that signaled the widow, their hair hanging loose and unbound, with no sign of ornamentation. Behind them walked *valiyamma* Gandhari, her hand on my mother's arm.

Subhadra and Balandhara walked behind them, supporting Uttara on either side. Tears flowed down Uttara's face, unchecked and unheeded. Someone had told us she was pregnant.

Draupadi came last. Though she had no husband to mourn, she too was dressed in sober white in memory of the five sons she had lost in one night of madness.

They came on, this long line of white-robed women, mute testament to a war we had won — and lost.

We stepped out of the river, walked up to where the priest waited for us and stood with our heads bowed and hands folded in prayer, mentally preparing to pay our final dues to those the war had taken from us.

Mother left Gandhari's side and walked up to us. "When you honor the dead, don't forget the name of a hero who died fighting on the Kaurava side..."

Arjuna looked at her, bewildered. Yudhishtira must have had some inkling of what was coming – eyes fixed on hers, he waited in silence for her to utter the name.

"Your elder brother, the one you know as Radheya..."

"Karna?!" The word exploded from Arjuna, half question, half exclamation.

"I shot an arrow into his heart as he begged for life... I took deliberate aim while he lay there bleeding, and shot an arrow into his throat... I killed my brother!" Arjuna crumpled to the ground, overwhelmed.

"Karna." Mother's face was impassive, her tone even. "The child I bore when yet a maiden, the child I abandoned to hide my own shame..."

"I ask this of you in the name of one who never got his due in life – please, my children, one handful of water, one final prayer in Karna's name..."

Turning, she walked back to her place beside Gandhari.

For long moments Yudhishtira stood there silent, unmoving, as if he had turned to stone. And then he looked up, and I saw the tears in his eyes. He clapped for an attendant; several rushed forward.

Find Karna's widow and his children, he commanded; bring them here so they may stand with our women when we pay him our respects.

The priest recited the mantras for the dead and named each person we had lost; in turn, we took a handful of water and offered it up to Ganga.

"Kuntiputra Karna..."

As Yudhishtira paid his respects, I thought back to all those encounters, all those years. To the time outside the elephant paddock when he had stood there watching while Duryodhana and Dushasana attacked me.... to his voice, which I heard clearer than all the rest, calling for rope so they could bind my hands and feet and throw me in the river...

I was the one who had insulted him that day, during the trial of strength. In my mind I heard the echoes of my own mocking laughter. "What is this *suta putra* doing with a bow and arrow? Give him a whip – that is all he is fit for, all that he deserves," I had taunted then...

Karna, the brother I had never known.

I tilted my palms, and let the water trickle out.

So many years ago, one of Ganga's little daughters had accepted a bundle entrusted to it by a shamed maiden. Ganga had taken the bundle in her arms, cradled it, rocked it, and brought it safe to shore.

Today, with the same impassive calm, she accepted my tribute to that child she had nurtured so long ago.

We were now the masters of Hastinapura and yet, as I walked along the corridors of the palace, I felt like a stranger, an interloper.

All those years in the jungle, all through the war that followed, I had dreamt of this homecoming; I had consoled myself with visions of the celebrations we would have when we finally won back our inheritance.

Now we were back, and there was no celebration. The streets of Hastinapura were deserted; behind shut doors the womenfolk mourned their dead.

At the entrance to what used to be Duryodhana's palace I saw an enormous iron doll, its body dented in several places. Its face, with a hideous smile plastered on it, was a cruel mockery of mine. This, I thought, must be the statue Visokan had told me about – an iron contraption created by an engineer, with hands that moved when levers were pulled.

Duryodhana had constructed it to look like me and each morning, he had 'practiced' by smashing at it with his mace.

I walked into the main palace, now dark and dismal. In the great hall, Dhritarashtra sat alone and unmoving, waiting for I don't know what. As I penetrated deeper into the castle a single, heart-rending sob from an inner room stopped me in my tracks. Hastily, I retraced my steps and walked out of the palace, seeking the solitude of my own quarters.

On the way I passed Arjuna, walking with no aim, no direction. He couldn't sleep, he said — his nights were haunted by visions of Karna's eyes, fixed on him in entreaty.

"Did you know?" To avoid replying, I wrapped my arms around him in a hug. How could I tell him I had known for some time, that I could have stopped him from killing a brother with just a word?

He walked away, cursing our mother. I will never be able to forget, he said – and I will never forgive her.

I thought of Karna. Of how he had lived his life with *kshatriya* blood in him, yet constantly reviled as a *suta putra*. He was a king, yet one who owed his kingdom not to the might of his arms but to the charity of his friend; he wore a crown, yet lived his life a vassal, never accepted as an equal in the company of his fellow kings.

No, I wouldn't be able to forget either.

But then I thought of my mother, of the life she had lived. Brought up a princess, she had one day, without warning, without even a chance to say goodbye to her own mother, been handed over to a childless cousin of her father's — who in turn had given her to a *rishi* for his personal maid, so the *rishi* would be pleased and bless him with a son.

I had spent enough time with the *rishis* of the forest to know what that meant – she would have cooked for him, cleaned for him, bathed him, waited on him hand and foot and even, if he so desired, given herself to him because how could she refuse?

Marriage to a king must have seemed to her the escape she had prayed for so desperately during those lonely years of her lost childhood – and yet she found she had to share her impotent husband with another, a younger, more beautiful wife who clearly dominated the king's affections. And then she had lost him; her sons, princes born to rule, had been forced to wander the forests like outcasts while she survived on the goodwill of her youngest brother in law...

No, I couldn't bring myself to curse her either.

"I haven't seen you since we returned to Hastinapura."

Yudhishtira was waiting for me in my chambers. I touched his feet, and sat down opposite him.

"I thought this was surely the one place I would find some *sura*..."

I had never known him to drink in our presence. I summoned a maid. She came, and poured. We drank. Yudhishtira looked after her as she walked away – she, too, bore the signs of recent widowhood.

"So this is what we fought for, this is what we won – a nation of widows!" My brother sighed.

"I spent a lifetime trying to avoid war... I did things my wife, my brothers, hated me for. I, who love each of you like my sons – I pledged you on a turn of the dice..."

"*Kshatriya dharma*... you couldn't refuse a challenge."

In some strange way, we seemed to have switched places — here was my brother, voicing the thoughts I had bitten down on all these years, and here was me making his excuses for him. "It is done," I told him. "It's over. What is the point in thinking of all that now?"

My brother drank some more. "Oh, I could have gotten out of the game if I wanted to," he said. "I could not refuse Duryodhana's challenge, but it was not our cousin who played against me — and there is no *dharma* that says I have to accept a challenge by proxy."

"Why, then? We could have walked away; we could have gone back to Indraprastha, built it into the greatest kingdom of our time... we could have been so happy, with our children around us ..."

"Our children. All dead. One day I will die — and there will be no one to do my last rites." Yudhistira jumped up from his seat and paced the floor, his agitation manifest.

I had never seen him like this, so totally devoid of the calm self-control that characterized him at all times, a self control that had at times maddened me almost beyond endurance.

"Do you think, my son, that they would have let us rule Indraprastha in peace?"

He picked up the skin of *sura*, found it empty, and clapped his hands.

"As long as our cousins ruled Hastinapura, they would have found one pretext or other for war. When they invited me for that game I thought, this is our best chance – if we can win the kingdom without bloodshed, in a game of dice, our cousins won't be able to hurt us any more, their power will be neutralized..."

"But I lost!"

We sat in silence, in the gathering dark, each lost in our own thoughts.

"I never told you this at the time, because I thought you would never agree – I knew none of you would agree," Yudhishtira said.

"Remember when I sent Krishna as my final emissary, with the message that we would accept five villages as our share? Later, in private, I told him if he saw the slightest chance to make peace, he should tell Duryodhana we would even be prepared to accept five homes somewhere – one for each of us, so we could live our lives in peace."

He sighed – a sudden, heart-wrenching sound that bubbled up from some subterranean well of frustration, of sorrow.

"Duryodhana refused, as I feared he would – but even so I would have somehow persuaded you, our brothers, even Draupadi, to let it go. We could have lived somewhere – in Panchala, or Dwaraka, anywhere...

"But that woman! She must have known I didn't want war – that is why she met Krishna and sent those messages to Draupadi, to Arjuna and to you, fanning the flames of your anger, making sure you wouldn't listen to me, making sure there would be war!

"And all that time, she knew it would be our own brother we would fight against... our brother we would be forced to kill... and she never said a word...

"Mother!" He spat the word out, like a curse – and abruptly, walked out of the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Episode 69

The throne Dhritarashtra had formally vacated loomed ahead of us as we sat discussing arrangements for our brother's formal coronation.

Yudhishtira had summoned us to the main hall of Hastinapura. He walked in while we were reviewing the list of friendly kings to invite, and perched on a small stool beneath the dais. Typical of my punctilious brother, I thought – though he was acknowledged the new king of Hastinapura, he would not occupy the throne till he had been officially crowned.

I was wrong.

"I've thought long and hard these last few days, and I've taken a decision," Yudhishtira said. "I called you here because I wanted my brothers to be the first to know."

We looked at each other, mystified by the portentous note. Life had just begun to settle into a routine of sorts. The four of us had busied ourselves with an exhaustive inventory of the treasury, the stocks of cattle and the state of the various trading and artisan communities — a review we were far from completing.

Arjuna and I had taken on an added responsibility – that of figuring out how to quickly augment our dangerously depleted army. As things stood we could hardly raise a single division, and that left us extremely vulnerable to inimical kings or even to random raiding parties.



War -- Grant Morrison

"Hastinapura is a nation without a heartbeat," Yudhishtira said, breaking in on my thoughts. "Wherever I go – inside the palace, on the streets – all I see are widows, all I hear is the heart-rending sound of their sorrow. The feeling of guilt, the feeling that all of this is my fault, that none of this would have happened if I had not insisted on my right to the throne, has been growing on me these last few days.

"I have therefore decided to give up the throne and retire to the forest, where I will spend the rest of my life in penance and prayer."

He held up a hand to silence our protests.

"No, don't say anything – my mind is made up, there is nothing further to discuss. I have decided that our brother Bhima should be crowned king. It is fitting – it was he who led us all along, he who won the war for us, he who destroyed our enemies, and *kshatriya dharma* says the kingdom belongs to the victorious warrior.

"Hastinapura today is a dangerously weakened kingdom. With Bhima on the throne and with Arjuna supporting him, no one will dare take advantage of this weakness..."

I was compelled to interrupt. "I don't agree. *Kshatriyas* do not fight for themselves but for their king – and right from our days as children in the forest, there has been no doubt in our minds that you are our king. We fought this war to uphold your right to the throne."

Yudhishtira made as if to speak. I held up my hand. "No, let me finish. From the time we were children, we have been brought up to perform different functions. Arjuna and I were brought up to wage war; Nakula and Sahadeva are masters in the arts of administration; and you alone among us have been trained to rule. You speak of *dharma* – but how does *dharma* permit you to abandon this kingdom and its people at the time of greatest distress? I agree we are weak – but you have Arjuna and me to look after our security. We need you to heal the wounds of war, to bring prosperity back to this kingdom."

"My child, did I not tell you at the outset that my mind was made up? You more than anyone else know I do not make up my mind lightly – I have thought of all of this, I have agonized over what my *dharma* demands of me. Know this — to be effective a king has to focus on one thing alone, and that is the welfare of his subjects. If he is tormented, distracted by doubt as I am now, he can never make a good king."

He paced around the room, agitated, while we looked at each other in silence, unsure what we could do, what we could say.

Abruptly, he stopped before me. "I know this has been sudden, that you need time to think. I will leave you now so you can discuss this with our brothers. When your mind is made up, come to me. I have to speak to our uncle Vidura, make sure he understands my decision and gets everything ready for your coronation."

Yudhishtira turned and strode out of the room. Arjuna was the first to break the silence.

"He is right, brother – we need a strong king now and there is none stronger, more feared than you. You have no reason to worry – not when you have Nakula and Sahadeva to help you in the task of running the kingdom, and me beside you to make sure Hastinapura is strong again ..."

"In any case," Sahadeva cut in, "our brother said his mind is made up, that his decision is final – so what is the point of discussion? He believes you are the best person to rule, and I agree — Hastinapura needs a king and if it is not Yudhishtira, then who better than you?"

I looked across at Nakula, who as usual sat silent, listening to everyone but not venturing any opinion of his own. "And you – what do you think?"

Nakula smiled. "Where is the need for me to say anything? Did you think I would have a different opinion from Arjuna and Sahadeva? Anyway, it is not as if such things haven't happened before — didn't uncle Dhritarashtra step down in favor of our father? And when our father thought he was unable to govern, didn't he give the crown back to Dhritarashtra and retire to the forest?"

"Listen, brother," Arjuna said, "there is nothing left to discuss. Our minds are made up. You need time to absorb this, so we'll leave you alone now."

He came up to me and bent low to touch my feet. Nakula and Sahadeva followed. I hugged all three – an embrace that contained a world of doubt, of questions, and a surge of gratitude for their unquestioning support.

I sat in the empty assembly hall, listening to the sounds of their departing footsteps and gazing at the raised platform in front of me. In the center stood the throne of Hastinapura, flanked by the two giant tusks bound in gold and crusted with precious stones. To its left was the smaller, but equally grand, throne for the queen.

My eyes fixed on the much smaller seat to the right of the throne – a seat set on a lower level of the dais, one without arms and the glittering paraphernalia of royalty.

That was my seat – the one I would, after the coronation, have occupied as Yudhishtira's heir. Now Arjuna would sit there, to my right, and I...

I walked over to the dais and climbed up to the throne. I looked all around to make sure I was truly alone, and then I sat on the throne of my ancestors – gingerly at first, and then more firmly, with a growing feeling of belonging.

All those years ago, when as a child I had first come to Hastinapura, the first thing I had seen when I entered this hall was uncle Dhritarashtra seated on this throne – an imposing, awe-inspiring figure. From now on, it would be me they would see on the legendary throne of the Kurus. Would I look majestic, I wondered, would I evoke awe in our friends and fear in the emissaries of our enemies?

I looked to my left and, in my mind's eye, saw Draupadi seated there, her eyes on me as I sat in state, dispensing justice.

My doubts vanished. My mind was made up. I would rule – and with my brothers beside me, I would be a good king, fair and just.

I jumped down from the dais and walked towards my own chambers, my mind in a whirl. I had to go to Yudhishtira and tell him my decision, ask his advice, learn from him all that I possibly could in the little time I had before he left for the forest.

Nakula and Sahadeva would look after the details of the coronation – but what then?

Our wealth of cattle had been depleted by the war – with our soldiers engaged and with no able-bodied men to look after them, large numbers of cattle had wandered off into the forest, and more had been taken away by the small raiding parties that infested the surrounding

forests. I must remember to order Arjuna to lead an expedition into those forests, clear them of the raiders – to have them running amok, unchecked, was too big a security risk for us to take.

There was so much to do. Nakula and Sahadeva needed to take stock — we could then figure out ways to consolidate our cattle, get the breeding process started again and oh yes, horses, elephants, we needed to replenish our paddocks and I'd have to find a way to free up Sahadeva's time so he could visit some of the neighboring kingdoms, find talented artisans to set up silk industries, metal and wood work, all the things we had done in Indraprastha to turn it into a bustling kingdom we would have to do all over again here, and that reminds me there is the question of Indraprastha and Panchala to be decided, what were we going to do with those kingdoms and I wonder if Arjuna had thought of Matsya now that Virat and his son were dead and Uttara was living under our protection, we had to urgently appoint regents who would rule the various kingdoms of our allies under our authority and oh yes I have to send a messenger to Krishna so when he comes for the coronation we can discuss this problem and decide on the right person and I needed to take my brother's opinion as well before he went off into the forest and out of my reach oh and while on my brother I wonder if we should do the Ashwamedha, in one sense it would mean that everyone accepts our sovereignty and I could rule without the constant threat of war hanging over us but then again there was the risk that if we embarked on the Yaga it could give other kings an excuse to gang up against us at a time when we were not particularly strong, I must ask Yudhishtira what he thinks of this...

I walked on in a trance, my mind whirling with thoughts of all that I had to think of and do, and almost missed the light tinkle of anklets that told me I was no longer alone.



Draupadi -- Grant Morrison's visualization

Draupadi walked out of the shadows and bent low to touch my feet. She must have heard, I thought – while she was always careful to greet Yudhishtira in this fashion, she had never done this for me or any of my other brothers until now.

“So have you decided on the date of the coronation?” she asked.

“Yudhishtira has made some decisions, but I am yet to make up my mind,” I said, hiding my elation under an off-handedness I was far from feeling.

“I heard,” she said. “That is why I came.”

To my surprise I saw a glint of tears in the eyes she raised briefly to meet mine before she looked down again.

“All those years I slaved in the forest, and that year in Matsya when I hid in the disguise of a maid, I always consoled myself with the thought that my time would come.” Her voice throbbed with the

weight of unshed tears. "I would remember Krishna's promise that he would one day see me seated on the throne of Hastinapura, and I'd dream of the day my husbands would win a kingdom for me and finally, I would be the queen I was born to be..."

She sighed, a wealth of weariness, of helplessness in the sound. "Maybe it is my destiny to live always in the forest, to live always as a slave..."

"Live in the forest?!" I exclaimed in surprise. "But why..?"

"What then? Would you have me live here instead as serving maid to your queen, to do for Balandhara what I did for Sudeshna?! Is that what you wish for me – me, Panchali, daughter of Drupada, sister to Dhristadyumna, wife to the Pandavas?"

"Balandhara...? But... it is you who will rule here beside me, on the throne of Hastinapura ..."

"Fat fool, they call you – and fat fool you are!" The scorn in her voice scoured me like a whip. "I was married first to Yudhishtira – it is he who has the first claim on me and if he goes into the forest, then I must go too, even if I am too young for *vanaprastha*, even if my mind and heart are not ready yet, not prepared yet to turn my back on life..."

Abruptly she turned and vanished into the shadows, leaving behind a long, shuddering sob that bounced off the walls and echoed down the corridor.

Sick at heart, unsure of what I must do, I hurried to my chambers. I needed to be alone... I needed to think... Balandhara my queen... Draupadi in the forest, wearing the deerskin and bark robes of *vanaprastha*... how had I overlooked this?

The maids had not yet lit the lamps. In the gloom, I saw two figures waiting for me – uncle Vidura and behind him a woman, her robe pulled over her head to cover her face.

"So your brother wants to go to the forest to do penance?"

It was mother.

"I heard he has decided on *vanaprastha* – uncle Vidura did his best to persuade him against it, but he seems to have made up his mind."

I stood there, silent, waiting. She had clearly come for a purpose – and she would get around to telling me about it in her own way.

"The people of Hastinapura have lost everything, my child – and now they are about to suffer their biggest loss.

"Do you remember the day I brought you children here, to the gates of Hastinapura, for the very first time? The people thronged the streets in their thousands then, flowers in their hands, waiting for their first glimpse of the prince who was born to rule them.

"And they have been waiting ever since for the day Yudhishtira will be crowned their king, the day the rule of *dharma*, of righteousness, will be established in Hastinapura. They have lost everything they had – and now they will lose the one hope that has sustained them all these years..."

I felt the sudden sharp sting of tears, and ground my nails into my palms – a physical pain to take away the sudden sharp agony in my heart as I realized what she had come here to say.

"What do you want me to do, mother?"

"Your brother must become king. You are untrained in the *shastras*, in *dharma shastra* and *rajya shastra* – you are not fit to rule. It is not just me, child – your uncle also thinks as I do. Go to your brother and tell him that – tell him that under no circumstances will you sit on the throne."

I took a deep breath, fighting back the haze that clouded my mind. And then I laughed – loudly, uproariously. I sank down on a seat and laughed still, slapping my thighs and drumming my feet on the floor.

"Mother," I gasped, "don't you know my brother yet? Don't you know it is just his sense of humor at work, this notion of me – what is it you always called me, fat fool? – as king of Hastinapura? Did you think he was serious?! Don't worry – Yudhishtira will sit on the throne, you have my word."

Vidura smiled in sudden relief. "God bless you, child," he said as he turned and walked away.

Mother eyes were shadowed with doubt, but then she too touched my head in benediction and walked out after my uncle.

Alone in the dark, I thought of that brief moment in the great hall of Hastinapura when I had sat on the throne of Hastinapura — that one fleeing moment when I was king.

And I laughed, loud and long.

I was Bhima, the mightiest warrior of my time. I would not cry.

Episode 70

The coronation was a very subdued affair – it would, Yudhishtira warned us, be in bad taste to organize lavish celebrations at a time when the people were in considerable distress.

Our brother only insisted that there could be no skimping in making the prescribed offerings: gold for the commander of our armies; for the chief priest, a black cow with a streak of white on its back; a pregnant cow for Draupadi, the queen; a horse for the *suta* who was named chief balladeer; bulls for the palace gardener and his assistants; two bulls for the king's personal charioteer; an ivory board and coins for the resident *chaturanga* player; a curved silver knife and red head-dress for the chief huntsman; a yellow and red turban and a bag of silver coins for the chief messenger...

It was an endless list. "I didn't know half of these," Sahadeva whispered to me at one point as Yudhishtira reeled off names and appropriate gifts. "The things *kshatriyas* have to learn about! Did you know that if our brother had an abandoned wife, he would have had to send her a sickly black cow as gift?!"

Once the prescribed gifts had been handed out, Yudhishtira had to do a tour of the city and meet with his subjects. Uncle Vidura, who was in charge of everything to do with the coronation, and the chief priest led the procession. We brothers walked behind them, with the responsibility of listening to any citizen with a grievance, cataloging the problems that were brought to our notice and at the appropriate time, bringing it to the king's attention.

Behind us walked the guests of honor. Only Krishna and Satyaki had accepted our invitation to attend. Senesan, to whom we had sent a formal message, was among those who stayed away — instead, a minister from the Kasi court arrived with gifts for Yudhishtira, Balandhara and me.

Yudhishtira, with Draupadi beside him, came last, stopping often to talk to the people who had lined the streets.

When we finally returned to the palace, it was the turn of us brothers to be recognized and honored. Yudhishtira presented each of us with

the ornaments and armor of a *kshatriya*, all made specifically for the occasion and blessed formally by the chief priest.

And then he ascended the throne, for the very first time.

In the order established by tradition, we had to go up on the dais and anoint him. First the priests and invited Brahmins, then the guests of honor, then mother, then the other members of the family in order of seniority starting with uncle Dhritarashtra, uncle Vidura, *valiyamma* Gandhari and so on, then the commander of the army and various other senior members of the king's entourage.

In my turn, I dipped the conch into the large golden bowl filled with water from the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati mixed with the urine of a pregnant cow, and poured it over his head.

The next stage was when Yudhishtira took me by the hand and led me to the small seat set to his right, at a slightly lower level on the dais. I was formally installed as the Yuvaraja – a much shorter ceremony, with only the chief priest and Yudhishtira anointing me. There was no room there for Balandhara, who stood with the rest of our women, watching.

It was time for the king's first formal proclamations. Traditionally, this took the form of relief for the more deserving of prisoners, whose sentences would be commuted – but Hastinapura's prisons had been emptied by Duryodhana, who had armed them and sent them to die on the battle field.

Life settled into a routine, and memories of war grew ever more distant. Yudhishtira summoned us one morning to discuss the depleted state of our treasury. Nakula and Sahadeva had completed their inventory, and as we waited for the king to join us, they told us it wasn't a pretty picture.

"The problem goes around in a circle," Nakula said. "Our industries are at a standstill because the able-bodied young men are all dead. Therefore, we have no money coming into the treasury — and without money, we cannot revive these industries and start new ones... it is difficult to know where to start looking for a solution."

"Maybe in the kingdoms of our allies," Sahadeva pointed out. "We need to bring in young people from Panchala, from Kasi, Matsya... the

promise of a bright future under our brother is the best incentive we have to offer."

When Yudhishtira finally came to the hall, it was in a state of perturbation. "Uncle Dhritarashtra wants to offer prayers and give away alms in memory of the dead – you have to make the necessary arrangements immediately, and there can be no stint," he told Sahadeva.

"Gold and cows for a thousand Brahmins... alms and food to all who come and ask for it... the expense of conducting *theyaga*... where are we supposed to find the funds for all this? Hastinapura is bankrupt, doesn't our uncle know this?" Sahadeva was agitated.

"I don't know. It is up to you and Nakula to figure out a way, somehow – we cannot refuse our uncle's request," our brother the king ordered. "Besides, uncle wants to retire to the forest after the ceremony – he says he cannot find peace here. And," he added, with a darkling glance in my direction, "it seems some people have been taunting him ever since the war ended, and making his life miserable."

Trust the old man to take one incident and convert it into a big drama, I thought to myself.

I had wandered into the large assembly hall one afternoon, the one where the dice game had been staged, and found uncle Dhritarashtra and *valiyamma* Gandhari seated there, all alone.

"Who is that?"

"It is I – Bhima," I said, and went up to touch their feet.

"Sit down, child, sit with us for a while," *valiyamma* said. "Nowadays, no one comes to see us, we spend our days all alone."

I sat at their feet. Dhritarashtra's hand reached out, rested lightly on my shoulder. "Killing and dying are an inevitable part of war, my son," he said, his grip suddenly tightening. "But was it necessary to drink the blood of my son?"

"When I smashed his chest, Dushasana's blood gushed up and wetted my lips," I said, off-handedly. "It didn't taste good, so I didn't drink any of it." Detaching his grip on my shoulder, I walked away.

It is not that I minded their presence – it was a large palace, one of several in the courtyard, and there was room enough for all. But I could never rid myself of the thought that more than anyone else, it was this old man who was responsible for the war – for all his pretense, he had time and again acceded to and even egged on Duryodhana as he schemed to bring about our downfall.

Even at the very end, when we asked for five villages as our share of the inheritance, he could have exercised his authority to grant our request, and thus avoided the war.

To see him now wandering the halls, sighing heavily whenever he heard footsteps approach, and playing the victim to the hilt, made my blood boil – though in deference to Yudhishtira's sensibilities, I tended to avoid the old man as much as possible.

I shrugged. "Let them perform the *yaga* and retire to the forest if that is what they want to do," I said. "As long as they are in our midst, we will never be able to put the events of the past entirely behind us."

The *yaga* was grand. Sahadeva and Nakula accomplished miracles, and provided for an event far more elaborate than our brother's coronation.

When the last Brahmin had been fed, and the last alms-seeker duly satisfied, the old couple prepared to remove to the forest, and that was when we heard that uncle Vidura had decided to accompany them.

I wasn't particularly surprised – for years now, his life had been that of a *grihastha* in name alone. Once he had played his part in overseeing Yudhishtira's coronation, there really was nothing for him to do in Hastinapura, no formal role to play.

The palace servants and the more elderly Brahmins gathered in the courtyard to give the old couple a send off. Servitors bustled around, getting the chariots ready and packing onto a half dozen bullock carts everything they would need to live in some degree of comfort in the forest.

Yudhishtira rushed up just then, in a state of considerable distress. "Mother has decided to accompany them to the forest," he announced.

"I've just spent the last hour trying to get her to change her mind, but she is adamant."

"Oh, let her go," Arjuna said, his voice harsh. Ever since that day on the banks of the Ganga, he had deliberately avoided mother and, on the rare occasions when she came up in course of our conversations, responded with a bitterness he took no pains to conceal. "She loves drama, and takes a special delight in surprising us."

Nakula and Sahadeva seemed more disturbed by the news. "What nonsense!", Sahadeva said. "After all these years, these trials, why does she want to go into the forest when she should be living here in comfort, as the Queen Mother?!"

They went off to try and persuade her and soon returned, shaking their heads. "Go, child," Yudhishtira told me. "Maybe she will listen to you."

I found mother in her chambers, giving some last minute instructions to her maid.

"Now what?" I asked her. "What is it you lack here? When we were confused, weary from all those years in the forest, when we wished to avoid war, you were the one who stiffened our resolve."

"If life in the forest was all that you desired, why then did you push us to fight for the kingdom? Why did we shed all this blood, create this kingdom of widows?"

"Because I am a mother, my child, and as a mother the one thing I desired more than any other was to see my children settled in their inheritance, to see their fame spread far and wide. You are *kshatriyas*, the sons of a king – to fight for your right was your *dharma* then, and to rule the kingdom you have won is your *dharma* now. My life is over – I have done all I can for my children; my own *dharma* now is to do all I can for your uncle and aunt in their last days."

"There is no need for my children to feel sad – rule in peace, with Draupadi and my other daughters beside you."

I knew mother well enough to realize there was no point in arguing with her. I turned, and walked back to the courtyard.

Leading him by the hand, uncle Vidura helped Dhritarashtra climb into the first chariot. *Valiyamma* emerged from the palace, her hand on mother's shoulder. They walked towards the chariot, passing us without even a glance.

Once she had helped *valiyamma* into the chariot, mother turned to where we stood and beckoned to Draupadi. They talked for a long time; I saw my mother fold Draupadi in a hug – a gesture as surprising as anything she had ever done.

Draupadi walked back towards us, tears streaming down her face. The whips cracked, the chariots moved out of the courtyard and drove slowly through the street.

We stood there for a very long time, watching this last link with the past fade into the distance and feeling within us the enormous weight of an uncertain future.

Episode 71

A chance meeting with two wandering *rishis* gave me the first news we had of our mother.

I was supervising the clearing of a large tract of forest on the outskirts of Hastinapura. Sahadeva wanted to create an enormous central cattle shed well away from the town and concentrate all our herds there – easier to protect and to focus on the breeding, he said.

I led a small band of our troops and a large group of wood workers in the task. The troops stayed alert against the chance that we might encounter militant tribals sheltering in the woods; the workers cut down the trees they needed for constructing the cattle sheds and adjoining buildings, had them towed by elephants, and burnt the rest.

The *rishis* wandered up while I was working with two elephants to haul away an enormous tree we had just felled. Our uncle, aunt and mother were doing well, they said. A large number of *rishis*, elderly Brahmins and sages had made their home in the vicinity; great-grandfather Krishna Dwaipayana had also joined them.

Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and our mother spent their mornings in prayer and penance and their afternoons and evenings in intense discussions on *karma* and *dharma*, on why we do the things we do and whether it is all part of pre-destiny or did we have any choice in the matter...

Yudhishtira sighed when, later that evening, I recounted my conversation with the *rishis*. "It's been so long — maybe we should go, see how they are doing, inquire into their well-being," he suggested.

"And we could try once more to persuade mother to come back with us," Sahadevan suggested.

Yudhishtira shook his head. "She won't ever come back, child," he said. "But... you know, that day when she first told me she was going into the forest, we had a long talk. I was angry — I said things I shouldn't have... harsh things, the kind of things no son should tell a mother. I need to see her again, to apologize, to tell her I understand things better now..."

We set out early next morning, Yudhishtira, Sahadeva and I. Arjuna opted to stay behind — someone had to, he argued; what if there was some sudden emergency and no one here to deal with it?

He had over time reconciled to the war, to those we had killed and those we had lost, and had plunged into the task of recruiting and training fresh soldiers for our army. But his anger towards our mother still smoldered deep within him, like live coals under ash, and there seemed no point trying to persuade him to join us.

Nakula was away at the time, touring the kingdoms south of the Vindhyas. He had been gone for some months now. Every once in a while, groups of artisans would come to Hastinapura with messages from him — stone workers, wood workers, master jewelers who could work in gold and precious stones, master carvers, painters, experts in the design and construction of weapons...

One day, a group of dancers came to our court. They were adepts at a form of dance that, they said, had been first created by the founder of our race, Bharata. Yudhishtira was so entranced by their performance he showered gifts on them; Draupadi installed them in one of the outbuildings within the palace compound and persuaded them to teach the younger maids and the daughters of the townsfolk.

It was late in the afternoon when, following the directions the *rishis* had given me, we arrived at the ashram. Uncle Dhritarashtra made no attempt to hide his happiness as we paid due obeisance; tears streamed from those sightless eyes as he blessed each one of us. "My child, I am grateful you came to see me," he told me as he laid his hand on my head in a gesture that was both benediction and caress.

Mother said nothing. She sat beside aunt Gandhari, watching and listening with a smile on her face as uncle Dhritarashtra asked about how the kingdom was faring, and gave Yudhishtira advice on various matters of statecraft.

It was quite a while before Yudhishtira finally managed to detach himself from Dhritarashtra and got a chance to ask after uncle Vidura. "He left the ashram several months ago," our grandsire, who was seated next to mother, said. "He is in the forest not very far from here, immersed in intense penance."

Yudhishtira decided to seek him out; I went with him while Sahadeva stayed behind to talk to mother. We walked a long way into the forest until finally we came upon a gigantic *peepul* tree.

We didn't immediately recognize the man who lay stretched out on the ground under its shade. A wild, unkempt beard covered all of his face except his eyes; his ash-covered skin hung loose on a skeletal frame; his breathing came slow, labored.

Yudhishtira exclaimed in shock and rushed to prostrate himself. Uncle Vidura's hand rose weakly in a vague gesture of benediction, then fell back at his side. His lips moved; Yudhishtira bent close to listen.

"Child, I think his time has come," Yudhishtira said. "Quick, fetch some water."

I raced through the forest, heedless of the brambles that scoured my skin, until I burst into a clearing beside a small lake. Fashioning a little cup out of a lotus leaf, I carried the water back to where I had left my brother, and found him sitting beside the still form of uncle Vidura, staring off into the distance.

He seemed not to be aware that I had returned. I touched him lightly on the shoulder. He looked up at me. "He is gone, child," he said.

Taking the water from my hands, he wet uncle Vidura's lips and then his own, sighed and, seemingly in a trance, walked away in the direction of the ashram. I followed.

It was only when the ashram came in sight that he stopped and turned to me. "I had meant to tell you this before, but somehow the time never seemed right," he said. "Vidura was my father – my real father."

I stared at my brother in stunned silence. He shook his head, and smiled wryly. "No, child," he said, "there is nothing in this for you to get upset or angry about, or to blame our mother for. Our father was impotent, you know that – and the practice of *niyoga*, of our women accepting other men in order to produce children, is common among us *kshatriyas*.

"I had known for a long time that King Pandu was not our father but it is only that evening, when mother told me she was leaving us, that I learnt who my real father was."

He walked towards the ashram. I watched him go, then turned and wandered aimlessly into the forest till I came to a little stream.

I drank deep, splashed cold water on my face and body, and stretched out on the grass by the stream. I lay there for a long time, eyes closed, listening to the gentle murmur of the water and the soft rustle of the wind in the trees, trying and failing to work up the will to get up, to go find my brothers.

Thoughts whirled through my mind like dead leaves in the evening breeze. Yudhishtira... Bhima... Arjuna... Nakula... Sahadeva... sons of Pandu, the balladeers called us, the Pandavas, children of a crowned king and rightful heirs to his kingdom... uncle Vidura is dead, my brother, his son, has a funeral to arrange, he will need my help, I should go... but is he my 'uncle'?... what is Vidura to me, what is the word I must use to refer to the father of my brother?

I did not know how long I lay there.

The light touch of a hand brushing away my tears startled me. I sat up abruptly, and found mother beside me in the gathering dark.

"Go home, my child," she said gently. "Your brothers have left. There is nothing here to sadden you, no reason for tears — go in peace."

"Peace?!" I jumped to my feet and stood looking down at her. "Mother — please... I have made enough mistakes, committed enough crimes... At least now, tell me who we are, tell me who I really am..."

Mother sighed. She was silent for a long, long time. Her voice, when she finally spoke, startled me: it was not the harsh, emotionless tones I was so used to but the soft, gentle tones — or so it seemed to me — of a young girl...

"Your brother Karna — he really was the son of a charioteer, a *suta*," she said.

It was too dark to see, and maybe it just my fancy, but I thought she was smiling. "He was the son of Kuntibhoja's charioteer... young... handsome... glowing like the sun..."

"It was a hard life, those years I spent as Durvasa's servant, his slave... there was no one I could talk to, no one to share my pain — except him. He noticed. He was the only one who noticed my

suffering. He tried, in many little ways, to help ease my burden; he spoke to me, he listened and when I couldn't bear it any more, when grief overwhelmed me, he held me and let me cry..."

Mother seemed lost in the labyrinth of memories.

"When Kuntibhoja told me I was to marry Pandu of Hastinapura, I was overjoyed – finally, my years of slavery were coming to an end. I was to marry a king – not just any king, but the most famous king of the time. When he came to see me, to take me to Hastinapura – he was so tall, so strong, handsome like a god..."

"And then..."

Mother's voice became thin, reedy, drenched in tears. "He loved me, at first; we spoke of the child that would be born to us, the son who would inherit the kingdom... and then, over time he began coming to me less and less. It was all my fault, he told me, though I knew different – I had already had a child and, in my shame, abandoned him in the river..."

"And then one day my maid came to me, weeping, to tell me my husband had gone to Madra to marry... She was so beautiful, your *cheriyamma*, Madri... I watched while they greeted her at the palace gates with the traditional *aarti* – I should have been the one doing that, but — I was in their eyes a barren woman, inauspicious..."

The silence stretched interminably, until I felt I would burst.
"Mother...?"

"It took a while for the king to realize the problem was with him, that he was impotent. No one could know, he said when he came to tell us he had decided to go into the forest. We must get children, he told us, while we were away from the kingdom — the succession needed to be secured.

"It is the fate of the Kuru women, my son – to the men of Hastinapura we are nothing but a vessel for bearing heirs. Look at you with Hidimbi, with Balandhara.... Look at Arjuna, that dearest child of mine who today cannot bring himself to look me in the face — how many women has he married and bedded and left behind full with child, without a thought, without a backward glance?"

"My eldest child would be born to rule — and a king has above all to be wise, compassionate, just, schooled in the ways of *dharma*. In your father's brother I found just such a man – the incarnation of all that was good and just. I took him to my bed and Yudhishtira was born – the son, I told Pandu, of Yama, the god of Dharma and of Death..."

"And I, mother? Who was my father?"

Slowly, painfully, she rose to her feet, walked away from me and stood on the banks of the stream, looking out into the darkness. When she spoke again, it was a whisper in the wind.

"A king needs someone at his side he can trust with his life, someone strong beyond belief, unshakeable in his loyalty... someone, I used to think as I bathed in the Ganga each morning, like Vayu, the god who wanders the earth with the seven winds on a leash.

"I prayed. For many many days and nights, I prayed with all my heart."

Afraid to break the spell with some sudden movement, afraid to miss a word, I inched closer to where she stood.

"The king was besotted with your *cheriyamma*, with Madri who I called my younger sister. There was nothing for me in that lodge once my work for the day was done. I took to spending all my time in the forest looking for flowers, herbs – anything, any excuse that kept me away from them. One day I wandered deep into the forest, too lost in thought to notice the skies darkening, to see the approach of the storm till it burst around me in all its fury.

"He burst from the trees like a whirlwind... this tribal, tall and dark and powerful beyond belief... he came upon me as I cowered beneath a tree, sheltering from the storm, and without a word he grabbed me and he threw me down on the ground and he took me and when he was done with me, he left me there in the mud, his smell on me and his seed in me..."

Obeying some impulse I did not understand, I fell at mother's feet and lay there for an eternity, chest heaving with a sadness without end.

At some point in the night, I sat up and looked around.

She was gone.

Bhimsen: Epilogue

They stood on top of a cliff and looked down at an ocean turned dark and deadly dangerous.

Like a glutton who even after a full meal picks at his plate in the hope of finding some overlooked morsel, the ocean that had swallowed an entire kingdom, castle and all, continued to throw up waves that combed the land, seeking odds and ends to devour.

They saw a dead bull lying where the waves had thrown it against a tree, breaking its back instantly; over there an overturned chariot, its shaft stuck deep into the mud; elsewhere, oddly, an earthen pot in pristine condition, its perfection an incongruous element of normalcy against the surrounding chaos.

They observed another oddity: in the midst of the ocean's turbulence one spot alone seemed calm, the waters still. That, they guessed, marked where the towering castle had once stood, with its vaulted Dome of Victory thrusting proud into the heavens.

In spite of his iron self-control, Yudhishtira shivered internally as he looked down at that once proud kingdom reduced to an overturned chariot, a pot, a few decaying bodies the ravenous ocean had overlooked.

He shook his head, fighting to clear the cloud of grief. What was it the patriarch, Krishna Dwaipayana, had said when they had formally handed the throne of Hastinapura to Parikshit, grandson of Arjuna and beloved of them all, and set out on the *mahaprasthana*, the final journey that would lead them to heaven or to hell as their deeds deserved?

"Never look back," the patriarch had advised them. "Not physically, and not in the mind – from this moment on you have no past. There is only the step ahead that you must take, and the next one, and the next."

Out of the corner of his eye, Yudhishtira caught sight of Arjuna perched on a rock, his head in his hands, his shoulders shaking with the strength of his grief – a grief time had not been able to mitigate.

He had been present when the destruction had begun and yet, or maybe because of it, Arjuna had not been able to reconcile with the fact that his dearest friend was no more, that the kingdom that had been a second home to him had vanished as if it had been a figment of his imagination, that the gardens in which he had first seen Subhadra and wooed her was now buried deep beneath the pitch black waters of the unforgiving ocean.

They had greeted him with cries of relief when, in response to the urgent summons, Arjuna had first rushed to Dwaraka. The mightiest archer of the time was here, they consoled each other; Krishna's dearest friend had come to their aid, and nothing bad could happen to them now.

Around them were the sights and sounds of impending doom: the roar of an ocean whipping itself into a consuming fury; the howls of the jackals that stalked the streets of Dwaraka in broad daylight; the screeching of the kites and vultures that circled overhead in such numbers as to turn the sky dark – birds of prey that had gorged on the flesh of Dwaraka's men and, hungry still, hovered in search of more fodder.

These sights and sounds paralyzed them with a fear beyond imagining – but still they took heart: Arjuna was here.

They rushed to him, the women of Dwaraka. The closest clutched at him; the others called out his name and reached their hands towards him, clamoring for his attention, pleading for his protection.

He knew many of them, women of Krishna's personal household. He had on his numerous visits sported with them in Dwaraka's gardens, even bedded some of the more attractive among them. Arjuna forced aside his own grief at the destruction of the Yadava and Vrishni clans and worked to calm their fears.

"We will go to Hastinapura," he promised them. "No harm will come to you there."

He organized them into a group and marched at their head down the broad streets of Dwaraka. There was no time to waste gathering provisions for the trek; there was no able-bodied male left to help him in that task. One young boy had survived the general carnage; Arjuna put him on a horse and sent him away to Hastinapura with a message for Bhima: "Come quick, brother — I need help!"

With the Gandiva in his hand, an arrow notched to bowstring and a full quiver at his back, Arjuna marched out of the towering main gate of the 'Kingdom of Gates', with its embellishments of brightly colored peacocks and dancing girls, and headed towards the forest.

He felt a lassitude in his limbs and a fog enveloping his mind, but put it down as a reaction to the strain of his desperate rush to Dwaraka. He marched on and behind him, now quiet from a mixture of relief and exhaustion, walked the women.

Without warning the Dasyus burst out of the trees, their roars met by shrieks of fear from the women. Arjuna calmly lifted the Gandiva – and experienced a moment of stark terror when the bow slid out of his suddenly nerveless hand and thudded to the ground at his feet.

He bent to pick it up and found that it was all he could to raise the bow: his strength seemed to have deserted him, and his skill. When he reached for a fresh arrow, he merely managed to knock the quiver off his back.

All these years, the Gandiva had been an extension of his hand, his will – now, it was all he could do to pick it up and when he finally managed, he looked at it as if he did not know what to do with this strange curved object in his hand.

Arjuna slumped to the ground in despair, his eyes unfocused and mind blank. Around him in a rising crescendo rose the screams of Krishna's women as the Dasyus grabbed them, threw them over their shoulders and raced away in the direction of the forest.

He lay there through that darkest of nights, next to the bow and the arrows that he was no longer master of. He lay there in the grip of a terror unlike any he had ever known, trying without success to shut his ears to the horrific sounds coming from the forest – the triumphant roars of the Dasyus mixed with the despairing wails of women stripped successively of their modesty and their lives.

At some point in the night, another sound intruded on his consciousness: the growing roar of an ocean that had burst its natural boundaries and commenced its assault on Dwaraka, swallowing everything it found in its path and returning, with redoubled fury, for more.

He had never felt such grief, such an enveloping sense of despair, ever before – not even when on the morning after the war he had walked field of Kurukshetra, his eyes fixed on a ground where the blood of his children had mingled with that of his enemies. But then that day, he had a friend who walked beside him, reminding him that to fight was a *kshatriya's* duty, that to kill and to die were inextricable parts of Life itself.

Today he no longer had that friend. No more could he rely on finding beside him a source of strength when he was weak; no longer could he take refuge in the encompassing wisdom that could make sense out of the seemingly senseless, and keep him grounded when the world as he knew it appeared to be shifting beneath his feet.

And so he cried through that long night: bitter tears for the friend he had lost, for the women who had trusted him and who had paid for their trust with their honor and their lives. And he cried for himself – the greatest warrior of his time, now reduced to the eunuch he had once pretended to be.

That was how Bhima had found him sometime the next afternoon: prone on the ground, the now useless bow and arrows inert beside him, his face ravaged with grief and his body devoid of strength to even stand up.

Bhima had lavished on Arjuna the attention a nurse bestows on a sick child; while his brother slept, he had wandered in the direction of Dwaraka and recoiled from the unbelievable destruction. The ocean in its mindless fury had destroyed the once proud kingdom brick by brick; it had swallowed large parts of Dwaraka and, even as he watched from his vantage point, was returning for more.

He recalled the one time he had visited Krishna's kingdom. Duryodhana was already in residence, learning the arts of the mace from Balarama. Krishna had urged his brother to invite him too, and when the messenger had come to Hastinapura he had been overjoyed.

He had taken care to wake well before dawn each day. Meticulously he had set aside his ornaments, tied up his hair, stepped out of his robes and tied his loin cloth around his waist in that special fashion peculiar to wrestlers and adepts of hand to hand combat, and hurried to the arena.

Each day, he had hoped that his guru would impart the secrets that, Sukracharya had once told him, were known only to Balarama himself. He practiced religiously all that he was taught and yet, when time came for him to leave, he struggled not to show the disappointment he felt at having learnt very little that was new.

The only memory he retained from that time was of Dwaraka's blinding wealth, its pomp and unrivalled splendor.

Bhima stood beside Yudhishtira, looking out over the waters that had swallowed Dwaraka whole, and thought: had Krishna known how it would all turn out? Had he, fed up of the growing corruption and decay of the kingdom he had carved out of nothingness, deliberately sent the Yadavas and the Vrishnis to their deaths?

From what they had been able to pierce together from the accounts of two or three survivors, Krishna had organized a massive 'celebration' on the shore of the ocean. He had provided limitless food and drink and when the revelry was at its rowdiest, had left them to it and walked away into the forest with his brother Balarama.

At some point in the celebration Satyaki, considerably the worse for drink, had chanced upon Kritavarma and charged him with cowardice, accusing him of his role in killing the sleeping Pandava children and others on the 18th night of Kurukshetra.

An enraged Kritavarma had in his turn taunted Satyaki, reminding him that he was on his knees before Burisravas and begging for his life when his friend Arjuna had cut off his enemy's arm – and Satyaki had then, Kritavarma reminded him, jumped up and cut off the head of the helpless Burisravas.

The argument led to blows and then to a full-fledged battle with swords; in a trice, the Vrishnis had taken up for Satyaki and the Yadavas rushed to the defense of Kritavarma. None survived.

Even as they pieced the story together and tried to make sense of it all, a wandering *rishi* had come to court with news that Krishna and Balarama were dead. Krishna was meditating under a tree, the *rishi* told them, when a passing hunter mistook him for a deer and shot him dead; grief-stricken at the death of his brother and the destruction of his race, Balarama had slipped into a yogic trance and given up his life.

Enough, Bhima thought – we have lived through several lifetimes in this one, we have endured more grief than any one human could possibly bear.

Enough!

He felt his brother's calming touch on his shoulder. "No more tears, Bhima – we have put all that behind us. Remember what Krishna once told us? Nothing ever dies – we merely change one form for another, one life for another. The time has come to give up this body, this life where we have known very many griefs and very few joys. Come!"

Yudhishtira glanced out at the ocean for one last time and then, turning abruptly, began walking down the hill.

Bhima followed. Arjuna pushed himself up from the rock he had slumped on, and walked after his brothers. Nakula sighed and glanced at his twin; with one mind, the twins walked in the direction their elders had taken.

Draupadi stood under the shade of a tree, watching them go and summoning up the strength, the will, to walk in their wake. Her heart still grieved for the one who was gone – Krishna, who had been her strength when she most needed it, the unfailing source of comfort at the darkest of times, the one who more than any other, more even than her husbands, had kept her faith alive when all had seemed lost: kingdom, pride, dignity, honor, all.

He was gone. What was left?

She turned her back on the ocean, and walked down the hill, picking up the trail.

For days without end they walked on in single file, stopping when the need for rest overwhelmed them, eating the berries and fruits they foraged during their trek and marching ahead again, their minds absent of thought, their hearts devoid of feeling, their weary feet plodding one step at a time through increasingly difficult terrain – until, one dawn, they saw looming ahead of them the snow-crowned peaks of the Himalayas.

The sight of Mount Meru in the distance seemed to give Yudhishtira renewed energy; picking up his pace, he hurried in that direction without a backward glance at his brothers and wife struggling along in

his wake. And when he got to the foot of Meru he began to climb, his eyes fixed on the peak.

Once, when escaping from Varanavata, he had struggled to climb a little hill and had to be carried on Bhima's shoulders. But not this time – this time he would climb the mountain on his own and, at its peak, find in himself the will to slip into *yoga nidra*, to attain salvation.

Behind him, Bhima trudged on mindlessly, ignoring the rocks that cut into his feet and the thorny bushes that impeded his progress, scouring his palms when he pushed them aside.

He was tempted to turn back, to see how Draupadi was faring – always, through the long years they had spent in the forest, it had been his self-imposed duty to smooth her path. With an effort of will he kept his eyes focused on the path ahead and on the form of his elder brother climbing rapidly up the slope.

Throughout his life, he had followed in that brother's footsteps. Even when his instincts suggested a different path, he had brushed such thoughts aside, sublimated his will to that of his brother. Now, in the final moments of his life, he could do no less – Yudhishitra led, so he needs must follow to whatever end awaited them on the mountain top.

And then he heard it – a faint cry, the sound of a body falling, the clatter of displaced rocks as they bounced away down the mountainside.

"Brother, wait!" Bhima shouted. "Draupadi has fallen."

Yudhishtira neither turned around, nor paused in his steady climb. "I am not surprised. She long ago lost the strength of mind to climb away from this world and into salvation."

Bhima froze in his tracks. "What?! She, this princess, followed us to our hovel, she married us, she partook of our troubles when she could have gone back, led a life of ease in the home of her father..."

"She followed us out of self interest, out of ambition – she wanted to keep our desire for revenge alive, she wanted us to fight and win a kingdom for her," Yudhishtira's voice came faintly to Bhim as he marched relentlessly on. "And above all, she was wife to all five of us, but it was only Arjuna she loved – even when she sat beside me on the throne, it was on him that her eyes were fixed. Those who fall, do

so as a result of their own deeds – keep your eyes fixed to the front and walk on...”

Bhima heard footsteps approaching behind him.

Arjuna. Draupadi’s beloved.

Moments later, Arjuna drew abreast. “Draupadi has fallen,” Bhima said.

Arjuna walked on as if he had not heard, his eyes fixed on the path ahead.

He saw Nakula passing him to the left.

“Draupadi has fallen.”

“We cannot turn back, we cannot wait for anyone,” he muttered, and walked on.

Bhima stood where he was, watching the forms of his brother’s vanishing in the mists up ahead. Any moment now, he thought, Sahadeva would come up to him, carrying Draupadi in his arms. To this youngest of the brothers Draupadi had been wife and mother both; she had reserved for him a special place in her affections – surely, Bhima thought, Sahadeva would not leave her lying where she had fallen.

He heard Sahadeva’s footsteps approach. Bhima listened for the sounds that would tell him his brother was staggering under a burden, and readied to take Draupadi from him – but the footsteps were strong, steady; moments later, Sahadeva drew abreast, then walked on ahead without even a glance in his direction.

Bhima craned his neck back and looked up at the tip of the mountain. Somewhere up there, salvation waited; somewhere down below, the wife he had loved above all else in this world lay where she had fallen, abandoned by all.

He made his choice. Abruptly, he turned and hurried down the path as fast as his tired limbs would take him. Ahead of him, half hidden by a thorny bush, he saw the crumpled form of Draupadi. He ran.

Dropping to the ground beside her, he lifted Draupadi's head onto his lap. She opened her eyes and looked up at him – and then she looked away, scanning the area for... what?

A last sight of the one she loved above all others? Or of the one who, as eldest, had most claim on her affections? A final glimpse of the handsome Nakula, of Sahadeva whom she had loved as mother and beloved both?

She looked back at him, and Bhima cringed at the disappointment in her eyes. "I am here," he told her. "I'll be here for as long as you need me."

Leaving her lying there, he ran around gathering the little grass and moss he could find amidst the rocks, and spread it out in the shade of a tree. Carefully lifting Draupadi up in his arms, he carried her to the bed he had made and laid her down, her head cradled in his lap.

She looked up at him for a long moment. Her lips moved, forming words he could not hear. He bent closer. "My children," she whispered, in a voice grown raspy with fatigue.

Her eyes closed. Bhima sat there, his back against a tree, his beloved's head in his lap, and thought back to the 36 years she had ruled as queen. At first, they had hoped for more children; each of the brothers had in his turn as her husband longed to be the one who would father a heir to the throne.

After a while, Draupadi just gave up. "I think grief has turned me barren," she had told him once, when he attempted to console her. "God gave me five wonderful sons and I failed them – why would he give me more?"

Gently, taking infinite pains not to disturb Draupadi who slept on in his lap, Bhima eased into a more comfortable position and closed his eyes.

A memory returned to haunt him: the memory of a man who, bleeding and broken, wandered the earth far below where they sat.

That night, Arjuna's fury had been terrible to behold – he had rushed into the blazing lodge and rushed out again with his Gandiva and his quiver. Without even waiting for Krishna, he had jumped into his chariot, whipped the horses, and driven away at furious speed.

By the time the rest salvaged some weapons from the inferno that was the Pandava camp and caught up with him, Arjuna had cornered Ashwathama and engaged him in a battle that raged ferociously even as they watched.

Fighting with a brilliance none had never before seen in him, Arjuna had systematically, ruthlessly cut down each of Ashwathama's weapons – and as the murderer of Draupadi's children stood there helpless, had proceeded to inflict the most gruesome wounds on him in the most deliberate fashion imaginable.

It was Krishna who stopped him then – Krishna and the grandsire Dwaipayana, who had rushed to our camp when he caught sight of the fire from across the river and who had followed us to the spot in Nakula's chariot.

They had stripped Ashwathama of his most prized possession, the blazing Syamanthaka jewel he wore on a gold band tight on his forehead. When Krishna ripped it away from him, the circlet had snapped and cut a deep furrow across his brow.

While Krishna pacified his friend, Dwaipayana spoke to Ashwathama. He was forbidden to ever enter the gates of any kingdom ruled by *kshatriyas*; he was doomed, Dwaipayana said, to wander the earth, forlorn and friendless, his life a constant reminder of his ultimate treachery.

"You brothers have each committed many sins during the course of this war," Dwaipayana had told the brothers then. "Enough – do not add the killing of yet another Brahmin to those crimes. Let him go."

And so, somewhere down below he wandered still, the man who in the dead of night had set fire to the Pandava camp and, with sword in hand, mercilessly cut down every one of Draupadi's children.

My work is not done yet, Bhima decided; it will not be over as long as Ashwathama remains alive.

Draupadi stirred; her eyes fluttered opened and she looked up at him.

"You are still here!"

I will be, Bhima said – for as long as you need me, I will be here.

He saw tears moisten her eyes, then. She glanced for one last time at the path ahead, seeking the forms of those who had gone on ahead. And then she caught his eyes again and, her voice a weary whisper, she said: "Next time, be born the eldest!"

Bhima sat there through the night, not moving, not thinking. When the first rays of dawn lit up the sky above the distant peak, he gently lifted Draupadi's head off his lap, and stood up.

He looked down at her still form for one last time; he glanced upward at the path his brothers had taken.

And then he turned and walked back down the mountain.

He still had work to do.

E & OE

72 writing days spread across 10 months [with various absences thrown in], and a little over 135,000 words — and it's finally done.

pause to feel the whoosh of relief from this end

When I started this, I had no clear idea what I had let myself in for; now that it is done, I have no clear idea what I can think of during the daily commutes to and from work, when till last week I had Bhima for mental company.

It's been fun. More to the point, it's been one long-drawn out learning experience, the fruits of which will hopefully inform all I do here on at work and on here.

There's a pro forma statement people make at times like this: "It wouldn't have been possible without you."

I'll say that now: It wouldn't have been possible without you. Only, my statement is not pro forma, but meant in all earnestness.

The feedback and the discussions kept me thinking straight; at times, particularly on one occasion when personal problems piled one on top of the other and I took a two month break, I found it damnably difficult to pick up the thread again and at one point even thought, ah fuck this, I just don't have it in me to continue.

I didn't at the time reckon without the emails. A couple initially, then a flood as my hibernation extended, all saying they missed Bhima, all asking when it would resume. I particularly treasure this one, from the elderly mother of a regular reader. She wrote, and I quote: "My son introduced me to your wonderful retelling of an epic I have loved; each Monday I wait for him to come home from work with the printout of the latest episode, and each Monday I am disappointed. Please write again — your grandmother would have been so proud of you."

So — I really couldn't have done it without you. Thank you.

If you liked the series, think kind thoughts of [this man](#) — a marvelous writer who deserves to be known far more widely than in just one little sliver of a state. If you found errors and inconsistencies, put them to my account.