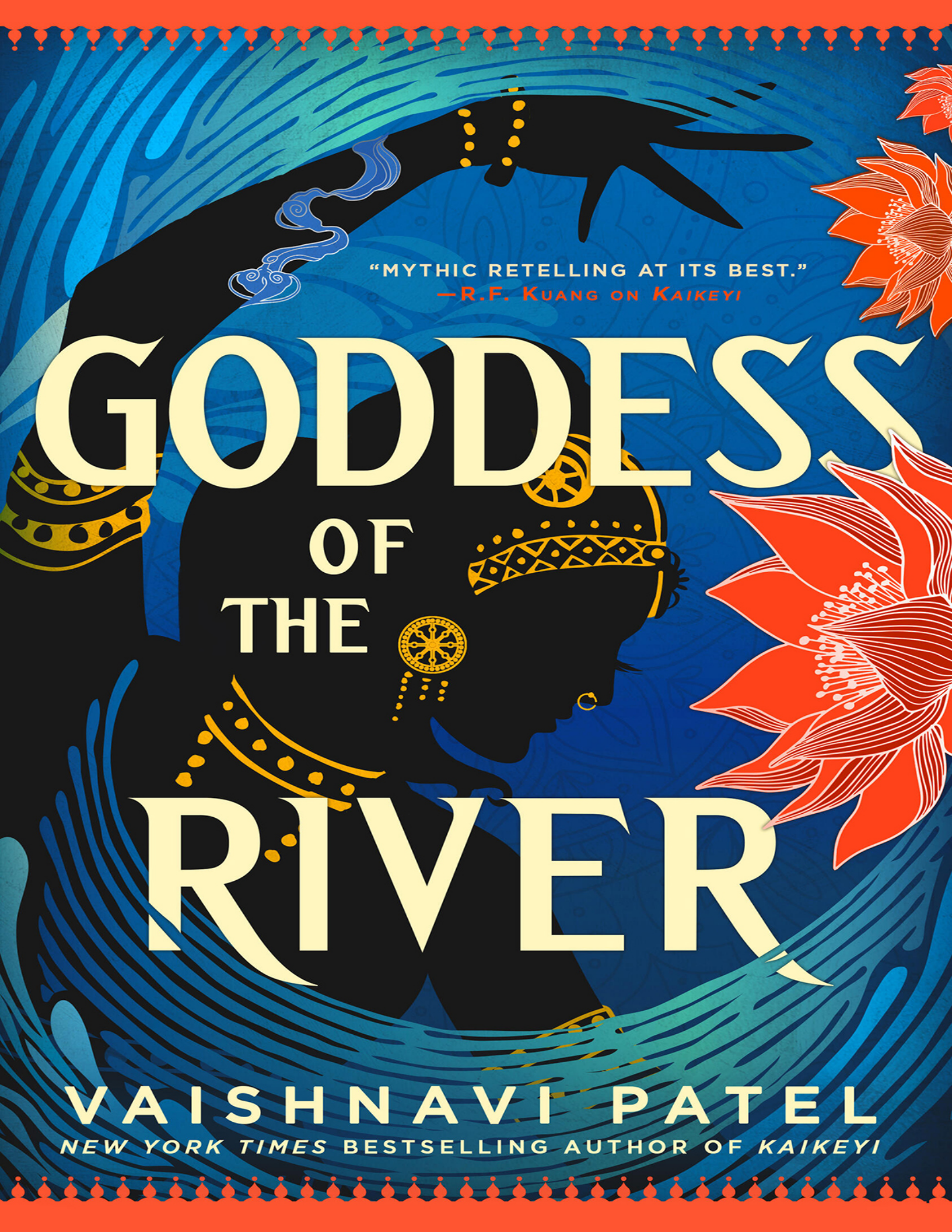

"MYTHIC RETELLING AT ITS BEST."
—R.F. KUANG ON KAIKEYI
GODDESS
OF
THE
RIVER
VAISHNAVI PATEL
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF KAIKEYI

VAISHNAVI PATEL

GODDESS OF THE RIVER

Redhook Books/Orbit
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10104
hachettebookgroup.com

First Edition: May 2024
Simultaneously published in Great Britain by Orbit

Redhook is an imprint of Orbit, a division of Hachette Book Group.
The Redhook name and logo are registered trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to hachettespeakersbureau.com or email HachetteSpeakers@hbgusa.com.

Redhook books may be purchased in bulk for business, educational, or promotional use. For information, please contact your local bookseller or the Hachette Book Group Special Markets Department at special.markets@hbgusa.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Patel, Vaishnavi, author.
Title: Goddess of the river / Vaishnavi Patel.
Description: First edition. | New York, NY : Redhook, 2024.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023045507 | ISBN 9780759557345 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780759557369 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Goddesses—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Novels.
Classification: LCC PS3616.A86673 G64 2024 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20231012
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023045507

ISBNs: 9780759557345 (hardcover), 9780759557369 (ebook)

E3-20240314-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

For my father and my husband, two men who have become far more than the world expected of them.

CONTENT WARNING

Please be advised that this note contains spoilers for the *Mahabharata*.

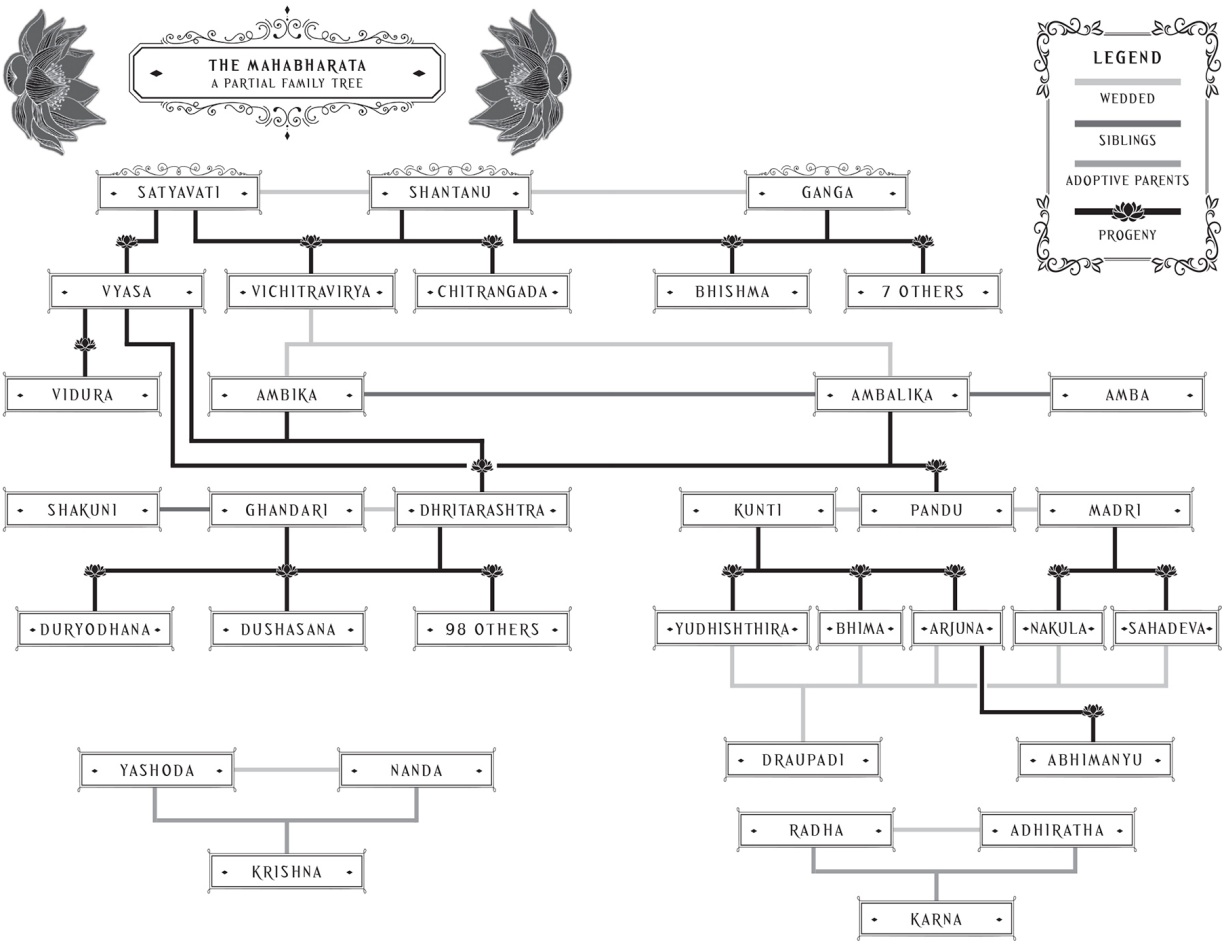
The *Mahabharata* is a story about philosophy, sin, and the meaning of life. It is a sprawling, almost two-million-word epic that contains most of the beloved stories of Hindu myth in some shape or form. It also consists of almost every terrible act one could imagine. *Goddess of the River* touches on many of these topics, including infanticide, casteism, and ableism. I would like to note some content that may be upsetting for readers to encounter without prior warning—this is not comprehensive but focuses on plot points that are central to the characters' stories.

In the *Mahabharata*, a recurring theme in multiple stories is the killing or abandonment of infant children in order to free them from curses. To the audience for whom the *Mahabharata* was written, the fact that the babies' souls were returned to where they belonged was of paramount importance; the fate of these children was believed to be a difficult but righteous choice. However, if reading about the deaths of infants will be upsetting for you, I suggest approaching chapter eight and the first half of chapter nine with caution. There will be references to this thread of the story throughout.

One of the major causes of the conflict at the heart of the *Mahabharata* is that a blind prince is passed over for the throne because of his blindness. Certain characters refer to the blind prince with epithets and disdain that were wrong then and are rightly considered highly offensive today. Both the *Mahabharata* and *Goddess of the River* portray this ableism as a bad choice with negative consequences, but please be warned that there are expressions of virulent ableism from some of the characters.

The *Mahabharata* shows how the Kali Yuga, or the age of darkness, began. We are still living in the Kali Yuga. Many of the worst demons of our world are present in the *Mahabharata* and in the pages of *Goddess of the River*, including sexism, casteism, violence, and war. But just as in our world, there is also hope.

For readers who want a glimpse of my research for this novel, I have included a short endnote. Thank you for reading!


THE MAHABHARATA
A PARTIAL FAMILY TREE
LEGEND
WEDDED
SIBLINGS
ADOPTIVE PARENTS
PROGENY
SATYAVATI
SHANTANU
GANGA
VYASA
VICHITRAVIRYA
CHITRANGADA
BHISHMA
7 OTHERS
VIDURA
AMBIKA
AMBALIKA
AMBA
SHAKUNI
GHANDARI
DHRITARASHTRA
KUNTI
PANDU
MADRI
DURYODHANA
DUSHASANA
98 OTHERS
YUDHISHTHIRA
BHIMA
ARJUNA
NAKULA
SAHADEVA
YASHODA
NANDA
DRAUPADI
ABHIMANYU
RADHA
ADHIRATHA
KRISHNA
KARNA

PART ONE

Headwaters

CHAPTER 1

GANGA, A LONG TIME AGO

DO YOU KNOW HOW a river forms?

Perhaps you have heard that it begins as a small stream in a cold and distant mountain, a trickle of melting snow and a splash of rain that slowly carves its way down steep slopes, connecting with other rivulets, growing, leaping, bounding as it cascades down the mountainside and into the land below, sculpting tree and rock with its powerful currents until it unites, at last, with the sea.

But that is not how I came to the earth.

No.

I came because they prayed for me, all those years ago, and I was young and naïve. I heard their prayers when I was but a tributary of the cosmic ocean, deep and endless. I was made of life-sustaining powers, of joy and love, my waters flowing from the cosmic ocean, my origin and my home. I was a part of it, part of this limitless divinity, connected to the source of everything. With its ancient power flowing through me I reveled throughout the heavens, going and doing as I pleased, free from tether or responsibility. I would have flowed forever, one with the universe that was one with me, but the song of humanity called to me. I danced to meet it, falling free from the heavens and down toward their world. Your world.

I did not know then that when humans pray for nature, they pray for something to control.

When the humans saw me coming, they grew afraid of my unbridled spirit and feared they could not tame it. So they uttered a hasty prayer to Lord Shiva of the mountains, whose peaks reached up to the heavens from which I descended, and he heard them.

He caught me as I fell, wrapped me around his holiest mountaintop before I realized I had even been trapped. I writhed and thrashed, for a free creature does not allow itself to be chained so easily. But he held fast, and I only succeeded in lashing out a swift path to the salty sea. By the time I realized my mistake, it was too late. I was a god of Bharat. Never again would my friends sit at my banks, laying down their burdens to play in my waters. Never again would I be made of power and feeling, instead forced into a permanent, physical form. Never again would I dance among the stars.

I had not understood that once I left my origins, I could never return. That when I severed myself from that which made me, it would be forever. You might wonder what a mother is to a river, whether a river can have a home. Only when I left did I know that I had lost my family, and myself.

I had longed to frolic with the humans on the continent below, and perhaps my fate was of my own making. Now I was to be used, to sustain, to cleanse, and yes, even to give life. But for you, never for me.

If Shiva had not grasped me so quickly, if he had failed to pin me down, it is true—my power and joy and strength might have destroyed your world. But ask yourself: Would that have been such a tragedy?

CHAPTER 2

GANGA, A LONG TIME AGO

IN THE FIRST MOMENTS—Minutes? Weeks? Years?—I raged. *Let me go*, I screamed from the depths of my soul. *Release me!*

I perceived Shiva as I perceived other gods, in brushes of his power and intent. *You cannot destroy this world.*

I won't, I said, heaving against him.

If I were to release you now, your rage would still destroy much life here.

I seethed, lashing out at him despite the lack of effect. *I am a god!*

Yes, you are. I could not see him, could hardly feel the cold mountain peaks in which his divinity resided, but I could understand his meaning all the same. *You still are.*

Gods cannot be captured!

You are wrong.

Release me!

You are of this world forever now. There is nowhere else for you to go. And whatever slip of him I could sense, could rage at, disappeared.

How dare you? I howled in his absence. *How dare you?*

In time, I came to tolerate my new home. The cosmic ocean was constant, the heavens solid and dependable, but this earth was as fluid as I was. I twisted down from Shiva's peaks and into the fertile realm of godlings who dotted the forested landscapes until I fanned out to touch the ocean's vast shores, the abode of the wandering gods. Even as I danced, churning and carving, expanding and contracting, my awareness flitted from bank to bank, watching the humans who came to me. When they first prayed for my arrival, they wished for clear waters and bountiful crops, a peaceful, lifeless feature to enhance their meager existence. But I did not fall where they expected, no. In my desperation to escape Shiva's grip, I fell to the east of their lands, where few dared venture. They must have seen me coursing through the sky, watched as I leapt from the ground as I bucked and twisted, and decided to chase this newfound blessing, uprooting themselves from everything they knew for the chance to have *more*.

I fell into a landscape, the first landscape I had ever seen. In the heavens, I flowed through emptiness, lapped at the edges of thought, and fueled myself from the power binding all things in the universe. But even though I missed my home, I was fascinated by the physical world of rocks and soil, found that I was part silt and sand, learned to love the greenery that grew in my waters and nurture the roots that reached toward me. And where the heavens had been filled with gods, those who could grow nothing into something, here I found little divinity, save for the Vasus.

They had no name for themselves, these beings with the lively presences of the divine but who were made purely of the things of the natural world. I discovered them by happenstance—or rather they discovered me. One night, they were playing one of their games, chasing one another through the forests under the light of the moon, when they stumbled into my waters. I jolted at the touch, for their souls were bright like those above. But they acted, at first, like the creatures of the earth—they chased one another, laughing with abandon. Then I watched as one unleashed a rain of flames at another, who only basked in their heat. Another made a gesture and it was like the stars in the night sky were dancing.

They were certainly not mortal, but they were no gods either. They had form, weight, substance, like all things here. Where they moved, they trailed bright greenery and vivid flowers, leaving in their wake warmth and light and all those things that gave life spark and strength and vigor. There were eight of them in total, clustered in the most fertile bend of my river, and they became my constant companions.

Who are you? they asked me.

Ganga, I said. *A god.*

Their presences flared and dimmed, and after some time I came to realize they were communicating among themselves.

Like Shiva, one said at last.

At the mention of his name, a longing for freedom surged through me. I realized, belatedly, that my waters had surged with me too. I doused the godlings who had gathered at my shores, and in response they laughed, dancing in the fall of droplets.

Not like Shiva, I said. They kept laughing, splashing in my waters and growing themselves high toward the sky, twining with one another. Any slight between us was forgotten. I saw within them the entirety of this mortal earth: the gentle fall of water, the bright burn of fire, the solid feel of earth, the whip and whim of wind, the warm comfort of day, the silver ethereality of night, the endless expanse of sky, and the familiar constancy of stars. Together, they were all things. They reminded me of my constant friend up above, a god who burned more brightly than all the rest but was quick to move and fast to forgive. Would I ever see him again?

I felt a hollowness inside me. It was an unfamiliar sensation, for gods did not ache. They did not lose. They did not yearn. They flowed, and they built, and they remained. But a river can only flow down, not up. There was no path back to heaven for me.

It was too much to think about, to bear. So instead I turned to the Vasus. I watched them play and gave them water, and we linked ourselves together, them and I, as time washed over us with its never-ending current.

A year was nothing to me, a generation the blink of an eye. The godlings

treated me with respect and admiration, and they brought new life and joy to my shores even as I lay furious in Shiva's grasp. They played games in the rocky shallows and I sent small waves to caress their glowing bodies. They cooled themselves in my water and I calmed my raging currents to give them pleasure. I could change myself to make the Vasus happy, for we were united in our immortal life in this mortal realm.

Although at first I took little notice of the creatures around me, the godlings took great delight in their varied shapes and forms. In time I brought these friends for my godlings too: Long-snouted gharials that tossed fish into the air, snapping them up, and which the godlings delighted in chasing. Gray-pink dolphins that jumped and danced through my waters, chirping their songs to the godlings, who would chirp back with joyful abandon. Thick-hided rhinoceroses and elephants, which they would race along my banks. Proud striped tigers that they would wrestle with like playthings. Although this world was not filled with the magic of the gods, I found pleasure in these fanciful inhabitants of the mortal realm.

So it was that when the first humans found me, I thought perhaps we might be friends. It was a sage, Jahnu, who came to me first and drank deeply of my waters. For all I had seen of them from the heavens, humans were strange creatures indeed, walking on two legs and speaking not with their souls but with their mouths. With noises. But the sounds this man made were not unpleasing. He was quiet, his melodious song blending with the voices of the forest from which he emerged. He drank and drank, as though he would never be sated. He thanked me for coming, for ending a drought. He blessed me, and prayed to Lord Vishnu that my waters might be purified. It was amusing to me then, the way humans thought the heavens worked, but I was also touched. Perhaps there was a purpose to me coming here, if this was what humans needed of me.

It continued in this way for some time, grateful humans flocking to my shores. I gladly gave them water and respite, sheltered them as they swam and scrubbed at their skin, and watched as they wept their thanks to me, whom they called *savior*.

The godlings had never conceived of such a notion as a human, but they enjoyed observing them, mimicking their gait and appearance and speech. They played tricks on the humans, scaring them with faces made of bark and leaf, and laughed at their new playmates. But they also sheltered the

humans from the storms and heat and wind of the world when they could not shelter themselves. We did not realize then the power of these creatures that had come to us, did not understand that humans could move the land in horrifying synchronicity with their own lives.

The first incident happened far from the river. It took time for word of the event to reach me, to hear the anguish of the Vasus, who had loved that particular grove and given it the full attention of their gifts. *Why?* they asked me, crowding at my banks as the panic spread among them. *Why?*

They congregated around me, for they could sense the endless depths of my power. But I could not help them, for held by Shiva as I was, I could not even observe the humans' actions. My awareness did not reach so far.

But eventually, the humans cut their way to my banks. They came with tools, fashioned out of rock, and struck the wood off the trees again and again. Of course, we had seen lions hunting deer by my banks, watched river sharks lay waste to fish and stingrays. We understood such things for pure animalistic survival. But this was different from the stalking of prey, the skillful dance of life. Lions did not eat with restraint, but they ate to live. When the splinters flew from the trees and they bled out their lifeblood in sluggish sap, there was no reason for it. The humans let the waste litter the forest floor, intent only on their prize. It was a deliberate, *chosen* violence.

The humans did not eat trees. They slept sheltered under the sprawling awning of nature. These humans had no will we could touch, no divine strength, but they had a well of desire so deep we could hardly fathom its depths. Surely, I still believed, this was as fleeting as the rest of the whims of mortal creatures.

If you stay by me, you will be safer, I told the worried Vasus. Even so, I knew they would not abandon their groves, those sacred places where their power shone brightest. *Come to me when you need to.*

The next time word reached me of the humans, it felt as though the godlings had only just left. But the humans had built something out of the trees they stole, had smoothed the wood and placed it in new configurations to shelter themselves. I could see, grudgingly, that this had its use for their frail bodies, and I thought perhaps this would be the end of it. They would be content.

But that contentment we knew in the heavens was not the lot of the

humans. I might have pitied them for this restlessness, for the ambition that clearly burned a ceaseless ember in their souls, if they had not hurt the Vasus so. They set their sights on a new goal, on becoming the master of all they surveyed, and so they cut down the forests to make fires of their own and fight the land itself. The ground burned so the humans could grow fat, could plant their crops in uniform rows rather than rely on the earth to nourish them.

There was one Vasu whose very breath made the earth grow greener, and when he watched the forest burn, he threw himself headlong into my waters. *It burns!* he cried out, and his anguished pain became my own. But I was unable to stop it, or shield him from pain. The other Vasus followed, retreating with him into the safety of my presence. It was as though their immortal souls had aged at what they had seen. They were the best things this world had to offer, and the humans discarded their bounties as though they were worthless. I would protect the godlings, for without them I would be alone.

There was one strip of land near me with a thin forest at my banks, and beyond that, fertile plains. I knew this because when the storms came, my waters swelled and I could stretch farther than before, and when I left, the wildlife grew stronger in my wake. This was the favored ground of the Vasus, one they had lovingly nurtured, and they watched with resignation as the humans approached. I rose in furious floods to drive the invaders away, but in a cycle of the earth they returned to try again. This time when I flooded, they used it to their advantage, rooting their strange plants into the marsh and harvesting from it a bounty. The Vasus trembled in fear to see them so close to me, lashing out with fire and wind and frightening bursts of darkness and light. But the humans gritted their teeth against each warning and plunged recklessly ahead toward destruction.

I wished my friend were here, for the godlings could not understand me and my sheer power, could not understand why I raged at my powerlessness. He was wiser than I would ever be, the one who always had answers. *Why am I here?* I would ask him, my dearest friend.

Why did you come here? he would ask.

To dance, I would say. *To revel in humanity.*

Is that the purpose of eternity? Vishnu liked to ask such questions, for he enjoyed teasing me with questions that had no answers. All I knew was

that endlessness seemed without meaning in the face of humanity’s short onslaught.

Still, I watched the humans do what we could not. They rode in on horseback and cut their own down just as they did the trees. Blood flowed into my river more sweetly than any paltry blessing freely offered, for it was the most honest thing they had. But these conquerors only set themselves more firmly on the path of progress and destruction, the two intertwined in eternal dance. Bands fought and fell and fought and fell, their fates relayed to me by the godlings who eagerly watched each skirmish. The Vasus seemed to care what happened to humanity, what the fates of these conquerors were. They hoped for some to win, picked those they favored. The best I could muster was apathy. I was trapped here, for humanity’s own selfish purposes, and now they ruined the same world they wanted me to bless.

In time, the strongest of the humans used my waters to settle near my banks. Their numbers doubled, and doubled again. These humans had an endless capacity to grow, it seemed, and as they did, their dwellings grew with them. There was a new name now on the lips of those who walked through the forests to collect my water and clean themselves, the name of a place grander than any other that preceded it, that rivaled the world of the gods themselves.

Hastinapur.

CHAPTER 3

GANGA, MANY DECADES BEFORE THE WAR

I COULD FEEL HASTINAPUR'S edge pressed close to my bank and its filth flowing into my waters, a bright, hot presence that nagged and ached no matter how I stretched myself from mountain to sea. It was only each year during the monsoons that I felt truly free, for the floods forced the humans back, made them understand how small their power was in comparison. My river had many tributaries that I could sense but never fully control, until those floods came. Then, with my waters swelled and filled with new power, I would surge my awareness through these streams.

It was during one such great storm that the monotony of time was broken. As the clouds rained down upon me, I felt descending from the heavens another presence. How my being sang when I recognized him, how I longed to reach up and greet him. But I could only sense the muted radiance of my dear friend as he alit upon the earth. He would come to me, I was sure.

I did not have to wait long.

The monsoon quickly became the greatest deluge I had yet witnessed in this world. The air was so wet with water, it was as though my own river

was rising to meet the sky in joyous celebration. I felt more powerful than I had ever been. I reached out to find my friend, and to my great delight, I felt him near the Yamuna. The glory of the rains allowed me to greet him. Tonight, fate had favored me.

He approached my waters, accompanied by the soul of a mortal. I brought my awareness to him and watched as an older man, hair half-gray and holding an infant child, advanced toward my flooded banks. I drew my presence up to greet the man, only to realize that Vishnu was the baby. He had come to the earth as a newborn child, a brilliant, shining babe entirely dependent on humanity's kindness for survival.

"Please," the man shouted, looking around as though I was not already there listening. "Please, if you can hear me! Allow me passage to save my people!"

I did not know why he needed to cross. I did not know why my friend was a baby, or whose people needed to be saved. But I trusted Vishnu, as I trusted in the currents of time to bring me here, to my friend, in this moment. He had come during the storms, and he knew I would be here waiting for him. I lifted my waters and parted them in a great surge. The man's mouth opened in wonder as I shielded him and Vishnu, the rain falling around them in a harmless patter. He took a cautious step forward, whispering thanks as he met solid ground. There were tears in his eyes, mixing with the rainwater already soaking him. Around my friend, the waters of the Yamuna rose like great cliffs, hailing his passing. His bright, burning presence was a balm to me.

At the end of the crossing, the man turned and watched the river water crash back down, a small smile on his lips. Then he hurried away, and I made a bargain with time, that just as I followed its course now, so too would it soon bear my friend, grown and strong, to me. My waters surged with joy to know he was there, on this earth with me, and so lost was I in this feeling that it took me a moment to realize a Vasu, usually as quiet as the restful night, had called out to me.

Someone visits you! he cried.

I reached out for him, a pinprick in the intensity of the storm, and realized that the same man stood at the other side of my banks, now cradling a small and unremarkable bundle in his hands. A different child, I presumed. A mortal soul. "Please, devi," he whispered. "Please, save my

people.” I could not understand why this man trembled and wept with sorrow, but I did not need to comprehend mortal ways.

I gathered my power to me, and this time I drew away my waters more gently, allowing him passage back to his quiet and godless side of the river. The man bowed his head as he walked forward, murmuring prayers and praises with each step. When he reached safe ground, he did not turn back, but kept walking with his head bowed to the winds.

Each monsoon, when my awareness reached the Yamuna, I sensed my friend. But it was not yet Vishnu’s time, and so I focused instead on the Vasus, giving them some respite and shelter from the human world. When it all went wrong, it was the height of summer and the Vasus were splashing at my shores. They called me “mother” from the human tongue, and spoke the language as though they had been born to it as babes. It was apt, for their survival was fully tied now to me, to the precarious stability that only a river can provide, to those life-giving places where the animals come to drink and women come to fill their pots, heads heavy with longing. The godlings mingled with the humans, toyed with them, and stole from them, and in taking their small pleasures became a bit more mortal. They did not need a reason for it, did not need to find a purpose. The godlings loved to disguise themselves and flit among the women, flirting and teasing, and it was there they learned of the cow.

“Did you hear?” one woman asked as she pushed back the pallu of her sari to dip her pot into my waters. “There is to be a great ceremony in two days.”

Her companion had both hands in the water, scrubbing a garment against the rocks, her knuckles white with the effort of keeping hold of the cloth against the tug of my current. “It’s unnecessary,” she said. “A waste of time.”

“Don’t be sour,” the first woman said.

The second woman snorted, lifting her dripping clothing from the river and beginning to wring it dry. “A strange man walks into this city with a cow he claims is a gift from the gods and the raja simply believes him? He

is foolish.”

“You only say that because you have not seen the cow. I saw it with my own eyes and I am telling you there is something holy about it. The man is a sage, after all.”

“It is just a cow. The raja wanted to throw a festival and he has taken the excuse. Or perhaps he has been duped.” The words flowed from her freely. Such was my pull, that people found themselves giving more than they meant, and the woman froze immediately after speaking, curling into herself as though anticipating a blow.

“He is our ruler because he has gifts we do not,” the first woman admonished. “You should watch your tongue. I know you have a good heart, but others will not.” I was not fully accustomed to the conventions of humans then, but I had witnessed enough to understand—she was making a threat.

The first woman turned toward the shore, and I observed with mild curiosity as the second woman plunged her right hand back into my waters and grabbed a rounded stone. She stood, clutching it in her fist, clothing forgotten, and for a brief moment I wondered whether she was capable of committing this act of violence.

But after a breath, the stone dropped from her fingers, and with a soft sigh she followed her companion.

The Vasus had been uncharacteristically shy during this interaction. I could sense them among the branches and trunks of the trees, watching and listening, and now they appeared, splashing water on one another as they chattered among themselves. I only half listened, losing myself in the ebb and flow and soothing calm of a river on a bright summer day.

The cow—

—it’s a gift—

—we’re gods too—

We do it! At this, my awareness snapped to them, for it was a startlingly clear clarity of purpose for godlings who usually acted as their whims took them and committed themselves thoroughly only in defense. But the speaker was the godling who had the affinity of the stars, had their cold-lighted purpose that lent him a hard strength his friends did not possess.

Do what? I said. I did not often ask after their mischief, and they turned to me as one.

We take the cow, the godling who had declared their intentions told me. There was no guile among godlings, no need to lie.

Why? I asked.

Because we can, said another. *They have so much, because they take from us.*

Doing this does not give you back what has been taken, I said, for I still did not understand. For all that we were kin, I was not a godling and they were not gods. There were some things that would not be shared naturally between us. *Do you wish to harm them before they can return to harm you?*

We do not mean to hurt them, the first Vasu said, stretching his light toward my rocky shore. *We only mean to cause them a bit of trouble.*

I could tell then that this was something I simply could not comprehend. *Be cautious*, I commanded at last.

As they ran off, I tried to settle. I was too focused on Hastinapur, and I did not want to be. I was always watching the city's inhabitants, half-apprehensive to see what they would do next, and that was no way for a god to live. In this most fundamental way, perhaps, the humans truly had conquered me. They had my mind, my attention, and it repulsed me. I wanted to believe it was purely for the Vasus, to protect the only beings I could rely on to be by my side in this endless existence, but I could not lie, not even to myself.

I went far, and then farther. I felt my way to the sea, to the salty tang of the home of the wandering god Varuna, who had brushed against me only once in the many mortal lifespans I had resided on this earth. I lingered in the lower foothills, settling myself in rocky rapids as they pressed away the pain of the memory.

Mother! The cry rippled across my surfaces, reeling me in from my wandering.

The godlings stood ankle-deep in my waters, huddled around a cow. The cow was larger than any cow that had graced my banks, a gleaming white with red spots and clearly touched by the divine. She stood, calm and watchful with doleful eyes. It was not she who had frightened my Vasus, no —

Before them stood a man, mortal to be sure, but holding a power I could sense clearly. Shiva had blessed him.

"You stole Nandini." His anger was like the air before a storm, thick and

oppressive. “She is a holy being, and you have sullied her.”

The Vasu who had appointed himself leader stepped up. He had taken the form of a man. “We borrowed her,” he said. His voice was musical, like the piping of a flute, and clearly otherworldly. For all we could learn and borrow the words of humans, shaping the sounds with the right inflections was far more difficult. But the man did not flinch away.

“You stole her from me while I slept, and for that you will pay.”

The leader of the godlings laughed, but there was no mirth in it. I knew he could sense Shiva’s power protecting this man, and I tasted his fear. They had called me here for a reason, after all. Still they could not back down when faced by a human. “What are you going to do to us? We are gods.”

“Nandini is blessed by Lord Shiva himself! Such an insult to him as theft cannot pass, no matter who makes it.”

“We did not steal anything from you!” another godling exclaimed. “Your people have taken from us and you keep taking. If anything, this is payment.”

The man gritted his teeth. I saw he was dressed in the robes of a sage. “You cannot take from the gods.” I could sense, underlying his words, some amount of fear. Fear of Shiva? That, at least, I could understand.

Caution, I counseled the Vasus.

“We want no trouble,” the godling said. “If you must take the cow back for your ridiculous mortal games, then—”

In that moment, the sage’s emotions tipped completely to anger. “You think you can do as you please, to whomever and whatever you wish? Ha! Hear me well, godlings, for the Lord Shiva gave me a gift, and now I will give you a gift of my own in turn. I will grant each of you a mortal life free from your memories. Then you may take what you wish from the *ridiculous* mortals. You may visit the pain you think mortals have brought to you on others. Is that not what you desired to do when you stole that cow? I am giving you a gift in my benevolence. And when you die you can return here, with your newfound… understanding.” As he spoke, Shiva’s power emanated from him, and I realized that he was utterly serious in his intention.

I did not know if he truly had the ability to capture an immortal soul and place it in a mortal body, but I could not risk letting him do such a thing to

my godlings. This was a curse, not a boon. And I had promised to protect them all. I rose from the water, cloaking myself in a woman's form so the mortal could perceive me, a crude approximation of the body, wrapped in layers of obscuring mist.

The man gaped. I saw awe in his wide eyes, wonder in his slack jaw, and for a moment I thought this would be the end of this. But then he wrestled his expression into something approximating indifference.

"Return the cow," I instructed the Vasus. The leader of the godlings moved jerkily to grasp the harness of the cow and hauled it forward ten halting paces before retreating backward until his soul was safe in my water.

"You have received your property. They will not bother you again. Now leave this place. In peace." I found it difficult to speak, preferring the smooth actions of my river water, but my harsh and awkward speech was sufficient to end this frivolous standoff over a mediocre cow.

Or so I thought. Instead the sage smiled. "You must be the Lady Ganga," he said. "I saw you during my pilgrimage to Lord Shiva's home."

I knew enough about humans to understand that I was being insulted, being given less than the deference due to me. This insolence could not stand. My waters reached for him in a sudden snapping movement, hooking around his ankles to drag him into my depths. Favored by Shiva or not, he was in my domain now and Shiva's mountains were far away.

But he stood firm, and the water could gain no purchase on him. "Fine, then. I am giving them a gift, and I will give you one too, so that you always remember your place. If you wish for clemency for your thieving godlings, I shall grant you this… You will be their mother. Am I not merciful?"

I could hardly hear him over the press of power spreading from him. It was as though I was trapped in another memory, falling to the mortal world, with Shiva's essence reaching toward me, binding me.

I pulled back on instinct, fleeing from his control. The godlings had disappeared from my awareness. What manner of power was this, to erase these immortal souls? It was not one I thought even the gods possessed.

One tendril of the man's power caught my soul. For a brief, crazed moment, I wondered if I could sever that part of myself. I could not bear to be caught again, bound again—

But what I could bear had no effect on reality. I could not outrace fate. His will burrowed into me with the force of ice sloughing down rapids, wrenching me up from the depths and giving me form, substance. The memory of Shiva's first capture racked through me as the man's curse worked its way into my being. I understood, now, what that Vasu had once described as burning. I learned that indescribable sensation: pain.

And then, the worst separation. As I fell to my banks, I could not feel my waters. They were mine no longer. I was not a river or a god. I was mortal.

CHAPTER 4

GANGA, MANY DECADES BEFORE THE WAR

I HAD NEVER BEEN cold before. I had seen people enter my river, seen the spasm that would run through them, but I never thought much of it. After all, mortals were strange creatures. But now I was cold—mortal—cold.

I was crying too, as though my body was expelling all the water in it so that I could be fully human. My fingers prickled, and the faintest brush of wind caused me to shudder. My teeth chattered without warning, so fiercely that pain shot through my skull. I glanced around me, hoping that I would see some spark or sign, but the forest lay still and silent. There had been eight Vasus who lived here and all of them were gone. Shiva's searing power had hollowed out the godlings as though they were not immortals rooted to the land but dust scattered in the wind. Though I could not feel anything, as sense-blind and unknowing as a fish on land, I knew in my soul they were no longer with me. The man who had uttered those cursed words was gone too. How long had it been since I was cleaved from my river? An hour? A day? A week?

My fingertips were turning blue, like the edge of the sea, and I could no

longer feel even pinpricks. On some base mortal instinct, I stumbled to my feet and took a few uncertain steps toward a patch of sunlight. The light reflected off my river and into my eyes and I staggered, unable to see. Even with my eyes clenched shut I could feel the warmth of the sunlight stilling my shaking, seeping into me far deeper than my skin. I blinked my eyes open, more slowly this time.

My river was magnificent, stretched out wide and glittering. The other bank was far, far away, its forest small and muted. Behind me, where I had just thought the forest silent, now I heard the soft hubbub of life. The birds and the insects seemed lonely without the accompanying clamor of the godlings. I stood there in that patch of sunlight, waiting until the water had disappeared from my arms, staring at the prickled flesh of my skin. I ran my pruned fingertips along the brown skin. These human senses were so limiting, horrifying. I had at least understood sight and hearing, for my own perceptions mimicked them. But this, my fingertips taking on the feeling of another thing… Was this how humans experienced the world? I reached a hand up to my hair, rubbed the roughness of the strands, which sprang back as soon as I released them.

A bird shrieked, and a startled flock took flight some distance away. Something was approaching. I stood, frozen and unsure, mind racing until the low voices of men reached my ears. I was naked and woman-shaped, defenseless. They were approaching too quickly, and finally I dove into the only place that called to me: my river.

No. The *river.*

Something burned in my chest and I surfaced, gasping for the sweetness of the air around me. My limbs trembled with the cold shock of the water, but at least this weakness was hidden and my figure submerged. Some part of my limited human consciousness focused on the sensation of the water itself. I had not felt many things in this world yet, but this was absolute bliss. I could not let any contentment weigh me down now, though. At least I knew how to swim instinctively, and that was a relief. I needed to get away. There were more men and settlements downstream, dangerous and unpredictable. But swimming upstream would be difficult with my meager strength and human requirements. And then what? My thoughts were scattered, for I could hardly fathom following one idea to its natural course before starting another.

My indecision cost me dearly. Before I had so much as moved, men burst into the clearing. The one at the front was more finely dressed than the others, his clothes embroidered and glinting in the sunlight, and I knew with an immediate certainty that this was the raja the women had once spoken of. Somehow he was here, at this river, just as I had emerged in this shape. It could not be a coincidence.

“Stop,” he called, his eyes locking onto me. “You are going to drown!”

Something unpleasant shot through my stomach and I twisted away to face the other bank, trying to avoid answering. A moment later, I heard a curse and a splash. “Do not be afraid, I’m coming to help you!” he shouted, and I turned back to see him clumsily wading into the water.

I could try to flee, but this man would follow. His soldiers were likely stronger and more able than me. I had to face him down. I weighed my options, then dove deep. For one fleeting moment I wondered what would happen if I remained down here forever. But my lungs chose for me, and I surfaced close to the shore, crossing my arms over my chest and leaving only my head out of the water. The raja reared back in surprise at my sudden appearance. “I’m sorry,” I said, then flinched at the hollow sound of my voice. Once, it had been a chorus, the stream and the river and the rapids and the shallows. Now I was reduced to just one sound, high and thin and afraid. “So clumsy. My clothes floated away. Can you help?”

One of his men laughed, and the raja turned to give them a sharp glare. “Of course, dear lady. You—” He motioned at the man who had just laughed. “Take off your tunic.”

The man looked around askance, but none of his friends came to his aid. He put down his bow and removed the garment with a resigned sigh before handing it to the raja.

“Cover your eyes,” I said, and the raja’s men turned away. The raja approached me, holding out the tunic with one hand over his eyes. He could take whatever he wanted from me, I realized. And yet he didn’t. Perhaps this was a coincidence, and he was a kind man. The fabric was coarse against my sensitive fingertips, but I quickly slipped the oversize cloth over my head while running out of the water so it would not get soaked through. It had a sharp, pungent odor and was slightly damp under the arms, but after donning it I was at least slightly less exposed. The raja removed his hand and stared at me, eyes wide and mouth agape.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Who are you?” I countered, unsure even of his name.

His men whispered among themselves for a moment until the raja waved a hand to silence them, his eyes kind and focused solely on me. “I am Shantanu, raja of Hastinapur. Surely you are not from here if you did not know that. How did a lady like you come to be in the middle of the River Ganga?”

I considered what I knew of mortals—they clearly had very little respect for the gods around them, else they would not despoil the waters and lands the way they did. So an honest answer was dangerous. But I did not think I could bear the indignity of lying about who I was either. “Where I am from,” I said slowly, “men do not ask women questions.”

His brow furrowed. “And what place has such customs?” he asked. I stared at him, wondering if he was angry, if he would now lash out. I did not know how to judge human emotion, so I braced my feet in the grass, ready to dive back into the water if needed. But after a moment, his eyes crinkled and he let out a short laugh. His smile was nothing like that of the sage who had cursed me. “I’ve never heard of such a place. I would much appreciate it if you told me about it.”

“I came here from the mountains,” I said, and it was not quite a lie, was it? But standing here, having already lied to prevent further outright questioning, I was realizing how fast and easy it would be to become like them. To slip into this human form instead of fighting it like the goddess I was. “It is not a place most men know.”

“I am curious to know what brought you here.” The raja could not have been accustomed to any limitations on how he spoke, but he was clearly intelligent enough to adjust. There was a sharpness in his eyes as he took in my form. “You are so very beautiful, I cannot believe your people of the mountains would just let you go.”

“Thank you. My lord.” I remembered the honorific a moment too late.

“You do not seem to have anything with you. Clothes, supplies, or the like, that is.”

“No, I was—There was a storm. Calamity. That befell me. I confess I do not know what I will do now.”

“There has not been a storm around here for days,” the raja said. His eyes narrowed, then he took two steps forward and laid a hand on my bare

neck. The brush of his skin shocked me. His touch was cold, and I longed to pull away, but I forced myself to meet his eyes. Instinct told me I could not show any weakness.

“What do you think happened, then?” I asked instead, curious.

“So where you’re from, the women have the power,” the raja observed, not answering my question. “I find it difficult to fathom a place where women can ask questions of their men, but not men of their women.”

“I am not yours, nor any man’s,” I said sharply. The idea of being possessed by another caused the words to well up before I could stop them. Heat surged through my body, making me itchy, restless. More human.

Shantanu grinned at my words, still kind but with a hint of something pointed behind it. “You, lady of the mountains, are unlike anybody I have ever met, and I have met a great many women. Come with me to Hastinapur. You shall want for nothing.”

He was a man surveying something he intended to make his own. The heat in my limbs became a forest fire, racing through me, urging me to dive into the embrace of the water and let the current carry me far from this sly king and his godless city.

My thoughts clamored, fragmented and overwhelming. I could not hold multitudes anymore; I could barely grasp a single idea. What was I to do? I was weak, and I did not know how to return to myself. I could not survive alone, but my entire being shied from the idea of joining together with *mortals*.

My chest tightened, as though an elusive makara had me in the grip of its crocodile-like jaws. Then I remembered—I needed to breathe.

I filled my lungs slowly with the sharp forest air, and at last a clear thought welled to the surface: the curse.

The man had said I would bear the Vasus, be their mother, and now the godlings were gone, and I was mortal. Surely he could not mean—no. I could not make children, grow and birth them in the mortal way. That was the most human act of all.

And yet… what other way was there to interpret what the man had said? How else was I to be mother to them? The idea of it caused an unpleasant churning in my stomach.

I took stock of what was before me. Here was a path I could take, readily provided. This mortal wanted me, looked at me with an expression I

had seen on other men before. He could help release me from this prison, so perhaps—"That is a kind offer," I said.

His face brightened, his eyes lighting up at my acceptance. "I need one thing in return, my lady," he said. "A name."

I frowned. "You have a name," I replied, before I understood his meaning. One of his men guffawed, then clapped a hand over his mouth, eyes wide. But the raja merely smiled, his eyes rolling up ever so slightly.

"Clever creature," he said, and something about the knowingness in his tone made me wonder.

But it was impossible this raja knew my true form. The sage had cursed me to be fully human. I stood here with dull skin and sodden hair, with nothing of my divine spark, that which made me a mighty river. "I want to know *your* name, for I cannot simply call you 'lady of the mountain.' Or the river," he added, and his canny expression sent another shiver through me.

If I said my name was Ganga, he would think me a liar—or worse, a woman too stupid to come up with a more convincing lie given where we stood. And this form was *not* Ganga. Ganga was a goddess, master of her waters and beholden to no mortal.

I cast around my slow-moving mind for any human name, and remembered Jahnu, who had shown me a kindness I had not needed but had received all the same. "Jahnavi," I told the king. "My name is Jahnavi."

CHAPTER 5

JAHNAVI, MANY DECADES BEFORE THE WAR

I AWOKE TO THE sweet smell of flowers, something soft beneath my back.

The trip to the palace had passed in a blur of fear and pain. I was without protection for my feet, and the rocks cut into my soft soles until they bled. Shantanu sent a man ahead to fetch a horse, but that proved no better. The animal was huge and unsettled by my obvious nervousness. The unsteady, stiff jolting sent my stomach roiling unpleasantly. I nearly wept tears of relief when the palace came into view—but the moment my legs hit the ground, my knees buckled. The ground rushed to meet me and now…

How much time had passed? In this new body, time seemed slow as thick river mud. There were no trades to be made with fate and time now.

I sat up, then glanced down at my body. I was dressed in a clean white garment that covered much of my skin, but I had no recollection of how I had come to be wearing it. When I was a river, people touched and used me as they pleased, but I had never minded; water was for sharing—skin was not. In this new shape I needed to be far more careful.

Gently, I set my feet onto stone floor. It was cool against my skin, hard

and smooth, unlike the floor of a forest. I was confident it would not bruise my appallingly fragile flesh, so I stood.

At the opposite end of the chamber, a woman appeared through an archway. Her thick hair was liberally streaked with silver, but her face looked youthful enough, eyes bright. Had she been watching me all this time?

“Oh, good, my lady. You’re awake. The raja wanted me to attend to you while you were resting and prepare you for an audience with him once you were refreshed.” As she moved closer, I saw that her arms were laden with bright fabric. “My name is Padma.”

“I am Jahnavi,” I said after a long pause, because it seemed she expected me to speak.

Immediately, a cough tore its way out of my throat. My mouth felt as though it had been left out to dry in the wind, and my voice sounded creaky as an old tree.

Padma clucked her tongue, putting the fabric down. She reached for a silver vessel and poured a sparkling stream of water into a smaller silver cup.

I took it greedily, reveling in the touch of water on my lips, on my throat. I felt strength flooding my body as I consumed, and poured myself more without waiting for Padma.

When I had drained that, I turned back to her and saw she was watching with a bemused expression on her face.

“Do they not have water where you’re from, then?” she asked, before laughing to herself at some private joke. “How are you feeling now?”

I did not know how to answer her question. “An audience?” I said instead.

“The raja wishes to speak to you privately.” She pursed her lips as she said it, a disapproving expression I was well familiar with from watching the women who congregated at the river.

“I see. He is very kind.”

“He is unmarried is what he is,” Padma said. “Sit back on the bed.” She pushed me by the shoulders onto the soft pallet. My legs folded beneath me, as if they already knew what to do. Padma produced a comb and began applying it to the tangle of strands on my head. “Is it common for women to wear their hair like this, where you are from?”

I lifted a hand up to touch one of the locks. I wasn't sure what was different between my hair and hers. "What do you mean?"

"To keep your hair short." Padma tugged the comb down over my scalp. I yelped, not expecting the burn of pain, and tried to move away, but Padma held me fast.

"Oh. Yes. It is… easier." For all I knew, it was.

Padma pulled and tugged in silence for a few moments. Then, "You're very dark for someone from the mountains."

I looked down at my hands. The fingers—my fingers—were slender and long. The skin on the backs was a warm brown, like the richest river mud, no longer as dull as it had been when pinched with cold and drenched with water. Were they not unremarkable?

I turned for a glimpse at Padma's arm, which did seem paler than mine.

Before I could speak, Padma muttered something under her breath and jerked my head straight. "Stay still," she commanded.

I closed my eyes, trying to be still to avoid angering her further.

"You look as though you are from Hastinapur," Padma continued. "We have had visitors from the mountains before, and they are pale, closer to milk. You look like you've baked in the hot sun, like any commoner."

"Perhaps these milk people you speak of were not from my mountain." I wondered what Shiva would think to hear me lay claim to his mountain, when in fact he controlled me.

"You do speak strangely." Padma seemed to have cooled considerably and without warning, and I wondered at it. She finished her ministrations with an unsatisfied tut.

"Have I offended you?" I asked. If this was how fickle they were, living among mortals would be tiring indeed.

Her lips twisted, making her face ugly. "You're playing the simple village girl, and the raja seems quite smitten with it. But there will be people at the court who do not trust you. Some might believe you are a liar, a yakshini trying to trap him."

The sort of raja who could be trapped by an individual he had just met was not much of a ruler, I thought. But then, considering how he had splashed into the river toward me without heed, Shantanu seemed to be a man who thought with desire first.

I did not say this, though. The king was clearly beloved by his people,

and as far as they knew I was nobody—a stranger from a mysterious mountain. I had seen enough of human life to know that distrust could quickly turn dangerous.

“What do you believe?” I asked finally.

Padma was sorting through her bundle of fabrics now, holding each one up near my face and scowling, until at last she selected a pale pink cloth embroidered with delicate golden vines and curling leaves tipped with pearls. It was strange, to see these patterns of nature’s beauty so painstakingly and gorgeously rendered when humans showed no respect for their source. “This will do,” she muttered. Louder, she said, “What I believe does not matter. You seem to be ignorant of the ways of this place and I do not like to see people hurt. Perhaps I should bite my tongue, but that is not my way.”

“Hastinapur is not my home. I have never set foot on this land before today,” I said quite honestly. “Whatever the raja might want with me—I am merely grateful for his kindness.”

Padma hummed in response, but her frown diminished slightly, and I understood that was a correct enough thing to have said.

She tugged the white gown over my head and draped the pale pink cloth around my body with a practiced precision, moving my limbs this way and that.

The cloth was soft, and despite her clear dislike of me, I admired the confidence with which she moved, working with the fabric to let it fold and flow, like a small river. Something about it made my throat ache with longing for the water, for the sinuous and powerful currents that I once made race and run as I pleased. It was the familiarity of practice that had lent both of us our abilities.

A sharp knock on the door broke me from the spell of longing. “Enter!” Padma called.

“The king wishes to know if she has woken.” A man’s voice, rough and low.

“If she hadn’t, you would have roused her with your shouting, so what use are you?” Padma faced the entrance, hands on her hips, although the person on the other side couldn’t see her posture.

“Don’t speak to me that way—” The man swung the door open with more force than necessary, chest puffed up. He deflated immediately upon

seeing Padma and winced when the door thudded against the wall. “Oh. Sorry, masi.”

Padma shook her head. “Stupid young thing.” I tilted my head curiously; her words were harsh, but her tone affectionate. “Well, as you can see, Jahnavi is ready. You may escort her to her audience. There’s no point in delaying. He is eager to meet her again.”

The man had turned a bit red—from embarrassment, I assumed—and he gave a jerking nod. Padma gave me a little push, and I realized I was meant to follow him.

I glanced down at my attire, then hitched up the cloth around my legs in one hand to walk more easily, but Padma swatted my hand away and gave a forbidding shake of her head.

I let the fabric fall, found myself forced to take small, stunted steps.

As I walked, my mind drifted to the mortal who had trapped me here in this indignity. He had been arrogant and foolish, but still Shiva had blessed him.

Another thought surfaced. If my curse was the result of Shiva’s blessing, perhaps another god could free me of this burden. It was not so long ago that my friend had fallen to the earth, and he blazed too strongly not to have retained his power. Maybe he could teach me how to reclaim my own…

Lost in my musings, I almost bumped into the man as he came to a stop outside an ornately carved wooden door. I wondered why the humans felt the need to take an elder tree, one of the most beautiful creations imaginable, and alter it in this way. They had taken a being that gave a home to leaves and flowers and stripped it of life. And then they carved leaves and flowers into it. I reached out a hand to touch the wood, to feel what they had reduced a soaring giant into, but it swung open at the brush of my fingers. Beyond it, I saw Shantanu seated at a table. He wore a loose yellow tunic and a golden circlet in his curly hair.

When he saw me before him, an eager light came to his eyes. He stood and gestured to the man next to me, who immediately retreated. I felt uneasy for a moment, being left alone here—but as I glanced around, I noticed a servant stood quiet in the corner of the room. Shantanu took no notice of them.

“How are you feeling, Lady Jahnavi?” he asked courteously.

“Much better, thank you.”

His eyes darted up and down my form in admiration. “I must say, I find you captivating. I will not speak in riddles to you. I have been searching for a suitable bride for some time, but you are the first woman I find myself wanting to marry.” His brown skin looked suntanned but clear, and his eyes were so dark they may have been black.

“There must be many excellent women in this city,” I replied. I was still trying to understand what about me he found so intriguing. I recalled my feeling at the river’s edge—my sense that perhaps he knew me for what I truly was.

He smirked, and now it was an unkind expression. “There are. They are well-bred and know how to behave. But you look me in the eyes and show me total disrespect without a shred of self-consciousness. And you survived whatever calamity befell you, by the grace of the gods. I have been waiting for the right woman to give this kingdom worthy heirs. It would be most auspicious to have someone so favored bear my children.”

I saw the way he looked at my exposed neck, the curve of my body, and the angles of my limbs, and I knew his veiled insults toward the women of his city gave only half the story at best: He wanted *me*, for a reason I could not fathom. “It was just luck,” I said at last. “So you wish to marry?”

“As soon as possible.”

There was some desperation behind his words, and a thrill of alarm ran through me, some animal instinct of warning. “Why so quickly?” I asked. “You barely know who I am.”

His brow furrowed. “Do you not worry for your own reputation? For you to stay at this palace without any chaperone is quite scandalous. Already you court trouble.”

As if I cared for such things. But perhaps I ought to pretend I did. “It would not ruin yours,” I countered, taking a guess at what privileges being raja might afford. Perhaps I was pushing him to anger, speaking in this manner. But what could he do to me? My soul was that of a goddess. Immortal. If he chose to kill me, most likely death would free my spirit to be divine once more.

But the godlings, I realized. The godlings would not be free until I bore them from my own flesh. I would have to live out this curse for their sake. Still, I would not scrape and grovel to this mortal man who was already weak with desire.

He stared at me for several long breaths—how frightening, that such a short measure of time now mattered so much, for humans drew finite breaths. “You are right,” he said at last. “Many years ago, my line received a prophecy from a great soothsayer. He looked into our future and saw our heirs ruling over all of Bharat. The land was prosperous, the people happy, and our name enduring, immortal. Everything my father, and my father’s father, and his father before him have done has been to achieve this purpose. To unite the realms in wealth, to end war and suffering when we are all one people. My heirs must be worthy to inherit this purpose, for I know the day is nearing when that dream is achieved.”

As he spoke, I could finally see some spark within him. He had been born to be king, a status earned not through merit but by the luck of his blood. But he still had a vision, inherited though it might be, driving him forward.

I wondered who had gifted his ancestors with this prophecy, for the future was not clear to even the gods. It seemed the sort of thing one might say to a king to soothe the ego, rather than true insight into the future, yet it clearly held much power in Shantanu’s mind.

The godlings, though, could not be the heirs he wanted. He spoke of conquest, of war and subjugation. They would want no part in it, this destiny of Shantanu’s line. If they were born with their memories, with the knowledge of their true origin, they would refuse this destiny, and I did not know how Shantanu might react to that. And if they were born without knowledge of their previous life… I could not let them stay trapped in this mortal world, ignorant of the great harm they would do to others as humans always did, when they would be forced to live with that weight forever once they resumed their divine forms.

My curse would force me to bear the godlings, but they could not be the family Shantanu wanted. But perhaps, if Shantanu served my purposes, I would bear him nine children before I returned to the river. The eight Vasus of my curse, and a true heir for his prophecy. It did not seem so difficult—to my mind, what was nine years when my conscience was endless? I would merely have to be careful not to myself fall into the vices of humanity, to keep myself apart and unchanging.

“My purpose, I think, is to marry you,” I said, choosing each word with care. “I will fulfill my duty to you. In return, you must promise me

something.”

I saw the greedy anticipation in his eyes as I said the words. “Yes, Lady Jahnavi,” he said indulgently. “What promise do you ask?”

“That no man, including yourself, will ever question me.”

Shantanu seemed taken aback, a frown flitting over his features and leaving just as quickly. “It is a strange custom to my people, but we are not barbarians. I can adapt to such a thing, if it will bring you comfort.”

Shantanu leaned forward to embrace me, pressing our bodies together as though he could hardly stop himself from doing more. A shiver ran down my spine, unpleasant and cold, and a painful heat bloomed in my stomach. But he did not seem to notice.

It was a blessing, I would come to learn: Shantanu noticed very little.

CHAPTER 6

JAHNAVI, MANY DECADES BEFORE THE WAR

SO I, THE GODDESS of the river, was wed to a mortal king.

I learned quickly that there was much that I had not fully understood in my observations of the riverbanks: how to speak in their manner, dress in their clothes, act in their ways. They had endless rules governing every moment of their lives, from the moment their eyes opened in the morning to the moment they closed at night. I realized now that I had seen them at my river at their freest—and every day I learned how to make myself smaller. To control my words, my tone, my eyes, my steps, my hands. How my hair must look, my clothes must fall, my jewelry must glitter. Every citizen of Hastinapur, even Shantanu, lived by such rules, as though any misstep would curse them forevermore. Every day I struggled between the curiosity that seemed to be a part of human existence and the knowledge that giving in, blending in enough to avoid Shantanu's ire, was making me less of a god.

For however alone and separated I felt here on this earth, however homesick, I never before had felt small. I was far freer as a river, even held as I was by Shiva, and now I understood the human quest to fill the

hollowness in their soul, though it only led to suffering. I was already cut off from the heavens; I did not want to be taken over by this sensation, and remember it when I was a deity once more.

My nights I spent in service of my curse. The acts were meaningless—not painful, not pleasurable, just another trick of the human body that I could not let myself grow attached to. But I was glad to do it, if it meant I could become myself once more. I thought often of the man—the sage—who had bound me.

I had learned that three days had passed from the sage's curse to Shantanu's appearance, and I had so many questions. Why had it taken three days for me to surface at the riverbank? The transformation had happened in an instant to my reckoning. And why had it taken exactly as long for the king to come to the river? The uncertainty was far too human for my liking, my need for answers a weakness. But eventually it overtook me, the craving for my divinity growing too much to bear. One night, after the king spent himself in me, I turned to him and said, "I never told you why I came all this way down from the mountains."

He smiled softly, his expression sleepy. "I assumed you just sprang formed from the river like the magical creature you are."

My heart thud-thudded in my chest, a distinctly human feeling I had not yet grown used to. "Of course not!" I knew I sounded odd, and cursed myself for it.

He put a broad hand on my cheek, drawing slow circles against it with his thumb. "It was a jest, Jahnavi. Tell me what you wish to say."

"Part of what brought me here was a desire to visit my cousin-brother. He lives nearby on the banks of the Yamuna. But I never completed the journey. I would very much like to."

Shantanu considered this for a moment. I wondered if he could sense the trembling of my heart, the fear tensing my limbs that he might refuse, that I might have to jeopardize this safe harbor and my standing in it. "Very well," he said indulgently. "The nearest settlement on the Yamuna is only two days' ride from here. But you will take a guard and travel by land so you are protected from any further calamities."

I slumped back in relief. "Thank you, my king." I rarely used titles with him, for I could tell my failure to do so only increased my allure, but I wanted him to understand how genuine my gratitude was.

“Anything for you, Jahnavi.” I knew from his tone that he meant it.

In truth, I did not think Shantanu was a good king. I had known him only briefly, but he had chosen his first wife to be a woman he found at a riverbank, rather than a useful ally. He was ruled by his passions for women, for wealth, for war—Hastinapur was always at war with someone, it seemed, depending on what Shantanu coveted. I did not know if he was a good man. But he was truly sincere when it came to his desires, and that could benefit me. “I will send Ishaan to collect you in the morning.”

This was a dismissal, one I welcomed. I left his bed and returned to my own.

Sleeping was one human behavior I had yet to master. My mind seemed always filled with worries and teachings and other deeply mortal thoughts, and below it the deep undercurrent of dread that I would never escape this curse.

But the exhaustion of the body eventually conquered my torrent of thoughts, and a restless and brittle sleep claimed me.

At dawn, Padma and her chatter arrived.

She had remained in my service, although I knew she treated me with disrespect. There was continued suspicion under her demeanor, but I could not understand how to correct it. “I hear you’re taking a journey today. I have packed your things and selected some travel clothing for you. It is certainly… odd for you to take an unexpected journey like this. Lady Jahnavi.” The last she added as an afterthought.

I emerged from bed, back stiff, limbs heavy. It was a wonder that mortals accomplished anything at all when they had to sleep, eat, clothe themselves, and do a thousand other small tasks besides. At least eating was a pleasure, even if it had to be done for sustenance. But, as with all human things, there was a cost: I hated hunger, and the monotony of it all was yet another weight on my shoulders. “The raja granted me leave only last night.”

“Well, you might have mentioned to me your intentions to ask about it!” I could tell Padma would brook no further argument, so I ignored her and

went about my morning ablutions, reveling quietly in the brush of water against my skin. Today, though, I did not linger. The urge to depart thrummed through me.

Padma had just finished draping my sari when Ishaan appeared at the door. I was pleased to see it was him, as he had been there the day Shantanu found me—the man who had laughed and then given me the tunic off his back. I thought I could trust him enough for this journey, given his loyalty to the king and his pride in his position. He would jeopardize neither for a strange river woman, and he knew better than to ask any questions.

One skill I had learned quickly, since it did not involve interaction with many humans, was riding horses. That first day had given me cause for worry, but all manner of animals were drawn to me at the river, and when I was calm they seemed to sense something of my spirit. I was grateful for it now. Much of our route took us along the riverside, and I spent hours just staring out at the wide expanse of it, the faint smell of algae and the occasional spray against my skin causing hot tears to prick at my eyes.

That night, I slept on a thin bedroll under the stars, and it was the first time since I had been bound as Jahnavi that I slept well. Such a statement was misleading, for it was not as though I had slept at all as a god—really, it was the first time in my whole existence I had slept well. It felt profoundly soothing to lie next to my river—*the* river—its soft sounds lulling me to a dreamless rest, almost feeling as though I had returned to my true home. Ishaan had to call my new name twice before I could bring myself to get to my feet the next morning; Surya was already beaming gold in the sky above us. Still, Ishaan assured me we would make it to Gokul by sundown, and with every mile, my anticipation grew.

Gokul, I knew, was hardly more than a collection of straw-and-mud huts. When we arrived, the village at sunset had an unhurried feel to it, and people emerged slowly from their homes to take in the sight of me and Ishaan on horseback and clad in what I’m sure looked like finery, wrinkled and dust stained though it was. They did not seem impressed.

I dismounted, scanning the faces of the younger villagers. Would I recognize him, after all these years? Would I be able to sense the god in him when all divinity was drained from me?

I should not have worried. A figure came racing from the river and barreled straight into me with the force of a gale wind, crying, “Sister!”

The rest of the villagers chuckled, shaking their heads, and most began to disperse back to their huts. We wrapped our arms around each other, and for once the touch of skin against skin felt calming. A different sort of home. “You’ve changed so much since we last met,” I said wonderingly.

He pulled back to look at me, face incredulous. “As have you.” Where he touched my arm, I could feel warmth seeping through my clothes and into my skin, supernatural and strong. I leaned into it, closing my eyes and savoring the sensation.

After a moment, I noticed a lovely older woman, perhaps Padma’s age, standing a few feet away, watching us with a slight smile on her face. She caught my glance and her smile widened. “It’s getting dark,” she said. “We would be honored, sister of Krishna, if you would grace our home.”

Yashoda served a delicious meal. We had more elaborate food at the palace, but the pleasure of eating warm roti and simply spiced greens next to Krishna was finer than the richest delicacies of Hastinapur. Ishaan took his meal outside, declaring he would sleep better under the stars. When our hunger was satisfied, and Krishna had ceased his teasing attempts to get me to eat more, Yashoda showed me a room where I could lay my bedroll.

Under the thatched roof, away from the river, rest was once again hard to come by. Through the doorway, I could see the nearly full moon rising silver bright. I wondered how Chandra felt, cold and alone in the sky, so close to heaven but still a part of the distant mortal world. It was the first time I had given any thought to his plight. He had come nearer to the mortal world much like I had, when the humans begged for light. But then, Chandra moved across the sky in an endless dance with Varuna. He pushed and pulled, and so did the tides, locked together, eternal and certain. He was not alone, not the way I was.

Lost in these musings, I almost failed to notice the flutter of the curtain. My mind dismissed it as the work of an idle breeze, the human consciousness unable to process too many inputs at once. But it fluttered a second time, then a third. I crept from my bedroll and peeked out. On the other side stood Krishna, a small light dancing in his hand and a

mischievous grin on his face.

We tiptoed outside into the cool night breeze. Only then did I see that Krishna was carrying a small bowl in his hand. He tilted it toward me in silent offering, revealing a golden substance I could not identify. I splayed out the fingers of my hand in question, a gesture I had learned from Padma, and watched as Krishna stuck a finger into the bowl and licked it clean. I copied him without hesitation, and in my mouth the substance melted into a liquid almost immediately. I gasped in delight. It was perfect: rich, mellow, delicious. Ghee, I remembered. It was put on food in Hastinapur, but it was even better here. Krishna's face split into a boyish smile, his white teeth contrasting sharply against his dark skin, shining almost blue in the moonlit night. I admired his radiance.

He took another taste, licking his lips contentedly, then started off down a winding path. I followed, and after several minutes, we emerged through a stand of trees and onto the banks of the Yamuna River. An involuntary sigh escaped me at the sight. The Yamuna was calm, more peaceful than my main river, and on a clear night it caught even the starlight, like glittering gems were floating in the waters. I leaned down to trail my fingers through it, watching the ripples wistfully.

"I thought this place would bring you peace. We can talk here, sister," Krishna said, sitting on a smooth rock with such practiced ease that I knew he had come here many times before. "What troubles you?"

"I am a mortal," I replied simply, coming to sit beside him. My arm tingled where it pressed against his; raw power flickered against my skin. It was tantalizingly close, and yet so far away. "I do not wish to be."

He twisted to look at me. "How did you come to be this way?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but all words fled. Tears pricked at my eyes, and I scrubbed at them with the heels of my hands while Krishna wrapped one arm around my shoulders. At last I managed, "It was a curse."

His face darkened. "Who in this land would dare curse a goddess?"

"A mortal man," I said, and the rest of the story came tumbling out. I had told nobody what had happened, keeping it dammed inside me, and now it flowed from my lips with abandon. It seemed the river's pull had not disappeared with my divinity. Or perhaps it was the desire for a release, the catharsis of sharing this burden and knowing, like Chandra, that I was not alone.

When I finished, Krishna was silent. A soft breeze blew over the river, clouds shifting to cover the moon. Krishna squeezed my shoulders, imparting a brief impression of heat before he sighed and stood to face me. “That is disturbing indeed, sister. It pains me to see you so hurt. I am sure you came here in the hope that I might lift this terrible burden from you. But I see no way to do it.”

My heart sank like a stone. “If it’s Shiva you’re afraid of, tell him I begged you. That I forced you. What more can he do to me?”

Krishna laughed then, a high, boyish laugh, and I remembered this was not Vishnu himself. In the celestial world, Vishnu and I had been friends, and close as siblings. He regularly came to me when I flowed between the stars, sitting beside me, feet dangling in my waters as we talked and played. Vishnu was one of the wandering gods, not tied to any place in heaven, instead coming to the realm of the mortals every few generations. He was kindhearted, always concerned about protecting humans. But I had other concerns.

“Why do you laugh?” I asked when nothing further was forthcoming.

“I’m not scared of Shiva.” He looked north, as if searching for his mountains.

“Then why can you not help me?” A sliver of hope wound its way into my chest. Then the clouds shifted again, and in the light of the moon I saw Krishna’s shadowed expression and knew with devastating certainty what he would say.

“It is not that I do not wish to. It is that this curse seems absolute. There is no thread I can find, no hint of your past self that I might tug on to unravel this net. It is not Shiva’s doing. It is the sage’s intent, coupled with the force of the gifted power… I am so very sorry, sister, but it seems the only way to lift this curse is to fulfill its obligations.”

His words felt like blows against my chest. For a brief moment, I forgot how to breathe, and when at last I remembered how, it came in the form of a heaving gasp. “You are mortal yet powerful. I am mortal and ordinary. I cannot even sense my river.” My words echoed across the expanse of water, coming back to us in a plaintive cry. “I cannot feel a thing. How can this be? Please. Please help me. I do not want this.”

He shook his head even as he wrapped his arms around me once more. “Please do not cry,” he begged. I tasted salt on my lips and only then felt

the tears on my cheeks. “Becoming mortal was of my choosing, for work I felt called to, and so I am as you see me. The power that Shiva gave that sage allowed him to choose your shape, whether he knew it or not.”

“Why would Shiva do such a thing?” I asked, more to myself than to Krishna. Part of me trembled to think of the answer—had he done it to teach me a lesson? Or was there some other purpose for which the sage still roamed?

Krishna did not share my apprehension. “Because he has lived in his mountain all these years. The only mortals he sees are the ones that seek him out, performing severe penances in the hopes of winning his blessing. He is an unreachable and unchanging presence in this world. Humans can rely on him. But because he judges each human who comes to him only on their actions in his mountains, they may use their powers for purposes he does not foresee.”

These words did not feel like those of a boy of less than fifteen years. For a brief moment, I could see his blue-skinned, gold-adorned aspect, his laugh like a flash of lightning, the core of him holding the power of the cosmos itself. “Where does this knowledge come from?”

Krishna smiled. “I have been observing this world for eons.”

“What work are you here to do, then?” For a moment, curiosity overpowered despair, natural to this shape.

He smiled, but kept his secrets. “It will unfold as it will, and you will see in time, Ganga.”

“Will you tell me once I am a god again?” I asked, for I could not bring myself to ask the true question, *Will I ever be a god again?* He had used my true name, and I clung to that small comfort instead.

Krishna understood my meaning. “You will be yourself again faster than you might think. But know that the shape of what is to come is ever-changing. How else can it be? I need to be here. And you need to be here too. Do not despair.”

I needed to be here? Did he mean on the earth, or in this pathetic mortal shape? How could I, in this form, be of any use to a divine plan? Even as a god, I could not see myself aiding humans as they destroyed this world. They were the source of all pain. “I want no part in the problems and quarrels of mortals. I never have. I wish to return to my river and forget.”

“I would not be so sure,” Krishna said. “After all, what is the purpose of

eternity?”

I might have laughed, for I had once imagined him saying such a thing to me. I might have cried, for I knew him so well I had predicted his very words. Instead, I stayed silent. I did not have an answer for him.

Krishna gave a soft exhalation. “Only you can know yourself. But one day, you will hold the answer, and I promise you will be happier then. You have been through much, and my heart aches that I cannot do more for you. I will do this: Should you need me, you know how to call upon me. And I promise to always answer.”

He once again sat beside me, and I laid my head on his lap. We stared out at the ever-moving river as the moon continued its slow journey, enjoying a moment of contentment.

He could not help me, but his presence, his recognition of me, could be enough for now. When Chandra dipped low, chasing Varuna at the horizon, we rose in unspoken agreement.

I left the next day, after Krishna had shown me the village and the forests and danced with me barefoot among the leaves, his laughter lightening some weight in my soul.

For the first time, I felt ready to face whatever was to come.

CHAPTER 7

JAHNAVI, MANY DECADES BEFORE THE WAR

ALMOST THREE MOONS AFTER my arrival in Hastinapur, Padma said, sounding unhappy, “You have not bled since you came here.”

“I have not bled,” I repeated. I had no idea what Padma was speaking of and hoped to get further explanation—humans had a love of chattering, and I had learned to respond just enough to spur them on.

“Were you keeping it from the raja?” she demanded.

Clearly she was accusing me of something, but I did not know what. My mind worked furiously. The women at the river washed out bloodstained cloths and complained about the cycle that caused it. And, occasionally, complained that it had not come, and that—

“I am with child,” I whispered, placing a hand on my belly.

Padma cocked her head at me. “You mean to tell me you did not know?” I shook my head. “Then it is the raja’s child?”

“Would it be another’s?” I asked in confusion. Padma clucked her tongue and turned away. She still did not treat me as a queen, or even as her equal, looking at me with a distrust that would have been amusing were it not insulting. She was convinced that I intended to harm Shantanu or his

kingdom, and I could not ask her questions for fear a worse story would reach the ears of the king.

I had little time for her scowls, though. I sat near the window, thinking, turning over in my mind the small changes in my body, the slight tightening of my clothes. But my soft stomach looked to my eyes the same as it always had been—not that I possessed any deep knowledge of living in this shape.

"You must tell the raja," Padma sniffed. "You have a duty to do so."

Padma's loyalty was with Shantanu first and foremost. Still, if I dismissed her she had no choice but to leave, and that was what I did now.

Once alone, I sank onto my bed. There was a godling growing inside me, and my mind spun with questions. I wondered who it might be. The Vasus had always acted together, but each was distinct in my memory, distinct in their soul. I wished I could see who had rooted in my womb, whether it was one with a love for the elements, or night and day, or stars and stillness. Would it change the pregnancy, I wondered, depending on their spirit? In my time at the palace, I had seen other women with child. As a river, I'd heard them mourn the loss of a babe, pray at my banks for another. If such a loss happened to me, would the godling's spirit still be freed, or would I be forced to try again?

I did not want to risk harming any of them.

But when the godling was born, how could I protect them from succumbing to the world of mortals? The Vasus had always been more taken with it than I, and so would be more susceptible—if I was struggling, they would give in to temptation. What destruction might a godling wreak, and what infinite regret might they hold after? I knew there was no worse fate than to be unable to return to that from which you came.

Still, I could not hide this pregnancy from Shantanu, especially because Padma knew. And when I swelled—no.

It disturbed me how quickly my mind offered the option to me, but I knew within the span of a few moments that all that was left to me was deception.

That evening, before Shantanu could push his lips against mine or tug impatiently at my clothing, I said, "I have news for you."

His forehead creased—so he had not guessed. "Please, tell me what it is."

"I am with child," I said, trying to mimic the joy with which I had heard

other women speak of such things. My chest contained a riot of emotions, and I did not want them known to him. He squinted at me for a moment, slow to comprehend my words. And then a light spread over his face. He stepped forward and placed a hand on my stomach, looking at me with wonder. Had I ever seen him this happy? My heart responded in kind to seeing his elation; I could not stop myself.

"Oh, Jahnavi, this is incredible! How—" He stopped suddenly, realizing he could not ask me questions. His face dropped. He pressed his lips together, clearly fighting the urge to ask, and I took pity on him.

"I only realized today, and as best I can tell I have been this way for a few weeks at most." I had no idea if this was true, and so I promised myself it was not a lie. I wanted to please him, even though I did not care very much for him, and I hated that these words had slipped out on instinct before I could stop them. To temper him—both of us—I added, "And I do not know whether they will be your heir, or a daughter."

"You do not seem happy," he said, staring intently at my eyes.

"I am worried."

He waved a careless hand in the air. "This is your first pregnancy. All women worry about this. We will make the proper sacrifices and penances, and you will have a healthy child. Do not fear."

Now I had to choose the words, instead of giving in to human impulses. I did not know which was worse. "Among my people, there is a history of difficulties in bearing children." I had practiced this speech to myself in whispers all day, but in this moment, I struggled. I only hoped that the king would take my hesitating speech and red face as signs of despair, rather than falsehood. He guided me to sit, his hands soft and gentle.

"We are not in the mountain villages now," he said. "You will be fine."

"There was a rumor," I continued, not meeting his eyes. "A rumor that some years ago, Shiva cursed the women of our village. I know not why. After this curse, the women of the village had problem after problem. Many died in childbirth. Finally, the women went and begged Shiva for mercy. He was still angry and wrathful, but he was not heartless. He proclaimed that every woman would have a child to continue their line, but that these children would come only after much suffering. Since then, women have borne four, five, six pregnancies before having a surviving child." This was easier to say, for some of it was true—Shiva, a curse, children that Shantanu

would never see.

Shantanu had gone pale. “It sounds like an old wives’ tale. I would not put much stock in it.” His voice trembled slightly, betraying his fear. A wife who bore such a curse was a poor marriage indeed, but he had not thought to learn anything about my history before we wed. “We will honor Shiva and pray for his mercy. To be safe.”

“There is no safety from the wrath of Shiva,” I said, and now I could meet his dark eyes. I had centuries of experience with this unfortunate truth. “But you are right. Perhaps all will be well.”

This time, the misfortune would be of my making. It was difficult to accept.

As the moons passed, I gathered information. I learned from noble women, whose company I was often forced to endure, the customs of childbirth in Hastinapur, namely that women often left to stay with their families before the birth of their child and would remain there for a moon or more. I spoke to the court physician, who told me that the pregnancy was very healthy and I had nothing to fear, and prescribed a particular diet to maintain my strength and vigor.

This was useful, but not as useful as the gossip and casual conversation with maids and washerwomen and cooks. The women who were, according to the nobility, born to be servants seemed far more capable of navigating the travails of life than did the supposed ruling class. And yet the humans had their hierarchies, forcing people into lives of hardship by birth lots, a system I felt I would never understand. The serving women, perhaps surprised that the rani of Hastinapur spent so much time perched on a low wooden stool in a smoky kitchen, taught me what herbs could be used to keep a child safely in the womb, what plants might trigger an early birth and therefore should be avoided, who the best midwives were among the commoners, how to deal with the strange cravings and moods of pregnancy, and how to prepare my body for birth and what came after.

The raja allowed me to do as I pleased within the palace, of course never questioning my habits, but I could not simply slip into the city proper. My

hair, which I kept cut to the length of my chin to keep Shantanu's interest, was too recognizable. Still, as time passed, the changes to my body made me less familiar. In the hallways of the palace, people looked twice at me before bowing and greeting me, despite my finery. I stole clothes from the servants' areas so I could wrap myself in drab garb when the time came.

About five moons into my pregnancy, I finally managed to find a way to escape the palace walls. There was a small door in the gardens, likely an entry point for the many who tended the array of flowers and trees. The gardens were one of the few places where I could find occasional peace and enjoyment. With the discovery of the door, that peace became my freedom.

The city was a foreign and unholy river, its lifeblood people, streaming this way and that in eddies and currents. I paused for a moment near the palace and took in the clamor of shopkeepers and sellers, the smells of animals and humans, the bright and strange sights of the city. Was this—human civilization—worth the destruction it had wrought? No, still no. Living among them, I only grew more certain that their domination of the land around them was not necessary to their survival. It just made them—some of them at least, the powerful among them—*happy*.

I forced myself on, one hand wrapped around my belly. Just a few days ago, I had felt the first flutter of the godling within and been convinced that something had gone wrong. My cries had scared Padma so badly she shouted for a guard.

When I explained that something had moved in my belly and injured the baby, she laughed hard enough for my cheeks to warm. Then she dismissed the guard and, softening slightly, said, "That is the child moving inside you." She touched my stomach without permission, and the godling kicked again. She smiled, her eyes closed and expression contented. "The prince is coming."

By the time I went to Shantanu to share the news, I had already grown protective of the Vasu inside me in a way I had never felt before. I had failed to protect them once, but now this one, this spark, was wholly my responsibility. While Shantanu excitedly spoke about how this was a good omen, I heard only a warning in my heart: My time ran short.

I walked briskly through the city, half-afraid at all times, toward the dwelling of the most trusted of midwives among the common people, Kavita. I did not know whether this was an aftereffect of my true form or

just a strange coincidence, but my mortal form had an incredible ability to navigate. People often oriented themselves to the river, and as a god I had possessed a perfect knowledge of myself, from mountaintop to sea, commanding a far larger span than most other deities. Maybe this was the reason that now, with scant information, I arrived quickly at a door at the very edges of the city, painted with a blue circle containing a pink lotus. Many of the women of Hastinapur, including me, were not well-versed in their letters, but this symbol was more than adequate.

Just as I debated whether I needed to make some signal—in the palace, doors opened for me—it swung open to reveal a tall, thin woman. Her eyes flicked down to my belly and then up to my face, and I fought the human urge to squirm. At last, she stepped aside to let me in.

"Rani Jahnavi, this is certainly a surprise." Kavita directed me to a plain wooden bench and I sat rather clumsily, shocked that the midwife had recognized me. "What brings you here? There are midwives and physicians more suitable to your caste who would come to you in the comfort of the palace."

Of the many things I struggled to understand about the mortals of Hastinapur, their caste system was perhaps the most difficult, for the nobility of the court claimed these distinctions were the gods' mandate to better their society. But I knew that to be a lie. It seemed to me that the nobility had discovered, maybe in a stroke of perverted genius but more probably like a gradual creeping ivy, a way to keep themselves in power. If they truly believed the gods had mandated such a system, they would not have allowed me to be their queen with nothing more than a quiet murmur, knowing that by my own half-truth admission I was of common birth.

The woman's frankness pleased me, though, for it meant I could dispense with my usual struggle to navigate niceties. "I do not care about that."

"Your people never do. *I* care. If something happened to you here, or on your journey, your husband would have me executed without a thought. I am expendable to him. You have put me in great danger by coming here."

"I—I did not think about that," I said at last. I recognized the hot flush rising in me as guilt. She was correct—Shantanu would not think twice about punishing a woman like the midwife.

Kavita studied me. "I assume you have made your way here dressed in

such a manner because of the strange presence growing inside you?”

“How—”

She gave a small, gap-toothed smile. “Many women have asked me how I know their bodies and pregnancies so well. Ordinarily, I tell them it is a secret. But there is something peculiar within you, and so I will tell you in expectation that you will trust me in return.”

I nodded at her, as there was no point denying it. Kavita already knew more than enough of my secrets without me telling her. “When I was a child, I lived far south of Hastinapur. My mother was a midwife and her mother before her, and so on. There was a story passed down among the women of our family that our abilities were a gift from a goddess who lived deep in the lush forests that bordered our town. In truth, I think they came from the many years of accumulated knowledge that passed down generation after generation. But for every successful birth, there were those with problems, beyond even the grasp of my family’s knowledge, and I could not bear it. So I traveled into the forest in search of the goddess.”

I found myself drawn in, leaning forward to hear her soft voice as she spun the tale. “I spent many days wandering through the thicket of trees as it grew darker and deeper. There were strange creatures all around me, things that appeared human at first glance but had wicked talons and pale fangs. One of them scratched me as I ran, and its poison began to consume me. I did not know which way I was going, could not see the sky. Eventually, I collapsed in a grove, overcome with exhaustion and ready to die. That night, the goddess came to me and she asked me why I sought her. I do not remember what I said to her for I was feverish and delirious.

“The next thing I remember, I was waking at the outskirts of my village, healthy once more. I did not realize the change in me until I was called to aid a mother who had been laboring for many hours. I took a single glance at her and knew instantly the problem. It has been that way ever since.”

Her story surprised me, and I longed to know the name of this mysterious goddess from the forest, but Kavita had continued on.

“After a few too many miraculous births, the village began to gossip. They decided I was more likely than not a dayyan and cast me out.” At my quizzical look she added, “A sorceress. One who feeds on the energy of others to perform magics.”

“That’s absurd,” I countered without thinking about it, amused by such a

declaration. “The only source of such power in this land is the gods.”

“Is that so?” Kavita asked. “You seem so certain of it. Is this perhaps related to your own circumstances?”

“You can tell there is something different about my pregnancy.” I evaded her question. I had practiced a lie for this situation, but it seemed I might have to offer some aspect of the truth instead. My mortal heart pounded against my chest at the thought of telling a near stranger my circumstances, sweat beading on my skin.

“You are having a healthy baby,” Kavita said slowly. “It is a normal child and yet there is something more to it. Magic, I would say, but you do not seem to believe mortals capable.”

I sagged with relief. “I have been having strange dreams of late. That the child inside me is not the human child of the king, but rather the offspring of a god.” I *had* been having strange dreams, about what my precious Vasu might become in Shantanu’s hands. “I would not ordinarily believe such a fanciful thing, but…”

“I have heard many women make that claim, often when they have been unfaithful,” Kavita said wryly. “But I see the proof here before me.”

“I have not been unfaithful,” I said firmly, and Kavita nodded her assent. Whether she believed me or not, it was not her place. It seemed she did not care much either. “But the raja needs an heir. This child cannot be his heir.”

Kavita shook her head. She did not seem shocked about what I was saying, but then, she had probably already heard everything I had to say and worse. “You are past the time of quickening. If you had come to me before, well… At any rate, I do not think it safe to try to rid you of it now, especially if there is something special about it.”

She paused there warily, as if expecting some reaction from me, but I did not know why. “I do not want to rid myself of it,” I said calmly. I had decided that the godling had to be born, had to fill its mortal lungs with unforgiving air so that it would have lived a mortal life enough to satisfy the bounds of the sage’s curse.

Kavita pursed her lips, eyes distant in thought.

“What is it?” I asked. “If money is an object—”

“I have helped other noblewomen with such dilemmas before,” she said. “I could help you deliver the child early, spirit it away to a different home, and give you enough proof that your husband would believe the child dead.

And I know you will compensate me for my troubles and my silence. But to do such a thing for a woman of your standing is too great a risk."

Despair surged through me. I would have gone to my knees, but my whole body felt weak with fear. "*Please*," I begged. "What can I do to convince you?"

After what felt like an eternity, she shook her head and sighed. "Nothing. I will, of course, help you. I cannot turn away anyone who comes to me for help, not even you."

Tears sprang into my eyes and when I tried to blink them away they instead rolled in fat droplets down my cheeks. With every passing week of carrying this child, I had less control of myself, of my emotions. My body, uncomfortable from the start, became even less my own. The tears were stupid, and mortal, and now she would never think me worth helping.

Kavita did not chastise me, nor did she attempt to stem my tears. She waited with a quiet patience, until I calmed on my own and wiped the moisture from my face with the edge of my pallu. Then she said quietly, "This must be done in secret, when you are past eight moons. The first part will be the hardest, for someone in your position. But if you are truly committed to carrying out this plan, you will find a way to convince the raja that you must travel to a relative's place for the birth, and that you wish to journey alone." She paused, staring intently at me. After a moment, I realized she wanted a response.

"I can manage this," I said. It would be a simple thing, really, to convince Shantanu that I wished to be in the home of my cousin, with my aunt assisting with the birth. I lied to myself now that telling a falsehood to protect a godling was not a mortal act but a godly one. I would commit any number of lesser sins for this Vasu. "I'm allowed much freedom."

"Very well. You can send word to me the same way you heard of me. Just ask them to tell me yes or no and I will understand your meaning. If you wish to proceed, you will be given herbs, which you will take on the full moon. You must find a place to do this, private and out of the city—"

"The river," I said instantly. "On the banks of the River Ganga."

Kavita was silent for a moment. "If that is what you wish. It is not a hospitable place for giving birth."

I tried not to, but once an emotion gripped me I was helpless, and so I laughed at this, a belly-shaking laugh that left me gasping for breath. The

river gave life, *was* life. Thousands of creatures gave birth in the river or at its banks, and millions relied upon it for their survival. Only to a city-dwelling human would it be perceived as inhospitable.

When I finally regained control I glanced up at Kavita, who was looking at me, to borrow a mortal expression I found delightful, as though I had grown two heads. There were plenty of two- and three- and ten-headed gods, but apparently such a concept was frightening to humans. “My apologies.” I wiped my eyes again. “Sometimes my emotions are not my own.”

Kavita gave a curt nod. “The herbs will cause labor to begin a few hours after you take them, so you must be careful. Your child is large and in proper position already, so they will be easily and safely born. As you know, your child is going to be different, and so I will ask you to determine who is suitable to care for your baby. I will arrange for the child to be brought to them. But you must know… You will need to maintain this lie, this secret, for the remainder of your life. That is no easy burden to take on. It will be difficult, and lonely.”

“I am prepared,” I said.

I knew that the hardest task still lay ahead of me. I needed to find a suitable mortal who would raise this godling free from the depravities of human life and ask no questions about receiving a newborn child to raise. My life would be measured only in how many of these lives I had to bear, my loneliness already constant. But when I was done, there would be no burden, only the knowledge that I had protected my godlings as best I could.

CHAPTER 8

JAHNAVI, MANY DECADES BEFORE THE WAR

THERE WERE NO SUITABLE mortals. Not in the city, and not beyond it.

Perhaps Krishna would have been suitable, but he was a young man with a purpose of his own, and he was not a true mortal besides. I could trust this mortal godling child to nobody, except maybe myself, but I could not raise a child without it being claimed, being decreed nobility and indoctrinated in the ways of royalty. And so, my mind turned over and over to the option I could hardly bear to consider—perhaps, once the child was born, I would free it from this mortal world immediately and return it to its former life.

But there were many problems with this plan. The foremost among them was also the essence of the task: Although many lives had been lost in my river, I had never taken a life on purpose. I did not want to start while mortal, and with my own child besides. I had grown ever more protective over this life inside me without meaning to, humanity seeping into my bones in the brief moments when my shield against it slipped.

But I saw no other way forward. A melancholy stole over me as the conclusion sank in. My body ceased to obey me, limbs freezing and tears springing to my eyes no matter how I fought for control. Even the king

worried about me, I could tell, because he agreed to my request to leave for Yashoda's village with little complaint. He did not like the idea of sending me alone, but eventually he seemed to agree, just to be rid of my relentless despair. The court physician visited several times. With Padma sitting as chaperone, he would force me to pace my room, and cluck condescendingly at my food intake. I was treated like a pitiable child, not a queen—but then I was acting like one, and not the other. In this haze, alone save for Padma's silent judgment, I passed those final weeks until the day of the full moon when Kavita had agreed to do this deed at last arrived.

The midwife's abilities made her dangerous to my plan, for she would know the child was born alive if she witnessed it. And so I would have to give birth alone.

I took the herbs far earlier than I had been instructed to, just before I left the palace, trying to taste the bitter leaves as little as possible. Their flavor lingered in my throat like an admonishment. Shantanu had wanted a guard to accompany me on my journey, but I insisted that in my homeland, a woman had to make her own way for the birth. Thrice he tried to question me and stopped himself, unwilling to play with what he believed to be the fickle tempers of the gods. So instead I walked out alone with a well-stocked pack along the path to Gokul before veering away, into the forest and down a winding path to the clearing next to the River Ganga where the Vasus had once played. If I closed my eyes and tried to drift away from my body, I could almost see them at their happiest, their small bright presences flaring. I sat there, trying to hold on to that ephemeral contentment, until a low ripple of pain came through me.

That first cramp was not so bad; I had grown used to the aches of human existence, and this wasn't much different. But as the sun began to dip low, the pain became so sharp I could not think. Seconds-minutes-hours passed in a blur of waiting and agony followed by brief respites when I tried my best to breathe. It was all I could do to remember to bite down on a leather strip Kavita had advised me to bring before the suffering took me completely. And then, just when I was beginning to despair that this child would not pass without Kavita's help, something within me shifted. I felt the need to squat, to push, to heave and pant and heave again, until, with a final scream torn from my lips, my child made his way into the world and began to cry.

I had laid out the items other women had talked about needing during their birth, and now I cut the cord between me and my child with a clean knife and wrapped the godling in the soft fabric of an old sari. He looked small and wrinkled and unremarkable, and I never wanted to be parted from him as long as I lived.

A glance at the sky told me I had another hour or two before Kavita arrived. Even though I was spent, I could remember with clarity my plan. And yet I just sat there, settling the baby's belly against my skin to warm him, and rocking him back and forth. He was awake, blinking up at me with eyes darker than I had seen on any human, and they were perfect. I hoped he could see me, know his mother was staring down at him. Loving him. After some time he became restless, and I knew what I must do. I held him to my breast, and although I expected discomfort, it was a good kind of pain. I did not begrudge him this. At last his sucking grew slow and then stopped, his eyes blinking ever more slowly until they shut in peaceful sleep. I held him close to my face and inhaled. He smelled like joy.

Before me, the river swept by, its usual soothing murmur magnified to my desperate mind. For the first time, I felt a true separation between me and the current. I had to, to survive this. Even if I would one day become this river again, that day felt further than Surya in the sky, because the river was going to take my child.

I shuffled forward on my knees. The rocks scraped my shins, drawing blood. It felt good, a punishment I deserved. For even though I had not chosen this curse, I was choosing this path now. Too soon, I reached the shallows, the water lapping at my legs. I was naked, as I had been when the curse first took hold, but this felt far worse. The river was cold, so cold. My poor child would remember the cold.

I clutched the baby to me with one arm, and let the other drop into the water. The current beat against my fingers, frigid and unwelcoming. I shuddered. The river had never felt that way to me. It had always been warm, was meant to be a refuge, a place of life, because I had made it so without even trying. And yet, it would have to put on its worst, most inhospitable face to welcome this child to it. I remembered the Vasus calling me—the river—*Mother*, and I almost wept for it.

I stood there as time stretched before me. I tried to remind myself of what I had seen of Hastinapur. The callousness of the humans of the palace,

the senseless violence of their wars, the way they took and took from the land. It was a mercy to release this child, it was a mercy to remove him from a future he could not escape through reincarnation, it was a mercy to prevent him from living a life he would be condemned to remember for eternity. Instead this child would become an immortal godling once more, freed from this curse, if not now, then when I had borne all of them.

As I knelt there, my body adjusted to the waters until I could hardly feel the cold.

But… no, it wasn't just that I had adjusted. The waters were warmer. I could feel it. They were warm, as though the sun's rays shone on this patch around me. The river was the same temperature as my skin. The child who lay against me would not need to know the pain of cold.

It was a small mercy, but it was a mercy. I pressed a kiss to the child's brow. He did not stir. I lowered him gently to the water. The wave lapped over him, splashing his face, but he did not wake. I took a deep breath, and then pulled him down. He lay on my lap, submerged, as tears fell down my face, mingling with the river. My child did not struggle. I did not breathe. My lungs screamed for air, but I could not let myself breathe. Not when I was doing this monstrous thing. I thought about lowering my face to the water, of letting myself slip away with my child.

The air shimmered before me. I gasped in surprise, unable to control myself, and breath flooded my lungs, making me dizzy. The shape coalesced into a familiar form. It was the shape of one of my Vasus, his very limbs made of water. It was as though he had cloaked himself in the river that gave him life, gave him death.

I lifted the child from the water and cradled its lifeless form to me as the Vasu looked at me with somber eyes. "Hello, Mother."

I let out a choked sob.

"Do not cry," he said. "You have set me free."

I gasped for air, staggering back to the bank so I could dry off the body. My baby's skin was chilled, and I couldn't bear it. "You are not yourself," I whispered at last to the Vasu. He was almost translucent. He was not right. I had done something awful, done this all wrong, and now there was no going back.

He moved his limbs, as if testing them. "It will take some time for the curse to fall completely. But I am freed from the darkness now."

His human form looked wrinkled, blueish. I wondered with some despicable, self-preserving corner of my mind whether Kavita would be able to tell what I had done. “Is that all you remember? Darkness?”

“And warmth,” he said softly. “I was never afraid.”

I rocked my baby back and forth, back and forth, as if I could provide the mortal form some comfort. The godling stood over me all the while. My mind was a tangle. My skin felt so very *wrong*. My stomach turned, creeping up my throat with an unbearable burn. “Mother,” the godling begged. “Please do not despair this way.”

Before I could speak, a voice called out, “Rani Jahnavi!” From slightly down the riverbank, Kavita came running toward me. “What happened? Are you all right?” She dropped to her knees before me.

I could only blink at her. There were no words.

“I know I am late. Another woman was in labor, and she almost died. I tried to send word, but it was too late.” Kavita’s expression was pained. “How… how is the child?”

I shook my head, not trusting my tongue. Kavita made a small, sad sound and pried the bundle from me. I did not know what she saw as she looked him over. I rocked myself back and forth, missing the feel of my baby already. Eventually, she turned to me. “I am so sorry, my lady. Sometimes, the child is born having swallowed the water of the womb. There is nothing that can be done. Nothing you or I could have done.” Her voice was gentle with sorrow.

How easy the excuse, the lie. I did not deserve it. All I could do was shudder, as tears began running down my face again. “You have been so brave,” Kavita said, placing her hand gently on my arm. “No woman should go through this, and especially not alone.”

At this, I suddenly remembered the godling. Kavita had not mentioned him, and sure enough when I looked over my shoulder, he was gone. My absolution. I wondered for a moment if he had been a piece of my own imagination. Kavita laid me down, ran her brisk, efficient hands over me, pressing on my limbs this way and that. “Are you in pain, in your belly?” she asked. I shook my head. I was in some pain, but I knew I deserved it. “Fortunately, you are healthy. There is nothing I can say that will take away your anguish. But know that you will heal.”

Could an immortal being heal from such a mortal sin? I supposed time

would reveal its secrets to me.

“Where would you like to go?” Kavita asked. “I am sorry to make you move, but it is not safe to remain here.”

“I am to go to Gokul,” I said. I did not know how I managed to think clearly enough to express this, but the words bubbled out of me without effort.

“That is some distance from here,” she said. “Is there nowhere else—”

“No,” I said. Now that I had named Gokul, all I could think of was Krishna. He could fix this turmoil within me. I would walk there somehow, if I had to. “My cousin is meeting me here soon to take me.” The words rolled off my tongue and I hated myself even more.

“I will wait with you, then,” Kavita said, making to sit next to me.

“You will return home.” I tried to sound commanding, the way the nobility did, although I had never quite mastered the skill. “You will leave me.”

“Rani—”

“Please,” I said. The word came out twisted, desperate, but somehow with this plea she rose to her feet.

“There is something about you, Rani,” she said. “I know I must obey.” She stared at me, as if I might tell her why. But I did not know what she spoke of. Perhaps here, some old authority of my divinity crept in… but no, I was so clearly mortal. “If you feel any pain or bleeding that alarms you, you must see a healer or physician. And do not tax yourself.”

I nodded my assent, not trusting my traitorous voice.

She looked back twice before finally vanishing into the night. The moment she was gone, I attempted to rise to my feet. My arms shook as I pushed myself up, and I slumped back down. There was a rustle from my side, and the Vasu appeared. He already looked more solid—or perhaps my vision was blurring.

“I will take you,” he said. “Rest now, Mother. You have done enough.” He leaned down to touch me, and as his form brushed mine, my mind lapsed into blessed stillness.

I woke, unsurprisingly, in Gokul. I blinked sleep from my eyes to find Krishna observing me.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

The events at the river came rushing back to me. “Tired,” I whispered. He said nothing but got to his feet, taking a vessel of water and lifting it to my lips as his other hand cradled my neck. “How long did I sleep?”

“Only a day,” he said. “The Vasu told me what happened. What you did.”

I turned my face away from him, unable to meet his eyes. “I felt I had no choice,” I said. My face burned in shame.

“You had many choices, sister,” Krishna said, voice uncharacteristically solemn. I braced myself for his judgment. “But you should not regret yours.”

I trembled, and he lowered me down, brushing hair from my forehead. “You set him free,” Krishna said.

I had expected Krishna’s absolution to help me, but while I was glad he had not condemned me, it did not calm my soul. A tear slipped from my eye and across the bridge of my nose, leaving an itchy trail against my dry skin. I sniffled, trying to hold back the sobs that threatened to overtake me. I was a helpless, idiotic, weak mortal. I hated myself. I hated that I had drowned my child, hated that I was not being punished for it. Hated that I was so lacking in strength that all my rage and loathing could not stop my piteous body from dragging me back into sleep.

When next I awoke, I felt more like myself. My mouth was dry, my eyes ached. But I could think more clearly, hold a thought, although the deep well of sadness persisted. When I raised myself into a sitting position, my limbs held steady. I drank a cup of water greedily, liquid spilling over my lips, and then another more slowly, taking deep, deliberate breaths. My abdomen and birthing area felt surprisingly unhurt, and I found no evidence of the pain and blood of childbirth. Even I knew that was not typical, but I did not question it.

I emerged from the dwelling into blinding sunlight, a golden wash covering my vision. A cool hand touched my arm and I flinched back before the image cleared to reveal Yashoda’s round, pretty face peering intently at me.

“I’m sorry,” I managed.

Yashoda shook her head. “You do not need to apologize. Here, sit. You should eat.” She placed a bowl of rice and ghee in front of me, and although I was not hungry I ate a few mouthfuls under her watchful gaze. I thought of Krishna, eating ghee gleefully in the moonlight. How far away that seemed now.

“Has the king sent anyone to check on me?”

“Yes, one rider to make sure you had arrived, the day after you did. I told him you were well and resting and could not come to see him, and he left. I do not think the palace expects you back for another moon or so. But they expect you to return with a child.” She said this quietly, without judgment, but still I wilted at her words.

“I could not—I had to—It would not have been right,” I said. I did not want Yashoda to hate me, though I might deserve it.

Yashoda gave me a soft smile. “You will find no harsh words or criticism here. I merely mean to warn you that you must have a plan.”

I swallowed another mouthful of rice. “I do have a plan,” I said at last. “But I do not know whether it will work.”

“Krishna tells me you are cursed.” Yashoda took my cold palm in her warm, callused one. “That you must go through this with six more children.”

“Seven,” I corrected her.

“The raja will grow suspicious of you, with time,” Yashoda observed. “What will you do then?”

“I have told the king that where I am from, men are not permitted to ask women any questions. A condition of our marriage was that he do the same. So far, he has held to this.”

She clucked her tongue. “Even with this strange condition, you have a difficult few years ahead of you. I suppose when difficult years are all you know, one will get used to it. But you are not alone, Ganga.”

The sound of my true name on a mortal tongue set my heart pounding before I could reason that Krishna would have told his mother such a thing. To live as a powerless god in human form was to live afraid.

To disguise my brief fear, I set to eating. When I finished, Yashoda helped me clean myself for the first time since the birth. It was odd for another person to see me like that, to show such tenderness that Shantanu never did, but she was calm and kind and when we were done, my body felt

so comfortable I almost fell back asleep. She showed me how to take care of my maternal instincts with more care than I deserved, for my body's productions were simply a reminder of what I had done. She dressed me in fresh clothing and pointed me toward the path I had once taken with Krishna down to the Yamuna.

My body had changed drastically in the two days I slept without food, some of the weight of the pregnancy already shedding. But my breasts ached, and my stomach felt hollow without the life that had until recently grown inside it.

The sight of the Yamuna startled me out of my self-pity.

Instead of clear, dancing waters, it was *wrong*, murky and sluggish. But more than that, it was *tainted*, in a manner beyond description. It felt like the opposite of Krishna—something was rotten in the heart of the river.

He himself stood alone at the edge of the water.

"I hoped you would not have to see this," he said, without turning around.

I raced the last few steps to him, to those precious waters, uncaring of how it pained me. I wanted to cleanse the Yamuna with my bare hands. "What happened?"

"Do you know of Kaaliya?" Krishna asked. I shook my head. "He is the great ten-headed poisonous snake. I suppose he heard that these waters were no longer protected and decided to take up residence here. What you see is the effect of his presence."

"He is here, now?" I asked aghast, searching the cloudy waters for any sign. I was angry, so angry that I almost vibrated with the force of it. These waters were mine. Not just my possession, in the mortal sense, but an extension of me. Not only had I failed to protect my own river, and those rivers that depended on it, but I had likely hurt Krishna's people as a result, for they relied on this water.

Krishna looped an arm around my shoulders. "I took care of him, sister. I dove into the Yamuna—" I gasped at the idea of Krishna immersed in this poison and he gave a little laugh. "I am fine, see? Kaaliya's venom did not hurt me. I dove into the Yamuna and fought with him. Eventually I managed to subdue him."

"Tell me everything," I whispered, awestruck.

Krishna settled back, a satisfied look on his face. "Some moons ago, the

villagers began to notice that the waters of the Yamuna seemed foul. The children who played in it grew ill, the cows who drank from it died. The fishermen who went to investigate swore they saw in the depths a giant snake, large as ten men, its heads coming up from all sides. All of Gokul decided to avoid the Yamuna, and even my mother forbade me from entering. I knew I could defeat any evil lurking in the waters, but I had to wait until she stopped watching me so closely. I did not want her to jump in after me and perish.

"One day, I was playing with my friends near the riverbanks. We were bored, herding our cows in the afternoon heat, and so I decided we should have a contest to see who could kick the ball as far as possible. I have to confess, I was hoping that one of them would kick the ball wide, and sure enough, the ball ended up in the river. All my friends immediately gave up, but I declared that I would rescue our ball.

"Before any of them could protest, I entered the river. The waters were murky, stinging my skin, but I could hold my breath well enough. I did not fear for my life, only that my mother might be called. At last I came upon his great body, lying coiled in the depths—asleep. With every breath, he released a plume of green poison from each of his ten mouths. I grasped his tail to pull him out, but he sprang awake."

Even though Krishna was sitting right in front of me, hale and whole, my heart was hammering in my throat.

"He did not even give me a warning, simply struck as though I was his prey. But he was not as fast as he thought, and I evaded him. 'Foolish boy!' he hissed, but I already had his tail and so he could not catch me. I swam up to his middle head and started dancing—in truth, I was enjoying myself immensely! I jumped from one head to the other as though I was playing a game with my friends, using the rhythm of the river and its currents. He tried to spit poison on me, but he could not catch me. I danced and danced until he could not go on."

Of all things, I could not have anticipated this. "So he is dead?"

"No. He begged for mercy, told me that mortals had destroyed his home and driven him here. I felt sorry for him. I let him go to the ocean, where his presence will not hurt anybody. Varuna will ensure it."

Before, if Kaaliya had come to the River Ganga asking for sanctuary, I might have cut him down just for approaching my rivers with his pollution.

Now I wondered if I might show some clemency too. But regardless, the destruction left in his wake was another weight on me. “Why is the river like this, then?”

“Kaaliya’s poison was strong, and the river was very sick. It becomes clearer every day, and I hope that the next rain will cleanse it fully. I am sorry you had to see this.” He shifted, as if to block the Yamuna from my view.

“You wished to hide it from me?”

“I did not wish to pain you. You have enough sorrows. It is not your fault, and you would do well to remember that.” As he spoke, I could almost see a faint aura of power around him. How I longed to sense it, to feel the crackle of ozone tingling across the river’s waters. To be free from this mortal form.

“You parted the river for my birth father many years ago, do you remember?” Krishna asked. I nodded, mute. The hope I had felt then was that of a different being entirely. “My birth mother was imprisoned by a cruel man, Kamsa, king of Mathura. Kamsa is my uncle, but we cannot choose our family, can we? He unjustly seized control of the kingdom, but when he did he was told that my birth mother’s eighth child would one day be his downfall. So he killed every one of my birth mother’s children, seven in a row.

“Sometimes, though, family can also be a blessing. My birth father and my foster father were cousins, close as brothers. When my birth mother fell pregnant with me, the two of them made a terrible, necessary choice, to free the kingdom from tyranny. You parted the river, and allowed their plan to come to fruition. That dark night, my foster father allowed his own daughter to be taken to her death, so that I might be saved.”

I had not known this part of Krishna’s story. I had never met his foster father, but I wondered if I would see my pain reflected back at me in his face. I wished now that I could meet him, so I could know if this terrible feeling would ever end.

“His daughter’s soul was liberated from the endless cycle of rebirth, and she attained true heaven because she gave her life for me. And I am here, and soon I will liberate this land from the grip of my tyrant uncle. Do you think my father did the wrong thing?”

I hung my head. “His circumstances were not the same. He was saving

you.”

“No,” Krishna said firmly. “You are too harsh on yourself. You set a godling free from a curse, at great pain to yourself. It is the choice of a god, one with the purest heart.”

I did not feel like one with a pure heart. But at least I could cling to this. *It is the choice of a god.* The conflict I felt was mortal, the pain I would have to live with was mortal, but my actions had still been those of my true self. I stared out at the Yamuna. Did I even know my true self, purposeless as I had been?

It was as though Krishna had heard my thought. “You need rest. Let us go back to our house. I will teach you a game.” His voice brooked no further argument and so I let myself be led away.

Krishna stayed close to me for the next week as I healed, diverting my attention with small tricks and games and jokes. He played his flute for me, coaxing from it melodies so lovely—the trills of birds, the hush of the wind, the rush of reeds—that I smiled despite myself. I let myself be comforted and led like a child, for it was easier than allowing myself to think and grieve.

At last, though, I knew it was time to return home and face my husband. And then… another pregnancy. Another separation.

How many would it take before my soul looked like the poisoned Yamuna, the waters and the woman an inseparable and twisted reflection?

CHAPTER 9

JAHNAVI, MANY DECADES BEFORE THE WAR

SHANTANU, TO MY SURPRISE, took the news well. I almost wished he hadn't, that he had raged at me, so I might have felt punished. But instead he asked, in his roundabout way, what had happened, and I choked out that the child had been born dead. He could sense my guilt, I was sure, but women were meant to feel guilt for such things and so it only made me more believable. A girl, I told him, to ease the pain, for losing a son would have been much worse to bear. Born early, I told him, to ease the lie, for such things happened quite regularly. The curse, I told him, to ease the future, for I needed him to accept this lie many more times.

I was allowed one moon of rest before I was obligated to begin trying for the next child. I did little with the time, lying in my chamber and staring at the ceiling, imagining green ivy growing through the stonework, crumbling it to dust. Becoming a place the Vasus could safely live once more. Taking walks in the garden, I envisioned the world this had once been, not so long ago, with tall grasses and animals of all shapes and sizes, perhaps even more powerful creatures with their own consciousnesses and lives. I did not begrudge humanity their shelter or their food. How could I

now, seeing what it took for them to live? But their limitless greed for control, their affinity for destruction, galled me. These small things steeled me, allowing me to separate myself from those around me once again and fortify my resolve.

I thought of the Vasu often, living alone in that great forest without his brothers and sisters by his side. My strength was the only thing that would save them. And so I pulled even further from human life, hoping that would be enough to insulate me.

The sage had given me the worst burden of all, for no other crime than defending those I loved. The Vasus had stolen the cow, and their punishment had been to live a single mortal life. But mine was to make seven new lives, and thus to never truly live myself as my body became inhabited time and again. It was a cruel twist indeed.

My body, my life, was not my own, and I hated it.

There was not much worth saying about the next five years, which continued in an endless cycle. In the winter, the king would lie with me, each time convincing himself that this time I would bear him a healthy child. In the spring, as I waxed, his interest waned. During the summer heat I would keep myself in seclusion, too tired and heartsick and wary to do more than pace my room. When the fall came, I would trudge my way to the river and birth a mortal godling. I had hoped the pain would diminish, the memories fade, but I recalled everything with perfect clarity.

I would feed the godling until they slept and the river warmed, and when their comfort was assured I would hold them in the waters until the life left their body. When they appeared to me, whole and well in their true form, I would clean the child and release myself to the mercy of the freed Vasus. If anything, the monotony of the curse made each death worse, for I knew exactly what was to come and could anticipate every little detail with horrifying accuracy each night in my dreams. I would see the babies as I held them under the water, looking at me with accusing eyes. I would dream that the Vasu did not appear, and that I had killed a mortal child for nothing.

The Vasu who loved green things, growing things, always trailing life in

their wake, came after a hard and arduous birth. I labored for hours to bring the child forth, despairing that it might never come, and in the end even hoping Kavita might miraculously appear and help me. After the first time, I had assured her I would give birth in Gokul, with my aunt, and did not need her assistance. But this second Vasu took a payment from me for its life, and I bled so much I barely had the strength to bring the child to the water. It was only when I woke in Gokul that I thought to fear what might have happened had the Vasu not healed me in return. But the memory haunted each birth like a specter.

The Vasu who was like a forest fire, scorching and healing the earth in turn, came third, so quickly that I hardly had time to fall to my knees. The scrapes on my skin burned, refusing to heal quickly like the rest of my childbirth pains, and so I carried the birth with me on my body, in the small scars only I knew.

The Vasus who shone like sunlight and moonlight came, as they had in all things, together. I clutched one, warm as the sun-dappled earth, as I labored to bring forth the other, pale as the moon itself. I sent them from the mortal world together, as they wanted to be.

The Vasu whose affinity was for the air and the wind was born in a storm passing so suddenly overhead I could not take shelter. His cries were drowned out by the thunder, by the pelting rain lashing against us, but the currents of the river calmed when I dipped him in their embrace.

The Vasu who was happiest in open spaces, in the stillness and silences that nurtured life, came into the world without a cry, barely breathing, and slipped away almost before her body was submerged in the water. When the Vasu appeared in immortal form, she said nothing, but passed a hand over my head. For one blessed moment, all the mortal thoughts and pain clamoring in my head became quiet.

Each year, it got harder. In the midst of these years, Krishna departed Gokul, and so I did not even have his kindness, his presence to look forward to. Without him to soothe my soul, I felt the weight of the years like shackles, dragging me down. My guilt was always with me. Worse, it appeared I had to share him with everyone; for in the sixth year of my exile, his new legend began to be born.

That year, for the first time, I did not linger in Gokul with Yashoda, and instead returned to Hastinapur in time for Deepawali, a celebration of the

great king Rama, who had lived long ago. It would be my first time celebrating in the city.

“Did you celebrate the Lord Rama’s victory in… wherever you came from?” a noblewoman asked me after the palace’s great puja had been completed. Privately, I had scoffed at the display—wealth and ability to waste did not make the palace any more deserving of our blessings than the poorest of humans, who often were made to labor on these days. I had not bothered to learn her name, just as the nobility had never bothered to learn anything about me. The disdain was mutual. If even Padma, who was paid to attend to me, hardly hid her dislike, why would they?

“Yes,” I said, hoping to end the conversation quickly. At the very least, I had celebrated Vishnu’s return to the heavens, and his return was only possible because he had defeated the asura king Ravana. I was sure his cause had been righteous.

“It is a beautiful story,” the noblewoman continued as she filled a clay lamp with oil and handed it to me as though she was giving me something sacred. “Lord Rama had been away from his home for fourteen years, exiled by the wicked queen Kaikeyi, and his people longed for their rightful king’s return. They rejoiced to hear of his homecoming, until they realized it was a new moon. How could he find his way in the darkness? So each villager in the kingdom, and each dweller in the great city of Ayodhya, gathered all the lamps in their home and placed them outside their doors to light the Lord Rama’s path. They triumphed together over the darkness.”

I tried to think about her story the way Krishna might. Humans, uniting against evil, showing their faith. It did not harm anybody, but rather reminded them every year that goodness required action. Perhaps he had even intended for humanity to remember him this way. If it was something Vishnu had wanted, it would not make participating weak or human. So I followed the noblewoman into the chill of the evening and watched pinpricks of light travel along the line of people assembled outside. Soon the flames reached us, and the noblewoman passed the fire to me. “A fine story,” I said at last.

“They say Lord Vishnu has come again,” the noblewoman said. “That he has come in the shape of a young man who defeated three fully grown men, the best fighters for miles around. I hope we might meet him when he comes to Hastinapur.”

Krishna. “Why would he come to Hastinapur?” I asked eagerly.

The woman scoffed. “Why else would Lord Vishnu return to this world if not to aid Hastinapur? We are the greatest city Bharat has ever known. He will help unite all of humanity, and under what better banner than ours?”

I snorted, and the woman gave me a disapproving look. “You think Vishnu comes to help human kingdoms triumph over other humans? He comes to cleanse this world of evil, to defeat enemies too strong for… us.”

“If his purpose is to aid humanity, then he will come to Hastinapur,” the woman said firmly. “We serve the gods and they serve us. Surely you do not think otherwise?”

Were humans truly so small-minded as to think that gods existed *for* humans? Humanity did not exist when the gods first blossomed in the universe. And while I had come here at the behest of humans, it was not to *serve* them. Any actions I had taken as a river had been to ignore or push away humanity, not to encourage it.

Now that the ceremony of lights was over, I did not wish to converse any longer. I would not allow more of this human self-centeredness to infect me, not when I was so close to being myself again. When I became a river, I wanted to be pure and untouched by these years. I wanted my old existence back.

With each year, Shantanu grew more distant. I knew he took another woman—or several—for I had become to him a poor brood mare. He had married me in haste, and I had failed to give him that which he needed most. It was Padma who told me this, and after this cutting comment I began to watch Shantanu, wondering if I had outlived my usefulness. What then? Some nobles took second wives, although it had fallen out of favor in Hastinapur. But Shantanu was a powerful man. I did not care if he might try to burn me alive and claim it an accident or poison my food and punish the cook, but a small part of me wondered what might happen if he succeeded in killing my mortal form. Would I be released from my curse? Reincarnated to finish my duty? Or would I cease to exist?

As the last godling grew inside me, my spirits lifted. I had already

decided that before I freed my own soul I would have one more child, because Shantanu had been a decent husband for all his shallowness and desirousness. I knew now that even the worst humans could have good qualities, and the best had flaws—Shantanu, somewhere in between, at least deserved a child after all this. No human could be perfect; such was their nature. But there was joy in the mortal world—friendship, love, though I experienced neither—and as royalty my child would have more opportunities than most to achieve happiness. I felt lighter to know that I was nearing the end and that this would be the last child I would have to hold under the waters. Despite everything, my time as a mortal had softened me.

I thought eagerly of returning to my river, finally, submerging myself in the waters until my soul loosened itself from its mortal shape. I would find the Vasus first, I decided, and confirm for myself that they were untouched by their experience. That my actions had been worth it. Perhaps this was why, lost in my dreams, I failed to recognize my circumstances changing around me until it was too late.

When I told Shantanu I was with child, he smiled and took my hand. “This time, you will bear me a healthy son. I know it.”

“I feel that my time has almost come,” I answered. “Maybe this child, and certainly the next.” I had never promised Shantanu anything with confidence.

His grip on my hand tightened, not painfully so, but in a way that reminded me who was in control. “It will be this time.” He stroked a thumb along my neck where it met my shoulder, and when I looked into his eyes, his pupils had become large and dark. Strange. He usually hated coupling with me when I was pregnant. But I put this oddity from my mind.

As the eighth full moon of my pregnancy approached, I went to find the kitchen maid who always brought my herbs from Kavita. But the head cook, a surly man who only ever had a smile or kind word for his workers, told me that she had been dismissed, on orders from someone in the king’s council. He sounded none too happy about it.

With no other way to get the herbs, I had to meet Kavita in person, something I had not done in years. After much planning, I was able to leave by the garden door, and found my way to Kavita’s once more. I worried about the risk, but quickly relaxed as nobody seemed to notice or follow

me. I took the herbs from the midwife and paid her well for her services, not just in this moment, but over the years. She looked tired, and old—or perhaps she had been made more vital in my memory.

“It begins to beggar belief,” Kavita said, “that you would suffer so many odd and stillborn pregnancies. There is something strange about you, my queen.”

I smiled at her, hoping it would be reassuring. “This will be the last time I need your help,” I promised. “But if you are curious to know more, go to the River Ganga two years from now, at the spot where you have always met me.”

Kavita rubbed a hand across her eyes. “I grow tired of this place. Lately I have been harassed by claims I am performing witchcraft. I am thinking of leaving here.”

Now I understood why she looked so exhausted. But there was little I could do to help her beyond the money I had already offered, trapped as I was in this body, in this curse. I rose to leave, so as not to take up more of her precious time. “In that case, any place on the river will do,” I said instead. “After everything that has happened, I think you will find the river responds to you.”

Her mouth twitched in what I recognized after all these years as a slight smile, one that mortals gave when they were pleased but did not want to show it. “I will remember this, my queen.”

And so I went back to the palace to prepare for the final godling’s arrival. Unlike my prior departures, when I had left early without speaking to anyone, Shantanu came to see me off down the path to Gokul. Once Hastinapur was out of sight, I veered off course toward my alcove on the riverbank. With each heavy step I took, dread seeped into my bones. The light mood that had graced this pregnancy dissipated, and the inside of my mind matched the cloudy gloom above. Although this was the last piece of the curse, it was still another death.

I had learned by now what supplies I needed to make myself comfortable, and I set my bedroll next to the river so I could place my feet in its cool waters between bouts of contractions. I had taken the herbs, and the labor started in due time, everything proceeding as it always had. I bore the pain alone, shaking and panting, for by now I knew nobody seemed to venture near this clearing. And then, at last, the baby. He looked no

different from his siblings, and I held him close against my skin for a moment, as I had with all his siblings.

But my contentment was short-lived, broken by the snap of a twig behind me.

“What are you doing?” Shantanu’s voice rang in the open air.

My heart dropped. I turned around on my knees, still clutching the baby. “Shantanu,” I whispered. He stood alone, sword in one hand, reaching toward me with the other. I continued, before I could stop myself, “You asked me a question.”

“I have contained myself around you long enough,” he said, his eyes raking up and down my body in obvious disgust. “You tricked me into silencing myself in my own home. You as good as cuckolded me. So I ask again, what are you doing?”

“I’m going to feed the child,” I told him honestly. “I am waiting for a moment.”

“Waiting for the right moment to kill your own child?” he demanded.

“You don’t understand,” I said. My voice cracked, but I had no energy to be embarrassed. “This is why I did not allow you to question me. You cannot possibly understand me or what I have to do.”

“The damnable sage told me if I was to go to the riverbank, I would find a goddess to make my wife, and she would bear me the perfect son. I see now he was mistaken—a charlatan, or worse, in collusion with you. I was to find a demon. But I will have my son.” Shantanu looked angry, but as he thought about it, he looked confused too. I understood that his attraction to me had been real, and it was disturbing him now.

“Please,” I said. I began to cry, hot tears running down my face. I was naked, weak, and alone, and now I had angered the king. I was in a worse position than when I had first become mortal. “This is not the son you want. I will bear you another one.”

“I will not lie with a demon again!” He took a step toward me, and then another, his boots bearing him steadily down the sloping bank.

“I am not a demon,” I said, rising shakily to my feet. The baby was still secure in my arms, blinking up at me. It gave me the strength to continue. “You mistake me.”

“Who other than a demon would deceive their husband this way?” he demanded. “Who other than a demon would drown their own children?”

“You don’t understand,” I protested, even as the weight of his words hit me.

Shantanu snorted. “Ah, yes, you have your children alone in secrecy at the banks of a river and return home empty-handed, but *I* do not understand. Perhaps you eat them? That sounds like something a rakshasa would do.”

“I am sorry for deceiving you, Shantanu—”

“Don’t say my name!” he roared. “I lay with you! I made you my queen! And all along you were killing my children—”

“They are *my* children!” I shouted. The child began to cry, and I bounced him instinctively. For all the children I had borne, I had rarely had them for long enough to need to provide them such comfort. “I love them,” I continued, more softly. “I am doing what is best for them.”

“Then where are they? You cannot possibly expect me to believe they were all stillborn. I suppose you would have told me the babe in your arms was stillborn too. And the curse about your village, about the pregnancies, you made that up as well! How dare you?”

I took a deep breath. “You are right, they were not stillborn. But they would not have been safe in Hastinapur. I let them achieve their true forms instead. Let me take this child away, and you need never see either of us again. You can start over, say I drowned.”

“I will take my son. Now. The sage promised me you would bear me a worthy heir, and I intend to have one for all the pain you have brought me.”

“The sage with the magical cow? He promised you all this?” I asked.

Shantanu’s stormy expression did not clear, but he stopped his slow advance toward me. “He showed me great miracles and promised to find me a divine wife for the right price. I gave him honors and jewels, enough to keep a man comfortable his whole life. I followed his guidance to the bank of this river and I found you. I could tell right away you were a strange creature, not of this land—”

“I am more of this land than you will ever be,” I said, anger surging in my veins. Perhaps the sage had intended to come here to make me a mortal all along, as a gift to this mortal man, and the Vasus simply gave him a better excuse. The greed of men knew no boundaries. He had traded a boon from Shiva for power, and I had been the most convenient victim for his schemes. All this pain and suffering, and all the pain and suffering of the godlings, had been borne for this infernal mortal’s gain. The feeling swelled

in me, rising like a flooding river, and Shantanu retreated a step, eyes wide and fixed on something behind me.

And then I felt it.

The push-pull tug of water, of *power*. It was deep in my belly, but it was unmistakable.

For when I had birthed this child, I had fulfilled the terms of the curse. I did not need to destroy this body to free myself.

I took a step back, and my bare foot touched the river water. The cool, clean perfection of the river—*my* river—surged upward, into my spine, snapping my head back. It was in this moment, the split second of distraction, that Shantanu lunged two paces forward and grabbed my son out of my hands.

"Devavrata," he said as the child wailed in protest. "You're safe now."

Somehow, the fact that he had named the child, my child whom I had carried and labored for, pushed me over the edge. I spread my arms and the river surged up, catching Shantanu's ankles and dragging him back toward me. "Give. Me. My. Son," I spat.

"Devavrata is not yours," Shantanu shouted in panic, fighting my grip. "He is mine. He is a prince of Hastinapur and you are a water demon. Look at you, attacking me as I hold him, as though he does not matter to you at all."

I looked down at my son, sobbing in Shantanu's arms, and understood the horrible truth of his words. I had failed to protect this last godling. I could not kill him now without killing Shantanu—and I could not countenance such an act, even now.

I lowered my arms and Shantanu scrabbled backward. "I am not a water demon," I said with the full force of my authority ringing in my words. "I am the River Ganga. I am a god. The sage did not lie to you. I could kill you and the child both if I wished to right now. But I am not a monster, not a demon. I will show mercy and let you live, though you do not understand the consequences of what you have wrought. In return, you must do something for me."

I watched as a host of emotions crossed his face. Anger, fear, despair, resignation. At last, he seemed to understand his position. With clear reluctance, he nodded his head. "What must I do?" he asked.

"You will bring Devavrata to the river once every turn of the moon, so I

may see him and assure myself that he is safe and well." And because I would need to find some way to counteract the mortal in him. Some way to keep him from humanity's clutches.

"What do you care if he is safe? You intended to kill him."

"It is not for you, a mortal, to know my intentions," I said. My words reverberated as my power returned, and he cringed at the depths of my voice. "Content yourself with the fact you still have your life."

Shantanu surveyed the roiling waters behind me and then looked down at Devavrata, who was now lying calmly in his arms. "Agreed." He spat the word like it was poison on his lips.

"Be warned," I said, forcing the words out as my consciousness started to fragment. "If you do not fulfill your end of this bargain, I will flood Hastinapur. All your people will know you as a cursed king, the one who brought misfortune on their city, and once that is done, I will take your life too."

I did not know if I could truly reach as far as Hastinapur, for I was now to be tied once more to the river, unable to move under Shiva's harsh hand. I had traded a mortal cage for a divine one. But my time among mortals had taught me that truth mattered little compared to belief. It was not a lie, and that was enough to make it convincing, to put the fear of god in Shantanu. For in witnessing my power, Shantanu believed.

He gave a small nod before picking up his sword and backing away down the path, cradling my son all the while. I watched him go, standing ankle-deep in my river, holding up my mortal body until he disappeared from view.

It hurt, oh it hurt, to know that this godling was in Shantanu's hands. He would not know who he truly was, and Shantanu would shape him into an instrument of destructive force, for that was how fathers raised their noble sons. While losing my children had always been awful, this loss nearly rent me in two, for he was not free. He was a captive now, in the city of mortals, to live a mortal life.

But even as despair coursed through my soul, the river called. To me. *My* river once more. I took another step backward, and then another, and another, until I submerged myself in my waters. The mortal body I had inhabited for so many years dissipated, and I stretched into the fullness of my being once more.

CHAPTER 10

GANGA, MANY DECADES BEFORE THE WAR

IT WAS HARD TO tell, after immersing myself back in my river, how many sunrises passed before I managed to take possession of myself once more. I reached up to the mountains, thrilled that I was *me* once more, fed by those glaciers and snowmelts, and then I raced down to the ocean, to my wide delta, rejoicing in its salty spray.

It was a wondrous feeling, to be free from that mortal shape. Those confinements of body and mind and sense were gone, and I was myself.

Something pulled at me, at the core of my self, and when I stopped, the awareness came flooding back to me. My children. In the first swell of divinity, I had nearly forgotten, for gods did not love in the same way that humans did. They were free from those binding attachments, and yet now that I remembered, the ache of separation returned. I had brought it back with me, and at a later time I would seethe that my godhood had been

diminished by my experience as a human, and decry many times the transformation that brought me forever closer to men. But all those thoughts paled in comparison to this fact: I could find them now. Talk to them, understand what they had known. Receive absolution.

I sent a thrum of power along the length of me, calling out to the Vasus. For a long moment, I felt nothing in return. I began to panic, fearing the worst—that somehow, they had disappeared as a result of my actions, had been erased from the earth. The river bubbled and churned as though it was boiling. Downriver I felt the distress of a fisherman trapped on his boat, the fish flopping and beaching themselves in the violent current, and with effort I receded, pulling myself back to calm.

After another moment, my patience was rewarded. I felt something at my source, the great blue glacier and the quiet pool from which I raced. It was muted and unclear, but I knew that somehow, the Vasus were in the mountains, beyond the extent of my reach.

I needed to find my children. And for that I would finally have to face Shiva.

Once, long ago, I had fought and lost, and I had been too ashamed—truly, too prideful—to ever try again.

But now, at last, I would meet him and I would know him. I surfaced in the icy mountain pool that marked my entrance to the mortal world. Next to me rose a towering white-blue block of ice, the glacier from which I took my waters. I cloaked myself in my mortal shape, more detailed now than ever before, for I hoped dearly to meet my children as I had first seen them.

“Shiva!” I shouted. My cry echoed across the snowy mountain crags. “Shiva, I have come for what is mine!”

There was a moment of stillness and then the mountain began to vibrate. My water trembled as snow shook from the rocks around me, but I held firm. I sensed behind my shape a blinding hot power. And there was Shiva.

He did not feel how I had expected him to. A firm presence, grounding, steady without being staid. There was a feeling of brittle metal all around. “Ganga,” he said. His voice in my soul was warmer than I might have

thought, deep and powerful.

“Shiva.” I held steady, not pulling away my presence. I felt foolish for choosing this shape, but I would not undo it now.

“After all these years at last you grace me with your presence.”

“I have always been here if you wished to speak to me.”

“What need would I have for that?” he asked, and I could tell he was thinking of the ice that held me. “But I rather thought that now that some time has passed, you might wish to come and thank me.”

“Thank you?” I asked, bewildered.

“You were young and foolish and I saved the world entire from you,” he said, voice betraying no emotion. “Gratitude would not go amiss.”

“I would rather you had done no such thing.”

“Quite selfish of you.” His presence skimmed over my waters. “I saved many lives, and I gave you a home.”

“You gave me a cage,” I said. “Why will you not release me!”

“I see no reason to. I have watched you these years, thinking you might learn. But even as a human you held yourself apart, as though you were so superior to those around you.”

I am superior to them, part of me thought. But not all of me. “Where are my children?”

“They are beyond this place, but they live in this mountain, in the home of their mother.” Shiva did not seem to understand my distress, and I did not know how to make him understand what I needed.

“This is not my home,” I said instead, but it was an insulting statement. I knew already that I had lost. Once again, the human shard that remained in me welled up to the surface. “Please, where are they?”

“Ganga, this is beneath your concern.” His calm infuriated me and I longed to lash out at him, to do anything other than dwell in this impotent rage. “They are Vasus, coming and going as they please. I would not control them.” That he would control me went unsaid.

“Can you call them here?” I asked, plaintive. “I cannot reach them.”

“The Vasus have retreated into my peaks, into the most untouched areas of my lands. They are at peace there, and they told me they have spoken to you besides. You know they are alive, and returned to their true forms,” Shiva said. “What do you need from them? I can assist you.”

Shiva’s words made sense to me, as a god. The Vasus were afraid after

what had happened, and had found a new place to call home. We were immortal beings, and this temporary separation was nothing to them, for they had not lived as mortals. I had succeeded.

And yet, *I* had been touched by my time as a mortal, with impatience and this desire to hold my children, and it was Shiva's fault. He offered me help now, but he had not stepped in when I needed help the most. "You gave a human a gift of your power and he cursed me with it and cursed the godlings besides. I would see for myself that the curse did not harm them."

"You were a queen among the mortals," Shiva said, seemingly unconcerned with his part in all this. "Not some wandering, starving peasant. You were safe, with all the luxuries of human life. You were not harmed, so why would the godlings be?"

"Because the power of a god was wielded against them," I said, hoping he could sense my rage. "By a *human*."

Shiva's power shifted. "You can believe of me what you will, but I would never allow my power to harm you or any other divinity." I started to form the words to argue, but he cut me off. "I tire of this. I will not disrupt the Vasus' well-deserved sanctuary for you. I would think you could understand its importance."

"Shiva—" But his power spread back over the mountains, and I knew he would talk to me no longer.

The pool lay quiet, pristine. Before my jaunt with mortality, I would have loved it here, sinking myself into the cool crispness of this place untouched by humans. But before my transformation, I would never have come here at all, too proud to face Shiva. I sent my waters out as far as I could, hoping to find some trace of the Vasus. There was little hope of it, for Shiva's strength eclipsed my own as long as he held me captive.

I fled, too heartsick to linger in this place of my repeated humiliation, and released myself into the gentler work of a river flowing to the sea.

I had a new restlessness about me. Imperfections nagged at my awareness. When I was one with my river, I had been able to shunt the worst of human pollution out of my waters, wash it back to shore or purify it. Now I had my

work cut out for me, for their contaminations had been building for years into burning sores on my being. I flexed my power, sending tendrils out to cleanse the distant tributaries where I could not myself go, and I reveled in this feeling that I had long taken for granted. Where before I had contented myself simply with existing, using the true extent of my nature only as needed to protect the Vasus and yearning for liberation, now I was at least grateful for what I had.

As the full moon approached, I waited anxiously for Devavrata's arrival. It had been one moon since his birth, and Shantanu's frightened retreat had convinced me he would return with my son. I waited in the clearing, wearing my old mortal form, for now that I knew what it meant to inhabit such a body, I could create the illusion of one quite easily.

I clothed myself in a simple sari and sat on a perfectly shaped stone I had placed at the water's edge. My hope was that though I had failed to free this godling, perhaps I could still show him some other path, hold him and teach him so that he knew he was not alone in the world of humans. That he was special, and needed to protect himself. For he was special, even among the Vasus—their fearless leader, sharp as the distant stars.

I lurked in the clearing all morning and afternoon, although I did not expect Shantanu to come until night. What had he told the people of the city? That I had died in childbirth, I supposed.

Time passed. Chandra arced overhead, and as his light grew, my spirit dimmed. The king was not coming. And for all my dire threats to him, I could not actually touch Hastinapur, which sat a mile away from the nearest river bend. I could pressure him, make sure no woman could fill her pots at my banks and guarantee that every fisherman would return home empty-handed, but I had seen enough of the city to know that punishment would harm many others before it touched him. The raja would always starve last.

A woman's voice called out from the depths of the forest, familiar to my ears. A branch cracked and I heard the pit-pat of quick footsteps approaching. I stood, and a moment later she burst into the clearing, muttering to herself.

"Padma?" I had wanted to appear collected, regal, but the shock was clear in my voice.

She looked up at me, noticing my form for the first time, and gasped. "Rani Jahnavi! I—I don't understand." On her back, a bundle squirmed and

mewled.

“Is that—” I reached toward her, toward Devavrata, but she took a step back.

“Are you a ghost? Have you put some sort of spell on our king?”

“No, I—”

“The king said you died in childbirth,” she said slowly. I could see her old dislike of me warring with what her eyes were telling her: that I was something beyond her understanding.

I turned away from her, toward my river, and let it rise up, higher, higher, until it towered well over both of us. “The king found me at the river. He did not realize—I *am* the river.”

She gave a gasp. “This is you?” she asked. I nodded, opened my mouth to explain further, but she bent slowly downward until her knees made contact with the ground. “I do not understand,” she said again, yet this time it was with a tone of reverence. A change had come over her, the hard lines and judgment of her face softening.

I had not realized she was so devoted before, but I had tried to interact with her as little as possible. Still, it did not go unnoticed that when I had been a human, friendless and alone, she had shown me no kindness—those were her true colors, not the face she wore before power. If this did not describe humanity, living in its den of fear, I did not know what did.

“I was mortal when I encountered Shantanu, but that time was brief,” I said. “For longer than humankind has had the words to speak prayers, I have been a river. Now please. Give me my son.”

She twisted and unfastened Devavrata without any further questions, and handed the child to me. The world spun. I took a step back, and then another, and sat sharply down on the stone, rocking my son and examining his perfect little face. I reached the smallest tendril of power toward him, just to be sure, and recognized the soul of the last godling of Hastinapur. But now he was just a small mortal babe, blinking at me with his large liquid-brown eyes. A drop of water splashed onto his face. I startled, then realized it was my own tear, in a body that shouldn’t be able to cry. For him, though, I would become this little bit more mortal.

“Why would the king say you were dead?” Padma asked after several moments of silence. I had forgotten she was there.

Without lifting my eyes from Devavrata, I considered her question. I

could not tell her the truth, for she had to return to Shantanu and live in his world. And I wanted these visits to continue. “I had to become the river once more,” I said. “It was simpler to say that I was dead, but he agreed to bring me my son once every moon.”

“Why were you mortal at all?” she persisted.

I shook my head, trailing a finger along Devavrata’s impossibly soft cheek. “That is not for you to know.”

I sat there for several moments more, unbearably full of light and happiness, before a second voice I recognized carried through the forest. “Padma? Where are you? Should I come?”

“I am fine, Ishaan!” she shouted back. Devavrata’s face twisted at the harsh sound, and I bounced him in my arms. “I require a few more minutes.”

“Come back soon or I will come after you, the king’s orders be damned. He will have my head and yours if anything happens to the prince.”

Padma sighed and reached for the baby. I twisted away from her, shielding him with my body, Padma’s motion driving all sense from me. “You can’t have him,” I said. “He is my son.”

“He is the king’s son too,” she said softly. “I need to go, or Ishaan will come here. Please, Rani. Ganga. Devi. I will come back in one moon.”

To a river, a turn of the moon was nothing at all. To a mother separated from her child, it may well have been eternity. I could not bring myself to hand Devavrata over to her, but I let her pry him from my arms. As soon as he left my embrace, he began to weep, wriggling as Padma wrapped him back up. His plaintive cries cut into the heart of me, and I longed to reach out and pluck him up. But instead I let him go.

Padma started back into the forest without a backward glance, as I sat there, a broken shell of a goddess. The sun rose, and set, and rose again, clouds of mist hanging around me to hide me from any mortal eyes. The river lay unnaturally still, stuck with me in my misery, until at last a desperate prayer for a current broke my reverie.

With great difficulty, I forced myself to release the form of Jahnavi and disappear, and with greater effort I managed to find the will to move the river once more.

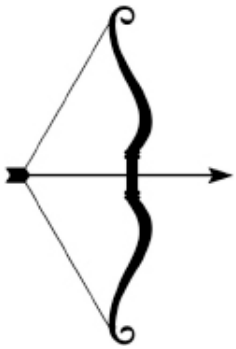
But my heart and soul remained in Hastinapur, with Devavrata.

PART TWO

Confluences

CHAPTER 11

BHISHMA, ABOUT FIFTEEN YEARS BEFORE THE WAR



BHISHMA OFTEN WONDERED WHAT the world might have looked like had his mother succeeded in killing him. It was not that he wished to be dead—or at least, he did not often wish that—but rather that when the burden of his many failures pressed down on his shoulders and made it difficult to breathe, he imagined a world without himself. His soul would have been happy and light. His father would have remarried without any obstacles, and perhaps his brothers and nephews would have been born healthy without the weight of his vow upon them. His middle brother would not have thrown himself into battle with such reckless adolescent abandon that he died without heirs, his youngest would not have had the consuming illness that left him an impotent king on the throne of Hastinapur.

In that world, he dreamed, his nephews would not have been born blind and anemic, respectively, and so would not have had any reason to resent the other's claim to the throne. And in that perfect world, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, his grandnephews who were more like grandsons, would not

be two rival factions to the throne of Hastinapur and to the Kuru line that had ended two generations ago. The Kuru line whose only surviving member was Bhishma. Instead, the brothers would have learned that they were alike, in their own ways, and become a loving family, united in bringing further greatness to the grandest empire the world had ever known. Those little boys who ran about the palace, whom he had pretended not to see sneaking into council meetings and had coached to greatness on the training fields and had advised in all matters of life—the boys whom he loved more than his own soul—would not be trying to murder one another.

Or perhaps, he thought as he stood in the ruins of a burned-down palace, this was inevitable. Perhaps Bhishma's path was meaningless in this grand scheme, in the heartbeat of war that drummed in every Kuru, blood or not, driving them to one single end.

The palace smelled so strongly of wax he almost wished to draw a cloth over his mouth like the rest of his men. But they were all looking at him for his reaction, and any hint of disgust would be seen as a sign of disfavor with the crown prince of Hastinapur.

"Tell me again," he said slowly, not sparing a glance at Shakuni. "Tell me exactly what happened."

He couldn't recall a time when he had ever liked Shakuni. Shakuni had always despised Bhishma because Shakuni's sister had married Bhishma's blind nephew, but Bhishma had tried not to respond in kind. Now, though, dislike was rapidly hardening into hatred. "The Pandava brothers were staying here, as honored guests," he said, his voice flat. "Some spark from a torch must have fallen, and by the time any rescuers arrived, the blaze had consumed the building. Nobody could have survived. This is a great tragedy." Bhishma slowly turned to look at him. Shakuni cleared his throat and wiped at his eye in a gesture so obviously false it was insulting. Even if he hated the Pandavas, burning to death was a horrifying way to go. Bhishma could imagine the way each of the brothers had faced their dire fate, and he turned away from Shakuni to hide his face. His sadness would be fodder for the other man.

Yudhishthira, that calm and serious boy who had always wished to know what the *right* thing to do was, who hardly stepped without ensuring it would not cause harm. He would have tried to calm his brothers as they stood trapped by a ring of fire, encouraging them to pray.

Bhima, always jumping headfirst into mischief, whether a mud puddle or battle. He would have raged at being trapped, tried to rush through the flames and find his brothers a path to safety.

Arjuna, who had even as a child possessed complete focus, no matter the task, impressing all with his commitment to constant practice and improvement. He would have reached for his bow, tried to find a way to shoot them out even as he understood there was no escape.

Nakula, always so quick to smile and find joy wherever he could, delighting as a child in the taste of sweet fruit or a beautiful bird. He would have accepted his fate and stood by Yudhishthira, trying to recount a happy memory for his brothers in their final moments.

Sahadeva, who had always loved a scroll more than battle, who could name all the constellations at only five years of age. He would have cursed himself for not knowing a way out, for his mass of knowledge coming to naught.

Bhishma swallowed past an aching lump in his throat. “A great tragedy indeed,” he said at last. “The rest of you may leave. I wish to mourn my grandnephews alone.” Shakuni could barely hide his smirk as he turned away. To one of his trusted soldiers, Bhishma murmured, “Bring me Vidura.”

And then he was alone in the tomb of his grandnephews. It had been built to be a tomb, he knew that now: a palace formed of bamboo and lacquered in wax. He recalled Shakuni’s expression, smug and biting. Was that how Shakuni had looked when he had conscripted Duryodhana into this plan? Duryodhana, the crown prince, eldest of the Kauravas, hated his cousins. He had been the one to encourage the Pandavas to stay at this palace. But Duryodhana would not have come up with a plot so devious. Not on his own.

Now the crown prince had the murder of his family on his hands, and a clear path to the throne of an empire he was obviously unfit to rule.

Had the Pandavas suffered much, Bhishma wondered? Death by fire was cruel, a painful end of burning and asphyxiation. The boys were young, so young. Too young to suffer for this foolishness of generations past. For his own mistakes.

He felt the prickle of tears, and without thinking about it, he walked deeper into the remains of the structure, his feet leading him to the area

where the brothers had likely slept. The flames would have burned hot and fast enough to destroy most of their bodies, but there would be something left of them, and he would bring that to be consecrated by his mother.

His footsteps dragged through the smoke-hazy halls. The wax and ash in combination stung his eyes until he could not clear the tears, which dripped down his cheeks. He brushed them away as his mind turned over the problem of what to do now, and again and again he struck that stone wall: He was bound by his word. Grief could not absolve him of the oaths that kept a kingdom together.

There was a rustling behind him, and he turned, dagger already in hand, ready to scare Shakuni out of his wits. Thankfully for Shakuni, it wasn't him. "You came fast."

"Your man found me as I was on my way," Vidura said. "I knew you would want to speak to me."

Vidura, one of the kingdom's best and most trustworthy advisors, had never spoken falsely or misled him before; indeed Bhishma was almost certain Vidura never would. He was righteous, and loyal only to righteousness, in a way that Bhishma envied in a piece of his soul he kept locked away. And the upright man standing before him did not look like a man mourning his beloved nephews. He looked like a man who knew more than everyone around him. Hope surged through Bhishma, hot and bright, but he kept himself still. He was a soldier first. "Do you have something to report?"

"If I do," Vidura said slowly, "will you immediately go and inform the king?"

"My first duty—"

"Is to Hastinapur," Vidura finished. If Vidura had not been such a dignified man, Bhishma thought he might have rolled his eyes. "Have you ever considered that Hastinapur is more than its king?"

Every day. "My first duty is to Hastinapur's king," Bhishma said instead. "But I have ever protected the young men under my care."

"Do you know who is responsible for this?" Vidura asked.

"Shakuni." The name fell from his lips like a curse. "This reeks of his foul schemes."

"The architect of this palace was employed by the crown prince. The invitation was engineered by the crown prince. Last I checked, Shakuni is

not the crown prince.” Vidura spoke calmly, but underneath his tone Bhishma sensed a tightly leashed anger.

“I intend to have a long conversation with Duryodhana when I return to Hastinapur,” Bhishma said. “But it is Shakuni who has planted hate within him, and Shakuni who came up with this plan, of that I am certain. Duryodhana is a good man, and he will make a good king, if this feud can be put to rest.”

Vidura studied his face for a long, uncomfortable moment. Bhishma felt his soul being weighed. Without speaking, Vidura strode past him, into the backmost room of the palace, where the walls were still mostly intact. He pushed aside a large, ornate stone chest with some difficulty to reveal the dark opening of a passageway underneath. “I knew what was planned for the Pandavas,” Vidura said. “Or I suspected it. I would not leave them defenseless.” *Like you* lingered loudly in the air.

“They escaped?” Bhishma hardly dared to voice the words aloud. Could not bear to imagine seeing the Pandavas alive if they had not truly survived.

“They should be at the other end of that passageway. But if you intend to find them, you must ask yourself why, for I know it is not because you believe, as I do, that Yudhishthira should be made king. What purpose will finding them achieve, other than setting the jackals at their back once more?” It was not treason for Vidura to speak such words, for who in the kingdom did not believe Yudhishthira would be a better king than his cousin? But Bhishma could not loosen his tongue to agree.

“Thank you,” he said instead. His gratitude was beyond what he could express to the man. Vidura had done what Bhishma could not, because Vidura had seen what Bhishma could not. If the man wanted to admonish him, that was his right. “Where will the passage lead me?”

Vidura shook his head. “You are one of the wisest men in the kingdom,” he said. “I believe you know where those who seek refuge go.”

Bhishma emerged at the banks of the River Ganga.

He had been thinking the whole time he walked about what he might say to his mother, with whom he had not spoken properly in years. But what

could he say to her? She would respond with that same cool disappointment that she had given him ever since—well, she was not wrong to be disappointed. After all, the rivalry that had nearly resulted in the deaths of the Pandavas could be traced directly back to what he had done. But he had not had a choice. The ruler of Hastinapur had asked something of him, and he was honor bound to obey. Besides, he was not a tongue-tied youth any longer. He was old—old enough that his grandnephews were feuding adults and all those he had known in his youth had long since passed.

And yet, as he stepped from the passage and heard the rushing waters, he remembered that where there was disappointment there was also love. Though he might be old, it was whatever gifts he had gotten from her that kept him vital and more powerful than any well-trained and youthful soldier. More capable than any ordinary human. His feet led him forward, eager, through the trees and onto the rocky soil that lined the riverbank. He knelt down and pressed his head against the ground in reverence, then cupped the river water in his hand and splashed it over his face.

“Bhishma,” came his mother’s melodious voice. “You are not here to see me.”

“I—”

“Do not trouble yourself,” she said. A wave lapped playfully at his knees, and he felt a rush of fondness toward her. “The children you seek have been through much. They will be glad to see you.” Only when she spoke the words did he allow himself to believe that they were really alive. His mother had seen them safe and whole. There was a stillness to the water now. “I am glad to see you.”

Despite everything, he felt a smile tug at his lips. “And I, you. It has been too long. I have been preoccupied.” He briefly considered explaining that the Pandavas were not children, that in fact they were capable of starting a war if he did not proceed carefully, but his mother was right in her own way. “Thank you,” he said. “Can you tell me where they are?”

“I can take you to them.” The words sparked a long-ago memory, and he rose to his feet and strode into the water. His mother welcomed him, the river a cool balm on his skin, erasing the still-present heat he carried from the palace of lac. He felt his mother’s power hold him so that he would not float away in the current, and the soft sediment gave way under his weight. Even though he knew he had no need for it, for his mother would provide,

he breathed deeply before ducking his head into the current. For a moment he felt as a child in the womb, safe and secure.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them it was to find himself floating in an unfamiliar patch of river, the sun warm on his face.

“They have gone inland, about a half mile,” his mother told him. “They are scattered and hunting.”

“I suppose there is no reason to go right away,” he said, and he could sense his mother’s pleasure. “I have your reassurance they are well, after all.”

“You should sleep,” his mother said. “You are tired. Sleep for a time, and I will watch over you.”

The Pandavas had made camp in a clearing just where his mother had shown him, and were gathered around a fire, speaking. He was about to make himself known when Arjuna looked up and called with joy, “Pitamaha!” It warmed his heart that they called him grandfather, reminded him why he was here. The other Pandavas turned and, as one, rose to touch his feet.

Bhishma blessed each of them in turn, then gestured for them to sit. “I am glad to see you alive, and looking no worse for the wear. I had feared the worst.”

“Uncle Vidura warned us that we should be cautious,” Yudhishthira said. There was a time, long ago, when Yudhishthira had come to him for everything. When Yudhishthira would sit on a stool as Bhishma reviewed papers and letters, and would ask questions. *Why is the raja of Gandhara angry with us?* Yudhishthira was never satisfied with the first answer, and he and Bhishma would talk for hours about the proper responses. How to honor friends and enemies alike, how to prevent war and collect tribute. Yudhishthira had learned this all from him—but now, he had not come to Bhishma with his worries. It was Vidura who had counseled Yudhishthira, Vidura who had saved their lives, and Bhishma had been ignorant. A fool.

“Duryodhana tried to have us killed!” Bhima exclaimed, and Yudhishthira shot him a warning look. “We all know it is true. Even

Pitamaha does not deny it."

"There are many forces at play here." Bhishma did not wish to lie to the Pandavas, but neither could he speak open treason. "To move rashly would be unwise."

"He thought I wanted the throne," Yudhishthira said softly. "I would have let him have it if he had only asked, though my claim is stronger. Now —"

"If a man would try to kill his own cousins in such a dishonorable way, he cannot have the superior claim." Arjuna spoke with a calm conviction, and Bhishma knew that Duryodhana had made a critical mistake. The Pandavas were not bloodthirsty, but once they had set their minds to a principle, they could not be swayed.

"Listen to my instruction," Bhishma said at last. "If you stay hidden, everyone will think you dead, and perhaps we may all judge what reaction that brings. I will return to the capital and see what might be done to bring this matter to a peaceful resolution, and when it is safe I will send for you to reveal yourselves."

Bhima and Arjuna looked mutinous, but Yudhishthira, Nakula, and Sahadeva all immediately nodded. Bhishma turned to the two. "You will obey me?"

They could not well say no to such a direct demand. "Yes, Pitamaha."

Bhishma rose to his feet, and for the first time in his life he felt his knees ache at the motion. "Stay safe," he said. "That is a command. I do not wish to hear of your untimely deaths again."

CHAPTER 12

GANGA, MANY DECADES BEFORE THE WAR

FOCUSED AS I WAS on Hastinapur, unable to release myself into the flow of water and time, I set myself to observation. I had thought I had no need to concern myself with the mortal world, that I could make my escape and forget their cities.

But now I had left a godling behind. My precious son. And despite living among them, I knew little of what faced a mortal prince. What I could discern was harrowing, for I watched princes of lesser kingdoms ride off to battle only to return borne across my river as ashes. Without even realizing it, my waters roiled and tossed the boats, such was my fear for Devavrata. I was ashamed to admit it, but I had become like them after all.

The curiosity ate at me, my fear of the unknown festering. Why did they continue to go to war when it hurt them so? How could I protect Devavrata from this fate? I let myself watch more and more closely, controlled by my morbid fascination until I got pulled in so deep, I was caught in the undertow of human memory.

I panicked, thinking I had somehow been dragged back into human consciousness. It took a moment to realize that the sensory assault—the

smell of blood and waste and rot, the runnels of red mixed with dirt, the screams and cries and pleas for help, the taste of vomit in my mouth, and a burning in my arm that consumed me, ate at me like a pit of darkness until I thought I would lose myself in it—was not happening to me. I had found myself in the memory of a soldier. With some effort, I managed to extricate myself from his pained mind, and realized I had tangled myself with an older man who was submerged waist-deep in my waters. His arm was gone below the elbow, and his skin was marred with scarring. His face looked peaceful enough, but I had sensed the turmoil beneath, the turmoil that had drawn him toward my waters like a moth to the moon. I found myself wanting to know more about his life. To learn how to prevent Devavrata from suffering this same pain.

Curiosity, that great human vice, had burrowed its roots in me. So I steeled myself and let him open up to me once more.

He stood at the bottom of a shallow hill, squinting up toward the top where the sun was just cresting. The men around him were murmuring, and he felt their disquiet. To charge up this hill would be suicide. The enemy would be hidden just over the crest, ready to flood their ranks with arrows and force them to retreat back down. Their side had greater numbers, it was true, but if his superiors won a victory it would be off these soldiers' deaths.

"We should encircle them instead!" someone called out. There was a tremble of fear in that soldier's voice. His hands shook as they gripped the hilt of his rusty sword.

Hoofbeats sounded and he turned to face his general. I recognized this man in a vague sense. I had seen him in court, conferring with Shantanu, seated at a place of honor. The general had seemed hard but kind then. Now, though, every soldier exuded fear at the sight of him. He scowled down at his soldiers, a curved blade in hand. "You know your orders!" he called. He nudged his horse forward toward the man who had spoken up. "Any man who fails to follow them will be executed."

The younger version of the man at my banks swallowed, then looked at the man standing to his right. *Brother.* "Stay behind me," his brother

whispered. “I will keep you safe.”

The man nodded, and then the soldiers were charging. I lost sight of him for a moment, in the frenzied chaos of the battlefield—or perhaps his memory itself blurred the time, because all of a sudden he was near the top of the hill, crouched behind a rock with his brother. Arrows rained down around them, and his comrades were screaming in pain, groaning in pain, or silenced forever. More of Shantanu’s soldiers kept coming, wave after wave pouring forward. “We must go,” the man whispered.

“It’s safe here,” his brother said. “We—”

“Move, men, move!” came a cry from behind us. The general was approaching on foot, behind two shieldmen, pressing forward to ensure the foot soldiers ran to their deaths. “Are you deaf? Move or you will be executed as the cowards you are!”

They threw themselves forward, away from the cover, and crested the hill to find a brutal melee. The villagers were fighting with everything they had—swords, axes, and clubs cutting through the exhausted ranks. I was afraid for this man, even though I knew he had survived. I could not understand how.

“Stay back,” the man’s brother said. “Stay alert.”

And then his brother was gone, throwing himself into the fray. But I felt the man’s determination not to let his brother fight alone. It was his elder brother, the one who always kept him safe, and he needed to repay the favor. And so he lurched forward, despite the abject fear making his limbs shake. He slashed indiscriminately around him, barely connecting with any others, but keeping himself safe until at last he spotted his brother, fighting a village guard. His brother could not see the other man sneaking behind him, sword raised. He flung himself forward, a battle cry tearing out of his throat as he raised his blade to meet his brother’s attacker. But at the last minute the man twisted and—

A scream ripped through the man as his arm was severed from his body. The pain shot through me too, until I wished I could scream just to release the cold agony. His brother turned, his last opponent falling to the ground, and the guard who had maimed this man ran his sword through his brother’s stomach just as his brother’s blade pierced the guard’s neck.

His brother fell to his knees beside him. Blood bubbled up from his mouth. The man reached for him with a phantom limb, his own pain

forgotten for a moment, but he could not touch his brother. He tried again, with monumental effort, his other hand's fingers brushing his brother's face as the light left his eyes.

It was his fault. He knew it in his soul. His brother had died because of him. If he had listened, if he had not been a distraction—it was his fault.

I was a river once more, churning around this broken man. I could see him, see the hole his brother had left. It was not his fault. He might have had any other fate, and anger rose in me. This was Shantanu's fault, and one day it would be Devavrata's role to send men to their deaths too. I did not know how to help him, for there was no freedom from these cycles that I could deliver.

It seemed, at least, that just by sharing with me this memory, the old soldier seemed less burdened. His shoulders were less stooped, his bearing a bit less sorrowful.

But I was filled with fear, now. Would Devavrata be that general, with no thought but victory, regardless of the price? Or would he be softer, nobler, sacrificing himself for another soldier?

I would have to be vigilant. I could not let Devavrata be tangled in humanity's worst vices, and his divine soul be forever scarred.

It was difficult to imagine Devavrata as a hardened warrior, when each visit Padma set in my arms a beautiful, perfect child. I could already tell he had kindness in his soul, in the way he seemed to brighten at the sight of the moon, or laugh at the sound of a bird's music. Devavrata always seemed to recognize me, relaxing in my arms and smiling at me, or excitedly babbling nonsense words to me. When he began to crawl, I created a mossy carpet for him, and later moss-covered stones for him to pull himself up onto. It brought me a boundless amount of joy to see him make his way toward me, enough that I would release him from my hold even though I had so little time with him to begin with.

About a year after his birth, the moment Padma placed him in my arms, he shouted, "Ma!"

I nearly dropped him in surprise, before turning with a fake ease toward

Padma. “Has he begun talking?” I asked.

She shook her head, looking at Devavrata with wide eyes. “No, devi. This is the first I’ve heard, and I take care of him for much of the day.”

I lifted and lowered Devavrata up and down, and he laughed. “Ma!”

“How do you know who I am?” I asked him in quiet wonderment.

Padma cleared her throat. “I talk to him about you, when nobody is around. I tell him about his ma, which might be how he learned the word. But how he recognized you…” She trailed off, shaking her head.

I hugged him close, reveling in the idea that this warm little body could recognize me as his mother, that we shared this inextricable bond.

I did not want to let him go. I reached out to my waters. I could take him now, pull him under with me, and nobody would be able to stop me. He could live with just me and we could be happy together.

Then Padma stepped forward to take him, and I realized if she went home empty-handed, she might be killed. In all honesty, I did not think this an entirely unacceptable consequence of getting to keep my child, but it reminded me there was a world outside of my own wants and desires. That Devavrata had a life outside me and might not like to be taken from a place of comfort and luxury to live alone in a river. And while I did not like Padma, I did not wish to be the cause of her death.

And so I let Padma take him out of my arms, my sweet, innocent child who reached for me. “I won’t tell anyone that he spoke,” she said as she situated Devavrata against her for her walk home. “The raja will not be best pleased.”

“Are you not worried that he might say ‘Ma’ in front of others?” I asked, nervous now. Shantanu might cut off these visits for any reason, and embarrassment at being snubbed for me by his infant son might just be one. I knew that the urgency of my long-ago threat would have faded in Shantanu’s mind.

“He has always shown good sense,” Padma said. “I cannot explain it. But he does not crawl into danger or touch dangerous objects or go toward any of the many troubles children might happen into. Have faith in your son.”

She turned to leave and I slipped back into the river, holding tight to the memory of my son and his first word like it was freedom itself.

As though that word had opened the floodgates, Devavrata began changing so rapidly that one cycle of the moon was an eternity. He could walk, then run, jabbering on about the palace and his days, although for some reason he never mentioned his father. I taught him how to swim, keeping the waters around him buoyant and gentle, until he dove and paddled like he had been living in the water his whole life.

He was a happy toddler, but grew more solemn when his lessons began at age five. He started to tell me about the history of the kingdom he would one day rule, about weapons and war tactics, and although he had smiles aplenty for me each time he visited, they became dimmer with time.

Once, when he was seven, he arrived with tears pouring down his cheeks, Padma stony-faced at his side. “He got into trouble just yesterday,” she explained. “He will not tell me why.”

“And I still won’t,” Devavrata snarled between sobs.

I put an arm around him.

“What is it?” I asked him softly. “You can tell me anything.”

“I asked my father why you do not live with us,” he said. “He said you were a bad woman and that you had no business living with us.”

I sank to my knees so that I was more level with him and wiped tears off his face with my hand. “Your father thinks I am bad, it is true. But I do not mind that.”

This did nothing to comfort him. “It’s not fair! All my friends live with their fathers and their mothers.”

I studied his red face and swollen eyes, my heart breaking. “I know it’s not fair. But at least we have this time together.”

“I want more,” Devavrata said, throwing his arms around my shoulders. “Ma, please come back with me.”

“I cannot,” I said. “I am so sorry.”

“Is it because everyone thinks you are dead?” he asked, sniffling. “My friends think I imagine seeing you, so I stopped telling them about our visits. But you are real, I know it.”

“I am real,” I assured him. “And I am always here for you. I am your

secret, though. Your friends wouldn't understand."

"Why do you live at the river?" he asked. "It is nicer at the palace. You wouldn't have to do any work."

I glanced at Padma, who stood several paces away, staring at a tree in a poor imitation of someone pretending not to eavesdrop. I wondered whether my words would make it back to the king, whether I would be accused of poisoning his mind and these visits forced to end. But perhaps her piety would help me now where it had not before. "Come closer to the river," I said, leading him to the edge. "I am going to show you something secret, that only you and I are to know. Can you promise me that you will keep it between us?"

Devavrata nodded, his tears stopping as he looked at me solemnly. I lifted a stream of silver water from the river into the air, rearranging it into the shape of a fish, then a bird.

He gasped, reaching instinctively for the bird. I floated it around his head, and in the light of the moon it shone with iridescent light. "How are you doing that?" he asked. He trailed a finger through the bird, which held its form, and he laughed in delight.

"This is my gift."

"Can you teach me?" he asked, eyes wide.

I shook my head. "It is not something that can be taught."

"Then how do you know it?" I could tell from the naked wonder in his tone that the sadness of earlier was gone from his mind, and I smiled.

I leaned in close to his ear. "Because I am the god of this river."

"But you are my ma!" He bounced up and down on his toes. "How did you become a god? Does this mean I'm a god too? Is that why you have to live here? To protect the river?"

I ignored his second question, not wanting to mislead Devavrata about his nature but not wanting to lie to him either. "Gods like me are not born," I said. "They exist when there is need of them. And yes, I live here because as a river god I am part of this river, and I need to keep it clean and safe. I would much rather live with you." I tapped his nose and he giggled, going a bit cross-eyed. "Except I cannot leave my river."

"It's your duty," he said sagely.

I shuddered to think why a seven-year-old might need to understand the sacrifices of duty. His tutors would make sure he understood dharma and

karma and all the rest of the teachings that had been explained to me during my human years, but what had he given up to be so grave? I wondered if he saw family besides me and Shantanu. I hoped his tutors would not try to instill in him that his duty was to lead wars he did not wish to wage, even though I knew they might. But perhaps, as a prince, he would be given a fuller picture of these forces than I had received as a simple peasant queen. I hoped he knew that his dharma, his duty, was achieving good and justice in the world, just as karma was more than just a measure of reincarnation, but the push-pull force of the universe, of action and consequence.

And still, I ached, for what child, innocent and sweet, should grapple with these concepts enough to accept that his mother could not be with him?

I thought of that soldier who had come to me, and his endless pain. He had been following the path prescribed to him, and likely been told it was the only path to salvation. The dangers of this teaching were beyond measure. I could not undo in a few hours what Devavrata learned every day, but I would at least present another way. “I do not do it as my duty,” I said. “I do it because I love being a river. I love you more, but I know you are happy and cared for in the palace. So I will wait here for you.”

“Do you mean I can come here whenever I want?” he asked.

I wished to say yes, oh how I wished, but if anything could break these fragile visits it was Shantanu believing I was taking any more than I deserved from our agreement. “The River Ganga will always accept you,” I said. “But you will worry your father if you go running off without permission.”

His shoulders slumped. “I miss you every time I leave.”

The words tore into me. I paused for a moment, trying to let it pass. Now was not the time to linger on pain, I decided. We had little time together. “Do you want to swim?” I asked instead. “I can make giant waves for you to ride.”

Devavrata grinned. “Yes! And can you make the fish swim next to me?”

I watched as he stripped and dove into the water. I warmed it around him and made the waves clear as glass so he could see the brightly colored fish circling around him. “For you, anything.”

We spent a few more happy years this way, meeting and playing twelve nights a year.

And then one evening, a little over ten years after his birth, Devavrata did not appear.

I had been feeling a foreboding for some time, a sense that time with my son was growing short, and the moment Surya's first rays appeared on the horizon, I knew. Sorrow threatened to overwhelm me, but inside that sadness a kernel of anger made its home. As the day went on, the anger grew, expanding and growing until that was all I could think of. Shantanu had broken his word. I would make him afraid.

I was no longer a callous god, and I would not kill his subjects or starve them unless I absolutely had to. Still, the women who came to my banks each day for water and the men who came to fish in my depths were my best chance for reaching Shantanu.

I did not enjoy preying on the weak, but I had no choice. And so any passersby were greeted with great mists, in which they saw spectral shapes and menacing portents. The women were unable to fill their pots without wading deep into my rocky shoals, the water surging away from them so that they had to leap into my depths merely for a pot of water. The fishing boats encountered dizzying whirlpools and fierce waves; the men kissed the dirt when they reached solid ground.

All who came knew, the message rippling throughout the city: "The river is angry."

"What have we done to offend her?"

"We must tell the king what we have seen. He will know how to fix this."

They returned home, and I waited. But under the light of the waning moon, the forests lay still and silent.

I became more ferocious, spinning the boats of the men until they were ill, and nearly drowning the women who washed their clothes in my water. In time, a member of Shantanu's court came to my banks. He looked afraid as he emerged on horseback from the forest.

“River Ganga, have mercy on me,” he cried, his voice tremulous. My waves crashed against the riverbank and he flinched, his horse shying back but unable to flee. “What do you want?”

In response, I let myself grow in every way, my banks flooding toward him, the force of the wind pulling him from the horse, which went running back into the forest. He fell to his hands and knees, fear radiating from him. “Please, whatever is in my power to give you, I will. Just spare me!”

There were tears running down his face. I could see the whites of his wide, wide eyes, bloodshot and scared, and I knew he was afraid to his very core. The wind softened, but he was in my grasp now in the water. I would not release him. There was no escape.

“I do not know what you want,” he said, voice shaking. His fear was what I needed, for when he went to Shantanu, the king would know just what I threatened. Water rose around him, to his shoulders, to his chin. Let him fear my power. Let him fear my destruction. To them, this was life and death, and their king was meant to protect them. When I let him go, I felt sure the king would send Devavrata, out of fear I might expose him.

I settled in to wait as night fell. The sky was black, ominous. The mortals feared the new moon’s darkness and looked to it as a symbol of rebirth in equal parts. I worried now that Shantanu might not send Devavrata into such an inauspicious night. But I did not have long to sit with my own thoughts, as a flock of crows rose from their sleep into the sky, and I knew people approached my banks.

I arranged myself on a mossy stone, feigning a relaxed posture against it as I waited for the soft footsteps to grow louder. I heard someone step on a twig and curse in a familiar, unwelcome voice. So the king was accompanying Devavrata. I could imagine all sorts of unpleasant reasons he might come, but near the river he was in my territory. When last we spoke, at the moment of my transformation, I was surprised, exhausted, could barely remember the feel of my own power thrumming within my being. This time, I would have complete mastery of myself—and of him.

It seemed as though an eternity passed before Devavrata emerged from the dark trees, Shantanu behind him. “Ma!” Devavrata cried, running toward me. Shantanu caught him by the collar and pulled him back, depositing Devavrata behind him.

“Jahnavi.” He said my old name as though it was bitter on his tongue.

“Shantanu,” I responded coolly. “I suppose you are here to apologize for Devavrata’s absence?”

“Apologize? To you?” Shantanu laughed, but it sounded more like a weak bark. “I have come to tell you that you will no longer be seeing my son. You have no claim to him. I told him of your wicked ways, of what you did to his brothers and sisters, and he does not want to see you any longer.”

My spirits sank. I remembered holding their little forms under the water—my son would hate me now that he knew. He should hate me. To a mortal, what I had done was unforgivable. Even knowing they were safe, I could hardly stand to remember it. But behind his father Devavrata mouthed “Ma” and shook his head. He had tried to run to me. He still loved me. Even though I did not deserve it, my child loved me. I repeated this mantra to myself as I rose to my feet. “You are the liar, Shantanu. And you cannot keep my son from me.”

“Or what?” he demanded. “I kept your son from you, and you conjured a few paltry tricks in response. You may have frightened the commoners, but I know you. I have bested you. I am not afraid of you.”

“You should be.” The river was surging, spear-like, at my fingertips. “You will honor our agreement, or else—”

“You would not murder me in front of my son,” Shantanu said. “So we will take our leave from you. I’ll grant you this much. You may say goodbye to Devavrata.”

He stepped aside, and Devavrata came to me, throwing his arms around my waist. “I’m so sorry, Ma,” he whispered.

“Do you wish to never see me again?” I asked him, holding him tight, smelling his hair.

“No, please,” he cried, twisting to look at Shantanu. “Please let me see Ma again.”

Shantanu stood there stiff as deadwood, unmoving in the face of his son’s tears. Watching him regard Devavrata with such detached displeasure, as though this child was just a means to an end, snapped something inside me. How dare he take my son from me, and be such a heartless father besides?

“You don’t have to go back,” I said to Devavrata. “You can come with me instead.”

“What do you mean?” Devavrata asked, looking up at me with wide,

watery eyes. “I can stay with you?”

“Would you like that?” I asked.

“He is not going anywhere with you,” Shantanu proclaimed, stepping toward us. “Release him.”

“You cannot keep Devavrata locked in the palace against his will,” I said.

“Watch me,” he growled. He lunged forward toward Devavrata, just as he had many years ago. But I was myself now, far faster than him. I stepped back, pulling Devavrata back with me into the shallows. Shantanu looked down at the water, eyes narrowing in fear, and I took Devavrata back a few more paces.

“Should I swim away, Ma?” he asked as the water reached his chest.

“Just wait here,” I said as Shantanu waded into the water. “I must take care of your father first.”

“No!” Devavrata cried out, grabbing my arm as though I needed this mortal-shaped body to wield my power. “Don’t hurt him!”

I had already summoned the water to overwhelm Shantanu, ready to drown him and free my son and myself to a new life. But I would not go against Devavrata’s wishes, would not hurt him more than he had already been hurt in this conflict between his parents. Shantanu splashed toward us, cursing the darkness for slowing him, and I sent a silent thanks up toward Chandra for turning his face away.

“Leave, Shantanu,” I called out. “Before you truly feel my wrath.”

“You cannot—”

I took the swell of water and lifted him up with it, catapulting him back onto the banks. I heard him crash to the ground and groan in pain, and hoped Devavrata would not be too angry at me for it.

“Go now,” I said, voice ringing across the water.

He got to his feet, shaking with fury, with fear. “I will be back, Jahnavi. I will not forget this. You cannot keep my son from me forever!”

I turned to Devavrata, ignoring the man raging impotently on my banks. I wanted to take him far from here, from his father and his palace, into my world. His world, his birthright. “Close your eyes,” I said.

“Why?” he asked.

“I have a surprise for you.” He gave me a small, tremulous smile, and his eyes fluttered shut. I leaned forward, pressed a kiss to his brow, and

sank him into the water with me. We emerged thousands of miles away in the span of a blink, and I led him to dry land.

“Open your eyes,” I told him, and basked in the light of his wondrous expression as he beheld the ocean.

CHAPTER 13

BHISHMA, ABOUT FIFTEEN YEARS BEFORE THE WAR

BHISHMA'S HAPPIEST MEMORY WAS at the ocean. He remembered still how it felt the moment he first saw it, the absolute wonder, as though he was in a waking dream. Endless expanse of blue, the smell of salt and seaweed, clean and perfect. He remembered those flashes of the inhuman nature of his childhood with a deep and abiding nostalgia. How desperately he sometimes wished to return. Things were clear then. Not simple, not straightforward, but righteousness and unrighteousness were easy to discern. He sometimes wondered if that was why he had bound himself to his vows with such fervor. They were a compass by which he could guide himself when the stars were hidden by the inventions of mankind.

He wondered, sometimes, what his grandchildren's happiest memories were. If they had any. He wanted to believe they had their moments, before the fighting began, when they could not understand that they were not all brothers.

Yudhishthira and Duryodhana had once, as very young children, found an old survey map of the landscape around Hastinapur and plotted an empire upon it. They had drawn in where they would build palaces and

cities and had proudly approached him, asking if he would be the general of their armies. Bhishma had not been much for playing, too old and busy, but on this day he playacted as a general, giving them orders and praising them as they fought imaginary enemies. He had pretended to be an enemy soldier too, and both had attacked him with ferocity until he lay on the ground in defeat. Yudhishthira had fallen, skinned his knee, and Duryodhana had helped him up, offered Yudhishthira his favorite play sword to cheer him. Yudhishthira had pretended he was not hurt, refused the sword, and they had happily eaten a snack of mithai instead.

It was not long after that an invisible barrier had begun ascending between them. Bhishma never had learned why, but he imagined that Duryodhana's father, Dhritarashtra, had said something to the boy, taught him that, because of Yudhishthira, he would never be a king with a palace. That being a raja was not a role shared with one's cousin. Somewhere along the way, Duryodhana began to look at Yudhishthira differently. Yudhishthira came to Bhishma, tears in his eyes, asking why his cousin did not want to play. Bhishma had put his arms around Yudhishthira's small, skinny shoulders and reassured him that not everyone could be the best of friends, but he was sure Bhima or Arjuna would play instead. And the next time Yudhishthira fell, it was because Duryodhana was there to trip him.

When Bhishma watched the chaos around him, he was grateful to have his own Dhruva Nakshatra, his North Star he had made for himself. He had watched the spoils of choice wreak their havoc on his family for generations, wreak havoc on their land for generations. It weighed heavy on his mind now as he rode back to Hastinapur holding the secret of the Pandavas' survival in his heart. He had traveled quite far downriver from where that cursed palace had been built, in an unimportant town for an unimportant festival, just to lure the Pandavas to their deaths. Even with his travel, he still had a day's ride ahead of him—it would have been longer, for a normal man, but he was not normal.

He could have, of course, asked his mother for aid. But he could not bear to face his mother again and explain to her his intentions. *You are tangled,* she would say. So he rode instead, pushing his mount through the darkest part of the night so that he crested a high hill as the sun rose behind him, and beheld the great city of Hastinapur.

Bhishma had known this city all his life, had been born at the banks of

the river that bounded it to the west, had traveled north for training, had left from the south with an army and returned from the east triumphant. But still the sight of its grandeur made him pause and survey what lay before him. Not every bit of it was grand, it was true; the wealthiest clustered around the towering palace of pink marble while the poorest spread out in rings around that brilliant center. The city sprawled for miles, running parallel to the River Ganga, unable to penetrate a thin strip of indomitable forest his mother always maintained. Even those who were deemed impure and pushed away from the city still lived with roads, still had drains and access to water. What other dynasty had managed such success, such safety and prosperity that people could build their homes outside the city walls? What other kingdom had such a forceful pull that it drew in and accepted every comer to its bounds?

The sight of Hastinapur settled his heart. This was what his mother could not understand, what Duryodhana did not yet fathom. This was why he had bound himself to the kingdom. His life's work, the security of his people, had already come to pass. Now all he had to do was preserve it.

He drove his horse forward, toward the outer edge of the city, which was already buzzing with activity. The latrine diggers, animal slaughterers, and the like, who kept the city running with their work, had little luxury of rest. Ordinarily, he might have dismounted and lingered—unlike the other members of nobility, he had no fear of these people—but today he needed to press on. On through the homes of the laborers and farmers, and the small merchants who could not afford to live within the walls, and through the gate of the city proper. From there, the main thoroughfare carried him rapidly to the palace, where he took the steps two at a time in his haste. Doors opened before him, as though by magic, until his strides brought him into the great throne room of Hastinapur.

Dhritarashtra already sat on the throne. His face was lined with stress, but he did not look sorrowful. "Uncle," he said, inclining his head toward Bhishma. His white eyes were unseeing.

"Raja," Bhishma said, and waited. He had long since learned the value of holding his tongue.

"My son informed me of the great tragedy. I hear in your voice that it is true."

"The palace where the Pandavas resided did indeed burn." Bhishma

watched the king's face closely. The man did not rejoice in the news of his nephews' deaths, but the relief in his shoulders was evident. Dhritarashtra wanted his son to have the throne he had once been robbed of. The elder son, deemed unfit by all the councillors of Hastinapur to rule because he had been born blind. That Dhritarashtra had all the senses he needed to govern was not in dispute, but there had been doubt at the time of ascension and he had been made to step aside. Perhaps it was Bhishma's inability to look past the mortal flesh that was his true sin—another mistake to add to Bhishma's lengthy tally, even if it had not been his actions alone that had put the king's younger brother on the throne first. That Dhritarashtra had gotten the throne in the end was no comfort to the king, because he would always know it was a prize by default obtained only out of the kingdom's desperation when his younger brother abdicated. But what was done was done, and now his greatest dream was for his eldest son, Duryodhana, to inherit the throne free and clear.

"The kingdom will mourn," Dhritarashtra said. "It is a great loss. My brother's line… gone." For all Dhritarashtra's faults and his desire for the throne, he had truly loved his brother. Although he had wished for his birthright, he had given up his claim to the throne to Pandu without complaint. But Pandu had renounced the throne for the life of an ascetic, to repent for sins he refused to detail. Bhishma remembered that moment vividly, for it was then that he realized how hopelessly confused his family's lineage had become. His father's ancestry, the Kuru line, had been his pride and joy. Bhishma had taken his oath to preserve that line, to ensure one undivided claim to the throne. It had become muddled because his half brothers had not produced heirs, so Dhritarashtra and Pandu were not even Kuru by blood, and further scrambled because the kingdom had been too prejudiced against Dhritarashtra's blindness to give him his due. There was no clear bloodline, and no clear ageline, and while the absence of one may have been difficult, the absence of both… They were paying for it now.

Bhishma swallowed. "Vidura is making a full investigation. We would not want to assume anything prematurely."

Dhritarashtra's grim expression softened slightly. "If anyone can discover the truth, it will be him. In the meantime, now that this tragedy has come to pass, I wish to discuss with you my plans. I think it is time to secure the line of succession once and for all, and name Duryodhana crown

prince.”

Bhishma found his grandnephew practicing with his mace on the training field. He had found much fault over the years with Duryodhana, always trying to urge him to greater goodness and valor, but the crown prince had always possessed an uncomplaining industriousness. His many brothers would not yet have woken, but here was Duryodhana, honing his skills alone. At Bhishma’s approach, he laid down his weapon and bent to touch Bhishma’s feet. “Namaskar, Pitamaha.”

“Duryodhana,” Bhishma said. The young man was trying hard not to show his happiness, but the effort of it gave him away in the vibrating of his limbs. “How have you been?”

Duryodhana glanced away. He knew that Bhishma would know he was lying, but he would not let Bhishma see his glee, out of respect. “The news of my cousins… It is truly tragic. Yudhishthira was the best of us, and now he is no more.”

“It was no accident,” Bhishma said. He had no need to step lightly with the prince he had all but raised. He had hired every tutor the boy ever had, followed his progress, advised him. He had found Duryodhana a strong match for his marriage, although the details were yet to be finalized. He had convinced the famed warrior Dronacharya to teach the boys so that Duryodhana’s martial education was equal to none save his siblings’ and cousins’.

Duryodhana’s shoulders stiffened, but he did not return his gaze to Bhishma’s. “Why do you say that?”

“Nobody builds a palace of wax and resin without intending something of it.” Bhishma let some force slip into his words, and Duryodhana flinched. It was such a small movement, but Bhishma could read the boy as clearly as daylight. He had hoped, even as he began this conversation, that Duryodhana would be innocent. That he could blame Shakuni through and through. But it was evident now that it was Duryodhana’s choices that had led them here as much as Shakuni’s. The Pandavas were right. Peace in Hastinapur would not be possible without change.

“Then its builders must be punished,” Duryodhana said. He truly was shameless, in a way that might have been admirable if he had used his skill to aid his kingdom instead of committing murder.

“I have found, in my long life, that those who act unrighteously will be punished,” Bhishma said. “You might think to start by meeting your grandfather’s eyes when you speak to him.”

Duryodhana’s lips tightened, and when he met Bhishma’s gaze there was some anger veiled in his expression. “I am the firstborn son of the firstborn son of Raja Vichitravirya.”

“And yet, Raja Vichitravirya was not the firstborn son of Raja Shantanu,” Bhishma said calmly. Raja Vichitravirya had inherited the throne properly, at least. Bhishma had taken his vow and renounced the throne. Vichitravirya’s only full sibling, his elder brother, had died young and heirless.

But by that logic, Pandu had become king properly too.

Duryodhana was unconvinced. “Yudhishthira and the rest are not even born sons of the Kuru line! Their mother had them by gods. It is Kurus who should inherit—”

“You know very well that your father is not a Kuru either,” Bhishma warned. “I am the last trueborn Kuru living, so you would do well to heed my counsel.” It was one of Bhishma’s deepest regrets, that his eldest stepbrother had been killed in war, leaving behind an impotent and sickly child to become king.

Bhishma’s oath had prevented him from stepping in to continue the line, for he had promised to stay celibate, and could not betray his father’s memory. The whole nobility still whispered the story of how Bhishma’s stepmother had arranged alternative means of impregnating the chosen wives of her impotent son. His father’s dreams had died with Vichitravirya; the bloodline had ended two generations prior to Duryodhana’s protests. No matter what the outcome of this struggle between cousins was, Shantanu’s blood would never again sit on the throne of Hastinapur.

Duryodhana saw Bhishma’s expression and swallowed, looking at his feet. “I will be a good raja. And I will mourn my cousins. I know you preferred Yudhishthira—”

“I will gladly serve you as my king when the time comes,” Bhishma said, for he did not have time for this. He needed to plan, to determine how

to steer this kingdom away from civil war. “And on that day, you must think of your kingdom first, not your cousin.”

Duryodhana’s face fell further at the obvious admonishment, and he turned from Bhishma to pick up his mace and run through his forms once more.

The idea came to Bhishma a few days later, as he studied a map of Hastinapur’s borders. Every year brought with it a new map, a new record of conquest, for he could scarcely remember a year where at least some small town or village had not sought to join with their might. Although Hastinapur was the seat of power, and the word of Hastinapur’s raja was law, it was impossible for one man to rule all this land alone. And so it was that many kingdoms—the ones that had surrendered before their utter ruin and so retained some dignity—still had their own smaller kings. Shakuni was the raja of Gandhara, but he would never dream of crossing Hastinapur. Shakuni’s hatred for Bhishma was far more personal. Bhishma had been the one to choose Shakuni’s sister to be Dhritarashtra’s wife. Even though Gandhari was now queen of a powerful kingdom and loved her husband—enough to wear a blindfold so she could experience the world the way her husband did—Shakuni could never see past Dhritarashtra’s blindness, could never see Dhritarashtra as a wise king and able man. But Shakuni had also been in too weak of a position to reject Bhishma’s overture of uniting the kingdoms in marriage.

Now, though, Bhishma remembered Duryodhana and Yudhishthira’s old, short-lived game. Dividing up territory and palaces. Ruling together. There was, not all that far from Hastinapur but far enough, an area of desert. It was said that long ago the ancestors of Hastinapur’s great kings had crossed over the sands to come to Bhishma’s mother. They had found no other souls living there, and had claimed it for their own, calling it the holy land of Lord Indra. Lord Indra did not actually live there, Bhishma knew, and the Kuru dynasty had never sought to expand into such a barren place. Duryodhana would not value it, for he enjoyed his life of comforts. But the Pandava brothers were skilled at making something from nothing, and

could live with deprivation besides. It was a not insignificant piece of territory if they shaped it for their own purposes. They could have their own kingdom, and Duryodhana could have Hastinapur, and the peace could be kept.

The solution pleased Bhishma, and it came to him none too soon. His nephew requested his presence in his council room later that day, and Bhishma knew the moment he entered that the raja had heard of the Pandavas' true fate.

"I have news that will please you," Dhritarashtra said without preamble.

"Is it good news, Raja?" Bhishma asked. "You do not seem happy."

His nephew's expression did not change. "They are glad tidings. The Pandava brothers—they are alive. They were seen in Gokul, traveling, it seems."

"That is indeed a blessing to hear," Bhishma said, matching the king's level tone. He would not stoop to the disrespect of feigning shock.

"You do not sound surprised."

"I had hoped," Bhishma said, and did not finish the thought.

His nephew set one hand on the stone table before him, fingers splayed out. "The question I must ask, then, is why have they not returned home?"

Dhritarashtra knew why, or had guessed, and was giving Bhishma an opportunity to serve his kingdom once more. "I would guess they would not know their welcome were they to return," Bhishma said. "Their cousin invited them to live in a palace that was made of wax and nearly caused them to perish. They have never been known to seek trouble where it was not needed."

"Indeed. And yet, soon the kingdom will be abuzz with their survival and whispers about why they have not come home. That is its own kind of trouble." *My son will not be accepted as king so long as Yudhishthira is known to be alive*, he was saying.

"If you were to invite them back, perhaps they would be more sure of their reception," Bhishma said.

"You think my eldest tried to kill the Pandavas," Dhritarashtra replied. "That is a strong accusation to levy against the crown prince of your kingdom."

Now Bhishma had a choice. He could dissemble, point out that he had not actually accused Duryodhana as such, but both he and Dhritarashtra

would know it to be a ruse. Or he could address the issue and, at last, bring the future of the kingdom into the open. “You may not like it, Raja, but your eldest and his cousin have ever been rivals. They both have a claim to the throne.” He paused, but the raja did not interrupt. “Either Duryodhana will succeed one day in killing his cousins and be forever weighed by that sin, or his cousins will decide to fight back. Both options will bring ruin to this kingdom.”

Dhritarashtra sighed. “What would you have me do? I have turned this problem over again and again but no solution comes. I cannot satisfy everyone, even with all the power I hold.”

“Invite the Pandava brothers back to Hastinapur,” Bhishma said. “Welcome them with all the ceremony they are due. And, as a token of how overjoyed you are by their safe return, name Yudhishthira king of all territories to the west of Hastinapur.”

Dhritarashtra’s brow furrowed. “We do not have territories there.”

“It is true our lands are most plentiful to the south and east, but only because we have never developed the west. There are few tribes living there; they will not object, for we already claim them as our vassals. Let the Pandava brothers have that, and they will be lords of whatever they make. They will be satisfied, and so will Duryodhana.”

At last it dawned on Dhritarashtra. “The desert? You would have me make Yudhishthira king of barren lands? It would be an insult.”

“It will be an opportunity,” Bhishma said. He knew now that Dhritarashtra would agree as soon as he could see the political angle of it. “Yudhishthira will not be able to refuse such a gift, not without seeming ungrateful. And he is hardworking—he will make something of those lands. And your son will have no reason to be jealous or covetous. They will live in harmony.”

“I understand,” Dhritarashtra said. “Send for the Pandavas at once. It has been too long since I laid hands upon my nephews.”

Bhishma hoped that this would be the end of it, that Duryodhana could be king of Hastinapur and Yudhishthira king of the desert, both of the firstborns of this generation finally ruler of their own domain. For a moment, he allowed himself to imagine that Duryodhana would not be insulted by the division of Hastinapur, that Yudhishthira’s headstrong brothers would not be angry at the land they had been given. That their

kingdom’s fate would not end in a war between Duryodhana and Yudhishthira.

But in his soul he knew, with a conviction he could not shake, that they were on a path to bloodshed. That whatever long-ago alliance had existed between the two loving, playful boys he knew was over, and the hardened men in their places would tear the world apart between them.

CHAPTER 14

GANGA, MANY DECADES BEFORE THE WAR

I DID NOT KNOW why I brought Devavrata to the ocean, except that the sea felt like freedom, and we both had need of it.

"Where are we?" my son asked in awe.

"This is the ocean," I said. "Surely your tutors have taught you about it."

He took a few steps forward into the surf, giggling as the waves lapped against his toes. "That's so far away on the maps. How did you get us here?"

I wiggled my fingers at him. "Magic." Although that wasn't strictly correct, it was the simplest way to explain the concept to him. I watched him race a few more steps into the dark waters, laughing with delight. "Do you like it? It will look even more majestic in the morning light."

Devavrata ran back to me smelling of saltwater. "Will we stay the night here?" he asked.

"If you wish," I said. He nodded eagerly, and I smiled back at him under the shimmering light of the stars. Then I collected seaweed and soft moss until I had created a bed fit for a king. Devavrata reached a hesitant hand toward this creation, and made a small sound when he discovered it was

solid and real. “I can change it if you want.”

Devavrata slipped into the bed with a sigh that sounded much older than his years. “I love it,” he said.

I sat next to him and listened as his breathing slowed and evened. It was the first time I had ever watched one of my children go to sleep. I was relieved to find it was nothing like death.

As morning came, I created a small cloud over Devavrata to shade him from the sun. He slept well into the day, until the sun was nearly at its peak in the sky, but I did not worry. He had experienced much this past night. When he at last awoke it was with a small, contented yawn that nearly brought tears to my eyes. So many firsts I was experiencing only now.

“How did you sleep?” I asked him.

He sat up in his makeshift bed, stretching his arms above him. “Very well. In the city, I have strange dreams sometimes, but I had none here.”

“I watched over you,” I said, dismissing the cloud. “Kept the bad dreams away.”

Devavrata crawled to the edge of his bed and hopped off it, running down the sandy beach toward the ocean waves, and I followed close behind him. “It’s so big,” he whispered. “How did it get so big?”

I laughed. “That is a secret, known only to the gods. But perhaps you may one day learn it too.” He smiled at me and opened his mouth to speak, but his stomach gave a loud growl. “You must be very hungry,” I said. I received fresh offerings from mortals daily, fruit and rice and flowers left at my banks, and I fetched some of these from near the mountains for his meal.

He sat on the beach and began eating, shoveling the food into his mouth and chewing rapidly before a sudden change overtook him and he straightened his spine, eating more slowly and carefully. The effects of the palace’s training, I was sure, for I cared not a bit how he ate. A part of me, watching his obvious enthusiasm, longed to be able to taste the dishes, one of the few mortal experiences I actually remembered fondly. “Will we do my lessons after lunch?” he asked.

In truth, I had not thought this far ahead. What did a young boy do with his days? Play, eat—and learn. “Of course,” I said. “They will be nothing like your palace lessons, though.” More than anything, I wanted Devavrata to be safe from the vagaries of other mortals, for even now I was not naïve enough to believe he would stay with me forever. He would wish for human company, for other companions, and for a purpose beyond living with his mother. At the very least, when Shantanu died, I would allow Devavrata to return to Hastinapur and claim the throne. But that was some years away, and I would use that time to show Devavrata the world he and his siblings had once inhabited, its beauty and importance. That I had already accomplished for the day, for the ocean was awesome splendor enough. And so I turned to a second purpose: to train Devavrata in combat so that he would not fall in Hastinapur’s constant warfare.

“Have you learned to wield a sword?” I asked. “Or a bow?”

“I have begun to learn both,” he said.

“We will start with the bow,” I decided, because such a skill would keep Devavrata far from his enemies. I fashioned one from a nearby tree, shaping it with the precision of my thoughts and handing it to Devavrata. “Show me what you have learned.”

Devavrata and I spent six blessed moons together. We played on the beach, and later when he grew bored, farther inland near jungles and forests. I presided over his learning in combat and taught him what I dared to of the gods. While we spent this time together, Shantanu raged at my banks. He screamed and shouted, sent soldiers out to my waters, but he could do nothing to harm a river. In one inspired moment, he ordered oil to be poured into my water and set aflame, and when I quickly dissolved the oil, scattering it to the wind, his soldiers refused to return for fear of reprisal. Then Shantanu grew quiet, and I believed I had won. It was a grave error.

In my defense, I was distracted by Devavrata. As time went on, his joy in being with me diminished. Although he loved finding rare flowers, and swimming through rapids, and dancing in the forests where it always rained, the natural world was not enough for him. He never said anything to

me directly, but I could tell he missed other humans. He would speak more and more of inhabitants of the palace, recount how his friends would respond to the wonders we had seen. He began talking about his duty as the crown prince of Hastinapur, how his people would one day need him, and I found it difficult to divert his attention when he got this way.

“Won’t my subjects forget me?” he asked once. “If they do not know who I am, I cannot lead them. Hastinapur will never achieve its destiny.”

These were large, strange words for such a young boy. “Hastinapur is a city. It cannot have a destiny.”

“My tutors have told me that the Kuru line is destined to rule over the entire world,” Devavrata said in total earnestness. “To achieve dominion over man and nature.”

“Do you even know what that means?” I asked him in sincerity.

He frowned slightly. “It means we will be able to tell everyone what to do. To share our greatness with others and keep all people safe.”

I did not want to tear him down, but I could not say nothing. “Well, I am part of nature. And perhaps humans wish to tell me what to do. But no human can have dominion over me, yes?” He nodded. “And how will you keep all people safe if you are fighting wars to expand your kingdom? It does not make sense, does it?” He nodded again, but still looked solemn.

“Will you help me?” he asked. “When I am raja. If you convince others to join with Hastinapur, then there will be no need to fight.”

It was a difficult question, one I had not expected him to ask but should have. But I knew that helping Hastinapur’s expansion would only lead to more destruction of the things I held dear, and so I slowly shook my head. “I do not wish to get involved with human affairs,” I said, and it was true. “You may not see it, but humans are not all good.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, eyes wide.

“You are my child,” I said. “You belong to the immortal world, like me. Humans cannot see the larger picture, and they will not remember their misdeeds. But you will. So you must be careful not to get too caught up in their dramas. To avoid their mortal flaws, and remember who you are.”

“I am your son,” he said carefully, clearly struggling with something. “But I am also to be king.”

“You will be the best king they have ever known,” I told him. “But you must be careful. Do not forget where you come from, because that memory

is the only way to return."

"I don't know if I can do it," Devavrata said softly, and my heart broke at the tears in his eyes. "I'm scared I'll do it all wrong."

I wiped his tears. "You will be wonderful." He hugged me, but still seemed worried. So I brought us to a sheltered harbor at one of my widest points, where a group of giants, massive and slow-witted and descended from demons from long ago, came to drink and dance every full moon. Devavrata looked upon them with wide-eyed wonder as I explained they were not humans, but something else entirely. That it was our secret to share. And all thoughts of Hastinapur were forgotten.

On his eleventh birthday, Devavrata asked to see the mountains.

I did not want to take him there, so close to Shiva, who might disapprove of what I had done. But I did not want to deny him, and so I brought him to the lower foothills where I cascaded down gentle slopes. He craned his neck up and up toward Shiva's tall peaks, his mouth widening in awe, until he toppled backward. He began to laugh, and I did too until there were tears of mirth in his eyes. It was worth it, to come to the foothills and the site of my shame, to make him so joyous.

Devavrata did not stop laughing the entire day as he climbed the rocks and slid down small waterfalls. But the next morning he woke sadder than ever and for the first time said, "I miss Hastinapur."

If I had a beating heart, it would have been racing as fast as a mouse's. "Would you like to return?" I asked him.

He hung his head. "I do not want to leave you," he said. It was not a *no*.

I understood that one day he would ask to return, and I, loving him more than anything in the world, would do it. I could not fathom why he would want to leave me, but his obvious sadness hurt me more than his ultimate return to Hastinapur. I prepared myself for the possibility that I would soon have to part with Devavrata.

A few weeks later, Devavrata asked to see Hastinapur. "I just want to make sure they are well," he said.

I did not wish to deny him. I brought him to a quiet place near the city,

where he could see the tall spire of the palace in the distance.

“Do you think they are fine without me?” he asked.

“I am sure they miss you,” I said. I did not want him to think he was unloved. “But they will survive without you.”

“I do not want to be selfish.” He looked small and afraid.

I put an arm around him. “You are not,” I said. “Let us go from this place.”

But the next week, he asked to come again. I brought him back, and he paced the forest for hours. I knew our time was growing short, and I began to steel my soul against the pain of losing him. Just then, I saw birds soar into the sky from near to the city. I remembered with a jolt my first moments of turning human. “We must go,” I said, tugging on his arm.

He slipped from my grasp. “Please, Ma, just another minute.”

“Devavrata, listen to me,” I said.

But he had chosen that instant to act his age. “No!”

I reached toward him to force him back into the river, to leave this place, when Shantanu burst through the trees.

“Father!” Devavrata cried. He ran to embrace Shantanu, and Shantanu’s arms immediately tightened around him.

The pain I felt at the sight was very, very mortal. I was not enough for Devavrata. I was not enough.

“How did you find us?” I asked, keeping my voice cold.

“I have had someone watching the river at all times, waiting for you to bring him back,” Shantanu said. He tried to maneuver Devavrata behind him, but Devavrata seemed to realize what was happening and wriggled free of his father’s grasp.

“He is not yours to keep,” I said. “He can do as he pleases.”

“Devavrata is the crown prince of Hastinapur. He must return.” Devavrata’s face fell at those words. I knew how seriously he took his duty.

“You can choose, my son,” I said to Devavrata. “We can be together every day. Wouldn’t you like that?”

“It does not matter what you wish to do,” Shantanu countered. I wasn’t sure if he was addressing me or his son. “Devavrata, the kingdom needs you. Every day the people cry out for their prince. Without you, there is no family. No dynasty. You must return.”

“Devavrata, no,” I whispered. “You don’t have to do this.”

My son turned toward me, and I could see tears shining bright in his eyes. “My tutors always speak about duty,” he said. “This is mine. My higher purpose! Don’t you think so, Ma?”

“No.” He had stepped close enough for me to reach, and I put my hands on his shoulders, pulling him closer so he could see just how serious I was. “The people do not need their prince today. You can do whatever you like, but do not feel forced—”

“This is his duty, his dharma,” Shantanu called out. “Any other mother would be proud to have a son who could recognize that.”

I knew I had lost. Devavrata gave me a small smile, a sad smile. “I know where to find you, Ma. But I must go home. I will visit you.”

It was that, his casual usage of the word *home* to describe a place far away from me, which convinced me in the end. I was not his home. With a breaking heart, I let him go.

Devavrata threw his arms around me, holding me tight. “I will be back soon,” he said. “Do not worry. Thank you for taking care of me all these moons.”

My soul cracked at these words. “You do not need to thank me for that. I am your mother.”

He stood on tiptoes and kissed my cheek. “I love you, Ma. Please do not be sad.”

I realized then that I was crying once more, a strange and mortal gesture. “I love you too,” I said in his ear. “Stay safe. Remember everything we practiced. You must hold yourself apart and never let yourself be corrupted.” I had not expected to part with him this way, and I hoped I did not scare him.

“Come on, Devavrata!” Shantanu commanded. Devavrata disentangled himself from me and waded slowly to his father.

“I am here,” he said. “There is no need to be angry.”

Shantanu grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him bodily from my waters. “You allowed yourself to be taken, and for that you *will* be punished,” he said. “Enough of this foolishness. Come away.” Shantanu pulled Devavrata away from the river and up toward the forest without so much as a backward glance, but Devavrata kept looking over his shoulder at me, twisting and stumbling, twisting and stumbling, in a pattern that would be burned into my memory for all time, until at last he was swallowed by

the trees.

CHAPTER 15

GANGA, MANY DECADES BEFORE THE WAR

I THOUGHT I COULD accept Devavrata's absence. But after having had him for those short few moons, I could not bear to be without him. Neither could I reach all the way to Hastinapur to watch over him and ensure Shantanu was reined in.

And so I went to Shiva, alone and heartsick, to ask for his help. I could sense his power dispersed across the mountain, and at the feel of his presence, a swell of emotion at my situation roared within me. I raged and screamed at the loss of my son until I tired of beating myself senseless against Shiva's rocky shores.

At last his presence coalesced in front of me, feeling as world-weary as I did. "I am sorry for your loss, Ganga," he said. "And I know why you have come. But it is my job to temper forces that threaten the human world. The mortals prayed to me to tame you—I do not take such an action lightly."

"Now I am in this world," I whispered. "My descent threatens no one. The humans are free to pillage and destroy as they please—it is they who need taming."

Shiva sighed. "Perhaps if you had come to me before, showed me that

you were trustworthy. But now I have seen you. You were cursed for meddling in mortal affairs and then you kidnapped the son of a king—”

“I took *my* son to live with me,” I interrupted.

“—and you show no remorse,” Shiva continued as if he had not heard me. “So I cannot let you free. And I will not allow you to separate a child from his father. You are a god, you have no need of a son, and you do not know how best to rear a mortal child besides. You show poor judgment.”

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked instead. I would never have stooped so low as to beg before, but I would do anything to see my son once again. Even this.

Shiva considered this. “If you could control your own course, you would take back your son and punish his father. If I knew that you would be more tempered, I would consider it. This brings me no pleasure. But I know you would want revenge.”

“He deserves it,” I said at once. “He manipulated his own child for his petty purposes, convinced Devavrata to leave me.”

“You are a god, Ganga. You have time, and your son will have time with you when his father is long gone. You cannot try to bend the world to such mundane wishes! You are powerful and important to the mortals, and that should be enough.”

I knew, and I was sure he knew, that there was little happiness in merely existing anymore. I *wanted*, wanted mortal things. And there was no *duty* for me here, for who could give a god their duty? I tried to change tactics. “He is a godling too. He does not belong in that world.”

“He was a godling once, but he is of that world now. He belongs with the humans, until the time comes for him to become immortal once more. Did you not see it?” Here, Shiva sounded almost gentle. “He wishes to be in Hastinapur. Let him live his life. He will be reunited with you before long.”

“And if I agreed to this, you would grant me my freedom?”

Shiva’s power was receding from me. “If I knew I could trust you, yes.”

I existed. My river flowed. For years I expanded my consciousness around Hastinapur, listening for any discussion that might pertain to Devavrata. I

saw him on only a few occasions, where he crossed my river, but I could not speak with him. His face was tight and drawn, and he did not even look to my waters. I understood he did not want me to reveal myself around others, but I longed to know more about his life, about who he had become.

Instead, though, I heard about Shantanu, more than I ever wanted to, from the gossip of the ascetics at my shores.

They came to bathe themselves after assisting with the ceremonies of a marriage. A royal marriage, I learned. Though they were wandering ascetics, their chatter was the same as all others. “Did you hear about his new queen? The king passes her off as a noblewoman, but she is hardly that.”

“I heard she was the daughter of a fishmonger,” offered another, wading into my shallows and passing water over his head.

“I heard that in her village they called her Matsyagandha, because she smelled of fish.” This one had a high, reedy voice. He wrinkled his nose as he spoke.

Another was scrubbing at his worn loincloth. “I suppose the king likes his commoners. It is good for him to marry and ensure he has more heirs.”

“She certainly seems less peculiar than the first,” said the first. “Rani Jahnavi with her strange hair and her strange mannerisms seemed as though she had never seen civilization! And the king pined for so long.”

The one who was immersed in my waters snorted. “He has had over a decade to mourn. That time has passed. Is the new rani already with child?”

The man washing the loincloth beamed. “When I visited the kitchen to collect our alms, I heard talk she had trouble keeping food down. Every morning.”

“Ah. I will pray for a son.”

Their prayers, and the prayers of the kingdom, were answered. The queen had her child, a boy.

“Did you hear what happened?” a woman asked her friend. It had been a few weeks since the news of the new queen’s son had reached my shores. These two had come to make offerings to me for the good health of an

ailing child. The one who had spoken reminded me of Padma in her bearing.

“With the prince? Bhishma?” asked a second woman who was filling her vessels. “Of course. Who hasn’t?”

The first woman scoffed at the name. I pondered it. Bhishma meant something like *terrible oath*—a strange name for a child, but they had said the new rani was strange. Perhaps she intended for the name to strike fear into those who heard it. “Is that what they are calling him? Is that not cruel?”

“After what happened, yes.” It all made sense now—the birth must have been difficult, and the rani had tried to bargain with the gods for a safe delivery. Perhaps Kavita might have aided her, but I knew she had left Hastinapur, for she had stopped by my banks on her journey home and I had healed the aches of her middle age.

I wondered idly what horrible thing the rani had promised that moved her to name her son after this oath. “I cannot believe the gall of the queen to ask for such a thing. And a commoner too!”

The woman with the pots stood, back bowing slightly with the weight. “Of course she wants her son to be heir.”

“But the raja already has an heir—” the shorter woman began.

The second cut her off even as she turned back toward the path. “An unreliable one, of questionable parentage. This will be better.”

I took from this that the new queen wished to make Bhishma, her son, the heir and force my own son to step aside. I was angry on my son’s behalf, of course, but I knew Shantanu would not let go of Devavrata so easily. Perhaps now, though, with another heir, my son would at least be allowed to visit me.

And yet years passed. He did not come. The women at my river talked only of Bhishma, whom they sometimes called Chitrangada, likely a nickname. In time, a second prince was born, Vichitravirya, or *weak manhood*. I wondered at the new queen, who gave both her sons such odd and terrible names. But then, what did I care what she named her new princes? I spent much of my conscious time inventing long and elaborate stories for what had happened to Devavrata. In one of them, he had been sent away, to live out his years in the home of some distant relative of Shantanu’s so that he could not threaten the new heir. He would outshine all

others wherever he went and eventually become lord or even raja of this faraway land, for all other claimants would have to concede to his superiority. Or perhaps, after living with me, he had decided to leave home and travel the world to seek out new sights. He had such a good and pure heart that he would fight for the less fortunate along the way, becoming a celebrated hero, and one day he would die of old age and return to me.

There was comfort in the natural world, for it was an extension of me, of what I had always known. As I watched the pain of humanity and pined for my son, I noticed the quiet solace of the still places more and more. The Vasus were not there to trail flowers where they walked and sing to the sun and stars, but the flowers still blossomed and the stars still shone, and sometimes that could be enough. There were no questions of higher purpose for the reeds, but still they grew. I watched them jostle one another for the light, each competing for Surya's attention, while their roots entangled, supporting one another beneath my waters. There was no question of duty for the fish, but still they swam. The blood of one gave life to the other, on and on, and from the dead sprang new life. I gave them a home, gave them water, and that was enough. I was enough.

And yet still my thoughts turned to Hastinapur. One day, a woman came to my banks near the city, dressed in finery but walking alone. She carried with her flowers and fruit, hanging in a basket heaped full on her arm, and she slipped off her shoes with a practiced ease on the shore. She waded into my waters without a second thought for her fine sari, walking with sure steps until she was knee-deep. She began removing her offerings and letting them drift gently into the water.

"Thank you," she murmured. "For the bounty you have always brought me. I know it has been so long since I last came, and now… Well, I hope I have done right. Please do not punish my family."

There were memories weighing on her, a worry in her soul. And I was curious, for I did not know why this woman who walked like a fisherwoman but dressed like the highest of nobles would have such worries, or a need to thank me.

She offered the memory to me freely.

She was standing on the banks of one of my tributaries. She was dressed simply, her sari tied up around her knees so it would not get dirty as she waded toward a small raft that many fishers used. It was early in the day, the sun had barely begun its course across the sky, and she was enjoying the solitude when a branch snapped behind her.

“Who goes there?” she called, raising the staff she carried with her always.

A man emerged from the forest. He was shrouded in darkness, so for a moment I did not recognize him. Then, despite the woman’s ignorance, I knew who I beheld. “It is only a mere hunter,” said the king of Hastinapur. “And who are you?”

The woman lowered her eyes, conscious that she was alone with a strange man. “Satyavati, my lord,” she said. He did not have the bearing of an ordinary hunter.

“I followed the most exquisite smell here,” he said. “And it now appears I have found its source.”

Her body hardened with anger. “You do not know me, you have no need to jest in such a way.”

The man, to his credit, looked confused. “What do you mean?”

Her cheeks burned with the memory of the villagers always laughing at her for smelling of fish. She had apparently been born smelling of fish, to hear the story told. “Nothing,” she said. “I must be going.”

“Wait!” he called. “I must know. Are you… are you married?”

The part of me that was an observer scoffed at his words. What drew Shantanu to strange women at rivers? He had just met this fisherwoman and now he wished to marry her?

The part of me that was in Satyavati’s heart did not share this same disgust, but neither was she excited at the prospect. “I do not even know who you are,” she said. “I cannot answer such a question. You should ask my father. He lives in the village only a few minutes’ walk toward the rising sun. Ask for Dasharaj.”

Shantanu opened his mouth to speak, but Satyavati cut him off, turning her back to him. Better not to encourage him, for he likely wanted something other than marriage. She waded to her vessel and, with the pole, set herself afloat, thinking it was the end of the matter.

Then, in her memory, she stood in a hut, facing an older man. Her father. “A man came to see me about you today,” he said. “I did not recognize him at first, but I know unmistakably now who he is.”

“Who is he?” she asked, curious but cautious. Her father had turned away every prospect for marriage she had ever had, for he wanted her to stay home and aid him always. She wanted nothing more than to leave. But though he seemed almost excited, it would not do to get her hopes up.

“Raja Shantanu of Hastinapur,” he said, a triumphant smile on his face.

She felt faint for a moment. “What could the raja of Hastinapur want with me?”

“Your hand in marriage,” her father said. “I told him no, of course.”

Satyavati thought she had misheard him, but her father had that smirk on his face that told her he was scheming. “Why would you tell him no?” she demanded, anger rising. She wanted more than anything to leave behind this miserable village and controlling father and smell of fish.

“Raja Shantanu already has a son, who is known to be without peer. The throne will pass on to him upon Shantanu’s death, and then you will be at the mercy of a young man who has no reason to aid you. If you have sons, he may see them as a threat. No, I told him you would not marry him without a promise that your sons will be his heirs.”

Her father had a way with words, and she found herself understanding his position. But she wanted this match. It was the best any woman could get, and even living as a neglected noble would be far better than the life she had now.

He could see it on her face. “Peace, child. The raja desires you greatly. He will return soon enough, with his first son disinherited. I know this.”

I withdrew in shock at this. The raja would never actually disinherit Devavrata… or would he? Is this why Devavrata had not come to see me for so long? Had he been banished to some corner of Hastinapur’s empire to live in quiet exile? It was a blessing this woman had come to me. I would learn everything I could.

Satyavati was in her hut again, eating rice and fish with her father, when

a knock sounded outside. He gave a knowing smile and went to greet the guest. “Welcome, Yuvraja Devavrata,” he said, gesturing him inside.

“Thank you,” the young man said, and then, there was my son.

My heart ached to see him. Devavrata had grown taller, broader in the shoulders, but he still looked like a boy. I leaned further into the memory, as though I could perhaps touch him, embrace him. Whisper in his ear that I loved him. But it was just a memory, and he slipped past my senses.

“I would speak to Satyavati alone,” Devavrata said without even looking at her father. The old man looked askance at Devavrata, but after a few moments of pointed silence, he left. Satyavati was certain he would be listening at the door. “How are you?” the prince asked.

“Well, thank you,” she said. He could not be more than a few years younger than her. “You honor us by coming here.”

“I love my father dearly,” Devavrata said. “But he has not been himself lately. He has been sad and withdrawn. At last, I asked him what was wrong and he confessed everything. He told me he could not bear to hurt me, but that his heart was with you. And he told me of your father’s condition.”

“My father cares for me very much,” she said, her frustration leaking through in her voice.

“As my father cares for me,” he replied. “But I cannot bear to see him this way. He told me that dharma commands a king have many sons to ensure the line of succession, but that he has only one and he fears for the kingdom.”

“He is very wise,” she said, for she sensed that perhaps this prince was here to capitulate. Perhaps she could have all she had ever wanted, and please her father besides.

Devavrata nodded. “My duty is to see to the welfare of the kingdom first and foremost. If that must happen by me stepping aside, then so be it. I do not crave the kingship.”

It distantly occurred to Satyavati that perhaps that made Devavrata very fit for the throne. But she kept that sentiment to herself, remembering her place. Who was she to philosophize? She was a simple girl, with a simple wish. “Then you should speak to my father. It is his word that determines whether I wed.”

“But I wished to know, Satyavati, do you want this? Do you want to marry my father? He told me that when he met you, you turned your back

on him. I would not wish you to be forced into a marriage you did not want."

This, at least, was an easy answer for her. "I want this more than anything," she told him.

His face did not change, but something in his shoulders tightened. Perhaps he had hoped for a different outcome. But she had been honest. She would not jeopardize her chance at escape for a particularly noble prince. What could he understand of being trapped in a backward village with no prospects and an overbearing father?

The prince opened the door, and her father all but tumbled inside. She pushed down a wave of embarrassment, but Devavrata's face betrayed no emotion.

"Thank you for letting me speak to your daughter," the prince said. "My father wishes to marry her, and I will gladly step aside for his happiness and the good of the kingdom."

But her father, shrewdly, did not seem satisfied. "You may have sons by the time the throne is to be passed," he said. "And they may have a claim even if you do not. No, I would not allow my daughter into such a trap."

Devavrata's eyes narrowed for a moment, and he looked toward the wall of the hut as if studying it for answers. He looked pained. "And if I swear not to have children? Would that satisfy you?"

Satyavati gasped, then, and so did I. How could this horrible man have wrested this from my son? Her father looked almost impressed. "Yes, that would be sufficient," he said, as though Devavrata had offered a good bargain for his fish and not just sealed the rest of his life from happiness.

Devavrata gave a sharp nod of his head. "Fine. I swear to you, and to the River Ganga herself, that I will never claim the throne, and that I will remain celibate for all my days. I pledge myself to the Kuru line, however it should pass."

The old man was stunned into silence. For a moment, he opened his mouth and no sound came out. At last he croaked, "I am astounded by your unyielding honor. You may take my daughter with you so she may wed the raja."

Devavrata turned to Satyavati and said, "I will wait outside."

She looked around the inside of the hut, at all her meager possessions. There was nothing to take, nothing to do except to say goodbye to her

father, who had never been an emotional man. She could scarcely believe what had just come to pass. Had she really been the cause of such a momentous thing, the fate of a kingdom decided in this fisherman's hut?

Her father's hands shook as he reached out to grasp hers. "Treat that boy well," he said. He had never told Satyavati to behave kindly to others before, but he appeared shaken by the way the young man had taken such a devastating oath without thought or question. "He is Devavrata, yes, devoted to the gods. But he is also Bhishma."

I flew from Satyavati's memory in horror.

How many times had I heard the name on the lips of many a person from Hastinapur? It could have also meant *awesome oath*. Awesome and terrible, two shadows of the same tree. How could it be, that Bhishma was my own son?

He had been too soft for the mortal world, too loving, and he had given up everything for his worthless, lustful father. I remembered once how Devavrata had agreed to return to Hastinapur for his father's happiness. He would give all of himself to aid others. I should have taught him to protect himself against that impulse. I had failed him, my beloved child.

My waters churned, and Satyavati backed away in fear.

My son had sworn an oath to be a puppet of her sons. It was not her fault, I knew, in some detached way. She had only wanted to better her station, and she had not forced Devavrata to make this promise. But still I raged. My son, resigned to loneliness, never to sit on the throne but always to serve it. He was too good, too steadfast to ever break his oath. The years of his life stretched before me, endless and empty, and I pushed Satyavati from my waters. Loneliness was the cruelest of feelings; to be lonely in one's own home was a pain I could hardly imagine. I had feared it for him when he returned to immortality, but it seemed in his goodness he had resigned himself to a mortal lifetime of estrangement.

I raged at Shantanu, raged at this mortal world. Raged for my child, a man now, too grown. Bhishma.

CHAPTER 16

BHISHMA, ABOUT FIFTEEN YEARS BEFORE THE WAR

ALTHOUGH LORD KRISHNA WAS his mother's friend, and a great and powerful god, there were days when Bhishma could not stand to be in the same room as him. Today, however, was not one of those days. Today, as most days, Krishna gave off a calm assurance, an affect that he knew things mere mortals could not fathom. And Bhishma found the god's presence a welcome balm among the sea of younger men who gawked and stumbled through the halls of Indraprastha's palace.

He understood their reactions. The first time Bhishma had entered the city the Pandavas had built, he had fought the urge to gape open-mouthed like a child at the wonders they had carved from the barren land. In barely a year, some mechanical marvel of water distribution had turned golden sands to lush greenery. The fields were laden with crops, and rows of trees hung heavy with fruit. Wide roads ran in circles around and through the city, like spokes of a wheel, so that five horses could comfortably pass abreast at any point. Even the laborers of the city were dressed comfortably and held their heads high. There were no hovels here, no creeping edge of poverty pushed ever outward like the overflowing borders Hastinapur possessed. All the

homes were built of sturdy clay—no wood or wax in sight.

When Bhishma had approached their palace for the first time, as it stood glimmering in the afternoon sun, his heart nearly burst with pride and affection. He had known the Pandavas would make something of their new kingdom, but he had never expected this. And inside the palace—wonder upon wonder. Bhishma had heard rumors that the architect had been trained in the heavens, that he had lived for centuries, that he was a friend to Lord Krishna. He thought these exaggerations, perhaps spread by the architect himself to gain renown, but now, he believed it. What ordinary man could conceive of such things? Bhishma had seen what little grew from sands even by the water, and here there was no water except for that which the Pandavas had managed to bring in. But the architect had shaped a paradise. The shimmering walls were in fact encrusted with precious gems, flawless and flashing. The palace was a series of open courtyards with fountains and pools, but also, as Bhishma had discovered, mirrors and illusions. He had nearly walked into a pool, thinking it solid ground. At the last minute, some instinct caused him to rear back, and he had seen the water ripple as the air moved.

“Well done,” someone had said, and Bhishma had turned to find Krishna, leaning on a pillar in the shade and grinning. Bhishma did not know if he was being mocked or lauded, and so he instead pressed his hands together and bowed his head in greeting, hoping for a quick escape. Krishna had raised a hand, in greeting or blessing, and then granted Bhishma’s wish, wandering off to another courtyard.

Bhishma had in his own time explored the wondrous room of sculptures that looked as though the animals themselves had come to life, learned routes through the mazes of mirrors, slept under the roof and felt the palace grow to accommodate him. But it was time now for the new visitors to arrive, and so Krishna and Bhishma had reunited in this entrance area. They shared glances as men flinched back from harmless walls or tripped into pools. Bhishma knew he was nothing next to Lord Krishna, but they at least could both say they knew the ways of the world and had some perspective to see the folly of many human actions. *How much longer must I watch this?* Krishna’s looks seemed to say. On cue, there was the sound of a splash as an unfortunate fell into the fountain, a curse, and the peal of a woman’s laughter.

Bhishma’s eyes found the pair and he saw to his dismay that it was Karna who had stumbled, Draupadi who had laughed. Draupadi was the wife of all the Pandava brothers, but the events of her swayamvara, the competition for her hand in marriage, where Arjuna had triumphed, were well-known to all. That Karna had been prevented from even competing, for he was not truly royalty—he had been raised to his status as ruler of Anga only by Duryodhana’s friendship and generosity, not by birth. That it had been the princess, Draupadi, who had stopped him and declared she would never marry the son of a charioteer.

Karna was Arjuna’s equal in many ways, but because of his birth, he would never be seen to truly equal his greatest rival.

Bhishma knew Karna was far more than he seemed, that even Arjuna would have trembled to know the truth. But he held his tongue. It was not his secret to speak, not his place to reveal something that would only hurt his king and the crown prince.

He remembered, though, what Draupadi had said when Bhishma had tried to warn her that bad blood between her and Karna might harm her and her husbands. Because Draupadi had come off better than Karna in their confrontation, Bhishma had suggested she might make some gesture of reconciliation. “Krishna himself was my witness, I did no wrong to Karna,” she said softly, but her eyes sparked. “I know the stories have come to blame me, but it was my brother who rejected Karna’s lineage. I was not even in the room when it happened. Should I be responsible for the actions of my brother? Are you responsible for the actions of your brothers? Your nephews? Your grandnephews?”

She was a piercing, intelligent woman, although she, like her husbands, was far too young to appreciate that it did not always matter where the fault lay, only how the fault was perceived. And now Bhishma watched as recognition flitted into her eyes on the balcony, followed quickly by regret. Whatever the events of her swayamvara, she had slighted Karna now. She rushed away, but Karna, straightening, caught a glimpse of her and stiffened. His cheeks turned pink, and his eyes darted around the room to ascertain if there had been any witnesses to his embarrassment.

Bhishma fixed his eyes on the waters of a fountain crafted from gold and silver, pretending he had seen nothing. This event was about Yudhishthira, who had never been as concerned by this long-running feud the way Karna

and Arjuna and Duryodhana and Bhima had been. Even as a child, Yudhishthira had not participated in the fighting, standing serious and solemn to the side and focusing on his studies. Bhishma had always felt great pride at the sight, that even as a child Yudhishthira held himself to a higher standard. And Bhishma was unbearably proud of him now, for this event signified something great—the ascendance of Yudhishthira to a higher order of kings.

Yudhishthira had undertaken a ritual, traveling to all of Indraprastha's neighboring kingdoms to request fealty, and all their kings chose to swear oaths of loyalty to Yudhishthira rather than risk fighting his brothers. Many of these kings had long been sworn to Hastinapur, but Yudhishthira obtained their loyalty without bloodshed. Even Shishupala, a nearby king who was known to be quite proud and vocal in his disagreements, had agreed without protest. And now all those kings were gathering here to complete the ritual so that Yudhishthira's reign would be properly consecrated. It was very much like Yudhishthira to achieve such a thing so calmly and easily, something even Shantanu may have struggled to accomplish.

Duryodhana, who had himself been officially made crown prince of Hastinapur, had acknowledged Yudhishthira's actions as properly taken, and righteous, and so the Pandavas and Kauravas, as they now called themselves, had achieved a balance of peace. And now Yudhishthira's rule was to begin with a great ceremonial sacrifice, attended by all these kings and the citizens of this prosperous city besides.

Bhishma's only minor regret was that Yudhishthira would have made a distinguished king of Hastinapur. But Duryodhana had shown himself to be a fair sovereign, dispensing justice with a steady hand, not quick to violence. He had even come today, at his cousin's invite, to witness Yudhishthira's ceremony. Time, it seemed, was healing all.

Bhishma was eager for this happiness, eager to see the Pandavas' happiness, and so it was he arrived at the great field behind the palace the next morning at dawn. Only Krishna was there, watching the sun rise and dressed in finery that Bhishma had not realized he owned.

"I had thought you might join me," Krishna said.

"Of course. I am glad to spend this hour with you, my Lord."

"We should enjoy the peace while yet we can." Krishna's voice was soft

and calm, so his meaning did not become clear to Bhishma for a moment. But before Bhishma could ask, a voice hailed them, and they turned to find Yudhishthira and Arjuna approaching. They looked younger than they had after the palace of lac. Unburdened. He smiled to see it.

Bhishma's seat among the assembled was near the front, a position of respect. He watched as Yudhishthira stood on the dais, preparing to begin the ceremony by selecting someone to claim the chair at his right hand. Usually, it was the eldest or most powerful at such a ceremony who would receive the honor. But here, although Lord Krishna held no special title or seeming great age, he was the obvious choice, as Yudhishthira and all the others surely knew.

Yet as Yudhishthira opened his mouth to make his declaration, Shishupala moved as if to get to his feet. Bhishma saw the movement, and so he was able to watch the dark red flush Shishupala's face when Yudhishthira said, "Lord Krishna, you honor us with your presence."

Unfortunately, the remainder of the assembly also witnessed Shishupala's presumption, and for a moment every breath hung, suspended.

A sneer spread over Shishupala's face. "*Krishna?*" he asked with great contempt. "You would honor a *cowherd* above all others?"

"Raja—" Sahadeva began in warning, stepping away from his brothers, hands held out in a calming gesture, but Shishupala would not hear him.

"He is not a king. We do not even know if he is a true kshatriya! He comes from a village of no import, with no proof of his lineage. Who among us can vouch for him? He could be the child of a latrine cleaner, cursing us all with his presence, but we bear that insult because we bow to your judgment, Raja Yudhishthira. But this—this is too much."

Bhishma could see that Shishupala's claims held sway with some. Krishna had not made his godhood evident to all, and even if he had there would always be those mortals who would question divinity. His mind flashed to his own father, long dead, who had called his mother a demon to his grave. "Nobody is being insulted," Bhishma said carefully. He let his voice ring, silencing the murmurs. He was one of the oldest there, and he

looked it; many of these men's fathers had pledged loyalty to Hastinapur following Bhishma's campaigns. "Lord Krishna is truly the greatest among us. I know he may be unfamiliar to many of you, but he is more righteous than any other assembled, for he is Lord—"

"Are we to take the word of a coward to vouch for this laborer?" Shishupala interrupted, an ugly sneer spreading over his face. There were audible gasps among those assembled, and it took Bhishma a moment to realize he was being insulted. It had been a long time since someone had possessed such arrogance and audacity. But Shishupala was not finished. "You should have been raja, but you were too scared to take the throne. Or perhaps you were just too scared of women, and knew you could not fulfill your duty to have an heir."

The man's supporters had gone quiet now. But Bhishma only smiled, as Sahadeva snarled, "Pitamaha's oaths are his honor. That is more than can be said for you, who swore fealty to my brother!"

"At least women are not scared of Bhishma," Krishna added softly. At last, it seemed, they had arrived at the heart of Shishupala's anger.

Bhishma had only heard of what had happened in stories, but the rumors went something like this: Not so long ago, Shishupala had been meant to wed the sister of his friend Rukmi. But Rukmini was a spirited and devout young woman, who had heard about Krishna's exploits and decided she wished to marry only him. On the day Shishupala was to wed her, the princess went to the temple of Parvati to pray for blessings for her marriage. And receive those blessings she did, for she emerged not long after with Krishna at her side. He led her to a waiting chariot, and together they rode from the city with Shishupala's and Rukmi's armies at their backs. At last Rukmi caught up to them and, though Rukmini begged him not to, challenged Krishna to a fight for his sister. Krishna beat him easily, but rather than kill his brother-in-law, he shaved his head and mustache, leaving him a laughingstock to all others.

Whatever had truly happened, it was Rukmi's humiliation, not Shishupala's. But now, all assembled had heard Krishna's implication, and Shishupala would be dishonored forevermore. Bhishma stole a glance at Duryodhana, who looked almost excited instead of horrified.

Not everyone took oaths as seriously as Bhishma, as Yudhishthira, as the Pandavas. Shishupala had sworn fealty to Yudhishthira for political reasons,

but his sympathy was with the Kauravas, who sat here looking as though they had swallowed lemons.

And Krishna was a friend of the Pandavas, a prominent ally. Shishupala was stupid, and had a personal grudge against Krishna, but he hoped for special favor from Duryodhana after this. In fact, Bhishma was not a gambling man, but would guess that Duryodhana had recently whispered in Shishupala's ear, reminding him of Rukmini.

So much for leaving behind their history; Bhishma should have known it had all been too easy.

Shishupala stalked toward Krishna. He was a tall man, and fit for war, but Krishna's lean form exuded power. "How dare you? You abducted an honorable woman for your own pleasure, because you knew you could not have such a woman any other way!"

Bhishma knew he was being insulted too, for what he had done long ago to win princesses for his brother's marriage bed was known to all. It was his one great shame. But Krishna had done nothing to be insulted this way, and to insult a god? Bhishma could not let it stand. "You would do well to hold your tongue," he said sharply. "Sit in your place and be glad that Raja Yudhishthira is too honorable to throw out a guest."

"You have no power," Shishupala spat. "Do not tell me what to do. You are no better than a eunuch."

"You may insult me as much as you need to in order to calm yourself," Bhishma said. He was used to dealing with children. "But if another word of insult passes your lips regarding Lord Krishna—"

"What will you do?" Shishupala was blustering, and Bhishma knew he was scared now. Bhishma had not been beaten in a fight for decades.

"I will cut your tongue out so that you do not blaspheme the gods themselves," Bhishma said. "I swear this on my honor."

At this, Krishna touched his shoulder. "I do not wish any blood to be spilled on this field, Gangaputra. Not on my account." *Son of Ganga*, Krishna called him, and Bhishma forced himself to relax at the name. He would give Shishupala one more chance.

"I forgive you your words and your anger," Krishna said. "You have insulted me a hundred times, but that too I can forgive. Every man has the opportunity to change, and perhaps you have. Please, let us not sully this day any longer. We are here to consecrate the rule of a great king."

Bhishma could tell that Shishupala was considering it, not necessarily because he held any respect for Krishna but because he did not wish to fight Bhishma. And Bhishma had taken an oath. If Shishupala continued to insult the gods, to insult Lord Krishna, he would cut out the man's tongue, Yudhishthira's sacrifice day or no.

But Krishna did not realize the man had not yet decided what to do—or perhaps he did not care. He turned his back to Shishupala and walked toward the raised dais.

In that moment, Shishupala made his choice.

"You dare to turn your back to me? You may have convinced this—this doddering old man that you are a god, but I know better. I will not be deceived by a lowborn wife stealer."

Krishna spun back as Bhishma stepped toward Shishupala. Bhishma had sworn to act on any further insult. He had given his oath, and now he would fulfill it. He could not live any other way.

His mother had once told him he needed to protect himself from corruption, to make himself more righteous than those around him. And this was how. He would rather die than break his word.

Shishupala cowered away, but he did not turn his back or flee. "Surely you will not hurt me for speaking the truth," he begged.

Bhishma clamped his hand around the disgraced king's arm. "You made your choice, and now you must face the consequences."

"Peace, Bhishma," Krishna said. "Keep the peace."

Bhishma did not dare turn around, for he did not know what he would say to Krishna, who asked for peace after inciting Shishupala. When he thought now of what Krishna had said in the morning, he wondered if Krishna had always intended this. If this was his way of purging one more unrighteous king from the world.

"I gave my word," Bhishma said, looking into the whites of Shishupala's terrified eyes.

"And you will not break it? Not even if I ask you to?"

Not even if a god asks you to?

Could there be anything more righteous than following the wishes of a god?

For a moment, Bhishma wavered. The wrath of the divine was no small thing. "What is a man if not his word?" Bhishma asked instead. "I know

you would not ask me to do an unrighteous thing.”

Bhishma heard a sigh, and he turned slightly to reach for his knife.

Without warning, his vision gave way to blinding white. In shock, he let go of Shishupala, who fell like deadweight.

In the next moment, his vision cleared and Bhishma realized the other kings and assembled persons had the same look of disorientation about them, rubbing their eyes, blinking rapidly, and glancing about in confusion.

Shishupala lay slumped at Bhishma’s feet, obviously dead.

“I wanted no blood spilled on this field,” Krishna said, stepping forward to stand next to Bhishma. He was glowing slightly, and Bhishma understood what had happened. Some small part of him resented Krishna for always having his own plans for the mortal world, and for dragging him into it, but the larger part of him was relieved. Now all the assembled knew the true nature of the man the Pandavas honored. Duryodhana had been firmly sidelined. And Bhishma had had no part in it.

He knelt down on the ground before Lord Krishna and pressed his head into the dirt at the god’s bare feet. “Thank you, my Lord,” he said.

A warm hand landed on his shoulder and pulled him to his feet. “Do not thank me yet, Gangaputra. We have many more miles to go, you and I.” He said it so quietly Bhishma wasn’t quite sure whether he had heard the words or imagined them. But despite Krishna emanating a pure and comforting warmth, Bhishma felt a shiver go down his spine.

CHAPTER 17

GANGA, MANY DECADES BEFORE THE WAR

EVENTUALLY, SHANTANU DIED. HE had been old for a raja even when I knew him, and now decades had passed. I heard he was ill one week and by the next he was gone. But there was no emotion in it for me. Devavrata—Bhishma—had chosen to entrench himself in the mortal world, so Shantanu was no longer an obstacle. It was the whole of humanity that kept my son away from me.

They brought Shantanu's ashes to me, a whole mourning funeral procession, and announced that by the order of his son, the ashes would be scattered in my river. I could not figure out which of the men assembled at my banks was his son, the man for whom Devavrata had sacrificed everything.

When they poured his ashes, I made them disappear immediately into the sea so they would not linger in my waters. The assembled crowd gasped and whispered, until one of the sages stepped forward and declared that the River Ganga had purified the king's remains, bearing him on to the next stage of life.

A few days later, Vichitravirya was crowned king. He had survived to

adulthood over his older, stronger brother, because he was too weak to fight as an adolescent in the kingdom's endless wars. The elder heir, Chitrangada, pride of the family, had ridden out to battle and been cut down. He left behind Satyavati's ill and feeble second son, the one being groomed for a quiet life, to take the throne.

Since Shantanu's death, the mortals of Hastinapur had begun to worship me, and it seemed every other day they bathed in my waters or sent ashes into my currents. They seemed to believe I could purify a soul, that I would do it for anyone regardless of their deeds or intents.

I was angry at this world for what it had done with my son, and I knew that every human was complicit. They all hurt one another in their selfishness, in a constant, unbroken chain. And yet I could not help my curiosity.

When the desperate woman appeared on my shores, I took notice. She was dressed in a fine sari torn and caked with mud, and she came on foot through a dark patch of forest north of Hastinapur. She bathed quickly in my waters, rinsing from her stick-thin body the dirt of the road and scrubbing clean her lank and lifeless hair. She looked as though she had not had a proper meal in moons—and likely she hadn't, if her behavior was any indication. Then she sat a foot from my waters and prayed, and I wondered if she would unburden herself. But she did not, and after a day she left. I thought that was the end of it, but then she returned with some fruit and continued her prayer. Every day for a week she rose with the sun to pray until at last, fed up with her, I decided to listen to her soft murmurs.

"River Ganga," she murmured to herself. "Mother of all rivers, guardian of souls, please guide my soul to a new body. I have sworn revenge on Bhishma, but this body will not allow it. Please, Ganga devi, help me."

The words tore through me.

I needed to know. I flooded my banks toward her, until my water lapped at her knees. Her eyes opened in shock, and I saw as she did.

She sat on a comfortable cushion near the front of a field. Her younger sister, Ambika in her mind, stood before her, a garland in her hands as she

beheld the young men arrayed before her. “What do you think, Amba?” Ambika asked, looking over her shoulder. The woman, Amba, thought she knew who her little sister favored, but her sister often changed her mind at the last minute. It made Amba happy to see her sister so excited, after all the uncertainty over whether their kingdom would be at war. The peace with Hastinapur was fragile and costly, true, but it was peace.

Soon, too, her own betrothed would be here, and they would wed at last.

The sound of hoofbeats startled them all. A chariot pulled up into the center of the field, bearing someone in silver armor that shone so blinding white it was difficult to look at. Amba lifted a hand to shield her eyes, squinting at the interloper even as the other women averted their eyes, and saw a young man standing, chin lifted upright in a haughty manner.

I felt my heart clench at the sight. My son looked well, straight-backed and broad shouldered and proud.

Amba recognized him too, in her memory, but with far more confusion. What was Prince Bhishma, who had sworn never to father a child, doing at a swayamvara? There was a dread beginning to stir in her, that nothing good could come of a surprise from Hastinapur.

Her father stepped forward. “Prince Bhishma, you honor us with your presence,” he said. “My daughter is about to choose her husband, and then you will have a place of honor at the feast.”

“There is no need,” Bhishma said, his voice ringing around the field. “Your daughters will be coming with me.”

Surely Amba had misheard. She rose to her feet to protest, just as her father said, “What need have you of my daughters?”

“They are to accompany me to Hastinapur. They have been chosen for the high honor of marrying Raja Vichitravirya.” He sounded like he was reciting words, but whether they came from the heart did not matter, only their meaning.

“I am betrothed,” Amba said, voice strong and sure even as her heart beat wildly. Bhishma turned to her and her sisters as though he was only now seeing them. “My youngest sister is too young to marry, and my middle sister is about to pick her suitor. Surely you have chosen wrong.”

“Amba!” her father spoke sharply. “Hold your tongue! Kashi is pledged to Hastinapur. You will do as he says—all three of you.”

“Thank you,” Bhishma said. “We are to depart now.” He gestured

behind him. Amba stood, gaping, intending to refuse. But Ambika dropped the garland in her hand and marched over to her sister, grabbing her arm. Amba tried to shake her off, used to being the one who knew best for her sisters. Ambika was flighty, Ambalika too young and coddled. But in this moment, Ambika seemed certain, and resigned.

"Come on, Amba," she hissed. Amba could see that Ambalika was climbing into the chariot. They were a vassal kingdom now. Perhaps this was why they had been allowed an easy absorption into the Kurus' empire: They would break her father by taking his daughters.

Ambika dragged Amba forward, and she followed her sister into the chariot. Soon the swayamvara was lost in a cloud of dust, the princesses racing toward an unknown future.

And then they were a few miles from home, and a horse and rider were gaining on them.

Amba gasped. She knew the horse, and the rider too, and the rider was many things, but a mighty warrior was not one of them. Perhaps she might have been happy in other circumstances that he had come for her. He loved her, a true love match. But she was too practical, and now there was no way to warn him, nothing to do but watch as Bhishma slowed his horses to allow the man to catch up. Watch as he drew his sword.

Salva, her betrothed, slid off his horse, his own sword in hand. "Release your prisoners!" he called out.

"They are not my prisoners," Bhishma said calmly. His whole affect was flat, as though every day he kidnapped princesses and fought their beloveds. It chilled her, despite the heat, that this did not merit any change in his bearing. This man was a killer. "These princesses are Hastinapur's by right."

I am nobody's, not even Salva's, she wanted to protest, but she knew that was not true.

"If you will not release them, then I will make you," Salva declared. "The eldest is my betrothed." Amba wondered if he thought he could actually defeat Bhishma, or if he believed that Bhishma would give in out of some sense of honor.

"If you best me, they are yours," Bhishma said, leaping forward. Salva barely brought his sword up in time, so outclassed was he, and the sound of metal rang in the air for only a few seconds before, with a sickening crunch,

Bhishma hit Salva's shoulder with the flat of his sword. Amba leapt from the carriage as Salva dropped his weapon with a cry. Bhishma raised his own, and she threw herself between them.

"Please!" she begged. "Do not kill him!"

At this, Bhishma's eyes softened slightly. "So it is not a political engagement, then?"

She shook her head. "It is a love match. Please. I could not bear it if he were to die for me."

Bhishma sheathed his sword and took a step back. "My apologies, then," he said. "I have seen only too well the power of love, and would not interfere. You may return home with your betrothed."

Could it truly be this easy? I, at least, was glad. My son had some honor still.

Amba's heart sang as she turned to Salva, sure that he would be feeling the same joy. But he looked disgusted and, from the heat on his cheeks, ashamed. "What is it?" she asked.

"He has beaten me for you," Salva said softly. "By all rules of conduct, you belong to him now."

"Salva, he is letting—"

"It does not matter," Salva said. "I could never even think to marry you now."

And Amba's heart broke, splintering into a thousand small pieces as Salva backed away from her, cradling his arm. As he flinched from her outstretched hand. As he hauled himself into his saddle and left Amba behind, more willing to obey a code than to take the gift that they had been given.

Amba stood in a foreign palace. I recognized it, and feared for her. Had any good come of this palace at Hastinapur? Her sisters seemed resigned to their lot, but Amba was not. She would not marry some weakling king who had not even come to win her himself, and on whose order she had been separated from Salva. Amba turned the problem over and over again in her mind, wondering how she might escape a fate she had never contemplated

for herself.

She had loved Salva because he had seemed to value her free will and freedom. She was accustomed to having control, as the eldest of only sisters, and she longed for more—for her own palace to reign in. She had been proven wrong in her love for Salva, it was true, but perhaps there was another way. The same code that had ruined her could provide her salvation.

The moments bled together, and she stood before Bhishma. “You asked to see me, Princess?” He was quite respectful, eyes trained toward her feet, as though he had not kidnapped her from her home mere weeks ago.

“I will not marry your brother,” Amba said. “It would not be proper.”

Bhishma frowned. “If you truly abhor him, we are not monsters. I will not force you to marry him. But if propriety is your concern, have no fear. I fought for you specifically in a fair fight, and you belong to Hastinapur now.”

Amba pushed aside her discomfort at this discussion of ownership, because he had handed her the winning move without even realizing it. “Yes, my lord. *You* fought for me. *You* won me. If anyone is to marry me, it should be you.”

Bhishma’s eyes widened slightly. “I fought on behalf of my brother, and for Hastinapur. I have taken a vow of celibacy.”

“That is fine,” she said. Amba had no love for this man. In fact, this would be the best outcome. “I am not asking to have a child with you. Only to have you as my husband.”

“I am sorry, Princess,” Bhishma said. His voice did not sound regretful, but rather distant. “That is not possible.”

“Why?” Amba demanded. “Why fight for me—”

“I took vows,” he said, interrupting her quite firmly. “To remain celibate and to always serve Hastinapur. That is why I fought for you, and even now it must come above all else.”

“You did not need me,” she insisted, trying not to cry. “You already had both my sisters.”

“I thought you might be happier together,” he said. “I was wrong, and I do apologize. But it is better for a raja to have many opportunities to have sons for his kingdom. If I had known you would be so opposed—”

“How would you know when you did not even ask?” she snapped.

At last his eyes met hers. “Do not take offense, Princess, but most in

your position would do as their ruling kingdom asked."

It was a sharp rebuke, but Amba could not get past his hypocrisy. How dare he lecture her on duty when he could not uphold his own? "Fine, then," she spat, anger rising. "If you will not marry me, then let me fight you, so I might at least go back into the world in possession of myself."

His mouth twitched, and Amba's cheeks colored, hot. He opened his mouth to speak, and a small laugh escaped before he clamped his mouth shut, visibly fighting for control. How Amba wanted to hurt him. He had ruined her life and refused to take responsibility, and now he *laughed*?

"I will take that as the jest it was meant," he said finally. "I would never fight a woman, Princess."

"I—"

"You are free to leave," he said. "I will send you back to Kashi with an escort of honor."

"My lord—"

"It is settled." He looked quite serious now. "I am sorry I cannot give you what you want. But neither can I entertain such dishonorable suggestions. Consider this matter closed."

Amba fell to her knees and clasped her hands together, a supplicant's plea. Surely, if she debased herself this way, he would see. He would understand. Bhishma's expression faltered, and for a moment Amba thought he would break.

But then he turned on his heel and left. She was alone, hot tears spilling over her face as she stayed on the floor and wept and wept—

Amba was home, in her father's court, her father looking at her, pale-faced with fear. "Why have you brought Kuru soldiers back to our gate?" he whispered.

"They escorted me here," she explained, confused at this poor reception. Surely her father would be happy to have his daughter home again. Surely he did not think, after raising her to be strong-willed and self-possessed, that she had done something wrong. But she was unsure. She had thought she knew Salva. Thought she knew Bhishma. There was no surety in this world.

"Salva told me what happened. You belong to the Kurus. Have they tired of you? Did you give them offense?"

"I told them I did not wish to marry their king—"

Her father slapped her across the face. He was not a strong man anymore, so the shock of it stung more than anything. She took a stumbling step back, suddenly very afraid. He had never raised a hand to any of his children before. “You refused to marry the king of Hastinapur? Are you an idiot or a fool?”

“Father—”

“Get out,” he said firmly. “Leave, and do not return. I will not have such dishonor under my roof, nor will I give such offense to Hastinapur by harboring you.”

“They sent me back here,” she tried to explain. “Prince Bhishma himself allowed it.”

Her father turned his back on her.

Something changed in Amba at that moment. The pain and fear and desperation coalesced into a single hard point. If none in this world would help her, would give her what justice and honor required, then she would do it herself.

And then I was the river once more, disoriented and heartsick.

Had that been my son, turning his back to another’s pain? So cleaved to his vows that he could not make the righteous choice?

At last I remembered that this was not just about my son, but about the woman who had come before me.

I stepped forward out of the water.

So intent on her prayers was she that she did not immediately see me; but when she did, she gave a soft gasp, prostrating herself before me. “Devi, thank you,” she cried out.

“I have seen the pain in your heart,” I told her. My waters remained calm despite the turmoil in me. “What would you have me do?”

Amba’s face fell at the question, as though I had asked her to bear a great sorrow. “I want to go home.”

This I could sympathize with, more than anything else in the world. I, who could never go home. But I could not force her people to take her back any more than I could force the heavens open for me. “What would you

have me do?” I asked instead.

Amba gestured to her body. “This is not the shape of a warrior.” She was thin and frail, that I had seen, but it seemed the result of long travels and penance combined with the distress of all that had befallen her. Still, I understood her meaning: It was clear she had never been particularly strong to begin with. I had seen women become warriors, raising arms to defend their villages or disguising themselves as men to become soldiers, but they were few. And she had not been trained for it. “Bhishma is one of the most fearsome fighters in all of Bharat. I need a god’s help so I might be reincarnated and master the ways of the sword and the bow from birth. So I might one day defeat him.” She sighed, looked away.

“How would defeating him help you?” I asked.

“He takes and takes and takes for his kingdom. Land and wealth and people. I want to know that I have strength in me to best him, to protect myself and others from him. I want that power. I would reclaim myself, and my place in my homeland.”

And this, more than anything, I could sympathize with. She wanted power to shape her own destiny, to obtain justice. She could not do it in her form, and had come to me for help.

She continued talking, pleading her case, but I hardly heard her. It was as though all else had fallen away in my despair at what my son had become and the knowledge that he had hurt the woman standing before me so deeply that she felt trapped.

My son had acted as Shiva had, thinking he knew best, and so determined the fate of another. But worse, he had done it to serve petty kingdoms and politics. He was not a god. He was clearly, painfully mortal.

I was disgusted with him, for the first time. Where was the compassionate child I had known? This was an instrument of war, of harm. A stranger, the kind of man I had feared creating when I bore my children years ago. I had been right to fear. But I was not human, to be immobilized by such considerations. I had birthed him, I had helped to raise him. I had caught a glimpse of his future in the eyes of others and failed to stop it. This was my responsibility too, and I had power. I had to help her, at the very least to escape this life into one untouched by my son. Perhaps then she could live as she wished to. I believed her desire for revenge was small, fleeting. What she wanted was freedom, some recompense for what my son

had wrought.

I would help her, I knew then. And if she still wished to fight my son, he had sealed that fate himself.

I did not know how to reincarnate Amba into the form she wished, for that had never been a power I possessed. But I knew Shiva had done so many times, and so I told her that I would take her to his mountains.

“I already prayed to Lord Shiva,” Amba said. “But he came to me not long after I began my journey and told me he would not help me.”

Shiva had in the past been all too willing to help the devout, no matter their inner desires, so this surprised me. “I will intercede on your behalf,” I promised, although now I felt a bit unsure. Would he listen to me when he had already made up his mind? He was obstinate, immovable, and unwilling to yield to my begging. But I had resolved to ease her pain, and so I had to try.

“Come into my waters,” I told her.

She obeyed, and in another instance she stood in my mountain pool, gasping, looking all around her in wonder.

“You honor me,” she said, and for the first time since we had met she seemed not angry or burdened but strong, like the woman she had been at the beginning of her memories. Ready to stand against Bhishma for the safety of her sisters.

Shiva rose to meet us, in a rough-hewn form of stone. So he too had a form for speaking to mortals. But Amba’s gaze shuttered at the sight. She stepped forward, out of my waters, and knelt.

“Ganga,” Shiva intoned, glacier on mountain. “Why have you brought her here?”

“She seeks reincarnation, and I would ask you to aid her.”

Shiva seemed shocked, for the first time in our long acquaintance. “You would *grant* her wish?”

Now I bristled. “Why would you not? She has performed many rituals and penances, which I know are important to some, and has been grievously hurt besides.”

“She seeks revenge,” Shiva said. Amba did not move from her prostrate position, but I could sense her muscles hardening.

“Yes,” I said. “But the purpose should not bother you.”

“Do you not know?” Shiva asked. “Perhaps she did not tell you. She seeks revenge against Devavrata, against your son.”

At this, Amba gasped, twisting up to look at me, naked fear on her face. It was not a secret in the mortal world, for Bhishma had spent nearly a year in my care and did not lie about it when asked—but neither was it well-known. I had assumed she did not know, and trusted her honest emotion.

“Yes. She does. But he destroyed her life, and she deserves a chance at a new one.”

The weight of Shiva’s power fell on me, considering. “I turned her away because I did not wish to hurt you.”

Of all the possibilities, this had never occurred to me. I wanted to ask him why he would care, but there was a mortal before us. And besides that, I could imagine. I found that after watching what Bhishma had done to Amba, what I thought I knew was shifting without warning; I could accommodate this shift too. I knew deep down that Shiva bore no hatred or ill will for me. He thought me flighty, callous, and wanted to protect the world from me—why would he not also seek to protect me when given the chance?

So instead I said, “I do not wish to give her the power to hurt my son. But she wishes for a new life, and she deserves that much. As recompense.”

“She could choose to spend that new life hunting your son.”

I did not know why he was so concerned with this, but the more he tried to talk me out of it, the more sure I became. I was not some fragile mortal who needed to be coddled. I was a goddess, capable of understanding justice. “Then that would be her choice. A choice my son never allowed her.”

At last, Shiva nodded. “Very well,” he said. “Amba, you have shown yourself to be unwavering in your faith and devotion. I would grant you a boon.”

Amba looked up at my watery form for a long minute, as if contemplating all she had heard. I wondered if she would change her mind, ask to be gifted an army, or a boon of indestructibility, or something else. But then her face hardened with resolve. “I ask to be reincarnated into a

form more free and fierce than this.”

I felt Shiva’s power coalesce around her, tightening and tightening, and I recoiled from the feeling of his constraining grip. Amba did not seem to feel it, only sighed. Her form turned to dust, and from her body came a bright soul that Shiva cradled with his power, like a mother holding a child. Then he let the soul go, and it floated through the air down, down, toward humanity.

Instinctively, I followed, racing down my river as the soul dipped in the currents above. It seemed to be falling toward my waters, where a couple was kneeling at my banks far south of Hastinapur. She was pregnant, but just before the quickening, and she and her husband were praying to me for the health of the child.

The woman cupped my waters in her hands and lifted them to her face. She drank deeply, before washing her face in the river, murmuring prayers all the while.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the woman gasped, grabbing her husband’s arm.

“What is it?” he asked, concern etched on his face.

The woman said nothing for a moment, a slow smile spreading across her face. Then she took her husband’s hand and placed it on her belly. The husband looked confused, and then, ecstatic. He gave a loud whoop, lifting his wife into the air and spinning her in a circle. “Thank you,” he said, and she joined her voice with his. “Thank you, Ganga devi.”

Shiva’s presence tugged at me. I found him still beside my mountain pool. Behind him stood seven forms, hale and strong.

I recognized them instantly.

“What—what is this?”

“You have changed,” Shiva said simply.

That old anger rose up in me again, that Shiva thought himself the arbiter of my goodness, but to my mind the feeling was smaller than before. And chasing it, far stronger, came the knowledge that these were the Vasus, whole and happy, reaching out to me with cries of *Mother! Mother!*

Any guilt or pain I had felt at allowing Amba's reincarnation dissipated upon seeing them, re-formed and immortal. They seemed free, far freer than my mortal son. One day Devavrata—Bhishma—would be among their number, and it would be a balm to him then to know I had helped erase at least one of his mistakes.

I reached my presence out to the godlings and mingled with them, sharing in their joy. It was clear that they had thrived in their new home, under Shiva's watchful eye. "You see what they see," Shiva said, when I turned my attention to him. "You have changed."

"I have not," I said. "You are only now seeing what has been before you all along."

"You think I know nothing, but humans come to me. They live in my slopes. They may not be so abundant as they are on your banks, but I have learned from them. I watched you become more human, and I despaired for it. You thought only of your child."

I released an all-too-human laugh. "Yes, I, a *mother*, longed for my son. The gods have children, and they raise them. You raised Ganesha right here on your mountains."

"But my son was a god. Yours is a human. And you see that now, see that you cannot change the mortal world, no matter how you hate or resent it."

"Is that what you are so afraid of? That I would seek to change them because I did not like them?" My waters roiled behind me. "I came to this earth *for* them. My descent was not meant to be destructive. I did not know my own strength. And then, more than resenting them, I resented you. Oh, yes, it is true I wished I had never come. Never listened. But humans cannot understand immortality. You can. And you kept me fixed, unable to have any freedom. For an *eternity*.

"You told me once you did everything for the greater good. But punishing me isn't for the greater good. You want stability, and constancy. And so you are afraid of me because my essence is change."

I expected him to chastise me for daring to question him. I braced myself for his anger. But he was calm. "Do you truly think that, Ganga? Would it make it easier if I had some hatred of you because our natures are opposed? You are wrong. I believed you bore animosity toward the inhabitants of this world. Perhaps you do not anymore, but I saw you when

you were filled with contempt for them. And then I watched you try to use your power to steal a mortal, to disfavor a mortal king, because of grievances that will pass easily with time."

I had thought we were coming to some sort of accord. "We may disagree on what is necessary," I told him. "But that does not mean you should control me."

"What have I stopped you from doing?" he asked, his bearing grave. "Perhaps my presence has prevented you from killing a king, and from stealing a mortal prince. Otherwise, you have had full control over yourself."

"That is not having possession of myself," I said. "I am a river, and I can hardly feel beyond my banks."

Shiva stayed silent for several moments. "I had not realized you could feel so little. Just as I can feel all my peaks and hills, you should be able to see all that you give life. From now on, that will be remedied. But I cannot simply release you entirely from my control, because you would continue to react to their every action."

"And you do not?" I demanded. "You grant them boons that let them reshape the world simply because they have pleased you!"

"That is different from reacting out of sentiment," Shiva said. "They prove themselves worthy, by performing their penances and showing devotion."

"Granting boons to devotees is not an impassive act," I responded, before deciding to change my strategy. "I brought this woman to you to receive the boon she earned, even though she hates my son. What more do I have to do to prove myself to you?"

"You brought Amba to me because of your son," Shiva said. "And you aided her to help ease the weight of his transgressions." I knew the truth of his words as he uttered them, just as I could sense in the stillness that Shiva would not countenance further argument.

"Is there something else you would have of me?" he asked at last.

I thought of Amba at my banks. "I want to be able to return home," I said to him. "If you will not let me change this world, then return me to my own."

Shiva's presence radiated sorrow. "That is not within my power," he said. "This is your world now. You are among the humans forever. So you

must look past that, and see that there is more to this world. If your essence is change, then *change*."

And with that infuriating, cryptic message, Shiva's presence faded.

But as he did, the wonderous sensation of *more* unfolded, a brilliance, an awareness of all that I was laid out before me. I let myself bask in the feeling of my many rivers. My extent reached farther than I had ever imagined, my waters giving life to a swamp where makaras freely drank with the trunk of an elephant and hunted with the jaws of a crocodile, to low mountain pools where winged lions lapped and sunned, even to deep basins under the desert where spirits reflected the quiet light of gems. In that brief instant of joy, I was expansive, vital, *free*. For a moment I forgot the humans and the eye always watching, waiting.

PART THREE

Rapids

CHAPTER 18

GANGA, MANY YEARS BEFORE THE WAR

THE EXTENT OF MYSELF was new and vast. I reached instinctively to meet it, trying to stretch into every corner of my being. And then I heard it. The cries.

Ganga devi, please spare us.

Release us from these floods.

Mata, we will do anything if you leave us be.

For some time, I could not understand their meaning. But then I felt Shiva, a stern reprimand in his presence, and suddenly I was small again. I saw them, humans gathered on my banks, fearful of waters that had swollen far past the lines of trees and fields.

I had done that, in my exuberance, in my happiness.

Immediately, I withdrew. But even rivers cannot move that fast, and once I recalled my waters, it still took a full night and day to end the floods, the pain I had brought.

When finally I pulled myself together, there was my son, in that familiar grove near Hastinapur. Joy swelled in me at the sight of him, for even though it had been years since he had been in my presence, I recognized

him as the strong, broad-shouldered man from Amba's memories. He wore his hair long, a beard covering much of his face. He must have been the age of Shantanu when I first met him, but he looked younger than his father had. His eyes were sad, reminding me of our days by the ocean when he longed to return to the city. "Mother, please, tell me why you are angry," he begged.

He waited, kneeling there, silt-laden water seeping into his finery.

"I am not angry."

"Then why have you flooded Hastinapur?" he asked. "I am sorry I have not come before. I was afraid you would be…" He did not finish the sentence. He looked to the sky as he spoke, as if addressing some distant god. But even though I had new power and awareness, I was still a river. Still water and mud. I had frightened him, and now he treated me as not just a mother but a god. From any other, I would have accepted it as my due, but here… it hurt that he showed respect out of fear.

This was what he had been taught.

"My waters have flooded all throughout their course. How is it you care only for Hastinapur?" I said, knowing as I did that I too was guilty. I had cared only for stretching my limbs, for unfurling myself after being tightly held for so long. "You should care more about the people of the world than these petty kingdoms."

"Without kingdoms there would be no order. The world would break down into madness." As though kneeling there in the riverbanks, one mud-streaked hand tugging at his hair, he looked quite the picture of sanity.

"Your Hastinapur seems to be bringing only pain," I told him. "Why do you cling so to it? You are more than that."

"Have you always hated Hastinapur so, for my father's sins?" He gave a mirthless laugh.

My temper rose at his accusation—but how was he to know any better? "I do not hate Hastinapur," I said. "I care for you. I would see you safe. And yet you have avoided me, and I see now that I cannot help you, because you have fully embraced this mortal world and all it means, with all its entanglements. But know I will always be here for you, should you wish for me. I shall always be your mother." Even after what he had done to Amba, that would not change.

Slowly, he rose to his feet. His legs trembled, small tremors running

through his whole body. I remembered with a flash what he had looked like as a baby, his tiny fists, his wailing cry. His father drawing his sword, taking him from me. My body transforming back into the essence of a god, my child pulled away from my arms.

I had not fought for him then.

I could not save him now.

His feet slipped in the mud as he turned to walk away, and without a thought I caught him. I pushed him upright gently, then let my presence fade away, mist in the sun. He half turned his head over his shoulder, a small smile on his face. “Thank you, Ma.”

Shiva had been right. My son was a mortal, and I a god. We would always be apart.

I sank briefly into eternity, trying to become that entity that Shiva had encouraged me to be.

My nature was change, a river the fastest of those forces that shaped the world, but that only made it harder to view the humans with steadiness when they constantly acted and reacted. I stretched myself out, feeling not just my river but all the places where my river water flowed. But instead of feeding the stars, I fed tributaries and streams; instead of summoning the gods to my banks, I summoned creatures and spirits; instead of nourishing the cosmos with beauty, I nourished the dirt and crops, the flowers and trees, and yes, even the humans. I tried to tell myself that was enough. Now that my initial surge of exploration had passed, I discovered farther, quieter wonders. I found gandharvas, creatures with the most beautiful voices, who sang to uninhabited jungle thickets and danced with the animals of the forest. Two-headed birds swooped over mountain peaks. And nagas, half human and half snake, slithered through my streams with fluid grace. I wondered if Krishna’s Kaaliya was one of them, from these regions that lay undiscovered by the humans, and by me.

But while I may have once delighted wholly in discovering them, creatures of power with sparks of the divine, they were of less comfort to me now. For in rediscovering the secrets of my many tributaries, I also

discovered hidden pain. I found pollution that creeks could not cleanse, for no deity resided within them. I found forests and plains made barren by human intervention. My first reaction was anger, but I thought of what Shiva had instructed me to do, to look upon the humans and feel nothing. I burned the waste from their waters in rivulets of steam. I coaxed life back into the trees and grasses. And then I watched, and waited.

It was difficult, to try to change my nature. A river responds, constantly, to everything. My course constantly shifted as the skies rained or trees fell or even animals and humans drank. For years, it seemed, I focused solely on this, on being a constant, reliable presence that was neutral to humanity's troubles. Now that my reach extended throughout many kingdoms of the world, I could see more clearly the way the faith of the humans kept the world going in the face of cruelties. I could see that my waters did so much more than fuel Hastinapur, and I could not be angry at the humans for bringing me here when they lived such desperate lives.

My son came to visit me occasionally, but he seemed to fear me, or my displeasure. I did not know how to navigate being feared by my own child, and so some distance grew between us.

In time, I remembered what it was like to hardly care for the passage of the moon. I felt sometimes Shiva's watchful gaze on me, but he did nothing to try to stop me, and I did nothing to alarm him. Perhaps we could have passed the lifetime of my son this way, in peace, and moved on.

But the world, it seemed, was training for war, tensing itself to unleash a storm.

And so it was that one day, a young man—or an older boy—came to my rivers. He approached confidently and knelt before me. And as soon as I reached out to him, I recognized a familiar soul.

"I have come to thank you," he said. He vibrated with tension, though, and I could tell he wanted more than to simply thank me. I brushed against his memories and found a tangled knot of grief and pain. But these were not Amba's memories—they were memories of this life, of this new form.

"What has happened?" I asked.

"I have a good life. Kind parents," he said, avoiding my question. "I have been training as a warrior."

Despite everything, my heart sank. "To kill Bhishma?"

The boy lifted one shoulder, as though to say *not really*—but those

words did not cross his lips. “To defend myself.” I waited for him to say more. He shifted from one foot to the other, restless. “The Kuru empire is constantly growing and expanding. They want my people’s land, and they are taking it by force.”

Now when I stretched out toward his memories I could see more clearly.

He stood in a training yard, shooting arrows at a target. “Very good,” the instructor said. “All of you should strive to be more like Shikhandi. He has such concentration, such focus. The rest of you—” Whatever else he might have said was cut off by the arrival of a messenger on horseback, riding across the field. “What is the meaning of this?”

“The Kurus are marching toward us,” the messenger proclaimed. He looked harried, afraid. “All able warriors are ordered to return to their homes immediately to aid in their defense.”

The tutor looked askance. “These are not warriors, they are boys,” he said. “The Kurus will slaughter them.”

A ripple of apprehension went through Shikhandi at his tutor’s declaration. He felt in his soul a deep fear of the Kurus, of the fearsome warrior who led them. Fear—and hatred. He had always known he carried the memories of more than one life, that there was more than one purpose to his existence, but now he could almost taste it.

His tutor and the messenger were arguing, and after a moment, the instructor turned back to the boys. “Pack your bags and return home at once,” he said. “If at least to see your parents before they come.”

Then Shikhandi was in a village, sword in hand and bow on his back, inside a dim room, facing a door. There were shouts and cries coming from outside. He knew his only chance was to flee, his parents right behind him, but still he was afraid to open the door. His father was no warrior. He was not yet enough. That knowledge thrummed through his bones. He had so much to learn before he could face the Kurus. The time was not yet right.

When there was a lull in the sound, Shikhandi peered around the frame; as he did, something wet seeped into his chappals. He glanced down briefly, trying not to be distracted, and then could not look away. Blood and feces

had swirled in eddies to their front door. The foreign soldiers were at the far end of the village by now, but his friends and neighbors had not been spared. He saw his uncle slumped in the street, the top of his skull missing. Some part of him was detached from this horror, but when he heard his mother gag, his own stomach turned. There was no time for it now. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her forward.

I watched them run for safety, sorrow blooming within me. I had given Amba this new life for a chance at happiness, and instead there was only more pain for Shikhandi.

By the grace of some god they made it to the forest, where other survivors were already huddled. His mother vomited then, as his father sank to his knees, shaking, unable to speak. They had brought almost nothing with them.

The rest of the gathered looked no better, dazed and overwhelmed, weeping and tearing at their clothes. But Shikhandi did not cry, did not vomit or tremble. He stood upright, every pore of his being radiating anger. He wanted to fight. He would fight. These Kurus were monsters. And he would slay them.

I tugged out of Shikhandi's consciousness, wanting to be far away from those memories.

"Why have you come here?" I asked. "I cannot make you strong enough to fight the Kuru armies. I cannot bring back those you have lost."

If he was surprised at my sudden insight, he did not show it. "I want revenge on your son, it is true," he said. "But as much as I do not like to say it, by all accounts your son is a kind and wise conqueror. The rest of the Kurus… They are like animals. They slaughter so many, without care or cause. They made themselves fat and rich off your bounty, and now they use it to destroy. I came to beseech you to right this wrong."

I was so stunned by his words that for a moment I did not know what to say. He was a child and an adult, the souls of both lives warring for supremacy within him, but regardless he had a clever tongue to try to guilt me into his aid. "You too have used me for your own purposes," I told him.

“It is not for me to decide that some kingdoms may not drink from my waters.”

His face fell. “Regardless of whether Bhishma acts nobly, it is his actions and tactics that fuel the endless Kuru assault. Surely you bear some responsibility for that?”

I considered that, the ledger of Bhishma’s life and how much he might suffer with what he had done when at last he returned to immortality. Did I not bear responsibility to the world for bringing my son here? And did I not bear some responsibility to my son, to ease the burdens of this world?

“I am of this river,” I told Shikhandi. “I cannot fight armies. That is not my role on this earth.”

Shikhandi’s face fell. He looked fifteen or sixteen, not old enough to have this weight on his soul. But I had seen these burdens on children younger than he; such was the cruelty of the mortal world.

“This was supposed to be a new life for you,” I said at last. “Unmarred by my son’s actions.”

At the cool touch of my power, his skin dampened with sweat and he shivered. “It is not.”

“Would you have another one?” I asked. Shiva would not be happy. The course of life and death and rebirth was not one that the gods should meddle in without good reason, but after seeing what had happened, I could not deny my instinct to aid, to try to change Amba’s—Shikhandi’s—course once more.

He shook his head. “I have made this shape into what I wished it to be, and I am comforted by that. There is no knowing where birth might bring me next.”

“Then I cannot help you,” I told him. “I am sorry.”

Shikhandi seemed like he wanted to argue before he remembered himself. He reached down and touched my bank in a gesture of respect. “Thank you, devi.”

I had many responsibilities as the goddess of the river, of the waters that sustained life. As my time as Jahnavi faded, so too did some of my desire to

interact with the mortals and witness their lives.

I did not know how much time passed, how many times Chandra showed his face, how many times we traveled around Surya's pull. Even checking on Bhishma every so often—the one impulse I could not resist—was no help because my son aged so slowly. I had watched Shantanu grow older in the seven years we spent together, but even though my son's beard grew long, his skin did not wrinkle and his hair did not gray. His lifespan was turning out to be far greater than an ordinary human's—the blessings of immortality in mortal form, perhaps. Or perhaps it was a curse.

Then, on a day that felt like any other, while Surya was blazing high in the sky, I felt a piece of his radiance fall toward the earth. Although it was only a small fragment, it burned bright, falling so fast I thought it might be a catastrophe raining down upon this land. On instinct I raised my waters to try to meet it, to halt the descent, before I remembered myself. What was I doing, reaching to catch Surya as Shiva had done to me? No. I fell back and waited, watching, as the fiery god descended without harm not far from Hastinapur.

I could have stretched myself out to speak with him, but I sensed that he did not wish to be bothered. Something about his presence was muted and distracted, and despite my desire to converse with him, I held myself apart.

But whatever reason he descended, his stay was brief. He was gone within minutes, and I puzzled over this strange episode for some time, before putting it aside and returning my focus to other things. Perhaps Krishna would know—I had not seen my friend in years, but I heard stories about him and his great exploits, and I knew that in time he would return to me. Such was our nature.

I had almost forgotten Surya's descent when, several moons later, a young woman appeared on my banks, a newborn child bundled in her arms. She was thin, the lingering roundness of her belly the only sign she was the child's mother. Her clothes were not very fine, and I thought I knew her story without her having to pray.

But as she knelt by my waters, I realized there was something odd about her child. He emanated warmth, like a small fire. Like a small sun. I brushed against him, and the faint spark of divinity reached to meet me. Surya. He had come here to father a child with this woman.

Now I became apprehensive, wondering what she might do. Fortunately,

I was saved from any dilemma when the woman pulled a small basket off her back. She set the baby in it and pressed a kiss to his forehead. She was weeping, repeating over and over, “I am sorry. I am sorry.” My heart broke for her, for the choice she had to make. To part with a child forever… It was an occurrence I saw often enough at my banks, but I ached for the mothers every time. I knew that agony intimately, and knew by now that it was the most enduring of pains. Though the mothers did not know it, whenever a basket was released in my waters, I would gently float it far away before safely guiding it to shore near a human settlement. Sometimes the animals would still find it first, and it was not my place to decide whether the wolf should eat or the human should live. But the child would be borne safely across my waters, because I had once knelt on those same banks, praying for the painless passage of my child.

When this woman released Surya’s child into my tributary, I knew immediately where I would bring him—to a peaceful grove downstream where humans often visited to rest or drink. I did not know Surya’s intention in fathering this child, but I would not thwart whatever his divine purpose was.

So I bore the child, easing the basket through rapids and dangers until we reached a clearing far to the south of Hastinapur. The child was calm and quiet, his skin giving off a faint glow. He giggled when the water splashed his face, and I let a golden fish arc above his basket. He reached up for it with a burble.

At last, in the south, my waves washed him ashore. As soon as he left the lulling embrace of my water for the still land, he began to cry, his wails loud and piercing.

Soon enough a plump woman with a kind face came running, drawn by his insistent sobs. “Oh my,” she said, scooping up the child. She glanced around, as if searching for his kin, murmuring all the while to the baby, who had quieted immediately in her arms. She looked down at the basket and finally seemed to grasp the situation. “Where is your mother?” The baby cooed and grabbed at her ear, tugging. “You’re quite strong, aren’t you?”

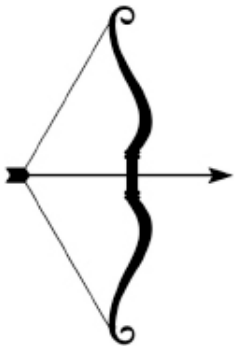
The baby was tiring after his day of adventure, and she clucked as he yawned, then grabbed again for her ear. “Well, you need a name, little one. How is Karna?” I almost laughed at that, such a literal name. *Ear.* The baby burbled sleepily, and she gave him a soft smile. “All right, then. My name is

Radha. Let’s get you home.”

I thought it was a simple job and well done to save a mortal godchild. It was occurring to me that even Shiva interfered in such small ways, to help those individuals who might shape their world. Perhaps that was what I was meant to do, as well.

CHAPTER 19

BHISHMA, ABOUT FOURTEEN YEARS BEFORE THE WAR



“THIS WILL END BADLY,” Vidura said softly. Bhishma’s eyes were fixed on the gaming table before which Shakuni and Yudhishthira sat cross-legged, but he gave a small jerk of his chin to indicate he agreed. “I told Maharaja Yudhishthira, no good comes of gambling. And he agreed. But the very next day he accepted the invitation.”

Watching this game unfold, Bhishma could do nothing but assent. He had been a fool to think Duryodhana satisfied by the display in Indraprastha. They had lived enough years in peace; Bhishma had believed all those old slights put to rest if not forgotten. But he should have known that even if Duryodhana had come to let it rest, Shakuni had not. Shakuni could never let it go, that the Kurus had robbed him of his sister. Bhishma had thought that Shakuni’s influence was properly excised, but it seemed that the man had whispered and whispered in Duryodhana’s ear, and Bhishma remained ignorant of it all the while. He had been a fool.

When the invitation went out for Yudhishthira and his brothers to attend

a great game of dice at Hastinapur, Bhishma knew what had happened. Yudhishthira had only one vice, and that was the dice. In his youthful folly he had more than once gambled more than he had. Bhishma had been able to aid him then, with a well-placed glare or threat, and a promise of coin from the treasury, but nobody could help him now. And it was Shakuni who had introduced the maharaja to games of dice long ago when the older man was a regular visitor skulking about the palace. He knew the way Yudhishthira reached for the carved ivory without question or thought; Duryodhana may not have noticed, but Shakuni was a master of deceit. And so Bhishma knew Shakuni would have taken other precautions in this game, some sort of trick to ensure he won and humiliated Yudhishthira sufficiently. He would not leave anything to chance.

"Why is *he* playing?" Bhishma muttered, low enough for only Vidura to hear. "If the yuvraja invited him, should not he be the one to play?" Before them, Yudhishthira had just lost the last of the gold he had brought for this game, and was now betting the gold in his palace coffers. And Shakuni was sitting there with his implacable smirk—a man who should not have been at the table at all.

"Nobody stopped him," Vidura responded. The dice rolled, and Shakuni won again. Duryodhana would not have been so lucky, Bhishma knew, and he understood Vidura's words as reproach for not taking further action. But what more could he have done? Both sides blamed him for inaction, but if he was as they wished him to be—easily swayed by flattery and power—the kingdom would have disintegrated long ago.

It would have been easy to stand up, to stop this game. Vidura's grip tightened on his cushion until his knuckles were a bloodless white. But this was Yudhishthira's choice, and Bhishma needed to learn to stop interfering. It had not worked thus far.

So he did not speak when Yudhishthira wagered all his gold and lost.

He did not speak when Yudhishthira wagered all his land and lost.

He did not speak when Yudhishthira wagered his palace and lost.

And he did not speak when Yudhishthira wagered his brothers and then himself.

The Pandava brothers had been shocked into silence. But when the dice revealed Shakuni had won—and their eldest brother had wagered them into slavery—they rose as one to protest. Not their brother's decision, for they

could not question that, but Shakuni's dice.

At this, Duryodhana jumped to his feet. "You accuse my uncle of such treachery? In my palace, when you are now my property? Yudhishthira, what is the meaning of this?"

Yudhishthira got to his feet slowly, head bowed. "My apologies, Yuvraja. My brothers are mistaken and they apologize. It seems I have nothing left to wager, and so this game is at an end."

Murmurs broke out throughout the room, and Bhishma glanced at Dhritarashtra, who was seated on a low throne at one end of the hall, with all the respect due a king. The old man was smiling faintly, not even hiding his pleasure at his son's triumph. After a moment, the mutters died down, and Shakuni gave a sly smile. "You have not wagered all."

Bhishma's heart sank. Yudhishthira was not in his right mind, and despite all better reason would try again to win it all back if he thought he had a chance. Yudhishthira's eyes sparked with interest, and Bhishma knew he was lost.

"You could wager your wife," Shakuni said. "Draupadi. If you win, I will give you and your brothers your freedom back."

Bhishma reached out then, raising his hand to stop Yudhishthira. But before he could so much as rise out of his seat, Yudhishthira had grabbed and thrown the dice. His total was high, but Bhishma did not allow himself to hope.

Shakuni's crooked smirk remained firmly in place as he lifted the dice and shook them. With his release, the rani too was lost.

"Fetch her!" Duryodhana said, glee lighting his face. "Fetch Draupadi at once!"

Vidura rose to his feet now, face grim. "You are a snake," he hissed. "All of you snakes. Why do you seek to create a feud and destroy your own cousins? You could have peace and instead you choose this? You demand a good, upstanding woman? Where is the dharma in such an action?"

He heaved a great breath, but nobody assembled spoke a word to back him. He looked down to Bhishma, as if expecting aid, but Bhishma could not openly contravene the ruler of his kingdom. It was wrong, he knew it. His heart ached for Draupadi. But if the choice was between defying his own oaths and saving a single person, he knew the answer.

Vidura shook his head but continued, undaunted. "Draupadi was not

lost, for Yudhishthira could not wager her. He did not own himself and so could not own her. Please, brother”—and here he turned to Dhritarashtra —“do not punish this woman so.”

Just then, the servant Duryodhana had sent to Draupadi returned. Alone. “My lord,” he said, voice shaking as he knelt before Duryodhana. “She refuses to come.”

Duryodhana’s face turned red with anger. “Dushasana!” he called, and his second brother came to his side obediently. “Fetch me my slave.”

Whatever Dhritarashtra might have said was lost forever with those words. Instead, the room waited in agonizing silence to see what would happen. Dushasana was vicious. He would force Draupadi to this room, there was no doubt.

Shouts came from the hallway. Draupadi’s voice echoed in the hushed, desperate silence. Bhima started forward, but Yudhishthira placed an arm in front of him. And then Dushasana came through the doorway, dark hair clenched in his fist. Behind him was Draupadi, half-bent as she was dragged forward. By her hair. There were several gasps. One of them, Bhishma thought, had been torn from him. He was not himself in this horror.

“Release her,” Duryodhana called, and Dushasana did. It added to her humiliation, Bhishma knew.

Freed, she turned immediately to Duryodhana. “How dare you drag me here, when I am getting my blood? Dressed thus for it? Have you no honor?”

Duryodhana’s face split in a wide smile. “Watch your tongue, slave.”

The words hit Draupadi like a slap. She turned to her husbands and saw in their faces the truth of his words, and their circumstances besides. “Who was lost first?” she whispered. “For if you were lost first, then you cannot have wagered me.”

“I—” Yudhishthira began, but Duryodhana interrupted him.

“I wish to see my new slave in her entirety,” he said, and patted his thighs. “Dushasana, strip her. She shall sit on my lap.” The second-eldest Kaurava was barely more than an obedient dog, and he immediately lumbered back to his feet.

Around him, some were turning away or covering their eyes with their hands, unable to watch. Or perhaps out of respect. But Bhishma could not

turn away. He was stuck in his spot, forced to bear witness to the truth of those he had pledged himself to. No matter who had whispered in his ear, Duryodhana had chosen this. He had chosen to ruin this honorable family—his own cousins—and humiliate an honorable woman. Draupadi met Bhishma's eyes, chin raised, and he could not turn his back. He took a step toward her.

But then the weight of his oaths bore down on him, pinning him in place. Duryodhana was his liege. Duryodhana had made this choice, and Bhishma's promise prevented him from counteracting it. To break his oath would be to compound injustice with injustice.

Dushasana grabbed the end of Draupadi's sari, and her eyes bore into Bhishma. He would never forget this shame. "You are worthless men," Draupadi spat. "Even you, Bhishma Pitamaha, and you, Raja Dhritarashtra, and you, Dronacharya. Have you no honor?"

"Quiet," shouted Karna, who had leapt to his feet with a manic look in his eye, some ugly enjoyment at seeing his humiliation now reversed. "You are no more than a common—"

"You are my property now," Duryodhana cut in. "Do not forget it."

"I am nobody's but my own," Draupadi said. Her voice was steady and cool.

Duryodhana's face grew redder. "Teach this woman her place!"

Draupadi stumbled as Dushasana tugged at her sari, and tried to clutch it to herself. Although she had five husbands, she was known for her virtue. For her piety. The man tugged with more force, and the fabric slipped out of her hand. She closed her eyes. "Lord Krishna," she said, her voice ringing through the room and silencing the jeers and cries of men. "Protect me."

And then the fabric covering her gave way. Underneath, a new layer of fabric was draped over her, as though nothing had happened. Gasps rang out, but Draupadi did not seem surprised. She fixed her gaze on Duryodhana. "I do not fear you. He is with me."

"Strip her!" Duryodhana shouted, rising to his feet. His brother kept pulling, and Duryodhana joined him as the rest of the men sat in quiet awe. Fabric amassed at their feet, and still Draupadi remained covered. Her lips moved in silent prayer, and it was as though a light shone on her despite the night. Lord Krishna had protected her, his favored, and Bhishma murmured a prayer of thanks himself. It had felt as though he was watching from

outside his body, and at last, relief had brought him back.

“What is the meaning of this?” a new voice came ringing out, and Duryodhana and Dushasana stopped their cruel work to see their mother, standing by their father’s throne. “The jackals themselves bay outside that some evil deed has been done, and I find it is my own sons doing these works?” The blindfold was firmly in place, but Gandhari still always seemed to know what was happening. Where Shakuni had turned bitter at Gandhari’s marriage, Gandhari had thrived, a desert rose. She favored her sons, but not in the way Dhritarashtra did. She had always tried to temper their worst impulses, and seemed genuinely disgusted at her failures.

At her words, Dhritarashtra at last seemed to remember he had responsibilities greater than the humiliation of the Pandavas. He stirred, shame crossing his face at his wife’s reproach. “It is true, this game has gone too far. Draupadi, you should never have been treated thus. Approach, and tell me what you wish from me to make this right.”

Draupadi seemed unfazed by this turn of events, but then again she had just been the subject of divine blessing. Her eyes scanned over the assembled crowd once, before she bowed her head to Dhritarashtra. “Please, free my husband Yudhishthira. I could not bear for our son to be a slave.”

“It is done,” Dhritarashtra said with a wave of his hand. He was the raja and head of this family, and none would disobey him. “But that is not enough recompense. What else would you have?”

“The freedom of all the Pandava brothers,” Draupadi answered promptly. Duryodhana’s expression was almost pitifully disappointed, like a child who had a sweet stolen from him. But he did not protest.

“It is done. Surely there is more?”

Draupadi shook her head. “I am no gambler, nor am I a greedy woman. Two wishes is more than enough, lord.”

Bhishma marveled at this woman, whose own sense of dharma appeared to be equal to that of Vidura. Dhritarashtra too was moved. “Then of my own free will, I grant you and your husbands back your kingdom and riches. There is no need for such ill blood between family. Go now, in peace.”

Murmurs broke out among the assembled. An ugly mood was rising among Duryodhana’s brothers, but Gandhari clapped her hands together.

“You heard the raja. Go, now!”

As one, everyone moved toward the doors. The Pandava brothers were standing shamefaced with slumped shoulders near the table, likely waiting for their chance to quietly thank Dhritarashtra themselves. But Draupadi stood firm in front of them, meeting the eyes of each departing Kaurava with a steely gaze. Karna was one of the few who returned her look, stepping forward as if to say something to her before looking away, cheeks colored. Draupadi moved forward, as if to touch his arm, but then he was gone and the moment broken.

Bhishma considered approaching Draupadi himself, but she would have nothing kind to say to him either—nor should she. So as Vidura approached the brothers, to commiserate or warn or something else besides, Bhishma slipped away. Inaction had been the right thing to do. He had almost lost his faith in honor, but Gandhari had shown there was still righteousness in this world. He would not forget again.

Draupadi found him the next morning. It was well-known that he meditated in the garden in the morning, enjoying the quiet peace and the fountain that reminded him of river rushing over stone. He heard a soft rustling and opened his eyes to find her kneeling down next to him. She was dressed in gray, as though a servant, but still her dark skin shone with her inner light.

“I am glad to see you well,” Bhishma said.

She gave him a considering look. “I am surprised to hear that, Pitamaha. I thought you might speak in my defense. Your tongue could have easily curbed Duryodhana.” She was not one to prevaricate.

“Duryodhana is the crown prince of Hastinapur,” Bhishma said to her. “And I am sworn to this kingdom, and so to him.”

“Isn’t every man sworn to dharma first and foremost?” she asked. Her voice was light, as though discussing the weather.

It had been a long time since Bhishma had discussed the nature of dharma with anybody. But Draupadi was more than able to understand it, and he owed her some comfort besides. “To keep my oath is to satisfy dharma,” he said. “It is as you said. Yudhishthira could not wager you, for

he did not own himself. But had he owned himself, he could have wagered you and his brothers besides, because they were all subordinate to him. In this way, I am subordinate to the Kuru dynasty."

"So you admit this, that my husband could not wager me?" Bhishma nodded. "Then why did you not settle that dispute, at the least?"

"Because Duryodhana had spoken otherwise. He had the higher power in that room, and it was not for me to challenge it." He doubted she would understand this subtlety, for few did. Certainly Bhima and Arjuna would not agree with his assessment, despite their deference to Yudhishthira.

Draupadi looked toward the fountain, as if weighing her words. "Warriors are sworn to protect the helpless. But in that hall of warriors, including my husbands and cousins, and even you, my most respected elder, not one man protected or defended me from depravity and defilement. Only one woman did. What am I to make of this?"

She reminded him then of another woman he had known a lifetime ago, demanding answers about dharma and his behavior that he could not answer. But where Amba had been driven mad by the injustices she perceived, Draupadi was calm. She would not be out of place in an ashram, debating such philosophies with a rishi. "It is true that dharma forbids harming the powerless. But if every man chose to judge this meaning for himself, the world would be in chaos. That is why we have a society built carefully for each man to have a place, and to know who they may look to for guidance."

"Duryodhana looks to *you* for guidance," she said. "He is answerable to no one."

"I swore my oath to ensure peace," Bhishma said to her. "War is a terrible thing, that harms those who are weakest. I did my duty to prevent it, and so my place is beside the Kuru kings, not letting myself be corrupted by my own wishes. But you are wrong, for Duryodhana is answerable to the gods."

At this, Draupadi smiled slightly. "Lord Krishna did rescue me, it is true. But gods should not need to enforce that which men should plainly know."

"You are safe now," Bhishma said, for he had no answer to that.

Draupadi sat silent for a moment, thinking. "My husbands… They are not safe. As long as they are not safe, I am not."

"Nobody has any quarrel with you," he told her. "And I will do

everything in my power to ensure it is known that what happened yesterday must not happen again."

"I hope they listen." She rose to her feet and walked toward the fountain. "But you must know as well as I that Karna has quarrel with me, and has Duryodhana's ear besides."

It was hard to argue with either of those facts. Karna was perhaps a stauncher ally to Duryodhana than Shakuni, who served only himself, because Karna truly loved Duryodhana. Duryodhana had raised Karna from obscurity to the status his abilities rightly deserved.

Perhaps, if Karna knew the truth… but Karna knowing the truth now would only lead to the ruin of all, for Yudhishthira would then be honor bound to obey Karna. And while Bhishma did not know how Karna would react to such a revelation, he was a man shaped by bitterness and resentment. "I do not wish to make excuses for him, but Karna has had a hard life. Harder than yours and mine. I do not think he quarrels with you, but everything you represent to him. All the ridicule and mistreatment he has endured for the circumstances of his birth."

"So it is acceptable for him to hate me, the one who has done nothing to harm him?" Draupadi reached out and trailed a hand through the fountain's water. "I'm afraid I do not understand the rules of conduct at all."

Her meaning was clear, and they both knew she understood better than most men her place in the world and how to navigate it. "You are a remarkable woman," he said at last. "The young men of this kingdom would do well to carry themselves as you do. But I know that in the end you will find yourself safe and happy."

"Do you truly know that, Pitamaha? We are only at a beginning, and this will end in violence. Surely if I can feel it, you can too. If they would strip a defenseless woman in the hall… there is nothing they wouldn't do."

Bhishma considered her for a moment, wondered whether she had some gift of prophecy. She sounded so certain. But then, she had been the wife of the Pandava brothers for some time, this feud marring her entire marriage, and she was astute. Perhaps she was right and he was ignorant, to think that peace was yet an option. But he had to believe. "I truly am sorry for what you went through. If ever you and your husbands find yourselves in trouble, you can come to me. I have only ever wanted harmony between all of you."

She turned to face him, her small mouth twisting. "I know you believe

that to be true, Pitamaha. But if it comes to war between Duryodhana and my husbands, we both know whose side you will fight on. And what that will mean."

CHAPTER 20

GANGA, MANY YEARS BEFORE THE WAR

I WAITED FOR MY son to return to me. It was clear there was a greater pattern to Hastinapur's prominence, if only because I now observed the frequent visitation of it by the gods—Yama, Vayu, Indra, and the Ashvins all came in turn as Surya had once done, although I never caught sight of them or their offspring. Krishna might have known, might have shared some knowledge with me, but he had not yet come to me. I knew that when the time was right he would return and sit at my banks once more, yet still I missed him. It was a mortal longing, for my friend. I longed too for my son. I could not stop it.

But despite that, I had patience, and better than that I had time, a certainty that my child would come to me. Because for all his ties to his kingdom, and to humanity, I was his mother. And there was no more human bond than that.

Eventually he came. To my banks, at night, furtive. I wondered what he was afraid of, and swept him away to the ocean, where he could more freely speak. "I am growing more and more frustrated with the nobility who come to Hastinapur," he confessed, the words bursting out of him. "They have no

care for the good of our kingdom, or even their own kingdoms if they are foreign. Only themselves and their children."

I recalled the nobility I had met, both in my time as a human and since as a river. I found it difficult to see through their eyes, for their thoughts more than any others' were run through with hatred and disdain for those beneath them, which I could never understand. Why did they despise their servants so, why were their recollections tinged with disgust for the people who made their food and cleaned their cities? The nobles came to me with their arms laden with sacrifices, but I felt more honored by a farmer offering a few fruits, or a servant giving me a bauble. I did not need any of these things to offer my waters as a refuge, but I knew they took pride in such offerings.

"I have seen that myself," I told him. "They do not seem to realize the world does not exist for them."

"It bothers me too," he said, and I could tell from his expression he was relieved and glad to have found common ground with me, at least for the moment. "They come to believe everything belongs to them, and that everyone else in the world is trying to stop them from having what is theirs."

"And you do not?" I asked, thinking of Amba.

Bhishma shrugged his shoulders, a boyish act, his toes digging into the sand on the beach where I had brought him. "I am not a perfect man, and I know that. But truly, I have no desire for gold or land or treasures. Because I cannot improve my station in any way, I am freed from those wants. The corruption that you warned of. I cannot marry, or have children, or be king. And I am sworn to Hastinapur, so I have no temptation to go elsewhere."

When he said it that way, his life sounded like a cage. Gilded, to be sure, but still a cage. Like mine. It sounded like he knew it too, and knowing one was in a cage was a terrible thing. I felt a surge of affection toward my son. Although what he had done to Amba was terrible, I still could never want him to suffer. "It is a harder life than you should be living," I told him. "But it has made your thoughts less muddled than those around you."

"I worry about the Kuru line," he said, looking out over my waters. "They have all been poisoned by this same endless desire. My father… He wanted many things. But the cost was his heirs. His bloodline ended with his sons. And his grandchildren in name, and their children—they may not

be what Hastinapur needs.”

“Have I seen them?” I asked. “I do not think the royal family frequents my banks.”

“Old superstition.” Bhishma laughed, and I did too. Shantanu would be pleased to see his revulsion of me live on. “But you have not. Dhritarashtra is the raja. He is blind, and so he was not first to inherit the throne, but he is a decent man. His half brother, Pandu, was the raja, but he was cursed by a sage and lived as an ascetic until his death. And neither is of Kuru blood. Their mothers, Ambika and Ambalika, had children with another man, for their husband in name, Vichitravirya, could not sire any of his own.”

I remembered Ambika and Ambalika, the younger sisters of Amba, from her memories, and pitied them now for what their forced marriage had become. “Wherever Shantanu is reborn, he must live with some sense of unease,” I said. “After everything he did to secure his bloodline.”

“Do you truly want to hear about mortal politics?” Bhishma asked suddenly. “I would hear your advice, but perhaps all of this is beneath your notice.”

“It is important to you.” I let the air warm around him, reminding him of my affection. “The perspective of a river may be different enough to be useful.”

“Here is the problem, then. Pandu was raja first, and his first son, Yudhishthira, is the eldest of any children of that generation.”

“So he should rule,” I said, even knowing that there would be some other issue.

“Yudhishthira is not Pandu’s trueborn son. His mother, Kunti, had a blessing that she could have children with the gods, and so Yudhishthira—”

“Ah,” I said, pleased to know this much of the story. “So he is Surya’s son, then.” Perhaps he had changed his name from the more literal Karna into something more fitting.

Bhishma frowned. “No. Yudhishthira is the son of Yama.”

Something about this tugged at me. I thought of the many gods who had recently come to earth, and apparently fathered children. “Is this Yudhishthira’s mother?” I asked, and I let the water fall into the shape of the woman who had set Surya’s child adrift.

“That is Kunti,” he said, his brow furrowing. “I am assuming you have met her then… when she bore Surya’s child? When was this?”

“At least ten years ago, perhaps longer,” I told him. I had seen Karna once or twice more after guiding him to safe shores, a chubby-faced babe, running around with his mother near my waters. *Look where we found you*, she would say. *You are our little blessing from the river.* But he had not caught my attention in many years, and I did not know what had become of him now.

To my surprise, Bhishma bit out a curse. “What is it?”

“If what you say is true, that would make this other child the firstborn son. He would have a better claim than even Yudhishthira. Although… I do not know if Kunti was properly wed to Pandu at the time.” He leaned his head in his hands. “This is all a mess. I do not know what to do.”

“Kunti released the child into my waters, and I brought him to safety far away from here. He will be extraordinary, for he is the child of a god, but he should not worry you. You came here because something else was on your mind.”

“Yes.” He took a deep breath, then lifted his head back up. “The firstborn son of Dhritarashtra is named Duryodhana. He is not as great as Yudhishthira and his brothers, all of whom are children of gods, but he is a good child. His father wishes for him to be king.”

“Why do you care what his father wishes?” I asked. “If you believe Yudhishthira will be the better king, then ensure he is the next raja. Truly this does not sound so difficult.” Mortals, I found, always wanted to complicate things when the choice was clear.

Bhishma shook his head. “It is not that simple. I am sworn to obey the raja. If Dhritarashtra named Duryodhana heir, I could not contravene it.”

“Then, if he is a good enough child, help raise him to be a great king.” For a moment, I wondered if I was being foolish. This seemed so easy to me, the path of least resistance the best path to follow.

“I intend to. But even still, I worry there will be war. Yudhishthira is a model of what a prince should be, and he might give up the throne to avoid conflict, but his brothers have strong tempers. They would not accept Duryodhana. And Duryodhana and his brothers would not accept Yudhishthira.”

“They do not sound like perfect children, then, if none would accept their own brother’s decision.” Just because they were the children of the gods did not mean they were flawless and blameless.

“It is difficult to explain,” my son said.

“Then allow me to see.”

Bhishma was watching an exhibition. Arjuna, the third of the Pandava brothers, had just defeated all the young princes who were engaged in an archery competition. Duryodhana was standing red-faced, the last competitor to be struck down. Yudhishthira was hovering in the back—his skill had always been with the spear. There was an ugly mood in the air, as if they were attending something much worse than a friendly competition.

“Can nobody beat him?” Duryodhana exclaimed. He was only twelve, and the loss to the younger boy had clearly pushed him over the edge.

“I am unbeatable,” Arjuna declared, a smug look on his face.

At this, Yudhishthira started forward. “Don’t say that,” he reprimanded quickly. “Do not insult the gods that way.” Arjuna looked to the dirt, scuffing it with his foot. Yudhishthira turned to Dronacharya, their combat instructor and the man who had arranged the exhibition. “Are we not done?”

And then, pushing through some of the assembled boys who were standing in the back, someone called out, “I could do what Prince Arjuna did. That and more!”

The lanky young man approaching looked to be a bit older than Yudhishthira, and there was something striking about his bearing. Some air of power, like the Pandavas carried with them. Arjuna rolled his eyes. “Who are you, some stable boy? I won’t fight someone like you.”

Bhishma swallowed down a reprimand from all the way in the stands. It would not do to shame Arjuna in front of all assembled, nor to openly advise breaking the rules of engagement—for it was true, by the rules of the world, a stable boy and prince should never fight. Yudhishthira grasped Arjuna’s shoulder sharply, and Bhishma felt a brief stab of pride for the older boy. He would never say such a thing, nor believe a servant inferior simply for their status. It was because of Yudhishthira’s goodness that he could hope for the future. All the same, he stood from the stands and made his way to the cluster, just in case anything spiraled out of control.

“What is your name?” Duryodhana asked the boy, who stood straight-backed and ready. “Your lineage?”

When the boy turned to Duryodhana, my son got a glimpse of his face. And I knew him. Even though years had passed since I last saw him, the way he shone was unmistakable. “Karna. My father is a charioteer.” A commoner.

Karna met Arjuna’s eyes. “Are you afraid to compete with me? You who has had every advantage? What have you to fear from the commoners you so despise?” Arjuna did not answer as Yudhishthira’s fingers dug into his shoulder.

“Can you really beat him?” Duryodhana asked.

“Easily.”

“Then… Pitamaha!” Duryodhana’s eyes alit on Bhishma as he drew near. “I would like to gift Karna some of my land, in Anga. He can be king of Anga then, yes? And he can compete?”

It was of course allowed, but an overreaction to losing to one’s cousin. “Yes, but…”

“It is done.”

Karna was looking at Duryodhana with something akin to worship in his eyes. “You cannot—”

“Please,” Duryodhana said, handing Karna his bow and quiver. “Just win.”

The boys had been shooting at targets set in various difficult positions ahead. Arjuna had shot all but one, and now he stepped back with a smug smile. Yudhishthira’s face was serious, but he murmured a brief “good luck” to Karna. Karna did not seem to hear, his face taking on the same intense concentration that Arjuna had just worn. Even before Karna lifted his bow, Bhishma knew. This boy was a phenomenal archer, a terrifying warrior—and something had just come loose between the cousins. Something that could never be replaced.

Dronacharya could not seem to believe his eyes when Karna’s arrow buried itself in the outer edge of the final target, the one that his star pupil had barely missed. Karna was older than Arjuna, it was true, but it seemed Arjuna had at last found an equal. A rival. And Dronacharya could do nothing to protect his favored pupil because Duryodhana had already claimed and elevated him. But Karna did not care about Dronacharya or

Arjuna, nor Yudhishthira, who stepped forward to try to congratulate him. He had eyes only for Duryodhana, the two boys looking at each other as if each had hung the moon.

"How can I possibly repay you?" Karna asked. His voice wobbled slightly.

"All I want is your friendship," Duryodhana said. Bhishma was glad that Duryodhana had learned to be generous. Even if he had done it to humiliate Arjuna, Duryodhana had, with kindness and an open hand, won a strong ally.

Karna smiled, and it was like a ray of sunshine had fallen upon him. "You already have that."

I recognized all the gods in the countenances of their children. Surya, god of sun and light, his son Karna strong and shining like a beacon of power. Yama, arbiter of justice, his son Yudhishthira serious and considering. Vayu, god of the wind, his son Bhima as large and showy as him. Indra, god of lightning and thunder, his son Arjuna accomplished and quick to anger. The Ashvins, twin physicians of the gods, their small, young sons Nakula and Sahadeva watching the proceedings with kindness and concern. I wondered, if another looked upon my son, whether they might see me in him. Was that why he preferred these brothers? Did they share something deeper, something that mere mortals could not understand, with the blood of the divine flowing through their veins? But then, he did not seem to care for Karna—

"He is the child you spoke of, is he not?" Bhishma did not even wait for my response before hitting his fist into his palm. "How did I never see it before? Do you see now what I am faced with?"

"I see that some of them are arrogant and unready, but they are children. Give them time, see what they become. As for the two elders, their hearts are in the right place, it seems. Is that not the best one can hope for?" I almost said that they reminded me of him, for they both did in their own way. But I did not think Bhishma would appreciate that comparison right now.

“I cannot tell Karna who he is.”

“I did not say you should,” I told him. His shoulders relaxed a fraction at that, at what he took as approval for his plan. I did not know whether he was making the right decision, but time would tell him, and that would have to be enough. “Help them—all of them—to have as happy a life as they can, and do not fill their heads with thoughts of war. They are still young. It is a mere rivalry that they have. You have not shown me some heinous blood feud from which none can recover.”

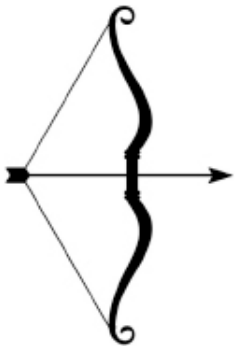
My son nodded, but I could see disagreement in his eyes. “That is true, but, Mother… I feel it coming. Something bad is brewing between them, even though they are not themselves bad.”

“Then avert it. Nothing is certain. You can counteract the forces pushing them to violence.” I knew even as I said it that it was hollow advice. I remembered my time as Jahnavi, how pervasive the way of life was even to someone like me with an eternity of existence and a strong desire to remain distant. What chance did young princes have? I did not know how to be more helpful to my son, a feeling of uselessness I hated. “Perhaps Lord Krishna might help you,” I offered at last. “I know not where he is, but tell him you are the son of Ganga and he will come to your aid.”

At this, he smiled. “I do not think I need to involve yet another god in the politics of Hastinapur just yet,” he said. “But I will remember that when the time comes. I am sure I will have need.” He sat with me for some time longer, watching the sun set on the ocean, before I returned him back to his mortal world once more.

CHAPTER 21

BHISHMA, ONE YEAR BEFORE THE WAR



WHEN THE SUN DISAPPEARED from the sky, all of Hastinapur descended into fervent prayer. Bhishma did not worry about the sun, for he knew that if Surya was conquered, the mortal world would have felt more than this slight disruption. It was, perhaps, an omen—a sign of the war that grew ever closer on the horizon. But more than that, it was an opportunity to visit his mother without enduring the watchful eyes that were always on him.

She rose as always to greet him in that cool manner of hers. “How are you, my son?”

“Worried,” he answered truthfully. Despite her obvious disappointment that he had embraced his humanity and involved himself in the conflicts of the mortal world, his mother had never failed to care for him or provide him aid when she could. It was better than many sons could hope for from their mothers, he knew.

She sat beside him on the banks, a being with all the radiance of endless

blue water in the sunlight, and now she laughed, a sound that reminded him of ice fracturing in a northern mountain pond. “This is a mere illusion, a natural phenomenon,” she said, gesturing at the sky. “Surya and Chandra have set paths for themselves, from which they do not deviate for the betterment of this world. Sometimes, rarely, those paths cross.”

“They say it portends war to come,” he said.

“That is because all of you feel that war is coming. When you know what lies ahead, you read that future in everything.”

“Is it inevitable?” he asked, suddenly afraid that she spoke so assuredly of the future. He still harbored a hope deep in his chest that somehow this would all be averted. He did not acknowledge, except in the darkest recesses of his mind, that if all his efforts at peace so far had ended in miserable failure, his next efforts were likely destined for the same.

He had known, after the dice game, that nothing was settled. And much to his disappointment, Yudhishthira had agreed to another, smaller dice game with Duryodhana despite the events of the first. Despite agreeing to give up his wife. Bhishma had felt genuine anger at Yudhishthira for this reckless, callous choice, this sickness that left him addicted to the dice table. Bhishma had advised against it, and although Duryodhana was beyond Bhishma’s control, beyond reason, Yudhishthira should have known better. Instead, he had wagered thirteen years of his brothers’ lives to be spent in exile, hunted by Duryodhana, with their lands forfeit if they were found. Bhishma was heartsick, disappointed in both of them, astounded at the height of their folly… and dreading what was yet to come. Because the Pandava brothers’ exile would be over in time, and regardless of whether they were found by Duryodhana before the exile ended or returned home afterward, they would want blood, and the kingdom would pay it if Bhishma could not stop it.

She looked at him. “I do not have the gift of prophecy,” she said. “Perhaps, if you were to ask another…”

“Lord Krishna seems certain,” he whispered.

“One does not have to be a god to know that is the direction your great empire has turned toward. That should come as no surprise. There were days not so long ago where you happily made war, did you not?”

Bhishma swallowed, uncomfortable under her calm gaze. She asked the question without any seeming judgment, but it was true that he had proudly

undertaken many campaigns for the Kurus, and he felt ashamed all the same. “Now it is my own family that is headed to war.”

“You have always been making war on someone’s family,” she said. Her waves lapped at his bare feet, softening the blow of her words.

“I know,” he admitted. “But it is only now that I am coming to truly understand their pain.”

A breeze swept over her waters. Without the light of the sun he should have felt cold, but instead Bhishma felt sheltered and warm. Safe. As though all talk of omens and war was far from him.

“Do you intend to fight?” she asked at last.

“I would have no choice, if it came to it,” he said. “I am sworn—”

“To Hastinapur,” she finished, saying the name like a curse. Her composure always broke when discussing Bhishma’s home.

“I am doing everything in my power to stop it from coming to that. It is more than just my family who will be hurt. The Kuru kingdom is massive, and the Pandava brothers have many more kingdoms besides sworn to them. Nobody will be spared. I cannot let it happen if any other choice remains to me.”

“That is admirable,” she said. “I am glad that you have such foresight.”

Bhishma had lived more than half a century, some decades beyond that, and had seen two generations come of age after him, but his mother still made him feel like a young man, in need of praise for understanding basic facts of the world. And yet, some part of him celebrated her words, basked in them. But that was not why he had come to her. “I did not come to talk about the war. Or, I suppose I did, but not directly. Recently… Well, for some time, I have heard rumors of a great warrior who is training to defeat me.”

“Surely there are many warriors who train to defeat you,” his mother said. It could have been a compliment if not for her tone that indicated she disdained the whole concept of warriors and defeat. Or perhaps that was simply his perception.

“That is true,” he said. “Ordinarily, I would not be concerned. But I heard…”

The words were hard to say, but his mother only waited, patient. Would she think him foolish, or would she confirm his worst fears? It was hard to say which option was worse. “I heard that this warrior was blessed by Lord

Shiva in his endeavors. Lord Shiva… and you."

To his horror, his mother did not immediately deny it. Instead she asked, "Is that all?"

"I would find it very concerning indeed if two deities as powerful as you and Lord Shiva had blessed a warrior bent on fighting me. Not to mention"—and here he debated whether to say it at all before pressing on—"you are my mother."

"I am," she agreed. "But I am also a god, and it is my responsibility to give aid when I am asked."

"So you did…" He could not bring himself to finish the sentence around the growing lump in his throat. He had made mistakes, to be sure, but for his own mother to be helping those seeking his demise?

"I can think of someone who might fit the description," she said softly. "I did not aid them directly, but I allowed Lord Shiva to do so."

"Why?" he asked. To his horror, his voice cracked, as though he was an adolescent of sixteen again. As though he was eleven, leaving his mother behind because the world was more important than a simple and foolish child, and his mother was a goddess who could not be expected to put him first. As though that secret hope that she would reach forward and take him, fight for him despite his words, was being extinguished all over again.

He was just another man, unworthy.

"I do not wish to see any harm come to you," she said, and for the first time, she moved to touch him, holding his hand in one of hers. "But I must also be impartial. I know you have striven to always be honorable, but even so, is there nobody whom you have hurt so badly they might appeal to the gods themselves for aid?"

Bhishma thought of Draupadi, chin raised and defiant as her elders allowed her to be disrobed in Hastinapur's great palace. But she was living in exile with her husbands, helping them amass allies on their travels. She would not swear vengeance on him, when Duryodhana and Shakuni had been the main architects of her misery. He closed his eyes, and a face swam before him. A young woman, weeping and begging as Bhishma refused her marriage, refused her honor.

"Amba," he whispered. His mother said nothing, but her silence was enough. "I did not mean to hurt her. I behaved as honorably as I could."

"Did you, truly?" his mother asked.

His tongue loosened with the memory. “I had no choice, in any of it,” he said. “There were two heirs, born after I renounced the throne. But the elder son died leaving only his weak younger brother. If there was any fault of mine, it was there, for I should have better protected my half brother… but he wanted to charge out onto the battlefield. I did not stop him.

“The Queen Mother ordered me to bring home the three princesses of Kashi for her younger son to wed. I had made a vow, to always serve Hastinapur. I could not disobey. I could not.” His mother said nothing, her gaze fixed ahead to the opposite shore. But he knew she could still see him, perceive him more than any mere mortal could.

“Kashi was sworn to Hastinapur, only recently at that time, and they had yet to pay tribute. Hastinapur had a right to take the princesses. And I did not drag them onto the chariot; they came willingly. When I learned Amba had a betrothed, I allowed her to go with him. It was he who refused. Because he was embarrassed at having been beaten.”

“But you did fight him for her,” his mother said.

“Yes,” he admitted, feeling slightly frustrated. What other choice had he had, when a stranger demanded he return the princesses? “He did not explain himself fully. He attacked, and I fought. It is not my fault that I defeated him. She could still have gone with him. Nobody needed to know that he had been beaten. I voluntarily released her.”

“But he adhered to his code, as you do to your vows.”

Bhishma knew that, knew this particular argument was perhaps not his best. He pressed on. “When she refused to marry the king, I did not force her. But neither could I marry her. So I let her go home.” There was silence, and Bhishma knew he had not told the whole story. “She wanted to fight me, but I could not. It would have been against every code of honor known to us. I humiliated her, by sending her home like a rejected maiden, I know. It is because of the circumstances I created that her life was ruined. But I did not choose it myself.”

“You did choose,” she said. “You chose to take the girls. You chose to fight her beloved. You chose not to fight her. You chose to obey your vows instead of doing what might have helped her.”

“If I broke my vows for every person they disadvantaged, they would be meaningless! I am doing what you told me to, preventing myself from being corrupted by all these temptations. Adhering to my word, even when it is

inconvenient.”

“Perhaps that advice was mistaken, then,” she said.

At that, something inside Bhishma snapped. “The vows were not my choice either, in the end. You cannot blame me for them, when I was simply trying to make my father happy!” He took a heaving breath, then gave voice to the thought that had long haunted him. “My father should not have intimated he cared more about marrying his second wife than keeping me as heir.”

“No,” his mother agreed. “He should not have. He was so very wrong to do that to you. He was wrong about a great many things, but none more so than that.”

“Everything that has happened, it is because of my vows. I know that. But I must honor my word. That is who I am.”

“Amba deserved more,” his mother said. “The gods gave her what she deserved. We did not give her any martial prowess or some special ability to harm you—I know you do not think me much of a mother, but I would not do that.” He opened his mouth to protest, but she lifted a hand. “We gave her a chance at a better life. Nothing more, and nothing less.”

It was as though an elephant had been lifted from his chest. “Truly?”

“Does that reassure you?” she asked.

“I am glad that Amba’s soul got that chance,” he said honestly. “But if you did not gift her new form any special power, then she cannot be any true threat to me on the battlefield. Yes, perhaps she could poison me or use some other feminine tactic… but I am not concerned.”

“Amba’s new form is Shikhandi. Amba has become a man. A warrior.”

It did not matter, and his mother should have known that. “Even if this Shikhandi is a man, I can meet any mortal man without difficulty.”

He felt the weight of her consideration for a moment. “I hope you achieve peace,” she said at last. “If anyone is capable, it will be you. But if war comes, I also hope that you do not make the same mistake twice.”

“What mistake?” he asked, for he truly did not know.

“Believing that honor comes from your vows alone,” she said. “Dharma is much more than keeping your promises.”

“I am well aware,” he said. “I know you do not believe war can ever be good, and you are right. But war can at least have some justice to it, and I will ensure this one does, if it comes to pass.”

“Even if your precious king of Hastinapur orders otherwise?” she asked.

He opened his mouth to answer, and a ray of sun fell into his eyes. He glanced upward on instinct, to see a burning sliver of light emerging from the blanket of the moon. Despite himself, he smiled.

“Some part of you worried the sun would not return,” his mother observed.

“Yes,” he admitted. “A small part, despite my better sense.”

Was it his imagination, or did his mother look sad? She did not reply, but instead raised her waters until his feet were entirely submerged in pleasant coolness, small waves lapping against his skin, and remained with him until Surya shone proudly in the sky once more.

CHAPTER 22

GANGA, MANY YEARS BEFORE THE WAR

IT SEEMED, AFTER MY son offered me his memories of Hastinapur's princes, that everything in Hastinapur slowed. The conquests, the dramas, the successions. I hoped that he had been successful, because I heard little of their empire for years, only occasionally picking up some word through those who visited my banks.

The blind king ruled peacefully. Shikhandi did not return, and I thought perhaps Bhishma would choose the right king among the princes, and although he was aging slowly, old age would eventually bring him back to me.

It came as a surprise, then, when one day, a young man came to my banks not far from Hastinapur. He carried a bow on his back, an instrument of war in a time of peace, which he released into my river. Soldiers often gave me their weapons to renounce war, but I was not aware there had been one in some time. "Please accept this bow, devi," he prayed. "And grant me the strength and fortune to find another, so that I may still be an archer one day."

It was this odd prayer that truly caught my attention. His hands trailed in

the water, and I realized he was missing his right thumb. He did not have the look of one who had been to war, and he seemed still hopeful despite whatever had befallen him. Now curious, I reached my power out to him, to see what sorrows he brought to the River Ganga.

He was a young boy, adopted by the chieftain of a powerful tribe and standing at the great training fields of Hastinapur. He loved archery, loved it more than anything in the world. It was an art form, a tool, not just a weapon. And he had heard of the great Dronacharya, teacher of the Kuru princes. Dronacharya could teach him. He just had to be convinced.

He was nervous, because his father was at war with one of the vassal kingdoms of the Kurus. But he had agreed to this, and the Kurus were known to be just and civilized. They would not turn him away, his father had told him. He believed his father.

“Who are you?” a boy asked. He had a bow slung across his back, his long hair tied away from his eyes and a smile on his face. An archer.

He offered the boy a smile of his own. “My name is Ekalavya,” he said. “I have come to ask Dronacharya to take me as a pupil.”

The boy laughed, and Ekalavya found himself laughing along although he did not know why. “You want Dronacharya to teach you?” he asked. Ekalavya nodded, eager. Perhaps he could introduce him. “Come with me.”

I wished I could reach out, warn the child away, for I recognized the boy he was with. No good would come of this.

The boy set off quickly across the field toward a large, strong man with flowing white hair. A thrill of excitement went through Ekalavya. He prostrated himself before Dronacharya, and his guide laughed again. “Here is a boy who wishes to learn from you, Guru,” the boy said. He went to stand off to the side, with a few other well-dressed boys. “Look at him,” he said to his friends, loud enough for Ekalavya to hear.

“That’s enough, Arjuna,” Dronacharya said. His voice was deep, commanding, and Ekalavya pressed his head to his feet. Arjuna, the Pandava prince who was already renowned for his ability. Of course he would laugh at Ekalavya’s paltry ambition. “Rise, child. What is your

name?”

“My name is Ekalavya, Guruji,” he said, lifting his face.

“Why have you come here, Ekalavya?”

“I wish to learn archery from you, sir.” He hoped his voice did not tremble.

“Most who come to me already know how to shoot,” he said. He gestured to a target toward the end of the field. “Why don’t you show me what you have learned?”

He had only a simple hunting bow with him, but he strung it, trying to ignore the sounds of laughter behind him. “Does he not know he is to *approach* the target?” someone said.

He nocked the arrow, drew the string, and felt calm fall over him as it always did. The world around him slowed, narrowed, until there was only him and the target. He released the arrow—and with a sharp whistle, it buried itself in the center.

He turned back to the boys and his future teacher, smiling. But the boys now looked angry, and Dronacharya troubled. He scrubbed the smile from his face. Perhaps he had been too arrogant. He ducked his head.

“You shoot very well,” Dronacharya said gravely. “Where are you from? Who is your father?”

Ekalavya swallowed. “My father is a Nishadha chieftain, from the north.”

Arjuna gave a nasty laugh. “Now I understand your matted hair, your dirty clothes. You are a tribal! You should not be here.”

“Arjuna!” Dronacharya snapped. The boy shut his mouth and scowled angrily at the ground.

A larger boy next to him crossed his arms. “You are to make Arjuna the best archer in the world,” he said. “Not some lowborn monkey.”

The eldest of the boys, his black hair tied back neatly, gave him a sharp smack. “Bhima! Apologize!”

Ekalavya’s face burned. He should have bathed in a stream before his arrival. He had been too excited. “I am sorry,” Dronacharya said. “You are very talented, and will be a credit to your tribe. But I cannot train you.”

“Why, Guruji?” Ekalavya knew he would not be persuaded, but still he hoped to receive some wisdom.

“I only train kshatriya,” Dronacharya said, and then he turned back to

his charges and Ekalavya was left standing there, bereft.

Ekalavya was in the forest. I did not recognize it, but from his knowledge it seemed he was no more than a two days' walk from Hastinapur. The trees were tall, thick, dark, but Ekalavya had found a sun-dappled clearing. There he labored, shaping a statue out of clay. He needed a teacher. If he could not have Dronacharya, then he would make one. He remembered Dronacharya's face clearly, his wise expression, his steady posture. Under his teacher's gaze, he would practice all day and worship all night until he became an archer worthy of his tribe.

When the statue was completed, Ekalavya began his studies. Days passed, moons, and then years. He was grown now, still practicing his archery in his self-assured way.

He heard a band of people approaching his hut and stepped out to greet them. His stomach fell. Dronacharya was here, of all places. Behind him stood Arjuna and his training mates.

"Ekalavya," Dronacharya said, surprised. "*You* are the archer who lives here."

"Yes, Guruji," he said, keeping his eyes on his feet.

"Did you shoot the dog?"

Ekalavya remembered, now, the dog that kept barking in the forest. He had not seen the animal, but he had heard distant voices calling to the dog and asking what it sensed, and so he had shot the dog's mouth sight unseen in a manner that would stop it from barking without hurting it. He had been trying to avoid the attention of the approaching men by silencing the dog, but it seemed that had backfired.

"Yes, Guruji."

"How did you learn this?" he asked. "Who is your teacher?"

He had studied at his guruji's feet every day, and could not answer falsely. "You, Guruji," he said, and brought the party around his hut to the back where the clay statue stood. "Everything I learned, I learned under your watchful eye."

"Incredible," Dronacharya breathed. "Show me."

That old hope and happiness came over Ekalavya, and he began to shoot arrow after arrow, first at his targets and then into the trees, creating shapes and patterns as he saw them in his mind.

“Halt!” Dronacharya called. He was smiling. “You have done exceedingly well, Ekalavya. I am impressed.”

Arjuna pushed forward, face red with anger. “How can this be? You promised to make me the greatest archer in Bharat.” Someone snorted behind him. One of the young men at the back was staring at Arjuna with untempered loathing, his skin glowing as though the sun was shining on him through the thick canopy. Arjuna did not seem to hear.

Karna, it seemed, had fully joined the young men of Hastinapur—arrayed against his blood brothers.

“He has done this with great study and piety,” Dronacharya said. “That is to be respected.”

“This man claims to have learned from you. Would you let such lowborn filth lie thus?” The man in the back flinched at Arjuna’s words, but the rest laughed, jeering. Ekalavya kept his eyes on his teacher.

Dronacharya shook his head slowly, looking desolate. “Ekalavya, if you claim to have learned from me, then you must pay me my gurudakshina. Do you know what that is?”

“I will pay any fee you ask, Guruji,” he said. Perhaps his teacher would ask him not to return home, or never to fight, but Ekalavya would gladly give such a price. Here in this forest, under this statue, he had been able to partake in his true love.

“If you are certain, then I would take your right thumb as payment,” Dronacharya said.

Confusion jolted through Ekalavya and for a brief moment he thought perhaps his teacher had a cruel sense of humor. Then he spied the face of the man in the back, looking upon the scene with horror. And Dronacharya’s eyes were fixed on the statue, unable to meet Ekalavya’s gaze.

But Ekalavya had given his word, and this statue had taught him, speaking in his guruji’s voice when he faltered. He knew immediately he would give what his guruji asked. Give everything, for this man and this cruel prince. His father had not raised a coward.

Before he could think too much on it, he drew his hunting knife and

severed his thumb. He felt no pain as he dropped to his knees and offered it to Dronacharya. The rest of the boys had turned away, but Arjuna was watching steadily. Ekalavya met his gaze, bleeding at the feet of his teacher.

These princes were among those who might one day rule Hastinapur. I suddenly understood Bhishma's worries. They were cruel, arrogant, and selfish. It did not surprise me that they would be so jealous of another's skill that they would ask for his maiming. But that their learned teacher had obeyed despite his clear desire not to, and the fact that Bhishma thought any of these boys fit for power, was disquieting.

Despite Ekalavya's calm exterior here at my banks, I could sense humiliation and hints of anger in these memories. He still revered his teacher, but that only made the hurt worse. He was surrounded by others and yet would never possess the understanding he craved or return to the home he left behind. I understood this pain. The anguish of my separation may have faded, but I never forgot what I had once been, the price this world had extracted.

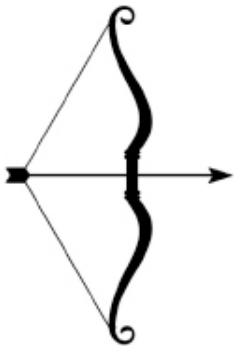
Unlike Amba, he did not ask for reincarnation or for any aid other than strength and luck, which I could not truly provide. But I was determined to improve his life, to make some mark on him and aid him on his journey.

I could heal him—but I did not want to encourage his dream of archery overmuch, for it was still an art of destruction at its core. So instead, I tried to offer him some measure of inner peace. I found that place in his mind consumed by the memory and, with a soft voice, tried to tell him, *It is they who should be ashamed.* I felt it work, felt him take heart, his burden lightened. But any happiness I experienced at this success was dim. My words to my own self felt hollow. I had given Hastinapur life, had been wife and childbearer to its king, from whom all this conflict now stemmed.

Not for the first time, I wondered how much of this was in fact the fault of gods who should have known better.

CHAPTER 23

BHISHMA, A FEW MONTHS BEFORE THE WAR



DURYODHANA HAD NEVER BEEN the most learned at math, preferring the battlefield and weaponry to books and scrolls. This was no sin or failure in Bhishma's eyes, but it did mean that it fell to him to inform the crown prince of the truth.

Under Duryodhana's terms, the Pandavas had to remain in exile for thirteen years. If they emerged—or were found by Duryodhana's allies—before those years were up, they would have to repeat their exile. Arjuna had emerged on the first day of the fourteenth year to rout nearby Kaurava forces, and Duryodhana had claimed victory, crowing that he had succeeded in forcing the Pandavas to emerge from their exile. When Bhishma told him that it was in fact the day after the new moon, and therefore the Pandavas' exile was at an end, Duryodhana grew quiet and retreated to a room with his brothers. Bhishma knew then they would not return the Pandava kingdom to Yudhishthira.

Yudhishthira must have known this too, but still he sent a messenger to

Hastinapur requesting what was his by right. Bhishma counseled Duryodhana that all rules of dharma, and his own rules of the dice game besides, meant that he should return Indraprastha at once.

Duryodhana refused. Dhritarashtra stayed silent.

Yudhishthira sent a second message, warning that in exile he had amassed many troops and allies. He only wanted peace, he said, to return to their separate kingdoms now that the exile was over. Bhishma counseled Duryodhana that as a kind and benevolent ruler, he should seek to avoid war at all costs, especially with those whose claim was righteous.

Duryodhana refused. Dhritarashtra stayed silent.

When Krishna entered Hastinapur, Bhishma still harbored some small hope that all this might have a peaceful resolution.

“Great rulers,” Krishna began, “I am here on behalf of the Pandava brothers, and Maharaja Yudhishthira. Although I have counseled them that they are entitled to their kingdom, nothing more and nothing less, they have decided to be kind to you. To give you the understanding you do not give them. Yudhishthira believes that perhaps it is better for the kingdom to be unified. But he and his brothers still deserve a place to live, free from the danger this court clearly poses to them. So they ask that you grant them five villages on the border of your great lands, one for each of them, that they might live in peace.”

Before Duryodhana could speak, Bhishma cut in. “That is indeed a wise and gracious proposal. The Pandavas are entitled to much more, by the terms of your agreement with them, but this would at least settle the question once and for all. You would be raja of all, and they would be minor lords, far from Hastinapur.”

But Duryodhana would not be swayed. “Did the Pandavas not gamble away all they had, even their own freedom, until a woman saved them? This folly is of their own making, not mine. As long as I live, the Pandavas will not have a kingdom, or a village, or the smallest patch of earth. I would not grant them even the amount of land that would fit on the tip of the smallest needle.”

Even Dhritarashtra looked shocked at this declaration. The lust for power, the desire to triumph, ran deep, so deep that it had consumed Duryodhana.

“If you will grant them nothing, there will be war,” Krishna warned.

“And you will be on the wrong side.”

“The wrong side?” Duryodhana sneered. “This land is all mine by right.”

“You have refused to give up that which is not yours to possess. You are contravening dharma, contravening righteousness itself.” Krishna spoke calmly, that god-calm Bhishma recognized from his mother. It stirred fear in his belly.

“Who are you, a cowherd, to tell me what is righteous?” Duryodhana demanded.

Had nobody learned their lesson? “Lord Krishna is an honored guest in our hall,” Bhishma said sharply. “You would do well to speak with respect.”

Krishna’s eyes met his, and Bhishma detected a subtle hint of approval. “You are to be my general in this war,” Duryodhana said. “And this honored guest will be your enemy.”

Krishna raised an eyebrow, as if to ask, *Will you be his general?* Bhishma looked away.

“I am not a general,” said Vidura suddenly. Silence fell, and Bhishma looked at him in shock. Though he was a powerful minister, it was not like him to speak in these circumstances. “But I have studied much, and I know this man is worthy of your respect. You must heed the call to peace, else—”

“Now you too would betray me?” Duryodhana demanded. “Perhaps it is your low birth, your shudra mother, that makes you feel such affinity for—”

“You know not what you speak of,” Krishna broke in, and there was a low undercurrent of warning in his voice. “Is this to be the king all you so-called learned and righteous men follow into war? He who tried to burn his cousins to death by trickery, so he might have the kingdom? He who undertook a rigged gambling match to deprive his cousins of everything? He who sought to strip a noble and virtuous woman before all of you? He who now refuses to return stolen land, a stolen kingdom, all for his own greed and jealousy?”

Krishna paused to take a breath. His eyes were shining, the court held under his spell a moment longer. “Your leader is wicked. Your leader is wrongful. He leads you all into sin.”

Duryodhana’s face had turned a bright, burning red. “Seize him!” he roared.

For a moment, nobody moved. The Kuru guards were not all as bold as

Duryodhana, and many believed that Krishna was in fact a god.

“Now!” Duryodhana shouted, and at last the guards rushed into action. They raced toward Krishna, swords drawn—

There was a blinding flash of light. Bhishma blinked away the sparks to see Krishna standing there, shaking his head in disappointment. It appeared that Vidura and Dronacharya had their wits about them, but nobody else was standing; all the Kurus were slumped or lying senseless on the ground.

“You are wise and learned enough to know better,” Krishna said. “Come with me. Prevent this war by refusing to fight for injustice.”

Vidura stepped forward without hesitation. “I have thought, all this time, I could bring peace by staying here. But I see now that is folly.”

“Gangaputra?” Krishna asked softly. Bhishma could feel deep within him the piece of his heart and soul that yearned to break his vow and follow Krishna urging him that this was the choice that would seal his fate. But he would be committing injustice no matter what he decided—and to break his word now would be the greater one. At least at Duryodhana’s side, as his general, he could do everything in his power to temper his grandnephew’s warmongering spirit.

He shook his head. Krishna turned away then, Vidura one step behind him, and exited the court. Bhishma did not look at Dronacharya, instead staying where he was until at last Duryodhana stirred.

“Do you see now?” Bhishma asked. “He is a god. You would do well to heed him. There is still time and opportunity enough.”

Duryodhana snorted. “It was a trick, nothing more. Neither his pretty words nor his talk of dharma matters. Our armies are larger, our commanders superior, and at the helm, we have you. The Pandavas are fools enough to fight you, and they are too foolish to win.”

And so the kingdom marched on toward war.

That night, hoping to speak to Lord Krishna, Bhishma dressed as a commoner and slipped away toward the river, knowing Krishna would likely visit his old friend. He stopped, though, at the sound of a familiar voice.

“Why did you ask to meet me?” Karna asked. “You heard Duryodhana. There will not be peace.”

“I thank you for coming,” Krishna said. Bhishma knew instantly what this was about, and traitorous hope burned in his chest. He had never been able to tell Karna, for it had never been his place, but Krishna could. If Karna listened…

“There is something you should know. Something that should have been told to you long ago.”

“And somehow this fact will make me force Duryodhana to end the war, I assume.” Karna had always been ready with a quip.

Bhishma crept closer, feeling like an interloper but unable to sneak away. Karna was looking at Krishna with an expression of suspicion. He was a handsome man, but where his skin usually shone, it seemed duller in the moonlight. Or perhaps it was just Krishna’s otherworldly beauty, his face ageless.

Krishna gave a small smile. “Perhaps. I confess I am hopeful you will see that the light of peace is superior to the endless night of warfare. I know that despite your actions, you are a virtuous man.” Karna said nothing. “You know that you were found floating down the River Ganga. But you know not where you came from. You were released into a small tributary not far from here, Karna. Your parents were of Hastinapur.”

“My parents are Adhiratha and Radha. From Anga.” Karna said this with finality, or perhaps like he was hoping to reassure himself.

“Your father is the god Surya,” Krishna said. “And your mother is Kunti.”

Karna’s face lost all its color, looking white as bone in the moonlight. He turned to face the river for a long moment, before turning back to Krishna, anger vibrating through his body. “You are a god, and worthy of respect, but I never thought you a liar.”

“I swear to you, on the holy River Ganga, I do not lie,” Krishna said, staying calm. “You are the child of Surya and Kunti.”

For several interminable breaths, Karna said nothing, his throat bobbing up and down. Then he shook his head. “I am the child of Adhiratha and Radha.” Krishna opened his mouth, but Karna continued, “I am the child of Adhiratha and Radha. I am. Adhiratha is my father and Radha my mother, and none else.”

“You can try to deny your parentage, but you will never escape it,” Krishna said softly. “You are the eldest of the Pandavas. Their claim is your claim, but yours is superior, for you are the firstborn son. If you go to Yudhishthira and tell him the truth, he will cede his claim to you. You could be king of all these lands—”

“What need have I, to be ruler of this empire?” Karna said. “I know you think little of me, but let me assure you I have never wished for an empire, or for rule.”

“I know,” Krishna said, laying a hand on the man’s shoulder. Karna was trembling slightly, but he seemed to rally at Krishna’s touch. “I know what it is like to be thought low of birth. You saw how your supposed friend spoke of me in court not half a day prior. You have only ever wanted to be accepted, and you can be.”

At this, Karna stiffened. “I have already been accepted. Duryodhana made me a king when the Pandavas refused to see me as an equal. He took my hand when Bhima, of your so-called righteous Pandavas, called my father a dog. All Duryodhana has asked of me is my friendship. He has never degraded or debased me or my family, which is more than I can say of your vaunted heroes.”

It was true, Bhishma knew. Arjuna and Bhima looked down on those outside the highest castes—as Duryodhana did too, when it suited him. But whatever his reasons, Duryodhana had always treated Karna with kindness.

“He has degraded you,” Krishna said to Karna. “He may not have done it to your face. But little by little, you have lost pieces of yourself to his friendship. You insult the Pandavas as they insult you, rather than turning the other cheek. You despise Draupadi and seek to hurt her. You seek to humiliate them all at every turn, the way they once embarrassed you. What they did was wrong, and they should be held to account for it. And yet, where they speak out of ignorance, you *intend* to harm them, even when there is no reason for it.”

To Bhishma’s surprise, Karna looked ashamed. “I regret it,” he said, and his voice was thick, as though holding back tears. “I do. I do not wish to be as they are, to give the same hurts they give. But it pleased Duryodhana, and he had given me so much.”

“So you see?” Krishna reached forward and brushed his hand against Karna’s cheek, as if to dry a tear. He was tender, an elder comforting a

child. “He has not been good to you either.”

“No,” Karna said. “The fault is with me. He never asked these things of me. I did so of my own free will, because I wanted to make a friend happy.”

“A friend should not be happy at the suffering of others,” Krishna said.

“Then you will not support Arjuna in this war, I suppose?” Karna asked, his tone hardening.

“I will support the cause of righteousness,” Krishna said.

“In all of Hastinapur, in all of these supposedly valorous kingdoms, only Duryodhana has treated me with any consideration. He is more righteous.” Karna was resolute.

“You are a Pandava.” Now Krishna’s words rang, his otherworldly power lending them weight.

“I am the son of a humble charioteer,” Karna said. He was not cowed. “I am the child of Adhiratha and Radha, and I am glad for it. I do not have need of a mother who abandoned me or brothers who looked down on me for no reason other than their own ignorant prejudice. I do not care for this inheritance. I fight for the Kurus, for Duryodhana, and for friendship. Nothing else.”

“You could have your revenge on the Pandavas by becoming their leader and capitulating to Duryodhana,” Krishna pointed out, but Bhishma could tell he meant it more as a gibe than anything else.

“Perhaps Yudhishthira would listen to my claim if I did so, but Arjuna and Bhima would slay me in my sleep. You know it as well as I do. If peace is so virtuous, so righteous, that I should abandon my only friend for it, then perhaps instead the Pandavas should lay down their arms.”

“All must act in the face of injustice,” Krishna said. “If you were to lead the Pandavas and renounce their claim, then it would be properly done. Otherwise, they have every right to go to war for Duryodhana’s misdeeds.”

Karna shook his head. “I am sorry, Lord Krishna. If you say that is dharma, then it must be true. But to me, these rules are folly, these claims nothing to a common man. What matters is loyalty, friendship. I cannot be the man you seek to end this war. I am no Pandava.”

Krishna was quiet. Bhishma could hear the soft rushing of his mother’s water. But eventually the god nodded. “To be so loyal is admirable. I see I will not sway you.”

“Do not misunderstand me,” Karna said. “I am not eager for war. I do

not enjoy the prospect of death. I wish there was a way to protect those souls. But I do not find your suggestion any more just."

Krishna smiled at that. "All the men who die on the battlefield will die doing their duty. In death they will enter svarga, that great abode. Let that, at least, be a weight off you, and go now in peace."

Karna strode up the path. Bhishma considered briefly trying to hide, but knew Karna would likely see him. Instead, he stepped out to meet him. Karna's sword was halfway out of its sheath before he recognized Bhishma. His posture relaxed, then tensed again. "Were you listening?" he demanded, walking forward toward Hastinapur as if he cared not for the answer.

"Yes," Bhishma said. "It is an honorable thing to choose your vows and bonds of loyalty over such a chance." And it was true. He had never thought much of Karna, who always seemed so filled with bitterness and hate, but now he did feel some sense of kinship for the man who would turn down a kingdom for someone he loved.

"You're not surprised," Karna said. "You… you knew?"

"Yes." He did not explain. Karna may not have believed him if he tried to, if he claimed that his mother had witnessed Kunti leaving Karna on the riverbanks so many years ago.

"For how long?"

Karna's anger was beginning to rise, Bhishma could tell, but still he answered him honestly. "Since just after you came to Hastinapur."

"Since… all this time?" Karna hissed. "You knew, and you said nothing?"

"It was not my place," Bhishma said.

"Not your *place*?" Karna demanded. "From the first day I came to learn from Dronacharya, I was ridiculed and mocked. They tried to refuse me before Duryodhana stepped in. And you could have stopped that all, and given me my rightful place—" He cut himself off as if he couldn't bear to say the words.

"You told Krishna it did not matter," Bhishma said. "That your parents were those who adopted you, and your status was nothing to be ashamed of.

And I agree that they were wrong for tormenting you, and I instructed them to stop. Their inheritance is to be earned."

"By definition, inheritance cannot be earned," Karna snapped. "I would not have wished for birthright or glory, but simply to have been treated as their equal."

"I am sorry," Bhishma said. It felt as though he uttered the phrase too often now, when he had only been trying his best at every turn. But did his intentions matter, when his actions had not stopped calamity? "It was not what you deserved."

"It is not as though any of you care what a person deserves," Karna said. "I always looked up to you, and the way you respected and treated everyone with honor and obeyed your vows without wavering. But this had nothing to do with vows. You simply did not want to change the accepted order of things, is it not? You liked Yudhishthira too much."

To Bhishma's recollection, this was not true. He had not spoken up because he had felt it was Kunti's place to disclose the truth about her firstborn child, and had thought that as a mother she would recognize her son anywhere. When she had not spoken, he had chosen to follow her lead and say nothing. But then, he had never asked her. Perhaps Kunti had favored Yudhishthira. Or perhaps Bhishma had subconsciously known that Yudhishthira would make the most righteous king. But in denying Karna the truth, he had given Duryodhana a powerful tool.

He would never truly know.

Karna watched him, a look of contempt on his face. "I would walk back alone," he said. "I suppose you came here to talk to Krishna. After all, you have always favored the Pandavas. You fight for Hastinapur out of loyalty, but I know you hope to lose. And I do not wish to walk with a traitor."

Bhishma was so shocked he stopped walking. To call someone a traitor was one of the worst insults, and Karna had said it like it was nothing. He watched Karna's retreating back until the man vanished, then turned in place—but there was nowhere else to go. Krishna was by the river, but what use would it be to speak with him? In the end, his decision was already made. He would fight against Krishna, and thus be on the losing side.

He turned back toward Hastinapur.

CHAPTER 24

GANGA, A FEW MONTHS BEFORE THE WAR

AFTER MY BRIEF ENCOUNTER with Ekalavya, I watched the mortal world closely again, for I could see now that Bhishma had not been needlessly worried. These princes, I learned from gossip and memories, were set to tear the world apart. I heard again and again about my son's attempts to make peace—to split the kingdom, to pay respects to both parties, to advise against warfare—and I could not help but think that it was his oath that had led to all this. And worse, it was my fault he had made that oath. I had thought I could deceive Shantanu because he was mortal; I had thought I could raise Bhishma like a god despite his mortality; in the holes I had left in their world, this unholy oath had been made.

I did not blame myself for the actions of these men, but I understood with a sinking certainty that it was my failure to understand the mortal world, my disdain for them, that had allowed these circumstances to arise in the first place.

I had failed to act toward Hastinapur. I had failed to do what was best for Devavrata as a child. I had simply watched and acted on whims, and scared him with my talk of corruption.

And there was nothing I could do now. Nothing to do but wait. As tensions in the kingdom simmered, more and more people came to my banks to pray. For most, I did what I had done for Ekalavya, sifting through their memories and blessing almost all of them with some small easing of their pain. A few I found to be truly evil, and for them I made their misdeeds weigh heavily in their mind where previously they had justified their conduct—coming as a penitent alone did not make me sympathetic.

But one night, a man came alone, with no offering. He sat on my banks and said into the darkness, “I have heard you offer absolution for people’s sins.”

I gave nothing away.

“I suppose, according to the rest of the world, I have many sins. And they are right that I have acted to harm others. But they are wrong if they think they understand me. Nobody can know… I suppose that is why I am here. So that someone might know and understand.”

I was silent, listening. I let the peacefulness of the dusk lull him, pull the words forth. I thought about viewing his memories, but something held me back. I did not think this man needed peace, or soothing.

“Everything I have done, I have done for revenge,” he said. He was lighter skinned than those of Hastinapur, with thick facial hair that was atypical from the mountain regions. “Acting for revenge is not appropriate, we are always told, but then again it is usually the Kurus doing the telling. They can’t understand anything other than conquering. They don’t understand deprivation. Because they have you.”

He said this with such venom that I was taken aback. What had I done to this man?

“You are a river, so perhaps you cannot understand. I come from the west, where we live in treeless mountains and cultivate what we can from scrub. What water we have is from our own ingenuity, through canals and other systems to capture our scant rainfall. Our farms are built on sweat and hope. And still, we thrive. We are traders and merchants who have learned how to live from what the land gives us. Our legends say that our people prayed for water, and you came down from heaven for us.” This much I knew, for I had heard them. I had come for them. The man spoke truly.

He sighed. “But by the time you arrived, we did not need you. We had found ways to survive. Some of our people left to find you, and became the

Kurus. They did not need to struggle to live. And they did not forget that there was prosperity where they had come from, to the west."

I understood now what my role in this was, just as I knew how this man's story would end: The Kurus had come for his kingdom.

The man sighed and leaned back on his hands. "They conquered us, and demanded my only sister as a bride for their blind king. But I could tell the man who came to us was the true power behind the throne. I knew my sister would suffer. So I said no. And what did Bhishma do? He said either my sister would be a bride as a show of our vassalage, or he would ensure the ruination of our kingdom. That this was the will of the king."

The presence of the river, my presence, continued to coax the story from the man, and he spoke eagerly, as though he needed to unburden himself of his words. "My brothers and I decided to fight, but one by one they fell until there was only me and her. Without telling me, she went to Bhishma and agreed to marry the king, and he accepted. I was so angry at her. The Kurus had killed all but one of her brothers. But she did it to protect our kingdom, and so I let her go. Then I heard she had decided to blindfold herself to understand the world as her husband did. She had married a cripple, who was forcing her to live as he did, and I could not let that stand."

My sympathy for the man for the loss of his family quickly evaporated. It sounded as though his sister was a strong woman who had merely made choices for herself—albeit in a bad situation—and he had decided to look down on her and her husband rather than respect them both. And to speak of his brother-in-law that way, for being blind? It was he who could not see past his hatred.

"The Kurus want to rule everything and everyone, and their sons are no different. But I am their uncle, and I have influence over them. I should not be blamed for using it to bring out their true nature. Duryodhana is so very malleable. One only has to mention an idea to him, and so long as it will cause others pain, he will agree. If I had not come to court to whisper in his ear, someone else would have.

"But at least I have done so with a purpose, not to enrich myself, but to destroy the Kurus from within. I have pushed them closer and closer to war, and when that war is over they will all be dead, or they will be kin-killers. Their own people will no longer respect them after they destroy the

kingdom in civil war. The Kuru line will be ended, and everyone who they have hurt will finally be vindicated." He smiled at the thought, looking up at the moon as though he was the happiest man in the world.

"And so I am here. I have many enemies; I do not expect to survive the war. But even though my goals are righteous, I have done many unrighteous things to get here. I have cheated and gambled, I have stood by as women were abused, I have lied, I have killed. The only difference between me and the Kurus is that I know what I have done is wrong, and have known it every step of the way."

Would the world be better off without the Kuru line? If my son died, he would come home to me. And the rest of them… I did not believe them worth saving, worth ruling. But my agreement did not make his actions righteous.

I reached toward him, searching now for his soul. He spoke prettily enough, but I could tell he was motivated by hate, so consumed by it that he would hurt anyone and anything to get what he wanted. He was dangerous. When I searched for some emotion, whether guilt or sadness, I found nothing. No part of him felt bad for what he had done. No part of him questioned.

The man trailed a hand in my waters, before lifting it in a fist, his expression hardening. "I feel your gaze upon me," he said. I had never had a mortal say that before, but I also found myself believing he spoke truly.

"I have often felt the weight of the gods observing me. But you never helped me. You would just watch and judge. I would not have had to act if you had controlled Hastinapur! I would not have had to act if Krishna had waged war instead of whispering in the Pandavas' ears! Damn you!" He rose to his feet as he spoke, shouting to the air, to the sky. He stood there, chest heaving for several seconds, as though waiting for a reply, before turning around and stalking away.

This mystery man troubled me. I was sure my son knew him, but if he was friends with the crown prince, my son wouldn't act.

But perhaps Krishna would. He had disappeared from my world for

almost a lifetime as he went west to found his own kingdom, but he had come to me many times in the past few years as things fell apart. He and my son often spoke of the same things—of palaces, and dice games, and the Pandava brothers. Krishna had told me that he knew the Pandavas to be righteous and that their rule was necessary to protect and preserve the world. I trusted Krishna to understand what was necessary.

I stretched out my senses for him now, extending all the way to Shiva's mountains.

I have not seen him, came Shiva's immediate reply. *Why do you need him?*

The Kurus, I said, and Shiva's presence seemed almost exasperated. The mountains he had raised were young compared to the age of this world, but they were ageless and enduring compared to the fleeting nature of human dynasties.

Let go of them, he told me. *Let go. You will only cause yourself pain.*

I understood his implication, that my entanglements worried him. And yet… *I cannot.*

I turned toward Hastinapur. In what felt like very little time, I felt Krishna's bright-warm presence camped at one of my tributaries. My influence was diminished there, but I splashed him so he knew I wanted him. Although his face was drawn with worry, he laughed. "I will come to see you, sister," he said. "As soon as my business is completed."

The next night I felt him approaching, another familiar man accompanying him. I recognized him as the infant I had saved, the man from Bhishma's memory. Karna.

He was arguing with Krishna, by turns angry and obstinate, as Krishna revealed he was Surya's child and the eldest brother of the Pandavas, and could end the war before it started. Karna did not seem shocked so much at his father's godhood—perhaps he always knew his impenetrable skin and indomitable skill were not entirely of this world—but his mother's identity shook him to his core. Just as quickly, though, he rebuilt himself. Karna proclaimed his loyalty to Duryodhana, and Krishna, I could tell, was frustrated. He watched Karna storm away into the forests for a few minutes, as though hoping he would return. But when he did not appear again, he finally turned toward me.

I rose up to greet him. "I take it your business in Hastinapur was

unsuccessful?”

“I did not have high hopes that war could be avoided,” Krishna said, reaching down and skipping a stone on my surface. It bounced three times before sinking. “But I had to try. War can only be a last resort, when all other tactics have failed. But short of committing dishonorable murder—which would not even resolve the question of succession, for a true king cannot inherit under those conditions—there is nothing left.”

“Mortals do what they will,” I told him, although he already knew it. “We cannot control them. And you have had someone acting specifically to foil you the whole time.”

“Ah, you met Shakuni,” Krishna said. I did not know if that was the man’s name, but the fact Krishna could identify him right away made it very likely. “He has always wanted Duryodhana to resolve his claims through violence and war.”

“His uncle?” I asked, and Krishna nodded. “Then you must know he does not want his nephew to win.”

Krishna frowned. “He certainly does not wish for the Pandavas to win.”

“He wants them all to lose,” I said. “He came here, hoping that I might absolve him of the sins he committed in service of this plan. But he hates the Kurus, all of them, and has been pitting them against one another all this time.”

Krishna’s face gave away nothing, but I could sense my friend’s emotion building, the power within him churning. “Of course,” he said at last. “I should have known. And yet it would have made no difference. If it had not been Shakuni, then perhaps Dhritarashtra himself might have influenced Duryodhana to covet the throne above all else. But Shakuni… It would make sense that he hated all the Kurus, even though their armies saved his kingdom from bandits more than once.”

“He did not mention that,” I said. Krishna gave a small shake of his head, then picked up another stone. This time, I did not let it sink, and it skipped clear to the other side, leaving a series of ever-widening ripples in its wake. My friend let out a quick laugh, and I remembered the boy who had run shouting to greet me in Gokul, my only light in the darkness of that time.

“I thought Karna might see reason,” Krishna told me after a long silence. “He has done some terrible things in his life, but he has also been

hurt, badly. I thought if he had the family he always wanted, he might change his mind. But these children, they do not understand just how many will die when the war comes to pass."

"I did not recognize he would be so important when I saved him," I said. "I only knew that he was Surya's child, and so I bore him to safety."

"You—" Krishna cut himself off, taking a deep breath. "Of course, who else could it have been? I almost wish you had not, for one life taken in your waters would have been far better than the destruction that will come. Without Karna, I do not think the Kauravas would stand a real chance."

"I cannot harm humans for what they might do," I said. "By that logic, you should blame me for failing to kill my son."

"I do not blame you, sister." Krishna slowly sat down, crossing his legs like a lotus. "By that logic, I should have killed Duryodhana long ago. But we cannot simply fulfill our own whims. It was a passing thought, and unkind."

I had nothing to say to that, but I longed to ease his worries. I caressed him with my waters, pulling him into the waves. "Will you fight?" I asked at last.

Krishna shook his head. "That is not my place. I am here to guide, to teach—I will be a charioteer, out on the battlefield, but I have sworn not to lift a weapon. This is a human war, not a divine one." He was floating on his back, staring up at the stars. "Your son will fight, though, and I do not think he will survive. I do not say this to hurt you, only so that you might be prepared."

"He has lived a long life," I said. I hated the thought of my son dying on the battlefield, in pain, but Krishna already knew that. Despite everything my son had done, he had also striven more than any mortal I had seen to do right in the world. "At least then he will be free of his vows."

"He could free himself, you know." Krishna was treading water now, his eyes closed as he spoke.

"When he was very young, I told him that he must hold himself to a higher standard. That he must protect himself from the corruption of this world. And he has taken that to mean that where other mortals will break their oaths for their own purposes, he will not."

"He might have listened better." Krishna's voice was free of judgment.

"I thought we are to let mortals make their own decisions," I said, only

half teasing.

“You are beginning to sound like Shiva,” Krishna said seriously. “Just because the mortals do as they will does not mean we should not help them to be as righteous as possible.”

I did not like the implication that my approach was like Shiva’s. I had been influencing the mortal world for some time now, although with little effect.

“I know you try to help them,” Krishna added, as though he had read my thoughts. “I have heard tales of how the River Ganga can soothe any sorrow, heal any mind. And that is important. But there are bigger issues in the mortal world, that require us to be far more involved than that.”

“What would you have me do?” I asked. “I am a river. My existence influences the shape of mortal civilizations, but I do not walk among them as you do.”

“You could,” Krishna said.

I thought of my time as Jahnavi. The idea did not sound appealing. “You are renowned for your deeds and power, and still people do not listen to you, else there would not be this war coming. What do you believe I can accomplish, simply by walking among them?”

“There is no way for you to stop this war from happening. But if you could take a mortal form, there are those who would listen only to you. This war does not have to end with everybody’s death.”

“My son will not defect from his vows for me.”

“You might be surprised,” Krishna said. “Consider it for me, at least.”

I could not remember him ever asking me for anything, and at last I began to take him seriously. “How?” I asked.

“We gods are here for the mortals.” Krishna had swum back to shore, and he began wringing out his hair in preparation to leave. “Once you try, it will be quite natural. And if you do, come join me. I will see you again, sister, if not in this war then after it.”

And then Krishna was gone, his beautiful presence fading from my awareness.

But his words stayed with me. Krishna had accused me of letting the mortal world pass me by, which was my exact accusation to Shiva.

I did not know what I had to offer. I did not know whether it would matter at all. But I knew who I was, and I could not let something as simple

and human as fear stop me.

So I dove deep within me, chased that kernel that could give me a human form. At first, I struggled to grasp it, to coalesce my power, for in my heart I wanted to be a river, and nothing else. But I thought of Jahnavi and found that Krishna was right. The closer I got to her, the more natural it felt, until it was like an undercurrent trying to pull me along. I surrendered myself to it, felt my divinity going—and then it all stopped.

If I did this, if I accepted mortality in this way, it felt as though I was accepting that the heavens were no longer my home. That this mortal realm was where I belonged. I felt a stab of that old pain, that longing for the cosmic ocean. But it was time to let that go. To accept that I could not return, no matter how much I wished to. That this world, where I flowed and roamed and witnessed the memories of so many, had changed me.

And then, like sediment settling, a flash of clarity. Of course it had. And I had changed it back. I had a course through the land, I had cut it and shaped it around me. I had birthed a *child*. I thought of Devavrata, so young and heartbroken as he left me to return to his home. His duty. How could I stay here and be comfortable when there was a chance to find my own true purpose? To help my son, and the inhabitants of this realm. My home.

I let the hesitation go, let what made me a god go, and allowed myself to become mortal once more.

PART FOUR

Delta

CHAPTER 25

THE WAR

BHISHMA HAD FAILED TO make peace. He had failed to fight for the righteous side. But he intended to at least succeed in making this war as fair and just as possible. Perhaps that way, the battles would be less devastating, and both sides would be spared the deepest anguish.

And so he called a meeting, before the first battle, to agree to a code of conduct. To bind all who fought with oaths the way he was bound, to keep them on the righteous path. Bhishma, Duryodhana, Dronacharya, Karna, and several Kaurava brothers met the Pandava brothers, who were accompanied by Krishna and Vidura, on the open field of battle to agree to the rules. It wounded Bhishma to see the Pandavas, and Yudhishthira especially, arrayed opposite him. He loved them all, and could not imagine raising his weapon against them. But he would have to.

“We do not want this conflict to lead to unnecessary suffering,” Yudhishthira said. “We have all learned the general warrior codes of conduct. But we should agree to a specific set of rules for this fight.” As he said this, he looked toward the Kaurava brothers and Karna. But Karna

scowled back, his eyes sliding to Arjuna.

In truth, Bhishma agreed Arjuna was just as likely to break any such rules as Karna. “We agree,” he said. “The first priority must be the protection of noncombatants. Women, children, servants, anybody who is not clearly armed and a soldier must be spared and granted safe passage to wherever they are going.”

“Of course.” It was Bhima who spoke, and Bhishma wondered what insult would come on its heels. “But we must also agree that such noncombatants will not be used for any deceitful purposes. No poisoning, assassination, or spying.”

“Of course,” Bhishma agreed smoothly before anybody present could take offense at Bhima’s blatant insinuation that the Kauravas would resort to such base trickery.

In this fashion they went back and forth, hammering out the terms that Bhishma hoped would make this war less catastrophic than the visions that haunted his nightmares. He did not know what the others thought of when they talked, but the question within him could not be silenced: When all this was over, who would be left to rule?

They agreed, without negotiation, that unconscious warriors should not be attacked, and that nobody should be attacked when their back was turned or when they had surrendered. After further argument, they agreed that a warrior who had been disarmed could not be attacked unless he had then picked up another weapon. Finally, both sides agreed, with sidelong glances, that no boons from the gods would be used in the war. Neither side knew what the other possessed, but Bhishma had more information than most and he insisted upon it. As the commander in chief of the Kaurava armies, he had many blessed warriors under him, but the Pandavas had Lord Krishna.

Bhishma wondered if anyone else felt shame for entering this fight the way he did. Dronacharya, perhaps, but he kept his opinions close to his chest. Shakuni was rejoicing. Duryodhana and Karna had for days been talking loudly about their superior numbers, how their foot soldiers were better trained, how the Pandavas would be dead in a few days, and Bhishma tried not to hope that some of the worse influences in this war would not survive.

After what felt like an eternity, each side trudged back toward their

camps, feeling as though they had given up too many advantages and gained too little.

“Pitamaha!” A loud cry came from behind him, and he turned to see that Yudhishthira had reversed course and was running across the field.

“Perhaps he has decided to see reason and surrender,” Dushasana hissed, and Duryodhana laughed.

“Pitamaha,” Yudhishthira said again, arriving panting before Bhishma. He dropped to his knees and pressed his forehead into the dirt at Bhishma’s feet. “I am sorry to battle you, who raised us and trained us, and made us who we are. I will not do it without your blessing.” His voice was thick with tears, and Bhishma had to blink hard against his own, his eyes burning.

“Rise, Yudhishthira,” he said, and he bent down to grasp the boy’s shoulder and pull him up. “It brings me such joy to see you grown. Fight hard.” He swallowed, and weighed his next words, before deciding there was no harm in speaking the truth. He had not been forbidden to say it. “I am bound by oath to fight against you. But I know that so long as you act honorably, you will not be defeated.”

Yudhishthira’s lips pressed into a small smile, and he ducked his head. “Thank you, Pitamaha. I hope… gods willing… we will speak again.”

It took time to make my way to Kurukshetra. It was easy enough to find, for I only had to travel toward Surya, who had transformed into a fiery red beacon on the horizon that struck fear in my heart. There was a sense of dread as I approached, the air thick with it. It swirled in currents and eddies all around us, as refugees streamed away from the field of impending war. I lost myself in the current moving toward Kurukshetra, amid trains of soldiers and supplies where a plain woman with a dark, shapeless cloak could move without notice.

Around campfires, people spoke of their villages being razed by the powerful weapons the soldiers were transporting, burning a trail to the field of war. Children cried for their parents who had left them behind to try to save what little they could. Women, heavy with babes, heaved labored breaths, unable to speak the names of the husbands and sons they had lost.

When I lingered with them, I learned that I could still feel each one's river of memory. I could not see into them the way I could as a river, but I could feel the rocky rapids and the chokes and dams, and where I could, I loosened them. The memories were still there, but distant—no longer an all-consuming pain.

Perhaps more importantly, for the first time, I held babies as they cried, tears clearing away soot in ragged streaks down their faces. Some came brought by their own young siblings, and all the women looked after the children as best they could. I took the babies so the children caring for them could sleep, and despaired that those so young had been burdened with such responsibility. When the babes were with me, I ensured they wanted for nothing. I cleaned them, and warmed them, and dripped milk in their mouths. I touched their skin to mine as they wept for their mothers, rocking them back and forth. "I am here," I whispered. "I am here." Songs without words rose from my throat, lulling them slowly into quiet. Into sleep, where they might dream a respite of happier times. I kept them in my arms for a few moments longer, watching their little chests rise and fall.

And then, like their parents had been forced to, I left them. To do my duty.

The sky was red the next morning, as if Surya himself was observing the battle. Perhaps he was, keeping watch over his son. Karna had not been himself since Krishna had told him the truth. He had been quieter, less willing to spout hate against his blood brothers, although he still supported Duryodhana in all things. Bhishma did not think he would ever defect, but part of him still hoped it might come to pass. With Karna on their side, the Pandavas would have a chance of winning the war quickly—and Bhishma knew, in a visceral way many of these youths did not, that the faster a war was won, the better for all.

Bhishma had barely slept. He had lain in his bed in the sturdy tent that had been erected for him and prayed. He prayed to Shiva, the destroyer, for power in this battle. He prayed to Vishnu, even though Krishna fought opposite him, to allow him to walk in righteousness. He prayed to his

mother, that he might be cleansed of his many sins and granted grace if he died in battle.

And then, under the red sky, he went to war.

Bhishma had placed himself at the head of the battle, and his handpicked men carved through swathes of the Pandava army for hours. Then an arrow at last managed to land near him, piercing the wall of the chariot behind him. Bhishma glanced up to see Abhimanyu, Arjuna's young son, racing toward him in his own chariot, his expression grim and determined.

Bhishma laid down his bow so Abhimanyu could see, and instructed his charioteer to pull even with the boy. "Leave," he said. "You are too young to be fighting here." How had the Pandavas allowed this? The boy was barely sixteen by his estimate. He thought of Arjuna at sixteen, brash and competitive. Too old to hear Bhishma's advice to slow down, to think before speaking. Not fighting on a battlefield for the fate of the world.

Abhimanyu's chin jutted out. "I am fighting for my family, and for the cause of righteousness," he declared. "I cannot back down. And I cannot let you continue in this manner."

"Then send your father to face me," Bhishma said. "He should be here."

"He is occupied elsewhere." Abhimanyu reached for an arrow. "Face me or retreat."

They were the words of an untested warrior, but Bhishma still found himself moved by his bravery. Abhimanyu would not back down, and so Bhishma forced himself to grasp his bow. At first he did not shoot at all, simply dodging, but Abhimanyu had been trained by his father. An arrow shot past Bhishma's head, severing the standard pole behind him. If Bhishma had been the child of mortals, with slower reflexes, it would have been the end for him.

The reminder of his own mortality forced him into action. He shot at Abhimanyu's wheels, a frantic volley that brought his great-grandchild's chariot to a juddering halt. Abhimanyu's face contorted in disbelief, then a dawning dismay.

Two Kaurava brothers who had accompanied Bhishma raced toward Abhimanyu. At first Bhishma thought they might go past him, press their formation ahead, but when they drew their swords Bhishma realized they intended to slay Abhimanyu. "Stop!" he called out. "Stop or I will cut you down!"

They did not stop, or perhaps they did not hear him, and Bhishma drew his bow. He shot their wheels out easily, for they did not expect any interference from behind. “He is a defenseless child!” Bhishma shouted. The time for calm had passed. “Go back to camp. Do not return to this battlefield until you have performed penances.”

Bhishma was not often angry, but here, on the battlefield, he allowed the emotion to fill him up as the cowed brothers left. If they had been willing to so blatantly violate the rules in front of him, he knew he needed to turn back to see what had been wrought in his absence. His skirmish with Abhimanyu had wasted precious time, and he urged his charioteer toward the main battlefield. Men stopped their fighting as he passed, but Bhishma could see as the sun set and the armies returned to camp that both sides had descended into violent bloodlust.

Soldiers, young men really, with arrows that had been shot through their backs. Men with mace blows to their kneecaps, when the rules of the mace prohibited hits below the waist. Horses that had been stabbed after being released from a chariot. He had seen all these things before, but it hurt to know that they had occurred because of him, because of his family, despite all the preparations he had made.

He had not done enough. And now it was too late. No matter who won the war, no matter how hard he fought, it was over. They had all lost.

How to describe such warfare, such loss? Even Bhishma had never seen anything like it. The ferocity that overtook the men—even the nobles, who had been raised on certain rules and should have known better—was almost frightening in its inhumanity. Or perhaps, his mother would say, it was deeply human. But there was more than just humanity at play here, for the gods themselves had granted their gifts to great warriors over the years, and now…

Arrows rained from the sky, piercing entire legions, who could not even raise their shields before the missiles hit their targets.

Fire raced through ranks, leaving charred skeletons in their wake, twisted into poses of agony.

Floods, lightning, all manner of catastrophes. The warriors, despite the rules, uttered the words of the boons they were gifted long ago, and watched as power descended on the fields with implacable force. But there was no wonder in it, no delight at watching something beyond humanity as Bhishma had once felt at the river. At the ocean, holding his mother's hand.

At the end of each day, bodies lay on the field and blood ran so freely that the ground was drenched. All night the men of lower classes who were not permitted to or not able to fight dragged the bodies to the camps so that they might be given funeral rites. The physicians ran out of supplies and could offer only prayers; the sages proclaimed that everyone who died in the war to end wars, as it was now being called, would attain heaven, and freedom from rebirth.

But it was hard to believe that, or to even think of anything other than the pain of this war, when they marched out the next morning and the soldiers' feet released sprays of rust from the earth that had not yet dried.

Bhishma engaged Arjuna twice, but their hearts were not in it, and neither struck true. Krishna was Arjuna's charioteer, and although nobody could match his skill, Bhishma counted himself lucky that the Lord had vowed not to raise a weapon or fight in this war. He wondered, on occasion, why Krishna did not just kill Duryodhana and ensure Yudhishthira's succession himself. But that would not solve the problem, he supposed, only prolong it—then the next generation would wish to fight, and so on. They had to solve their own problems, Krishna would say, and he could only help them to achieve righteousness.

Duryodhana grew increasingly restless as their superior numbers did not lead to immediate victory. He was angry at Bhishma's counsel, which was always to make peace. But he was also in pain, Bhishma knew, for his brothers were dying in this slaughter where the Pandavas were not.

And there was the matter of Bhima, who was openly breaking the rules of warfare.

Bhishma did not know whether Duryodhana's story was entirely believable, but to hear him tell it, Duryodhana had paused on the field to mourn the loss of one of his brothers. He had been weaponless, head bowed in his chariot. Bhima and his giant son had fallen upon him from behind, Bhima swinging his mace at Duryodhana's turned head. Duryodhana's horses had saved him, spooked by the thundering footsteps. Their panic

pulled the chariot forward, causing Bhima to stumble and miss. Bhima had attacked a defenseless opponent from behind.

But how to penalize the other side? The Pandavas certainly would not bar Bhima from fighting.

Bhishma lay awake all night contemplating the problem, but could find no solutions. Even if they had agreed to the rules of conduct, even if they had given their solemn oaths, those words were meaningless if nobody obeyed. Bhishma had thought, perhaps naïvely, that most would want to obey, would want to act as they should. He was not so stupid as to think everyone would do so, but he had held some hope that the nobility would, if only to show their moral superiority. But he had been wrong. And he had to keep fighting, until the end came.

CHAPTER 26

THE WAR

ON THE NIGHT OF the new moon, I approached one of the main camps. It was bustling despite the time. I reached out my awareness, able to sense all the human minds around me, but did not find that bright spark that was my friend. Instead, I was overwhelmed by the suffering I felt; it pressed upon me so heavily that I could not determine which camp I was in, until a man stopped me.

“Can I help you?” he asked. And I recognized him. He was the man who had come to my banks not so long ago. Krishna had named him Shakuni.

So I was in the Kaurava camp.

“Do you know where I might find Bhishma?”

He cocked his head, then gave a little laugh. “Who are you? Does he know you? Bhishma does not have much use for women.” He hummed. “Perhaps you might be Dushasana’s type, but he doesn’t pay well…”

“Bhishma and I are acquainted,” I said, annoyed with how he spoke about both me and my son. “You seem well for a man at war.”

He shrugged. “Wars happen all the time. But this one has the honor of

ridding the world of evil."

"I am sure the other side is saying the same."

"Both things can be true," he replied. For a moment I wondered why he would say something like this to a stranger—but I was in a woman's shape, and I had forgotten how little value the human world gave this form. "Regardless, I am happy to fight."

"Is not the greatest evil war?" I asked him.

"This is the war to end all wars," he said. "Unrighteousness for the sake of righteousness." I brushed against his consciousness, but I found he already knew the wrongness of what he had done, as he had confessed that day on my banks. He simply did not care.

"Are you unwell?" he asked me. "Perhaps you should sit."

I came back to myself, surprised at this moment of kindness from him. "Thank you," I said. "I am fine. And I am sure you are needed."

He looked up to the horizon, where Surya was just beginning to show, before nodding and hastening away, leaving me alone.

I glanced around. At the very edge of the field was a forest, and I made my way through the dense thicket of trees toward the Pandava encampment. The stench of death, of refuse and blood and decomposition, filled my nose, and I could hear the screams of the injured and dying pleading for help. I kept my sense of humankind as close to myself as possible, for the emotions and guilt of the dying were overwhelming. Even so, I found myself pausing, sagging against trees as I waited for the waves of agony to pass.

So much suffering, and for what?

When I emerged at last at one end of the Pandava encampment, I was surprised to find an older woman standing there, peering out into the field. She gasped when I emerged from the shadows of the trees, before realizing I posed no threat and calming herself. "Are you lost?" she asked.

I recognized her too. This was Kunti, the woman who had left her child in a basket for my current to carry away.

"I am looking for a friend," I told her. "But he is fighting now."

"You can wait with me, if you would like," she said. "I wait here every day for my sons, praying for their safe return."

There was a crackle, and a bright flash of lightning on the battlefield. The wind shifted, bringing to us the smell of ozone and charred flesh. The

gift of Indra. Or rather, just as with the sage who had once gifted my sons mortality—a curse in disguise. Kunti had tears in her eyes, and lifted her hand to her nose as if to ward off the smell. But there was no way to escape these plains of death.

“I am sure you are very worried,” I said quietly.

“My sons are great warriors. But how can any person fight when everyone has such power? And I…” She trailed off, and I knew she wanted to unburden herself. And yet, she could not, not to a stranger who might know who she was and tell others.

“I am not from here,” I said to her. “And I don’t know your sons. But I am sure they are grateful for your faith.”

She gave me a small smile, which quickly wavered and fell as a roar came from the battlefield. I could tell she was trying to decide whether a vague statement to a stranger would be any danger at all, and the stress and terror quickly made her take the leap of faith. “Tell me,” she said. “If you had done something to place your children in danger… perhaps something that put one child in the path of another, what would you do?”

“I have a son,” I said. “And I have been unable to protect him. But I would try to speak to him, to warn him. I do not want to be the cause of his suffering, even accidentally. Perhaps your sons would be understanding if you spoke to them?”

“This son, he would not speak to me,” Kunti said softly.

I had saved Karna’s life, and now perhaps Kunti could convince him to stop the war. Krishna had failed, but Krishna was not Karna’s mother. There was a power to blood in the mortal world, after all. “I cannot pretend to know everything that passes between mothers and sons,” I told her, weighing each word carefully. “But children are never exactly who you think they are. They may surprise you. All of them.” She owed not just Karna but the rest of the brothers the truth. I wondered if she had the courage to tell them.

She looked at me, hope and skepticism mixing together in her eyes. “Lord Krishna himself told me something very similar not so long ago,” she said. “Perhaps this is a sign.”

And so we sat there, waiting.

On the eighth day of the war to end all wars, Bhishma contemplated lying down in the field and waiting for death to find him. Surely it would not take long, for all around him was death, only death.

Lord Krishna had told him, in one of those smiling interactions that had once so annoyed Bhishma but that he now longed for, *Duty must be done without expectation*. Bhishma had responded then that he always did his duty without expectation, for he had already forsworn any reward. And Lord Krishna had only shrugged and bitten into the pear he was holding, laughing in pleasure at the sweetness of it.

It was too late now for Bhishma's renewed understanding. Too late for the realization that he had expected the prosperity and longevity of his family as his reward. Too late to understand that Krishna had been warning that expectations were all too easily foiled, as every day the men he viewed as grandchildren committed heinous acts and died in turn, and every action made him want to scream and weep.

Keeping one's solemn and sacred oath was certainly in keeping with dharma. But did his duty not encompass more than that? Could his duty to his people be so easily abdicated by declaring it so? It was far too late to ask this. Now there was only the war. Bhishma clung to the small comfort that he was the only leader on the field who could truly say he wanted peace and nothing more.

So he stayed alive to fight as humanely as possible, although that was a paradox. And he clung to the knowledge that he would at least obey his oaths and vows to the rapidly approaching end.

At the end of that eighth day, as ten of his brothers lay dead on the field, Duryodhana came storming up to him, face wild with grief and anger.

"I am sorry," Bhishma said. He tried to keep his face neutral and his posture relaxed, in the hopes of calming Duryodhana down.

"I am your ruler! You swore to obey me!" Duryodhana all but shouted. The men around them had all conspicuously turned their backs and were certainly listening to every word.

"And I have, in all things," Bhishma told him. Surely he could not be

accused of disloyalty. “The warrior who slew your brothers drew snakes from the ground to attack all who grew close. And he spun up illusions so that none could know which his true form was as he fought among the ranks. There was nothing I could do, though I tried. In what way did I disobey?”

Bhishma, unlike Duryodhana, had been there. He had heard the warrior shout, seen the whip-quick bodies of the snakes appear in the barren dirt. It had been the work of a powerful entity come to life, and Bhishma could not have stopped it. He had knelt before one of his grandchildren, watching as they convulsed, trying to squeeze the venom from their wound. The foam from their mouth had stained Bhishma’s tunic, blood and spittle mixing together as the venom did its work.

But Duryodhana did not care. “You always favored the Pandavas, always preferred Yudhishthira to me,” he said, low enough that only Bhishma could hear. “Even now, I see in your eyes, you blame me. Yudhishthira chose to return, chose to fight. I am only claiming that which was always my birthright, and still you lead our armies to defeat.”

“Do not speak that way with me,” Bhishma said, his voice soft but sharp enough that Duryodhana flinched, a brief look of shame crossing his face. “All the armies and people of the known world are here. And you would suggest I lead these soldiers—those whose only reason to be here is loyalty—to ruin? You think I would willingly wish for them to die, for some childish partiality?”

“Then why are the Pandavas winning?” Duryodhana demanded. “We have the greater armies, the greater warriors. Yet each day they are more than up to the challenge of your formations. It is as if they know what you will do.”

Bhishma stepped closer to his wayward grandnephew. “Are you suggesting I have been telling the Pandavas what to expect?” he asked, keeping his expression neutral. “Is that the accusation you level at me?”

“No—no. Of course not.” Duryodhana swallowed, then gestured toward Bhishma’s tent. A servant had already lit the lamps, and Bhishma spared a thought for whoever had been dragged here just for that purpose. The camps were becoming dangerous as emotions and bloodlust heightened. But Duryodhana did not care. “The Pandavas started out with every disadvantage. But now the field grows even. We must end this, decisively.”

Bhishma did not usually feel the aches and pains of age, though he was closer to a century than a half century. But he did not usually face armies so vast that the horizon began to curve when he looked at them. He sat on a low stool, his knees almost weeping in relief. “If I could end this decisively, I would. Do you think I, of all people, desire this bloodshed?”

“I think you may not have realized it, but you desire the Pandavas to win.” Duryodhana had a deserved reputation for being underhanded and sneaky. But one thing Bhishma had always liked about him was that he also spoke what he wanted directly. He was not one for false modesty or lies of praise.

“I desire peace, and only peace,” Bhishma said. It felt like the truth, but some part of him worried it might be a falsehood.

Duryodhana paced before him. “If that is true, Pitamaha, then why are the Pandavas winning against the greatest warrior and strategist the world has ever known?”

“I am not that,” Bhishma said. “The greatest strategist is one who can prevent the war in the first place. But if you wish to know why the Pandavas keep winning, that is simple enough. They have righteousness on their side.”

Duryodhana scoffed. “The men who would gamble their own wife are not righteous!”

“You induced them to gamble.” Bhishma rubbed at his wrists, sore and tired. “Your representative suggested they gamble Draupadi. So whose sin is it really?”

“Theirs!” Duryodhana exclaimed. “The choice was left to them, and they took it. They have been this way since they were children.”

“The grudges of childhood—”

“Arjuna convinced Dronacharya to mutilate a poor tribal boy because he was a good archer. That was not a grudge against me, just his own vanity. And look at how they all treat Karna, simply for not being kshatriya. They have made his life miserable.”

All that Duryodhana said was true. But he had missed the bigger picture entirely. “It is not right, but it does not matter. Yudhishthira’s claim to the throne was superior to yours, but he still relinquished it for the sake of peace. You could not stand to see him make a great kingdom from nothing —do not interrupt me, it is true. So you plotted to take his land from him,

not once but twice. And when he fulfilled your terms and conditions, you still refused to return his kingdom. They have Lord Krishna on their side. Your soldiers may be loyal, but they know you have not been wronged. When men feel they have righteousness with them, within them, they can fight with the power of ten men."

"You think our soldiers are to blame?" Duryodhana asked, eyes narrowing. "That can be—"

"I do not think anything of the sort," Bhishma interrupted, before he could devise some punishment to motivate the men.

Unexpectedly, Duryodhana dropped to his knees before him, head bowed. "I cannot bear to see my brothers continue to be slaughtered by these tactics. So tell me what we must do. However risky, however difficult or expensive, tell me what will end this war quickly and I will do it."

Bhishma sighed, the sound escaping from him before he could stop it. "The way to end the war quickly is to sue for peace."

Duryodhana's head snapped up. "Why must you always return to this idea if you are not a traitor? It is *my* kingdom. I will not give it up, not even an inch of it. You were always lecturing us on dharma, so let me ask you this: Why should a man willing to gamble away his kingdom rule anything? I have never abandoned Hastinapur, nor its vast empires."

"What will be left to return to?" Something in Bhishma had broken. "Every day that passes harms every kingdom fighting here. There is nobody who will be unscathed by the wide reaches of this war. Will you be king of ashes?"

Duryodhana rocked back, looking stunned. Bhishma could not recall the last time he had spoken to Duryodhana in this way. After a long, tense silence, Duryodhana said, "I will send a messenger to Yudhishthira. Perhaps there is some solution yet undiscovered."

Something in Duryodhana's eyes was disquieting to him, but Bhishma's soul, so desperate for hope, pushed it aside. He let himself breathe.

CHAPTER 27

THE WAR

AT LAST THE SUN set, and the sounds of war subsided to the agonizing cries of the injured. There was no peace to be found, it seemed. I began anew my search for Krishna, but instead felt that warm soul of Surya's son at the outskirts of the camp. Perhaps Kunti had listened to me and called him here, and I wanted to know how this story ended. After all, it was because of me that it had begun.

"Please," Kunti's voice came. "Do not bow to me."

"You are my elder," Karna said, his voice stiff.

"You do not know how happy it makes me to see you here before me. I should have… I have made a terrible error." Kunti's voice was teary.

"It does not matter. What is done is done."

"I am begging you, as your mother, come home. Come home to your family."

"My family? And where is this family? I do not see them here." Karna gave a bitter laugh. And he had a point. It was not just Karna's life, but his brothers' too that were at stake. Yet it seemed Kunti had not told them. "Did

you know that Arjuna sent a beggar to ask for my god-protected armor? I never refuse those in need, and he took advantage of it. He stoops to the worst levels, then descends further. He hates me, and he would hate me, brother or no."

"Do you not believe me?" Kunti asked softly. "It is true I can offer you no proof. But I can describe to you the basket I sent you away in—"

"Sent me away," Karna interrupted. "That's an odd way to say 'left me to die.'"

"How can you say that?" Kunti demanded, and now her voice was sharp, a mother reprimanding a child. I wondered if Karna felt it. "I sent you down the river to find another home. That you might grow up safe and happy, not tormented or murdered for being born outside of marriage."

"You sent an infant into a river. I was more likely to be eaten by a crocodile than found by another." Karna's voice was flat.

"I knew the river would protect you. You are a kshatriya, born to rule. It would not be your lot to die in such an ignominious way." Kunti's voice was soft, beseeching, and so very wrong. That is not what I had done—I tried to prevent any child from dying in my waters, kshatriya or no.

For a long moment, Karna did not respond. Long enough that I wondered if he had left. "I have done things wrong in my life. I am not Yudhishthira, above most mortal sins. But I have never been as deluded as the kshatriya are that your place of birth makes you fit to rule, or serve, or worship. You do not truly believe it yourselves, for you elevate those you need to further your own purposes. I am holding my tongue, but truly, do not say such a thing to me again. I am who I am."

"I am sorry," Kunti said without hesitation. "I have hurt you, again."

"But you're not sorry for saying it." Karna sighed. "Why did you ask me here tonight?"

"I seek an end to the war."

"Ask your eldest son," Karna said, and Kunti inhaled sharply. "Does he even know? He and Duryodhana are currently trying to negotiate a peace."

"That will fail." Kunti sounded more certain of this than anything else she had said so far. Her omission was enough answer—she did not intend to tell her other sons the truth.

"I know," Karna said. "Duryodhana is not without flaws. He can be mean, stubborn, prideful. But he saw me, when your sons did not. He saw

me.”

“I do not want any of my sons to die,” Kunti said. “Please, do not fight your brothers.”

“I have not been fighting,” Karna told her. “Lord Bhishma would not allow me to fight. He wants the Pandavas to win, it is well-known. Duryodhana was wrong to appoint him as the general of our forces, but you should be grateful for it.”

“I am grateful.” Kunti sounded relieved. “He is sparing all of you the pain of brother fighting brother.”

“It would not cause me pain,” Karna said. “And it is not his responsibility to prevent it either. His responsibility is to Hastinapur.”

“Perhaps he knows that you are a worthy ruler, and is trying to protect you so that at least one righteous heir to the Kuru line survives,” Kunti argued.

It was clear Karna did not want to entertain this thought at all. But it sounded exactly like my son, who had always tried to think about the bigger picture. It was what had made him so easily manipulated, for he wore his soul, his hopes for the future, on his sleeve. If I had not taught him to be scared of ever desiring something for himself, an entire war may have been prevented.

“All this time, you have had five sons,” Karna said at last. “And I promise you when this war is over, you will still have five sons. I will not seek to harm any but Arjuna. You have my word, and though I am no Yudhishthira, you can be assured I will keep it. Would that make you happy?”

“Why would that make me happy?” Kunti cried.

“You were always so proud of your five sons,” Karna said softly. I could hear some pain in his voice. “To be the mother to such accomplished young men, the heirs of Hastinapur, the builders of Indraprastha…”

“I am sorry,” Kunti said. “I am sorry that you were not raised in your birthright—”

“I am not sorry,” Karna said. “My parents were the best I could have wished for. They raised me to be loyal, to be dutiful, to be a warrior. I am proud of where I come from.”

I imagined that this would hurt Kunti very much, but she only said, “I will always be grateful to them. But you are also my son. I wish for all six

of you to survive. It does not bring me any joy to think of you or Arjuna dying by each other's hand. Surely you can understand that."

"I am sorry for you," Karna said. "If you truly wanted that, you would tell Arjuna. You would tell Yudhishthira. But you cannot promise to do so, because you care more about their triumph than my fate. I cannot make promises I will not keep. There are too many years of bitter history between us. Even if I promise to stay my hand, he will not."

"You could achieve peace tonight, if you wanted," Kunti told him. I remembered Krishna saying the same thing, to little effect.

Karna laughed. "I know you do not truly believe that."

"The Kauravas are going to lose," Kunti said. "You know that, because you are intelligent and wise."

"I will go home to die, then," Karna told her. In that moment, he sounded so much like Bhishma in his resolve that I almost gasped. "I do not want thrones, or riches, or renown. I want to be where I was loved. If you are certain your sons will win, then take comfort in it. But I will return where I belong."

Kunti was crying in earnest now. I could hear her soft hiccuping sounds, the desperate breaths as she tried to gain control of herself. I had encouraged her to do this. I had caused her pain. There was the sound of movement, and I imagined that Karna was embracing this woman, who had let him go and resigned him to this fate. "Please do not weep for me."

After a moment, Kunti said, her voice thick, "I cannot help but feel this is the only time I will hold you. The only time I will truly see you. What can I do to make you decide to stay?"

"You sealed my fate when you abandoned me all those years ago," Karna said. "I understand why you did it, but the time for changing that is long past. Offer me your blessing, and let me go."

"Whatever blessing you want, I will give it," Kunti told him.

"Bless me, that no greed will ever cause me to stray from the path of righteousness."

At this, Kunti began crying again. I felt a deep sense of shame that I had presumed to know what might move these mortals. But when I listened to her sobs, I thought perhaps something in her seemed looser. That she was better off for having tried.

"Farewell." Karna paused, and then added, "Mother."

His presence rapidly approached me, and it was too late to hide. He strode out of the back of the tent, wiping his eyes, and stopped in his tracks when he saw me. He turned to look at the tent, then back to me. “Do I know you?” he asked. “I feel as though I know you.”

This man had been lied to again and again. His whole life was defined by lies. I could not compound that with another. “We have met,” I answered.

He closed his eyes, breathing deeply. I wondered if he was trying to calm himself or if he was searching his memory. “I cannot recall ever seeing your face,” he whispered. “And yet, your presence is known to me. Please, tell me how we have met.”

“I met you when you were just a baby,” I said. I hoped my voice would convey everything that my words could not. “I rocked you when you cried. You would not remember me.”

His eyes snapped open. “You are the River Ganga. You carried me to safety.” He fell to his knees before me, his eyes wet with tears, a wondering smile on his lips.

“Yes,” I told him. I touched his head with my palm, and he bent under it. “I am sorry, for whatever my part in this is. I thought only to rescue a child. When your mother—your new mother—picked you up, I thought you would be safe in her arms forever.”

He touched his head to my feet before rising. “Why would you apologize? You saved me, when my birth mother abandoned me.”

“I was there. I watched her, and she did not wish to give you up.” But that was not the whole truth. “Now, though… she would manipulate you, for the good of all her children. I am sure she wishes it was another way.”

“Do a person’s wishes matter?” Karna asked. “Or is it their actions on which they should be judged?” After a moment he realized he was still speaking to me, and ducked his head. “Apologies, devi. You do not wish to hear my musings. Can I help you?”

I smiled. “I was searching for Krishna, but I do not think he is here. I do not mind listening to your musings. You remind me of my son.”

“Your son…” He trailed off. “So it is true. Lord Bhishma is indeed the son of Ganga.” Karna seemed surprised, as though it was a rumor he had not thought to credit.

“Yes,” I said. “I know you do not care for him.”

Karna gave me a rueful look. “I would not wish to lie to a goddess.”

“You are like him,” I said. “Both bound to your loyalties even at the cost of losing.”

“With all respect, we are nothing alike.” Karna looked over my shoulder, toward the darkness. “Lord Bhishma fights for the Kauravas because of his oaths. But he looks down on them. He would not weep for their deaths. I fight for them because they showed me great kindness, in the face of prejudice.”

“You think very little of him if you do not think he cares for your friends. He cares for all of his family very deeply.”

“Still,” Karna said. “There is little honor in fighting for a side you believe is wrong, if you would pardon me saying so. It would have been better for him to defect, rather than dragging all of us through this.”

I found myself fascinated by this young man who would argue with a goddess. I wondered if perhaps he really wanted to quarrel with my son, but could not. “Is that true?” I asked, for I did not know the answer myself, but I felt that he was wrong. “Is it not honorable to uphold your word and duty before all else, before personal feelings? Is it truly righteous to act as you see fit, according to what you believe is right, even if that means you must be disloyal and break an oath?”

Karna pressed his lips together. “I see now why you would seek Lord Krishna. You are of course right, for you are a god.”

I had once thought this true, many lifetimes ago. But no longer. “Krishna is indeed always right,” I said at last. “But he is not the only one who is right.”

“I appreciate your words,” he said. We stood facing each other, and I could see how tired he was.

“Have you heard that the River Ganga can purify sins?” I asked. “I witness the burdens people carry, and I carry some of them with me instead.”

Karna’s eyes widened, clearly understanding the offer for what it was. He weighed it for several long moments. “I cannot truly regret what I have done,” he said. “I think there are many more deserving than I, more powerless than I. You should turn to their troubles instead, devi.”

I reached out and touched his face. For a moment, I considered doing it anyway, aiding this man who reminded me of my son. But I could not

disrespect his wishes. And so instead I let him walk away, and stretched my senses to his mother, who still stood weeping in her tent. She had erred, many, many times, but she had done so to protect her sons. I could not judge her, but neither did I want to help her. It was true, what Karna had said. Kunti could end the war by telling Yudhishthira the truth, but she would also burden Karna when she would not burden the son she had raised. So I simply acknowledged her pain, witnessed it so she was not alone.

I understood why she, and Satyavati, and I, had done what we had done and brought the world to the brink. Each of us, in our own way, had tried to protect our children, as mothers were meant to do.

But a mother could not protect her children from all pain, no matter how she might try. It was folly, and those follies had led the whole world here, to these plains of suffering. I turned myself to the rest of the camp, overwhelmed with grief. I did not touch memories of guilt or other sins, but the endless grief I took up and released, a river purifying its waters through reeds and marshes. They may have looked like obstacles, but they were vital to the cycle of the world.

Just as, I now knew, humans were not small and empty, impediments to the proper functioning of the universe. They had love, so much love, for their friends and families and strangers and indeed themselves. And I felt in myself a love for them too.

They met in a small forest not far from Kurukshetra. There was no moonlight, and so each of them carried a torch. Yudhishthira and Vidura had come, and Bhishma accompanied Duryodhana alone. Bhishma was glad that for once Karna, Bhima, and Arjuna were absent; though they were all age mates and should have been like brothers, their rivalry had instead sowed poison into the very bones of the kingdom.

Yudhishthira looked tired, as tired as Bhishma felt. Vidura reached forward to clasp Bhishma’s arm, and he felt a deep warmth for the man. Vidura had no reason to show him kindness.

“I was heartened to receive your invitation to negotiate a peace,”

Yudhishthira said. His voice was a rasp, the torchlight casting long shadows over his face, heightening the circles under his eyes into yawning pools.

“Pitamaha advised me that this might be the best course of action,” Duryodhana said.

At the mention of Bhishma, Yudhishthira seemed to soften. “I too want peace. It is appreciated.”

“I will be brief. Ours is still the more favorable position, with all the venerated elders of our kingdom fighting for us.” Duryodhana did not look at Vidura as he delivered this insult, but Vidura’s face remained expressionless regardless. “But we see the toll this war has wrought and we do not wish for all our people to suffer needlessly. So tell me your price to end this war. What would you have from me?”

Yudhishthira’s face was a clear signal of suspicion. “I am the rightful heir of Hastinapur, Duryodhana.” Duryodhana’s face clouded in anger, and Bhishma internally winced. That was the wrong thing to say, and Yudhishthira should have known it. “My brothers told me that nothing short of your total capitulation was worth peace, that all our soldiers would fight to the death for my birthright. But I disagree. I would be content with what we had before: half. Indraprastha and its surrounding lands, and the rest of our allies unharassed by Hastinapur.”

Duryodhana was plainly angry at this, but he pushed it down. Bhishma was almost proud. “If we were to grant you everything you asked for, everything you had before you gambled it away, then what did my soldiers fight for?”

Yudhishthira blinked, confused. “They fought because you asked them to,” Vidura said after a moment. “They will stop because you ask them to.”

“They fought knowing each of my cousins was fatally flawed. Gamblers, liars, cheats. Arrogant fools,” Duryodhana spat. Yudhishthira flushed, and Bhishma knew it was time to step in.

“Both sides of this war have made terrible sacrifices,” he said, trying to soothe them. “Should they not all want it to end, and for their lives to be spared above all else?”

“That is what I want,” Yudhishthira said. “But my soldiers fight for what is right, what is just. They would continue to fight if I stood down, if they felt the terms were unfair.”

“Then you are just playing at virtue.” Duryodhana laughed, cruel and

mocking. “*You* are free from sin, even if people do terrible things in your name.”

Yudhishthira bowed his head. “I feel every death on my conscience.”

“I would give you the five villages you once asked for,” Duryodhana said, an expectant smile on his face. He was no fool. He had come here intending to make this offer, knowing that regardless of what Yudhishthira said, he, Duryodhana, would come out looking as though he had tried.

“That is an insulting offer, and you know it,” Yudhishthira said quietly. “You speak of your soldiers’ sacrifice, but what of ours? To fight for five small villages?”

“You said it was better to avoid war, and that you would accept such an insult to do the righteous thing.” Duryodhana managed not to sound mocking in his recitation, but only just.

“You intentionally misunderstand me.” Yudhishthira at last sounded frustrated. “I would have accepted such an insult to spare the rest of the realm. But the rest of the realm has not been spared. Now there must be some justice. What you propose is the same as surrender, and I will not do that. Not when I know I am right.”

“Very well, then,” Duryodhana said. “I hope your righteousness is some comfort. If you win, it will only be through the utter destruction of every army in this land. What will be left then to rule over? Will you be king of ashes?”

“Duryodhana!” Bhishma snapped. Those were his words, his admonishment, and they had been meant for a man who was willing to burn down his family’s empire for his own greed, his hatred of his cousin. That was not Yudhishthira.

But the words had their intended effect. Yudhishthira’s shoulders tensed, and he turned without another word, Vidura following close behind.

“Did you intend only to make Yudhishthira feel guilty, to use my own words against him?” Bhishma demanded.

Duryodhana shrugged, turning his back on Bhishma to walk back toward their camp. “If that is how you feel about this war, then that is the truth of it no matter who wins. But you see your precious Yudhishthira was no more willing to make peace than I was.”

“You insulted him with that offer. His old kingdom was a fair price for peace.” Bhishma was so full of rage, he felt inclined to violence. All of this

had been to teach him, Bhishma, a lesson. Duryodhana had never cared to make peace, only to motivate him to fight harder, to lose his love for the Pandavas.

“There is no fair price for peace anymore,” Duryodhana said. “The winner will take it all, whatever is left to take. That is what was written when we were born. No man can change his fate.”

And although Bhishma knew logically that Duryodhana had not been required by fate to hate his cousins enough to seek to kill them, that he had not been forced to usurp the throne from a more deserving candidate, he could not disagree.

Strife had been fated for the kingdom since he had chosen to indulge his father. Since his father had longed for a pretty woman more than he had loved his son. Since his father snatched him from his mother’s arms. Perhaps since the Kurus of Hastinapur had wished to conquer instead of living contentedly with what they had. With all that weight of history pressing down on this family, how could there have been any other outcome?

“Here is the truth of it,” Duryodhana said. “If you do not fight as though you actually wish us to win, I will strip you of your title and give it to Karna. You have been forcing him to sit aside, but he would defeat Arjuna or die trying.”

The thought chilled Bhishma. Karna had become a good man, relatively speaking at least, but he was also fueled by rage. He would stop at nothing to defeat the Pandavas. No tactic, no loss, would be too great for him. And Duryodhana’s threat was not empty. “Tomorrow will be different,” he said. “I will ensure the Pandavas leave the battlefield defeated, their armies in disarray.”

Duryodhana frowned at that, sensing the many holes in Bhishma’s promise, but he stalked off without saying anything further.

And all night, Bhishma sat awake in his tent, thinking on the past without end. Was there ever a moment he could have stopped it? Could he stop it now? If he ran Duryodhana through, maybe. But then Yudhishthira’s kingdom would be built on an act of profound treachery and oath breaking. Yudhishthira would probably give the kingdom to Duryodhana’s brothers in recompense.

He should have been firmer with Dhritarashtra, forced him to discipline

Duryodhana. Sent Shakuni from court. Reprimanded Bhima and Arjuna. The weight of his regrets pressed into every crevice of his soul.

Just when it seemed like the interminable night would never end, would swallow him and his family and kingdom up whole, the sun’s rays peeked over the horizon. The depths of his failure lay before him and he struggled to get to his feet, to do his duty and fulfill his oath.

Before the despair could swallow him whole, he felt, for the first time away from her banks, the soothing caress of his mother. It was as though he was immersed in her currents instead of trapped on this field of horrors. Likely it was his mind, trying to summon some small comfort. But it was enough. It was enough.

CHAPTER 28

THE WAR

I WOKE TO KRISHNA'S flaring-bright presence. "Sister," he whispered. "You came."

I threw my arms around his neck and felt his smile against my shoulder. He did not laugh, and I could feel his spirit was grim. "How are you?" I pulled away to study his face. He was a god, strong and proud, his dark skin still glowing, but everything about him was dimmer to my eyes. "You need some ghee," I said at last, and this finally pulled a laugh from him. The sound of his mirth was like the chime of bells that had long lay disused.

"How long were you waiting?" he asked without answering my question.

"Not long."

"The camp seems calmer," he said. There was a young man behind him, standing motionless, although he must have been exhausted. I stretched out toward him and found, to my surprise, he too had the touch of a god. Yama. I had seen Bhishma's memory of this boy long, long ago. Krishna must have noticed my interest because he added, "This is Maharaja Yudhishthira,

the leader of the Pandavas. Yudhishthira, this is Ganga devi."

The king's eyes widened and he immediately knelt to touch his head and hands to my feet, even as I protested. "Get some rest," Krishna told him once he stood. "The sun will rise soon enough."

When he was gone, Krishna led me to his own tent. "I wanted you to see this great war, but not because I wished to cause you pain."

"You wanted me here to change Bhishma," I said.

"Not change him." Krishna shook his head. "He is fighting this war nobly. *Too* nobly. He fights to preserve lives on the battlefield each day, to minimize damage."

"How could that be wrong?" I asked, feeling pride for my son.

"Each day he prevents loss of life, he also prolongs the war. If both sides were to become more ruthless, it would be a few terrible days of fighting. But at the end of it, the Pandavas will have triumphed, and the lives lost will be fewer in total."

I understood then what Krishna was saying, but I vehemently disagreed. "If the Pandavas win by fighting so ruthlessly, can they truly be the side that should win?"

"If both sides fight this way, should neither win?" Krishna countered. "Should they destroy themselves and let all the kingdoms of humanity collapse? At the end of this, very few will be standing. And I will ensure that they are righteous and prepared to lead."

"I do not doubt you," I told him, for I did not. "But I will not go and tell my son to fight in a manner he believes to be unjust."

"I would not ask you to," Krishna said. He sat on the side of his cot and ran a hand through his hair. "I am here for my purpose. Other gods have come to do their part. But you were there at the very beginning. And I thought you might wish to be here at the end."

"The end of what?" I asked him.

"It will be the end of an age," Krishna said. "The age of Hastinapur. The age of dharma."

I did not have anything to say to that. Hastinapur had not been any great bastion of dharma to my eyes, but perhaps what came next would be worse. This war and all that had preceded it had eroded the pretense that people lived by any rules of conduct other than their own whims. Perhaps that is what he meant; that after this war, people would not even make any attempt.

“What should I do?” I said after a moment.

“I do not know,” he said. “I can tell the mortal world what to do, but not you, sister. You chart your own course. You always have.”

“Not anymore,” I told him. “I do not mind being here anymore, for I know this world needed me. But I cannot chart my own course. I am not who I was.”

Krishna looked surprised at that. “You are who you have always been,” he said. “You might have taken different forms, been made of different substances, but you know the truth. We are all one.”

Tears pricked at my eyes at his words. He was right, from a certain point of view. We were all one with the universe, god and human and river. “Don’t you miss the heavens?” I asked him suddenly.

“Of course,” he said to me. “But when I was in the heavens, I missed you.” And there was nothing more to say.

On the ninth day of battle, Bhishma rode out with dread in his heart. He knew he needed to fight, truly fight with all his might, or else command would be stripped from him, and any control he had over the fate of his kingdom would be lost to him entirely.

And so he set aside his reservations, his guilt and pain. He fought.

He was an excellent warrior, steadfast, courageous, and powerful. But there was something inside him—his immortal soul, his mother would say—that turned him from a strong warrior into a destroyer of armies. He became a lightning strike, a wildfire brought from the sky. He had kept himself restrained thus far, but now he let himself go.

Arrows flew from his fingertips, an endless rain, stopping chariots and slaying men before they could even draw their bows. From the moment the sun rose, he became an instrument of death, until he could almost feel Yama around him. So long as a man held a weapon in his hands, Bhishma slaughtered him. His body tingled with electricity, driving him forward. He was one with his charioteer, one with his horses, a single weapon for the Kauravas. It was as though arrows disintegrated as they fell upon him, barely denting his armor. What little cuts he acquired did not cause him

pain; he felt more powerful than ever when his blood spilled, his nature bursting forth.

His men surged forward, close on his tail. Their arrows flew in a hail, felling fleeing soldiers and men still fighting alike. Bhishma's chariot hit the line of dead bodies, spraying blood everywhere. His charioteer, who had been by his side for decades, did not even flinch, lifting one hand to swipe at his face while he kept smoothly guiding the horses forward. Bhishma fired in clean motions, until without warning a cough tore out of his throat. His eyes stung, and the battlefield began to turn hazy. Smoke. He looked up and shouted a warning, and his charioteer barely dodged as a rain of fire crashed toward them from the sky, colliding into the soldiers just behind him. The white-hot flames were all-consuming, creating a barrier of death between Bhishma and the Pandava armies just beyond. A boon from Agni, perhaps, or Shiva, and it could only be counteracted by another boon.

The fiery storm rippled, beginning to push toward Bhishma's forces. He turned abruptly away, toward a group of Pandava soldiers to the southwest that were fighting with some Kaurava foot soldiers, obviously not expecting any great resistance. His men flanked them, and he descended from above, a wrathful typhoon of destruction. He pressed, on and on, until he reached the other edge of the great field, and turned, and saw a great swathe of death behind him.

The divisions of the Pandava army scattered and ran in his wake, and he was startled out of his haze by the sight of frightened faces, bodies kneeling on the ground and staring up at him, begging for mercy. Noncombatants. He turned away and drove back into the field, seeking out the Pandavas' warriors that had been left on the wrong side of the firestorm.

An elephant division approached him, men mounted high on their backs, charging forward. The great beasts trumpeted, and Bhishma reached behind him, nocked another arrow, and let loose. Although it was only one arrow, it pierced through the elephant's eye, and the animal came crashing down. Another elephant stumbled on it, its leg cracking. Bhishma murmured a quick prayer, and as he shot each arrow, a bolt of lightning ran through his skin, through the arrows, and exploded into the elephants and their riders. He was no Indra, and he would not use boons, but still his prayers were answered, and he laid waste to all until he was alone in an elephant graveyard.

The Pandava armies were fleeing, the fire between them having burned itself out, and only Arjuna and his division were still willing to face him in combat. The smell of blood and excrement was stronger today than it had ever been, his foray destroying any pretense of virtuous combat that did not involve the utter annihilation of the combatants. But still he did not care. He was here for a purpose, and he would see it fulfilled.

“Do not fight me,” he shouted to Arjuna, with what part of him was still concerned for the well-being of the Pandava brothers themselves. His voice came out as loud as the roar of a tiger. “You cannot win.”

He saw Arjuna stiffen as his words reached him. Krishna, dressed in yellow robes, spoke to Arjuna then, and Bhishma understood without hearing that Arjuna was being told to kill him.

Bhishma stood, patient, his men assembling behind him, both sides waiting for a sign. Arjuna was shaking his head, his bow loose. He could imagine Arjuna refusing to fight, as he had supposedly done on the first day of battle. A white and pure energy had shone forth from the Pandava side for a moment, and then battle had finally commenced.

And then, a prickle of intuition. Without warning, Bhishma loosed an arrow at Arjuna’s chariot, cracking one of his wheels. His men took their cue, showering the Pandava armies with hell, and he surged forward, drawing a sword in one hand to cut through the Pandava ranks, abandoning Arjuna to instead ruin his troops. He was one man, a hundred men. He saw faces he recognized, soldiers that had turned sides, and cut them down. No old bonds could save them now. He was a flash flood, surging forward until the Pandava ranks broke, even the most disciplined of soldiers unable to bear the horror of watching their friends and brothers mowed down like cattle. Bhishma spotted Abhimanyu, grim faced, bringing up the rear and preparing to face him. He hesitated for a brief moment—and in that moment, his bow shattered in his hand.

Only two men could have made such a shot, and he had forced one of them to remain in the camp again this day.

He reached down for another bow, and this one too was shattered before he could draw it. He laughed as Krishna pulled Arjuna’s chariot around to face him. “Excellent shot! Well done!” he called out. Arjuna faltered at his words, and in that time Bhishma managed to draw a third bow and fire upon Arjuna.

His first arrow grazed Arjuna’s hand, but Arjuna did not flinch, instead returning the volley, which buried itself a finger’s breadth past Bhishma’s side. Arjuna had missed on purpose. The chariots circled each other, round and round. Bhishma hit Arjuna once, twice, but Arjuna could not touch him. Bhishma could feel a triumphant smile on his face. It was only a matter of time until Arjuna retreated from the field.

And then Arjuna’s chariot came to an abrupt stop, and Krishna leapt from the chariot, an expression of pure and righteous fury on his face. Like a thunderclap, all bloodlust evaporated from Bhishma’s body as the god stood there, chest heaving, the hem of his robes growing red as he stood on the blood-soaked ground. “If I must kill you myself, I will,” Krishna said, his words ringing like a holy proclamation. “This war will not be endless.”

Bhishma’s bow dropped to his side as Krishna bent in a fluid motion and lifted a broken chariot wheel from the ground, holding it before him like a bludgeoning weapon.

“Lord Krishna,” Arjuna called out, his voice young and frightened. “Please return. You vowed never to take up arms in this war.”

It looked to Bhishma as though that vow had already been broken. Krishna, the most powerful of the gods, had broken a vow because of *Bhishma*. How could it be, when oaths were so sacred?

How could he have done this?

He descended from his chariot in three swift steps, still clutching his bow, and knelt on the ground. “I am prepared, Lord Krishna,” he said. And he was. The release of death at the hands of a god would be a blessing now, and from one such as Krishna doubly so. “Strike me down, and I will still be your servant.”

But Arjuna had also descended, and running forward, he threw himself at Krishna. His arms wrapped around the god, trying to pull him back, but Krishna took another step forward and then a third, advancing on Bhishma.

“Please, Lord Krishna,” Arjuna begged, maneuvering himself in front of Krishna. “You promised not to fight. Do not do this on my account.”

“You have not fulfilled your duty,” Krishna said, his voice weighted with judgment. “Saving this world comes before any vow.”

“I will do it,” Arjuna said. “Stop your advance, and I will. I swear it, on my honor and my bow.”

Krishna stopped. The wheel fell from his hands. His face was still

clouded, but without another word he spun around and mounted Arjuna's chariot.

Bhishma remained kneeling as the mighty presence of Krishna faded. But he could not kneel in blood forever. If he was not to be granted a swift and noble death, then he would return to the terrible fighting. He turned toward his chariot.

The day wore on, but the Pandavas seemed to get no closer. At last he realized they were fleeing him. That was not what warriors were taught. But then again, many of the men who remained were not kshatriya, trained from birth to fight, but all the other soldiers who had been called up. How could they be expected to have the same courage? Yudhishthira was retreating too, to fight another day. Bhishma loosed arrows toward their ranks, harrying them, and they began to fall to the sheer power of his strikes.

Darkness fell over the field. The end of battle for the day. The Pandavas remained safe.

He rode back to camp, and as he did many of the Kaurava warriors cheered. Dronacharya gave him an approving nod from his own chariot. Duryodhana was beaming, waiting for him. "Pitamaha! You have honored us greatly."

Bhishma tried to smile, but his face felt frozen. "Thank you, Duryodhana."

"The Pandava army was fleeing. In total disarray. Another day like this, and we will surely win," Duryodhana declared.

Bhishma felt some relief that Duryodhana's dogs were no longer at his back. But tomorrow, Arjuna would wish to kill him. He would either have to kill his grandnephew—his grandchild—or be killed by him, leaving the young man to bear that guilt. His vows pressed in on him until black encroached on the borders of his vision. "I must clean myself," he said, and passed by the jubilant soldiers to enter his tent, where a washbasin was already waiting.

He scrubbed at his hands, flecked with blood. Some had crusted into the grooves of his skin, and he took a brush to it. Now the pain of the day came flooding back, and as he removed his armor unassisted, he wiped his many cuts and bruises. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see the fields.

The men he had killed swam before his vision. One soldier who was dying but still alive screaming as his skull was crushed in. One of his men

shooting and felling a retreating soldier. He did not speak a word to reprimand him. An elephant, hours away from death by a broken leg and unlikely to be attended to, trumpeting in the field, a great mournful cry.

Krishna's face as he advanced, absolute fury and power, more than could be contained in any man, but something more—

Scorn.

Krishna had been filled with scorn for Bhishma and his actions. Krishna had been willing to break his solemn oath just to stop Bhishma.

How long had Bhishma obeyed his oath to serve Hastinapur loyally, no matter the consequence? How long had Bhishma justified his actions as serving a greater moral compass?

He sat heavily on his bed, frozen. What had he done, what horrors had he wrought, just for Duryodhana's misguided ways?

He was a young man, renouncing his claim to his birthright to make his father proud.

He was stealing brides for his brother, allowing a girl's whole future to be stolen from her.

He was watching his grandsons gleefully attempt to disrobe a woman in a public hall, sitting silently by.

The walls of his tent pressed in on him. All this time, he had defined himself by his word, thinking his vows would be his guide, would prevent him from straying. But while he had followed the path of his oaths, it had not been the path of righteousness. He was overwhelmed with the knowledge, held at bay so long without acknowledgment. And yet he did not have the luxury of time to decide what to do next.

The solution came to him as pure instinct. In that moment, he wanted the comfort of a time when everything had been simpler. The counsel of a goddess. "Mother," he prayed. "I need your guidance. I am lost."

Nothing happened. He lay back on his bed and closed his eyes, meditating as best he could to clear his mind. He struggled for several long minutes—felt the despair overwhelm him—was ready to give up—

A cool hand touched his forehead.

Even though he had never truly known her as human, he knew that touch. He would know it anywhere. It was the first touch he had ever known, and he was certain, deep down, the last he ever would. "Mother," he said, opening his eyes.

Ganga stood above him, a somber expression on her face. She looked younger than him, but it was undeniably her. He stood, and stooped to touch her feet. She embraced him, holding him as he at last began to cry.

CHAPTER 29

THE WAR

KRISHNA HAD DIRECTED ME to Shikhandi, and I had followed my friend's advice. Shikhandi had not been surprised to see me. He was covered in muck and blood, but he had a fierce smile on his face as he greeted me, touching his hands to my feet. "I hope you are not here to dissuade me from dispensing justice," he said.

"So you are still intent on killing my son?"

He turned from me, cleaning his bow. "Why wouldn't I be? Of all who fight for the Kauravas, is he not the guiltiest?" I waited for more, and in my silence, he continued, "He knows he is wrong, but he fights for the same reason he destroyed my past life. He would rather do what is easy than what is right, and we all suffer for it."

"And have you continued to suffer?" I asked.

It was Shikhandi's glance over his shoulder that I remembered the most, the look in his eyes. "I left my people behind, in the end, when I realized I could not help them any longer. I traveled to Pancala. I pledged my service to the king, one of the few independent kingdoms left. And do you know

what happened?” He did not even wait for a response, looking beyond me, his eyes glazed. “Dronacharya led the Pandava and Kaurava princes together, as their gurudakshina, to conquer and humiliate Pancala, all for some past slight. They carved up the land and its people, divided it in pieces, and left it bleeding. And Bhishma did not stop him, although he has had command in Hastinapur all these years. My king came here to fight for the Pandavas, and so I followed. Your son ensures his own destruction over and over.”

He walked away, and I might have stood there frozen—but my son called me. I could feel in his prayer his pain. His hopelessness. I was far from him, but when he reached for me I left at once, cursing my slow mortal form as I ran through the forest, trying desperately to reach my son in his hour of need. I heard the pain in my son’s prayer, and I remembered what I had felt on that great battlefield all day. Bhishma had glowed in my senses like a godling, as though he was close to his true form. All around him had been suffering.

Now, as I approached, I felt his turmoil. I slipped into his tent without difficulty and saw him lying back, his white hair fanned around his face like a mark of divinity. His forehead was creased, in pain or concentration, and I reached out to smooth it away.

He wept, and I soothed him. When he had calmed himself, I finally spoke. “What do you need?” I asked.

“You know what has happened,” he said, not meeting my eyes. “I do not see how this war will end with anything short of the utter annihilation of the kingdom.”

I brushed his hair back. “Perhaps it is time you stop thinking about the kingdom. Think about the world, and do what is best.”

“I cannot defect,” he said with a sigh. “I considered it. But neither side will trust me if I do. It will shake their belief in all our values, and every soldier will take it as proof they can do what they wish without consequence.”

“I did not say you should defect,” I said, trying to follow his scattered thoughts. “Fighting for the side you think is right is better than fighting for those in the wrong, but it is still fighting. It is still destruction.”

“My duty is to fight.” He looked confused now. “It is not my lot to give up arms and become an ascetic. But fighting for the side my oath bound me

to has led me to the ruin of my family."

"War has led to the ruin of the Kuru line." I could see it, stretching out before me. "Your father wanted conquest, but he wanted other things more. But your younger brother who should have been king died in war. The bloodline has been lost since then, although that is of little importance."

Bhishma nodded. "I have turned the problem over many times. If we had fought fewer wars before we knew this war was coming, both sides would have fewer allies. The destruction would certainly be less."

I laughed at that, for it sounded absurd to me, but stopped when he looked hurt. "This war would not have happened if not for all the rest. These young boys grew up in war. Their first experiences of adulthood were war. And all their allies were so grievously wronged… There has been poison in all your veins for decades. You only know it now."

"I know," my son said softly. He sounded his age then. He sounded like a man who had watched everyone he loved destroy one another, and I wished I could erase that pain, for he would have to live with it forever. "That is why I need your aid. I need you to help me do what I cannot, and determine how I can do my part to end this."

I remembered holding him in my arms as a newborn babe, preparing myself to drown him. The tenderness I had felt for him, the agony of separation when he had been torn from me by his father. Love and pain, all mixed up in a way I knew now was simply existence.

Despite all that had befallen him since, somehow I did not wish that he had died. I had gotten to see my child grow, to now be a man willing to give that final sacrifice to atone, and to make his world better however he could. I knew Krishna would see it as too little, too late. But I could not stay angry at my son forever, and especially not now. Because we both knew that the only way for him to leave this war was to die.

It was why he had called me here. So that his mother could help him do what he could not do alone. It broke my heart.

"Swear to me you will never fight Shikhandi," I said to him.

"What?"

"Make me one last vow," I said. I blinked away the warmth in my eyes, as though my mortal body rebelled against these terrible words. I was finally killing my eighth child. It was best for him, best for the world, and yet I would live with the knowledge forever that I had done this to him. It

was selfish to want differently. I pressed on. “The only one you have made to honor your mother. Swear it to me, and hold true.” It hurt, it did, but I was not afraid for him any longer. I knew now that no matter how these years had impacted him, he would survive this experience to become an immortal once more. There was no amount he could change that the universe would not care for him, would not welcome him back to his place. Because he was a piece of that oneness all along.

He swallowed. And then he smiled. “I swear to you, the River Ganga, that I will never raise a weapon against Shikhandi. It will be penance, at last, for what I did to those women all those years ago.”

It was not my forgiveness to grant. But I could tell it would ease him. And so I lied. “It will give you absolution, my love. My son.” I held him to me one last time. And I accepted, at long last, that I would never be rid of these contradictions that living briefly as a mortal had given me. But compassion was not a weakness. I could help heal this world’s wounds despite it. No, because of it.

I left my son to live or die as he chose.

Ganga, Shiva called. *Will you come?*

It was so different from anything he had said to me in the past that I tripped, stumbled. But I could feel my brief work here was done. *Yes.*

Then I was no longer in the acrid fields of war, but in crisp mountain air.

My mortal body was gone.

“Will you lecture me now?” I asked. I found I did not care. I had put to right what I had started.

“You are not Krishna. Why willingly go to that field and bring yourself further pain?”

“Were you worried?” I demanded, incredulous. He said nothing, but I thought, after all this time I had known him, that I could predict him. “You feared it would hurt me, make me vengeful or rash.” I tried not to let my disgust at the conclusion come through, although of course he would know. I was not afforded the luxury of private thoughts.

“After everything, would it be too much to believe that I only wished

you would not have to witness it?”

“I am a god,” I said. “I should witness the pain of humanity.”

“I do not mean you are incapable of watching. But your son is a general in this war. I know it is difficult.”

I pushed down the initial, instinctual surge of anger, realizing that it was deeply irrational. “Krishna invited me to come,” I told him at last. “He thought perhaps there would be some use for me there.”

“You do not need to seek out use,” Shiva said. He paused, then added, “But did you find what you were looking for?”

“You have mentioned my mistakes,” I said. “I know I have made them. And so has my son. He fights a war, but yearns for peace. He was in that position because of his own choices. His mistakes. When I went there, I thought I needed to fix what I had broken. But I did not. My purpose was to help others untangle themselves. And I did that for many, including my son.”

“You never broke anything.” Despite being stone, Shiva’s voice sounded softer. “I know perhaps I have intimated that you have, although it was never my intention. There is a difference between your behavior and what you have caused. The mortals make their own choices. If you had never become mortal, the mortal rulers would still have found other ways to cause the ruin of their kingdoms.”

“Perhaps you have forgotten, but it is your interference with the mortal world that caused me to become human.” My second brush with humanity had changed me, I was realizing. My nature was change, still, but I had settled into myself. I could speak to Shiva calmly, without recrimination. “Interacting with those who live with us, who worship us, is not a mistake. My error was the way I influenced my son, my failing to protect him from his father and his kingdom, and perhaps even which mortals I chose to favor. But becoming mortal was not my choice.”

“You think this,” Shiva said. “But you chose to protect the Vasus. *That* was your choice.”

The sage had promised Shantanu a bride, I remembered. But Shiva had never lied to me. Maybe the sage had chosen me purely because I had chosen to love the Vasus and he had felt humiliated. I would never know for certain, and it did not matter. The many runoffs of that moment had long since become rivers of their own. “It should not have happened,” I said at

last. “It was wrong.”

“I agree.” I could feel Shiva’s presence on me, stretching throughout the entirety of my being. “It was not my intention; I did not know.”

Something about Shiva’s admission touched me. And I felt satisfied—no, vindicated. I had been righteous all along. “I do not agree with the way you have kept me,” I said. “But I understand why you first caught me. I understand at last.” I thought of my son then, who was always trying to find the correct path, who was trying to do right for his family and his kingdom even when he did wrong. The outcome mattered, I knew more than most, but so did the striving.

I thought too of Satyavati, trying to escape her father and village life and ending up married to a man who loved her only for her mysterious beauty. Many in Hastinapur had looked down on her, and even I had thought she bore some part in my son’s vow. But her demands had been only to protect herself, and even then one of her sons had died in battle and the other had died of illness, and she had been left alone. I thought of Kunti, abandoning her firstborn son in the river because the world would be cruel to them both otherwise. And now, all her sons at war with one another, and unwilling to listen to her calls for peace. All mothers, and their sons, trying their hardest and failing. But I could not hate any of them. Any of us.

Shiva was looking upon me contemplatively. “You have ensured your son’s death,” he observed.

“I did that when I gave birth to him,” I said. “This is what he wants. I only helped him take the step, provided him some comfort in the choice. If you think that is interference, I cannot help that. I have tried to be uncaring, tried to simply endure, but that is not my way. Not now that I have lived as one of them.”

“I know.” Shiva paused, as if considering his next words very carefully. “Perhaps it is another mistake of mine. Your son is about to die, to return to his true state. What will you do then?”

“I will be a goddess,” I said. “What else? If he wishes to be with me, I will welcome him. I will honor whatever atonement or contemplation he sees fit, but I will not control him, if that is your fear. He is free to join his siblings here.”

“I see,” Shiva said. “I have begun to wonder why I keep my tether to you. It is not as if you hold dangerous intentions any longer.”

I had not let myself dare to hope, not in a long time. But something within me leapt at his declaration. *Could it be?*

"You seem to think that being freed from me means that you can do as you please. You hardly know what that means, because you have never been able to try. But this world has its own rules. Your origin will always be here; your river may change but it will take time. Our powers cannot do everything. It takes me centuries to raise a mountain. And although you may hear prayers and see far beyond your banks, it would take a truly extraordinary effort to do more than watch."

"But I will be able to choose," I said, holding myself unnaturally still as I stared at Shiva. "I will be able to choose and that is what I want. What I deserve, for I am in fact your equal, but for a moment of poor luck."

"Yes," said Shiva gravely. "You are."

He sharpened his power like a blade, all his great magic driven to a single point of concentration. "Are you prepared?" he asked.

I was the least prepared I had ever been. Freedom was an unfathomable idea to me. And yet I wanted it. I wanted it more than anything. "I am prepared," I said.

His power was upon me. I had expected it to be sharp, a harsh severing. But he picked us apart gently, untangling me from him. I felt it, the moment it happened: a lightness of being, a sudden weightlessness.

It was over. He was gone. And I was *free*.

CHAPTER 30

THE WAR

A WEIGHT HAD BEEN lifted off Bhishma. Shikhandi, he knew, was in the Pandava camp. Shikhandi had never tried to meet him in battle before, despite his vow. But surely that time could be made to come, and soon.

“Pitamaha?” a familiar voice called from behind his tent. Why was Yudhishthira there? Was Bhishma imagining things now? Surely he had not imagined his mother. Her presence was so clear, so inimitable. “May I enter?”

Bhishma stood from where he had been cross-legged on his bed, and opened the tent flap. Yudhishthira stood outside, tear tracks on his face. Krishna was behind him, looking far more resolute, and Arjuna brought up the rear, face downcast, but eyes burning.

“Come in.” He held the flap open as they filed in and sat cross-legged on the floor. Technically, mingling between camps was allowed while the sun was down, but as far as he knew it had not happened thus far. “What can I do for you?”

“Thank you,” Yudhishthira said softly. “This is—difficult to say.”

“Surely you do not intend to surrender, after all this.” What would be the point of it all, of rejecting Duryodhana’s pitiful offer last night, if they gave up after one day of his fighting? Krishna would not stand for it.

Thankfully, Yudhishthira quickly shook his head. “No, Pitamaha. Although after watching your prowess today, it would not be foolish to surrender. I knew you were powerful, but none of us had truly faced you in battle until today, had we? I thought that perhaps we ought to in fact retire into the forest and give up this war. You were like a wildfire.”

“A flash flood, perhaps,” Krishna said, although his tone held none of his good humor. “I counseled that going into the forest would be a dereliction of the duties of a king. While you may crush most armies as a farmer crushes a small bug underfoot, perhaps you have a weakness and may yet be defeated.”

“Every man has a weakness,” Bhishma said. He was somewhat perplexed as to why this conversation was being recounted to him here, given that Krishna could strike him down now if he so pleased.

“Of course.” Krishna gave a small smile at that. “Arjuna could slay you in battle.”

“That is true.” Arjuna was the best archer in the world, and the child of Indra. Of course he could defeat Bhishma.

But Arjuna looked away, face contorted. “What kind of man would I be if I slew my grandsire?”

“A dutiful man,” Bhishma said. He would not lie to his own grandson, certainly not to save his own life. “A loyal man. The Lord Krishna himself was willing to break his vow—”

“Not on my account,” Yudhishthira broke in. And now Bhishma began to understand the shape of this final meeting.

“Bhishma is indeed a great man,” Krishna said, locking eyes with him, even though he spoke as though Bhishma was not there. “But he fights for the side of injustice. His judgment is compromised, and if I break my vow to stop him, so be it.”

“I came here because I thought there might be another way,” Yudhishthira said before Bhishma could respond to Krishna’s words. He did not know how he might have, for they cut him quite deeply. Yudhishthira took a deep breath, and tears welled in his eyes again. “You raised us. We were fatherless and you took us in. You made me who I am. You gave me

everything. And even so, I must ask for this final boon from you. How might we kill you? How might we achieve victory?”

He had thought perhaps that his tongue would resist. But it was, in the end, remarkably easy. After all, speaking truly about his vows could not be seen as contravening any oath. He was simply telling his beloved grandson how to remove him from the war. “I have taken a vow never to fight Shikhandi. He is in your camps even now.”

“Shikhandi?” Arjuna asked, brow furrowing in concentration. “He is an excellent warrior, but he has never met you.”

“I knew him, in a past life.” This was harder to say. “I wronged him. At the time, his old form was no threat to me.” His words implied his vow was decades old, even though he had made it mere hours ago. “I recently learned he was in your camp. Here to take his revenge on me, perhaps. But I cannot fight him.”

Yudhishthira frowned. “The rules of combat prohibit striking an unarmed warrior, or one who is not fighting. Pitamaha, I cannot encourage such an action.” This was why Yudhishthira was better than Bhishma ever could be, why he would make a great king. Bhishma felt more secure in the knowledge he had made the right choice.

“Do not worry,” Krishna said. “Gangaputra has given us a great gift, and we will honor it. Thank you, Bhishma.”

He smiled. Surely his mother would be proud of him, and proud of what he had done. “You will be victorious,” he promised the brothers seated before him. “There will be others who take my place. Karna. Dronacharya. But I know you can overcome them.”

“Duryodhana must be mad if he would let Karna become general,” Arjuna muttered, and Bhishma gave him a sharp look.

“Karna will be a difficult opponent,” Krishna said to Arjuna. “You never truly know a man, and you do not know Karna.”

Yudhishthira, surprisingly, looked shamefaced at that statement. What did he know, Bhishma wondered. No. He would have given up the war immediately. There was something else to do with Karna… but it was no longer Bhishma’s place to know Yudhishthira’s mind and thoughts as his own. Instead, he rose, and the three men rose with him, murmuring goodbyes.

Yudhishthira was the last to leave, unable to meet Bhishma’s eyes.

“I wish I had been born a laborer,” Yudhishthira said softly.

“No, you do not,” Bhishma told him, grasping his shoulder. “You were meant to be a great king. You have done that which is hard but right, and proven your worth.” His words were true, but he could not help but think why any man was *born* a laborer, or a king. Why valor was the domain of only kshatriya, and menial labor the domain of only shudra, and whether he had been wrong to believe birth mattered all along. It was far too late to wonder now.

“I do not want this to be the last time I see you.”

He was prepared to die tomorrow, and did not know what to say. But somehow, looking at Yudhishthira’s face, he knew this was not their final parting. “We will meet again. I know it.”

He waited for hours on the battlefield, stalling his attacks to give the Pandavas every opportunity to bring Shikhandi to him. By midday he began to despair that it would ever happen. Krishna and Arjuna were back on the field, harrying him, but not pressing their advantage at his distraction. Had they decided not to take the opening after all? It did not feel like a reprieve, but a great disappointment.

And then he saw a man approaching on horseback. The moment Bhishma could see the man’s eyes, he knew. This was Amba’s soul. If he looked too long in those depths, he knew, he would see that past life, the wrongs still unburied.

Shikhandi climbed into Arjuna’s chariot, and Krishna brought the horses close. There were no heavenly interventions now, no boons or prayers. Just Bhishma and Shikhandi. Bhishma’s own charioteer began showing his own skill, but he was no match for Krishna. Arjuna’s first arrow struck one of Bhishma’s horses, the second broke his front wheel.

“I must climb down to fix this,” his charioteer said. There was fear in his voice. “His arrow went deep.”

“Do not fear. They will not attack you.”

As Bhishma climbed down, so did Shikhandi. Bhishma’s sword was strapped to his waist, and he itched to draw it. To not draw it was to break

his oath to Hastinapur. His fingers brushed the hilt. To draw it was to break his vow.

He did not draw it.

“I know you,” he called instead. “I know why you have come here.”

Shikhandi said nothing. His gaze was steady. There was no passion in it, and Bhishma worried something was staying his hand.

“Once, long ago, I sinned. I failed. I failed you, and I failed my dharma. My dishonor is the cause of all this.” He gestured around, hoping that this reminder might give Shikhandi the push he needed. “You are right to be here. Right to take your due, and Ambika’s, and Ambalika’s. This is what I deserve.”

At this, Shikhandi hissed, a low, inhuman sound. “Do not say their names.”

“You are a fearsome warrior indeed. I have heard of you.” He stopped ten paces from Shikhandi, not wanting to get close enough for Shikhandi to feel his humanity. The fate of their world, it seemed, balanced on the edge of a knife. “I am sorry for what I did to you. I am so very sorry. It was wrong, and it is a hurt I can never undo.”

“Do you want forgiveness?” Shikhandi asked. His voice was mocking, but Bhishma did not care.

“Yes,” he said. “I do.”

“Once, I knelt before you and begged for any small kindness. You could have granted it then, but you did not. So kneel before me, and I will consider it.”

At once Bhishma knelt in the dirt, head bowed. “I beg your forgiveness, though I will never deserve it.”

“Stand and fight me,” Shikhandi said. “You refused before. I will forgive you if you fight me now.”

“I am sorry,” Bhishma said, his heart sinking. “But I took an oath not to fight you.”

“You and your oaths!” Shikhandi snapped. “There are things more important than oaths and vows. Draw your sword and fight me.”

“I will not. There is nothing more important than this vow.”

Shikhandi snorted. “How convenient. By the rules that you set for this war, I cannot strike down an enemy combatant who is unarmed, who is refusing to fight. You claim you want forgiveness, atonement, and yet you

still dishonor me."

Bhishma swallowed. There was only dishonor in this war, it seemed. "Sometimes, there are more important things than rules. You yourself just stated my own vows and oaths should be meaningless."

"So I should dirty myself for you to remain blameless?" Shikhandi laughed, a bitter sound. "You never change, do you? I changed completely, and you—"

"It is just a different form," Bhishma said. "Not a different person. Your sisters went docilely to their fate—"

"How dare you?" Shikhandi spat. "My sisters were forced to be with a man they wanted nothing to do with, a man who wasn't even king, to propagate your Kuru line. You will not speak of them."

"Your sisters helped cause all this," Bhishma said, gesturing around. "We all had our part to play. You must own that."

"I own my actions," Shikhandi said. "I always have. The kingdoms of the world might have said differently, but I know that truth now. My sisters had nothing to do with this. They did their *duty*." He said the word like it was poison. "It was the men of the Kuru dynasty who caused all this."

Bhishma thought of Satyavati, of his own mother. They had made choices, but it was true that the greatest blame lay at Shantanu's feet, and his own. "Perhaps it was. And I am a man of the Kuru dynasty. So look no further."

"Do you want to die?" Shikhandi asked him.

"You want to kill me," Bhishma said. It was not an answer, but Shikhandi still stiffened at his statement. "Otherwise you would not be here."

"I will not let you drag me into dishonor," Shikhandi said. But his resolve was slipping, by the way his fingers twitched. He wanted to reach for an arrow. And Bhishma knew then what to say to help him on his way.

"It will not be dishonor," he said. "I wronged you, and you can have your revenge. If you took it, if you struck me, I would forgive you."

At this, Shikhandi turned away from him abruptly, stalking several steps back toward the chariot. For one heart-stopping moment, Bhishma worried that perhaps he had said the wrong thing. But then Shikhandi stopped. His shoulders were shaking.

He turned back toward Bhishma. Perhaps it was Bhishma's imagination,

but Shikhandi’s cheeks seemed to glisten with tears in the bright sun.

In a motion that would have made Dronacharya proud, Shikhandi nocked an arrow and released it.

It pierced Bhishma’s right shoulder. He did not cry out as he fell; he felt as though he was watching from afar. He heard faintly a great hue and cry, or perhaps that was simply the ringing in his ears.

“I can never forgive you,” Shikhandi said. He threw his bow into the dirt, where it skidded until it brushed Bhishma’s knees. And then he turned and walked away, past Arjuna and Krishna, through the fighting men, and away from the battle.

Only when Shikhandi was gone did the pain begin, did Bhishma return to his body, to a burning sensation so deep he felt that this must be death. He panted, sweating in agony. His head lay in the dirt, and blood flowed freely in front of him, matting the loose earth.

Then the pain was over. He was released. And he was *free*.

CHAPTER 31

AFTER THE WAR

I HAD LONG IMAGINED freedom. I had imagined wrenching myself from the glaciers of Shiva's mountains. I had imagined thrashing about and destroying humanity for separating me from my home. I had imagined reversing my flow, pushing myself back up to the cosmic ocean.

Freedom was none of those things, and it was all of them.

And although I would never leave Shiva's mountains, restrained by the forces of the physical realm that required me to have a start and an end, he was gone from me, truly gone. A divine weight had been lifted.

There was nobody to stop me if I wanted to destroy humanity. Nobody but myself—a far more powerful constraint than I had ever imagined.

I could never return to the heavens, yet I could dance with new family here, freely.

But the world I returned to in this newfound freedom was shattered, the suffering without reward or end. No flood or drought or earthquake could wreak the havoc that humanity had accomplished all on its own. An entire generation of men, wiped out. No, generations. How could it be? How

would humanity survive this?

My son did not return, but I did what I could for these humans, offering them a safe haven where violence could not touch them.

I had barely gotten this freedom and set to this work when Shiva called me. It was not a pull, nor was it a demand. My waters did not move to his whims. I felt his presence at my pool, and I sensed a question.

I took my time answering, just because I could, but when I arrived, he did not seem angry. “Ganga,” he said, and my name echoed around the mountains. “I wondered if you might not come.”

“You called,” I said.

“I have been watching the war, and it is about to come to an end. I thought you might wish to see it.”

My desire to refuse was immediate. I did not want to make myself beholden to Shiva once more, to rely on him or touch our powers. But I could not say no, so after a moment I reached out to him and together we were transported.

We were not on the great battlefield but near it, next to a lake. A man was meditating in the water, tears streaking his face. “Duryodhana, leader of the Kauravas,” Shiva said.

From around a bend came Krishna, and behind him Yudhishthira, Arjuna, and the other Pandava brothers.

“Finally!” Arjuna exclaimed, and moved to nock an arrow. Yudhishthira threw up a hand to stop him.

“He is defenseless,” Yudhishthira said, before pitching his voice louder. “Duryodhana, surrender now. Give up your claim, and the survivors can go in peace.”

“What survivors?” Duryodhana spat. His mouth was twisted, and he did not turn to face his cousin. “You may as well strike me down from behind. It is how you have won your victory.”

Again Arjuna started forward, only to be held back by Yudhishthira. “It is over, Duryodhana. If you accept that, you may be able to find some peace. You can live out your days in comfort. Let us end this like the civilized men we are.”

Duryodhana emerged from the lake now, dripping and red-faced. “I will never surrender to you. I would rather suffer this defeat a million times over. If you wanted peace, you could have stopped this war before it started.

You only offer it now, O self-serving one, because you are in a better position."

"Enough," Bhima boomed out. "The day you dragged Draupadi into the gambling hall, I vowed to kill you, Duryodhana. I swore it to her, after, and I will keep my promise now. You will duel me, for the kingdom."

"Bhima—" Yudhishthira began, but Duryodhana had already nodded his assent, and reached for his mace. Krishna, I noticed, said nothing. Surely he should intervene, I thought, for why, after all their fighting, death, and destruction, would they settle it thus?

The men circled, evenly matched, I could tell, despite having little knowledge of the mace. But in time, Bhima began to flag. Krishna studied the scene, and we studied Krishna. He began to move, no hesitation in his posture, until he was within the large man's sight. When he had his attention, Krishna slowly and deliberately patted his thighs.

Yudhishthira, from the other side of their small clearing, saw Krishna's actions and covered his eyes.

Bhima, with a surge of energy, brought his mace down on Duryodhana's thighs with two resounding cracks.

His cousin crumpled with a cry, tears on his face.

"It is against the rules of mace fighting to strike below the waist," Shiva said. "But I think his vow to avenge his wife's humiliation took greater priority."

I found I was not surprised that Krishna had encouraged that man to break the rules. I understood.

We watched as the Pandavas left their cousin to an agonizing death. As Duryodhana's friends surrounded him, as he begged them to avenge him, and then as the life left his body. It felt small, anticlimactic after everything that had happened. War had a large scope, but in the end, what was it if not the sins of individuals? I sensed, under Shiva's stoicism, his own sense of mourning.

And then, I felt a fervent prayer. I recognized the Pandava brothers, and Kunti, of course, approaching my waters near Kurukshetra. The area was treacherous for humans to tread, rocky and covered with slip-sand. But these humans were filled with sorrow, and let the sharp stones pierce their sandals in their haste to reach my waters. I extended my power past my banks, marveling at the ease with which I could push my will, and I

smoothed the ground, creating a path for them to reach me.

It was a younger woman who noticed first, a small smile forming on her drawn face. She darted ahead, running into my waters. I felt from her a profound catharsis as she reached them, tears streaming silently down her face. She cupped my water and then let it pour from her fingertips, whispering names of men to herself. I let some part of my presence stay around her so she would not feel alone, but my attention was drawn by Kunti.

She fell to her knees before reaching my river, pulling at her clothes, and weeping, and that was when I knew she had only five living sons.

“What is it?” Yudhishthira asked, kneeling before her. “Tell me, are you hurt?”

She shook her head, her lips clamping themselves shut. I felt a kinship with her in that moment, for the grief at the son she could not save. We were very different, and yet a mother’s pain was the same. “My son is dead,” she said at last, softly. Yudhishthira rocked back on his heels. “My son is dead!” This time she shouted, and all of the brothers startled.

“Ma, we have all survived,” Yudhishthira said gently. He gestured his brothers forward, into her line of sight. “Look. All five of us.”

“I had six sons,” she whispered. “You were not my firstborn, Yudhishthira. Before you, I was visited by Surya, and he gave me a son. But I was unmarried, and so I gave my child to the river. He was brought to the family of a charioteer.”

“No,” Arjuna said, taking a step away from her, as though he could distance himself from her words. “No. It cannot be.” His face was pale.

“Karna is *dead*,” Kunti cried out, and Arjuna turned away. Yudhishthira was shaking his head as if in denial. “He chose loyalty over power, and now he is dead.”

Yudhishthira looked as though he had been stabbed. “We destroyed the world for a crown that was not mine,” he said, a wild look in his eyes. “I should be struck down.”

Arjuna grabbed his arm, shaking him. “I committed fratricide. The sin is mine. What have I done?” He stumbled forward, toward the woman who was watching the scene, stricken. The moment his foot touched the water, I was—

Arjuna was a child. His father was dead, and he had moved into the palace where his uncle was now king. His eldest brother never smiled. His second-eldest brother got into constant trouble. And he walked within the gilded walls, with everything at his fingertips but happiness.

But his grandfather was there—not his real grandfather, he knew, but Arjuna called him Pitamaha all the same. His grandfather was a great warrior, and one day he found Arjuna wandering and brought him to the training grounds. He placed a small bow in Arjuna's hands and knelt behind him to help his weak arm pull back the string.

When they released and the arrow buried itself into the straw target, his grandfather smiled at him. "Incredible! You are going to make a fine archer, Arjuna." And Arjuna smiled back.

Arjuna was a teenager, the best in his class. Nobody could touch him when it came to archery; not even Dronacharya or his Pitamaha could match his talent. He delighted in making his teacher proud, his grandfather proud, his eldest brother proud. And then came Karna.

He remembered his first glimpse of Karna. He was overly proud, show-offy. He was willing to break the rules of fair combat so he might win gifts from Duryodhana. All would have been well if Karna was talentless, but no, Karna used every extra year he had on Arjuna to scramble for equal spot.

He tried once to do as Yudhishthira would have wanted and extend the hand of friendship. Karna was captured during a small skirmish, one of the safer battles the young men of Hastinapur were sent out to fight on behalf of the kingdom. Arjuna slew his captor and freed Karna, cutting through the rope binding his arms and offering a hand to help him up.

"How did you manage to get captured so quickly?" Arjuna asked. It was the kind of teasing comment he would have made to Bhima or Nakula.

But Karna turned red immediately. "Not all of us can wait in the back ranks, the safe positions."

“I wasn’t—you—so ungrateful!” Arjuna sputtered out.

Karna shook his head, already drawing his sword to reenter the fray. “I would thank you, but I think your head is big enough.”

There would be no more helping Karna after that.

Arjuna was an adult, standing in a smoke-filled battlefield. Before Arjuna was Karna, standing proud in his chariot. That *Karna* of all people had been elevated to general of Duryodhana’s troops just showed his cousin’s desperation. Karna was a monster. He had only become worse as an adult, lusting openly after Arjuna’s wife and committing violations of just combat as if he knew no other way to fight.

“You must kill him,” Krishna said. “If you kill him, this war will quickly reach its end. But do not underestimate him. He is a formidable foe.”

“I can beat him,” Arjuna told him, eyeing the most profitable angles. He knew he could wear Karna down. The Kaurava army deserved nothing but death after murdering his son. *For Abhimanyu.*

Arjuna did not know whether Karna had any boons left at his disposal, but he still did—he could call upon a divine shield. He had been saving it for Karna, and so he could be fearless, using extreme tactics and the element of surprise. He let loose a volley, three arrows at a time as Krishna drove him forward. He let himself stay open, an easy target, and when Karna took advantage, Arjuna used it to send one well-timed arrow at Karna. The divine shield did its job, and Arjuna savored the look of shock in Karna’s eyes, followed swiftly by pain as the arrow burrowed into his arm. Karna had moved at the last minute, and the killing blow was only a passing wound. Karna pulled it free with a curse, murder in his eyes.

The boon was used, and Arjuna was vulnerable now. They were equally matched. He muttered a prayer to any god who might hear. *Please, let me defeat him.*

And so it was. Karna’s charioteer swerved at the wrong moment, hit a rock half-hidden in the ground, bounced, and sank into a pit of mud. The wheels stuck fast and deep, and the charioteer immediately jumped out as Karna kept up a stream of arrows. The chariot would not move. At last

Karna, realizing he might be overrun, jumped out and strained to move the chariot too.

Krishna pulled them closer. Karna was currently unarmed and, by the rules of combat, could not be struck down. Arjuna wanted to, his fingers twitching with the urge. But he saw tear tracks falling down Karna's face as he strained and strained against the mud. "Please," Karna called out. "Let us free the chariot." It was the first time Karna had ever said *please* to him.

"What should I do?" he asked Krishna.

"It is dishonorable to strike an unarmed man," Krishna told him. "But it would be dishonorable too to let Karna live when you have sworn to kill him."

Arjuna remembered Yudhishthira's anger just this morning when he reported that Karna yet lived. He had lied to Yudhishthira that their armies had been victorious, let him think that Karna was at last defeated. When Arjuna finally confessed the truth, Yudhishthira had shouted at Arjuna that he was undeserving of his weapon or his friends or his title. Yudhishthira had never spoken this way to his brothers, or anybody—the war had changed him. Karna's existence was corrupting his most loving, perfect brother. Arjuna swore to him again that he would kill Karna, or forfeit his own life.

"Please. Do not contravene dharma," Karna shouted again. The wheel shifted slightly, but did not release.

"Where was dharma when you helped disrobe Draupadi in the hall?" Krishna shouted back. "Where was dharma when Abhimanyu was slain?"

At his son's name, Arjuna could hold back no longer. With a roar, he loosed a final arrow. It pierced Karna's neck cleanly and his head fell to the mud. The men behind Arjuna cheered, but tears pricked his eyes, for reasons he did not know.

It was over. Karna was vanquished. So why did Arjuna feel like he had died instead?

I could not take away his pain, not when he had cut down a man begging for his life. I thought of Krishna, exhorting him on, but knew that he would

say Arjuna’s actions were immoral and still necessary. There were no good choices in this world, only the weight of those choices.

So I watched his memories, his and others, of their husbands and brothers and fathers, and though there was nothing I could do to heal this hurt, I made sure they felt that this river would carry those memories. I swore to each of them, this: I would be a witness for their dead. I would preserve them.

One woman, a bright spark in her eyes, nudged her companion and gestured at my flooded bank spread before them. “It is like the river is crying with us,” she said. And, in my own way, I was.

Still, my son did not come to me.

Eventually, I felt Krishna at my banks, expectant. He looked younger, as if the relief of the war ending had given him back his enduring spirit.

“Thank you for your help,” he said softly when he sensed my presence. “I do not know what you said to him, but the Kaurava army had no better commander. His leaving the war was one of the most humane acts I witnessed in those eighteen days.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“I observed it,” Krishna said. “I know how you are able to take people’s sins from them. I am sure you could do so with me.”

“Is that what they say about me?” I asked, surprised.

“What they say?” Krishna echoed. “No, sister, that is what you do for humanity. What you have been doing.”

“I see what burdens them, and I decide whether to help ease that weight, that is all,” I said. “And I do not forget. I think, perhaps, I do not want to carry my son’s death with me forever.”

He tilted his head at me. “Your son is not dead. He is dying, yes. But he is harder to kill than any ordinary mortal.”

For the briefest of moments, his words were beyond comprehension. It could not be. Krishna would not lie to me, and yet… “What do you mean?”

“Bhishma was grievously wounded, and unable to carry on fighting. He is presently unconscious. But he is not dead, not yet. He loves his kingdom

more than anything, and he will not leave it until he has done for it all that he can.” Krishna smiled softly as he said that, even though for as long as he had known Bhishma, he had seemed disapproving of his single-minded devotion to Hastinapur.

But something more bothered me, the idea that my son was clinging to life, in pain, because he still had more to give. “Has he not done enough?” I asked.

Krishna waded into my river and gave a slight sigh as the cool water reached his torso. “The war has left the world in ruin. The fighting may have been contained to the battlefield, but the scale of death… Sister, it is unthinkable. So many have been torn from their families and their homes. It will take generations for this world to rebuild.”

I wondered what Shiva might think of this, that Krishna had played a hand in this great destruction when he had held me captive out of fear I would do the same. But I recognized simultaneously that this was different—this was human choice. Or at least, some of humanity had chosen. Others had been dragged along.

“What are you thinking?” Krishna asked, as always sensing the many streams of my thoughts. “Perhaps it would have been easier if I lopped off Duryodhana’s head and ended it all. But then his brother would have taken his place. Maybe if I wiped out their entire lineage the conflict may have been finished… but the failings of the ruling classes would still be there. Now, whoever is left has learned. And all the unrighteous have been dealt with.”

“Your own Arjuna killed his brother. He has been prideful and cruel since his childhood. How can you call that righteous?” I asked it without heat, truly wondering. I knew he would have an answer.

He smiled at that, wry and sad. “Arjuna is willing to do what must be done to achieve his purpose. Even things that might also be cruel, that others might look down on him for. On the morning of the first battle, he told me he couldn’t bear to fight. That he couldn’t fight your son, his teachers, his family. I could see that all the Pandavas’ army felt the same way. So I told them that all men must perform their duty to stand up to injustice before all else. He acted contrary to the laws of combat, it is true. But he did so to save his brother’s kingdom from being overrun by those who would privilege their own wants.”

“So by your measure, you would find Karna lacking? Because he chose loyalty over his duty to lead?” I made sure he could understand my skepticism.

“Sometimes, there is no choice that is righteous. Karna had many faults, but he was also a great man, to be able to keep striding forward knowing that he would die and his cause would fail.” Krishna looked contemplative. “Even Duryodhana was kind to his subjects. And he died in an awful way.”

“Will all be right in the world now?” I asked him.

He dipped under my waters and swam back toward shore. Only when he surfaced did he answer. “The next age of humanity will be filled with suffering. But at least they will have knowledge to help them through. Soon I will be leaving, until they truly need my guidance again. I have done my best, and now it will be up to you, and the others who are left here, to determine what the future holds.”

“And the mortals,” I said, giving him a light push with my waters.

He laughed. “Of course,” he said. “They will always be making their own way.” He hesitated, then asked, “Will you take me to Shiva? It is a long way to go on foot, but I feel I must thank him for this victory.”

“How did Shiva help?” I asked. “He did not come and fight or send armies. He refused to involve himself.”

“We have different approaches to humanity,” Krishna said. “I come to defeat evil, it is true. But one day, when the time comes, Shiva will destroy this earth to save us all, so we may start anew. I must give thanks, for he and I are one.”

There were many responses I could give to that. But how observant had I been of Shiva, truly, since I had arrived on this earth? How many years had I even been here? I could not say. So I brought Krishna upriver, all the way to my source.

He gave a delighted laugh when he saw it, the great pool and glacier up in Shiva’s mountains where I now flowed freely. “Of course this is where you come from, sister. It is so beautiful, so clean and pure. Even here, so far from the heavens, you are the same as you ever were.”

I did not know what to say to that, so instead I kept my silence as Shiva appeared before us, now a man with dark skin. I had never seen him in this form, with his matted hair and blue neck. Somehow it was more awe-inspiring than any of his other forms. The divine in mortal shape, a god still.

Krishna bowed his head. “My victories I owe to you.”

Shiva tilted his head to look at Krishna, then pressed his hands together and bowed as well. “And mine to you.”

I left them to speak.

Finally, Krishna called to me, and I returned. “Will you take me back, now? There is more I must do, before my time comes.”

In a moment, I had brought him near Kurukshetra. “I do not wish for you to leave,” I told him. I had been so overjoyed when he came, and my joy would not have changed even knowing now that he was an omen of all that had since transpired.

“I will return,” Krishna said. “I promise. I will return, and I will sit on your banks once more.”

CHAPTER 32

AFTER THE WAR

BHISHMA WOKE UP. HE had not been expecting to, and he could sense that consciousness would be limited for him, a borrowed resource before he breathed his last. He lay in an uncomfortable position, a stabbing pain in his shoulder. The arrow was still there. He was parched, he realized when he tried to swallow. The water had leached from his body. He cleared his throat to call out for water, and the opening to the tent swung open.

“He is awake!” a voice called out. There was a commotion, during which he closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, Krishna was kneeling by his bedside.

“Hello, old friend,” he said, brushing a hand against Bhishma’s forehead. All of Bhishma’s pain faded at the touch, and he even forgot about his throat.

“It is good to see you,” Bhishma replied. He knew, in his gut, that the war was over and the Pandavas had triumphed. “I did not think I would open my eyes again.”

“I am glad you did,” Krishna said. “Your grandsons would like to speak

with you. I think it would do Yudhishthira some good."

"Of course." Bhishma's heart leapt at the chance to see them one last time.

Krishna stood and walked to the entrance, and Bhishma closed his eyes to rest for just a moment. When he opened them again, Yudhishthira was sitting by his bed, the rest of the Pandava brothers crowded behind him.

"Pitamaha, I am so glad to see you," Yudhishthira cried.

"You as well, Maharaja. I knew you would prevail."

But Yudhishthira's face fell at the greeting. "I should not be king, not after all this. I have done terrible things for this crown, and I am undeserving. I have broken the kingdom."

Bhishma understood then why he had managed to stay alive. He had one final duty to the king of Hastinapur. Not because of his oath, but out of choice. Out of love. What a blessing, to have this.

"If you had not fought for what was right, someone else would have had to fight this battle instead. In the end, righteousness must have its due. You must take your crown and go rule the kingdom of your forefathers as well as I know you can."

Yudhishthira shook his head. "You do not know me. I have done terrible things. I lied to Dronacharya to bring about his death."

It was shocking, to be sure, that Yudhishthira would tell a lie. But if Dronacharya had been the commander of all the Kauravas' forces after Bhishma, he may have needed to. "It is not right to lie. But neither is it right to let your men die or your people suffer." He paused, weighing his next words. His shame. "If I have learned one thing, it is that the rules of respectability and conduct matter less than knowing and doing what is right. And I believe you know dharma, Yudhishthira. If you must bend the rules of conduct in order to serve justice, then so be it."

Yudhishthira looked more and more shocked with each word he spoke. It was the opposite of all Bhishma had taught them, all he had lived by. It was the opposite of the behavior that had led them to this ruinous war. At last, he nodded, but he still looked miserable. "There is another thing, Pitamaha. I thought I was right, that this throne was my birthright. But it never was. I have—I had an elder brother. And he is dead, because of me. So you see—"

"Karna made his choices," Bhishma said fiercely. "Yes, I knew. But I

did not feel it was my place to say. He was given the choice, and he chose the Kauravas. He was not given as many choices as he should have been for his birthright, but he chose to give up his claim to the throne. He chose to turn his back on birthright itself, and who is to say that he was not right to do so? The best way to honor his memory is to not dishonor your kingdom."

Yudhishthira inclined his head. His shoulders squared, as he seemed to take the words to heart. He would make a good ruler, for what was left.

From behind Yudhishthira and behind the brothers, Bhishma saw Krishna incline his head in a small bow. Bhishma's eyes filled with tears, and Yudhishthira seemed to get the wrong idea. "Are you in pain? We will make you more comfortable in your recovery—"

"I am not recovering," Bhishma said softly. "I am waiting for the right time to leave."

"You must not leave us, Pitamaha," Yudhishthira pleaded.

A command from the ruler of Hastinapur. Perhaps the best one. Maybe his oath would be strong enough to tie him here, but Bhishma was not interested in trying. That last tether was gone now. Instead, he closed his eyes. *Life-giver Ganga,* he prayed. *Cleanse me of my sins. They are many, and I am sorry for them. Please, Ma, grant me this final wish.*

My son prayed to me, and I came. It was an instinctive thing; when I heard his cry, my presence ascended to the acrid and blighted land that had once been the battlefield of Kurukshetra. All the Pandava brothers attended to him, and Krishna too. When I reached the tent, where my son lay on his deathbed, he roused, pushing himself up onto his elbows.

"You are ready," he said to Yudhishthira.

"Are you sure?" the king asked. Something of his face reminded me of my son, though they bore no relation.

"I am," my son whispered. "Rule well, Yudhishthira. Remember what I have taught you. A wise king rules with compassion, not fear. Be forgiving, be honorable…" He trailed off, his voice barely a rasp.

"I will," Yudhishthira vowed. "I promise I will make you proud. I swear

it.”

“I know,” Bhishma said, and then he coughed, pressing a hand against his wound. “I am ready too.”

“You should rest,” Yudhishthira said, helping my son lean back.

But Bhishma did not hear him. Instead his gaze was fixed on me, although I was not truly there. “I am thirsty, so thirsty,” he whispered.

Yudhishthira got to his feet, shouting for water, and beyond the tent, the scant remaining men obeyed. They ran this way and that, as though it was a difficult task to find a cup of water for a dying man.

“Please,” Bhishma said, looking only at me. “Please, Ma.”

Though we were on this dead field, many days’ journey from my river, something in me broke at the sound of my dying son. He wanted water, and that was something I could give him. I plumbed the depths of my power, searched for the current of water, and summoned it to me. To my son.

“Water,” he asked, a third time. His eyes fluttered closed, mouth open.

From the ground burst forth water. I brought the river itself, *my* river. It surged into the dry air like a fountain, a torrent of those clean mountain streams. Instead of falling from the sky, I traveled up from the ground, purposeful. The men around us shouted in alarm, in warning, rushed toward my son. But I directed a small stream of water into his mouth, down his throat. He swallowed, and a contented sigh escaped his lips.

When his soul left his body, I caught it myself. I took it, leaving his mortal body behind, the body I had birthed and held tight so long ago. I brought him home, to his grove, where we had first met and breathed his star-bright life back into being. And then I left him there, to find whatever peace he might.

Do you know how a river runs? Perhaps you have heard that it begins as a droplet of rain on faraway slopes, one drip and then another trickling down those unforgiving stones, controlled by the rocky mountains and forced to drive forward without thought or choice, urged mindlessly to the thirsty seashore.

But that is not how my river flows.

No.

It is true, what they say, that I will always miss the heavens from which I came. But I know now that I am still one with the universe that is one with me. I do not need to flow from the cosmic ocean to be its tributary. There is nowhere I can go, no amount I can change, that could make me less Ganga of the heavens, Ganga of the earth.

And here, on your earth, I am free now, free to make my own path. I will see many kingdoms rise and fall, see power so great that all the earth trembles before it. I will see my son run through this land once more, turning always to that kingdom he so loved. I will see humans hurt other humans in ways they will never hurt me, and I will give comfort and life and shelter. I will see. I will see.

And when I protect you, it will be because this river *chose* it. Because I chose it.

Before I fell from the stars, I was divine, but I was not a god, not really. You called me here and made me one. As the cosmic river once fed me, I will feed you. I am not here to destroy your world. I have no need to, not when you are still striving. But I will change it, change you, slowly, in the way only a god can. One stone, one stream, one river at a time.

ENDNOTE

Just as with Kaikeyi's story, I first heard Ganga and Bhishma's story two decades ago from my grandmother. One summer of stories was devoted entirely to the *Mahabharata*, that sprawling epic tale that seemed to my childhood self to contain more side stories than main plot. Ganga's story was one such "side story" that I only appreciated for what it was later in life: the start of all the strife in the *Mahabharata*. But when I took a class in college analyzing the *Mahabharata*, we barely spoke about Ganga's curse. *Goddess of the River* is an exploration not only of Ganga's perspective at the start of the *Mahabharata* but of the rippling effects of her choices on the remainder of the story.

As a primary text, I used the Penguin Classics version of the *Mahabharata*, translated by John D. Smith. This is an abridged, eight-hundred-page version that I highly recommend to those interested in reading the epic, as it can be read cover to cover and retains the vast scope of the story. I referenced Kisari Mohan Ganguli's full translation to read specific sections of the *Mahabharata* unabridged and occasionally referenced the Bibek Debroy translation of specific passages for comparison.

The *Mahabharata* is a story concerned with dharma and the tensions between duty and justice. Because of its seminal place in the Hindu canon as both a religious text and a morality epic, innumerable books and articles have been written about each of the story's main characters, themes, and interpretations. Dr. V. S. Sukthankar's volume of collected lectures *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* is one such analysis, worthy of special mention for its careful examination of the ethical and religious implications of the epic; I referred to it many times when grappling with these same issues. Readers who wish to further explore some of the subjects tackled in *Goddess of the River* may find interesting Romila Thapar's article "War in the 'Mahabharata,'" Arti Dhand's book *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage:*

Sexual Ideology in the Mahābhārata and article “The Subversive Nature of Virtue in the Mahābhārata: A Tale about Women, Smelly Ascetics, and God,” and Rudrangshu Mukherjee’s article “Dharma and Caste in the Mahabharata.”

Just as with *Kaikeyi*, *Goddess of the River* owes a great debt to scholars of ancient South Asian civilizations for uncovering answers about everything from construction methods in desert climates to common techniques of warfare. *Goddess of the River* also required significant research into the ecosystem and ecological history of the River Ganga, and I am thankful for the many scientists who have devoted their lives to charting the evolution of this incredible river and preserving its waters for generations to come.

Goddess of the River takes creative license with many elements of the *Mahabharata*. To name a few: I have condensed the timeline of the lives of the individuals involved and have changed characters’ internal motivations at various key points, although the overall plot of the *Mahabharata* is unchanged. I have collapsed or omitted certain characters for ease of reading—a four-hundred-page novel cannot support the same cast of characters as an almost two-million-word epic. I have placed Ganga in critical moments of the *Mahabharata* where we are not told she is present in the original. I have added a push-and-pull dynamic between Ganga and Shiva that feels natural to the circumstances of their relationship in the novel but is not present in the original forms of the story. I have also imagined Ganga as possessing a type of memory power that is not traditionally associated with her in order to bring an extra sense of fantasy to the world. Finally, as with all Hindu myths, there are many versions of the *Mahabharata* told throughout South and Southeast Asia. *Goddess of the River* borrows from alternate oral traditions for aspects of Shikhandi’s and Shakuni’s characters in particular.

The *Mahabharata* is a story about sin and religion in which almost every character commits great misdeeds; it does not need complicating. Instead, *Goddess of the River* is my examination of the story through the eyes of two difficult, complex characters, and a contemplation on the nature of power and the responsibilities of those who wield it. There are no easy answers to be found in *Goddess of the River*, but I hope that, just as with all the great *Mahabharata* retellings that came before me, there are at least

good questions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

People tell you that second books are hard. People tell you that writing a book during a pandemic is hard. Somehow, I still thought I'd have an easy time writing a second book during a pandemic. I was very, very, wrong. *Goddess of the River* only exists because so many people lent me their love, support, and expertise. It truly took a village. I am still a little bit shocked to have made it here, but so very grateful.

First, thank you to my incredible agent, Lucienne Diver, whose feedback and encouragement got me through far more tough patches than I care to admit. When I worried I might never write a decent book again, you were the only person who told me I could do it whom I actually believed. Thank you for holding my hand and guiding this book through to the finish line. Thank you also to the team at the Knight Agency for your wisdom and expertise.

Thank you to Priyanka Krishnan, my brilliant editor. *Goddess of the River* took many forms before this final one, but I only uncovered its truest, best version because of your guidance. Thank you for always believing in the story, even when I did not. Thank you also to Tiana Coven and Alyea Canada for helping shepherd *Goddess of the River* to publication. And a massive thanks to Lisa Marie Pompilio for the brilliant covers and to Ellen Wright for your tireless work to get my books into the right hands. I am also indebted to the rest of amazing team at Orbit/Redhook, including Alex Lencicki, Lauren Panepinto, Alexia Mazis, Angela Man, Jenni Hill, Nazia Khatun, Paola Crespo, Rachel Goldstein, Stephanie Hess, Anna Jackson, and Tim Holman.

I wrote and edited *Goddess of the River* during a difficult time in my life. I was incredibly sick, and many, many doctors doubted me for months. The reason I am here today to publish this book is because in the end a few doctors believed me, searched for solutions, and gave me a cure. Thank you to Dr. Sangeeta Mehendale, who spent days of her own free time

researching my condition and got me a spot in a clinic that was equipped to treat me. If I grow up to be half as kind as you, I will be very happy. And thank you to my doctors at the Mayo Clinic, who gave me my life back. I am grateful for you every day.

There are so many others who helped me bring *Goddess of the River* into the world with my sanity intact, and to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. Thank you to Rebecca for coaching me through my debut process and being a huge voice of support; it made such a difference to me. For reading drafts and providing feedback, for hyping me up when I was struggling to get back on my feet, and for your friendship through all the ups and downs, thank you to Alex, Bennett, Dan G., Dan P., Ehi, Gabby, Hannah, Hassan, Isaiah, Jamie, Jay, Justin, Juveria, Kendall, Nina, Rucha, Sanika, Sarah, and my Pitch Wars crew. And thank you to Judge R. for your enthusiastic support—it has meant the world to me!

Thank you also to you, my readers, for reading and supporting *Kaikeyi*. I never in my wildest dreams imagined that *Kaikeyi* would find the audience that it did, and your love for it kept me going in some of the hardest times. I appreciate each and every one of you who has invested any time and energy in my writing. It is a privilege I do not take for granted.

Finally, thank you to my family. Words cannot express how grateful I am that I can always trust my family will be there to take care of me and pick me up. My mom accepted all my anger and bitterness and gave it back to me in love as she walked with me every step of the way. My dad taught me what it means to sacrifice for family. Ananya, thank you for loving me so much you forgot racism existed. Thank you also for reading every single draft of this book, from the weak soup stage to the final form. This book would not, and could not, be what it is without you. Aditya, thank you for dropping everything to come when I needed you. I am so lucky to have a little brother like you. Sona Mavshi, thank you for all your love and prayers. Samir Mama and Sucheta Mami, thank you for welcoming me to Houston with open arms. Ajji, thank you for gifting me these stories as a child so that I could make something new of them as an adult. And James, I do not know how to thank you in any adequate way, but know that I am constantly grateful for you. You show me the definition of true and abiding love every single day.

BY VAISHNAVI PATEL

Kaikeyi

Goddess of the River

Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.