



The Winds of Hastinapur



*For the story of the
Great War is also the story of
women, of Ganga and Satyawati and
all who came after...*

SHARATH KOMARRAJU

THE WINDS
OF
HASTINAPUR



Sharath Komarraju



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*To the memory of my first cousin
Vikram Dev (1980–2012)*

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PROLOGUE



Ganga Speaks

Through the ages this tale will be retold by many – courtiers, poets, saints, peasant-folk – and it will change with each recital, for no man can relate a story exactly as he has heard it. This is as true high up on Meru as it is here on Earth; it is said that Narada, chief musician at Indra’s court, has never told a tale the same way twice. So perhaps men of Earth could be pardoned the slight if they cannot help but bend the story of the Great War to suit their whims. They do so bidden by instinct to which all men serve as slaves, no matter where they live and unto whom they are born.

Yudhisthir lies dead by my feet, his old brown eyes staring up at me. His skin has already begun to shrivel and harden, and his limbs have turned blue under the falling snow. But on his face he wears the smile he died with; the smile of knowing, at long last, that he had arrived at his journey’s end, and if he felt any disenchantment at being told that there was no heaven atop the Ice Mountain, he did not show it. Or perhaps the knowledge broke his will, for no sooner had the words escaped my lips than he buckled down on his knees and rolled over on his back. He may have breathed once or twice after that, not more. The Wise Ones have said that if you wish to kill a man, find the flame of hope that glows steady in his heart and extinguish it, for that will snatch away the will to live and he shall drop to his death of his own accord.

Arjun sleeps amongst the black rocks a few hundred metres down the mountain, and then a short distance further down, Draupadi and Vrikodara lie entwined as one. Nakul and Sahadev are sprawled on their sides at the bottom of the mountain, their eyes shut. They all wear Yudhisthir’s smile on their lips, for they all saw what Yudhisthir saw just before his last breath.

The gates to the holy lands of Meru are now closed to the earthmen. Not too long ago, a man sufficiently pure of thought and cognizant of magic could walk upstream along the Great River and arrive, eventually, not only at the tip of the Ice Mountain and the cave of ice where the River now takes birth, but at the gateway to Meru, through which the River once flowed in a torrent on her way down to the plains of Earth. Now the clouds have descended on the peak of the Ice Mountain, and the cave of ice is covered by a high, impregnable white wall. The world of Meru lies beyond this wall, shrouded by a veil of magic woven together by the Mysteries. It is no longer one with this world of men.

Perhaps with time, tellers of this tale will refer to Meru as a world that never existed within the realms of Mother Nature, of whom we are all born and to whom we shall all return. Perhaps in speaking of the people of Meru, they will refer to them as gods, as all-powerful, all-knowing beings, and it will not be their fault, because to men who have not studied and practised the Mysteries, everything is magic. And now that the world itself is unreachable, so are the Mysteries – until the people of Meru decree otherwise.

From the beginning of time, the Great River has flowed both on Meru and on Earth, and I, Ganga, Lady of the River, hold within me the knowledge of all the Ladies that have come before me. I know every place that the River has been to, and I know every man and Celestial that has taken a dip in me. The longer I live, with more assurance I know this: there is no difference between those on Meru and those on Earth. Those on Meru live longer, and on their deaths pass on their memories to their successors – much like my Mother had done by coaching me in the Mysteries – and it might be that because of this they can be called immortal. But they do die

when their time comes; in that we are all subservient to the only goddess there is: the goddess of nature.

My hair is white and thin now. In a few moons the goddess will claim me, and I do not have a fresh young virgin by my side to impart my knowledge to and take my place once I am gone. The Mysteries of Ganga and her sight will vanish with me, and the Great River will become nothing more than a body of lifeless water, beginning at the cave of ice and ending, as per the wishes of the Earth, in the Eastern Ocean at the end of the world. It is my intention, therefore, to tell you the story as it happened – as I saw it happen. And once I am finished, I will lay down next to Yudhisthir and sleep with a smile on my face.

I do not make claims that my tale is the one true tale. The Wise Ones have said that there is no such thing as a true story, that no man can tell a tale without bending it in some way. Therefore all I can say is that this is my truth; the truth as I know it; the truth as I saw unfold, both through my eyes and through the eyes of my sisters before me.



There may be parts of the tale that I do not recollect well, and perhaps this might make my listener draw away, but there is little I can do about it. I no longer drink of the Crystal Lake, and my mind bears the same wrinkles of age just as my body does. I speak of events that have occurred over four generations of men, so it shouldn't surprise you that my hold wavers here and there, more so on the more mundane details.

But I remember, like it was but this morning, where it all began: with the visit of Prabhasa, the Elemental of dawn, to our hut one cloudless spring morning when I was all of nine years old.

Mother had sent me down to the bottom of the White Rock to bring back a handful of wildflowers – spring’s first bunch – so that we could make an offering to the goddess before we broke the fast of the new moon. It was on my return that I saw the stranger sitting at the feet of my mother, his hands joined. He opened his eyes upon hearing my step to look at me for a second, but only a second; the next moment his gaze was back upon the Lady of the River. There was a faint shade of brown in his long hair, especially where it curled around the ears and covered the upper halves. His upper garment, light orange in colour – the garment of a hermit – lay flat on the rocks by his side. But hermits seldom wore that youthful mirth on their faces, and their bodies were seldom so firm and strong.

‘You have brought the flowers, Jahnavi,’ said my mother without looking in my direction, and when I went up to place the flowers and fruit by her feet, she ran a hand along my hair. ‘What you ask for, Prabhasa,’ she said, and gently guided me next to her on her seat, ‘is impossible. Are you certain the sage’s wife wanted you to see me?’

‘You are the only Lady of the River I know.’

‘So I am. But you ask of me a miracle that even I cannot perform. I am past child-bearing, O Vasu. If I still look like I might give birth, I assure you it is only because of the water of the lake. But tell me this; why do you have your sight set on me? Surely Meru is not short of young maidens who would do your bidding.’

‘Who on Meru is more able than you to be mother to the Vasus, my Lady?’ Prabhasa said.

Mother smiled, and picked up a flower and smelled it. ‘It has bloomed at dawn today,’ she whispered close to my ear, placing it in my hands. To Prabhasa she said, ‘But the sons are not going to live their full lives, are

they, Prabhasa? It matters not who the mother is if the sons are not going to live. Or does it?’

Prabhasa bent his head as if he wished to hide behind his joined hands. He sighed heavily. ‘It is the eighth son, my Lady.’ He brought his eyes up to meet my mother’s. ‘He is to be born in Hastina.’

For a long time Mother did not move; neither did the smile leave her face. She stared at the flower in my hands with what I thought was love, but then I saw that she was no longer looking at the flower at all.

‘And he is going to live,’ she said at last.

‘Yes, my Lady.’

‘This is not just about the curse, is it, Prabhasa?’

‘I do not know enough about it, my Lady, but I think Indra has decreed that—’

‘Indra? Indra himself?’

Prabhasa said, ‘Yes, my Lady. Indra has decreed that the time may have come for an intervention in the land of men.’

Mother’s smile broadened, her eyes fixed at some point past the flower and the rocks; perhaps she was looking at the base of the White Rock, I thought, where the river took birth. ‘And he has chosen you as the bringer of change,’ she said, musing.

‘It appears so.’

‘And me? Why has he chosen me for this? Do you not know?’

‘I do not, my Lady. The sage’s wife, Arundhati, bade me here.’

‘Ah, Prabhasa,’ said Mother, and smiled at him, ‘I think I know why they sent you after me. Yes, I think I do.’

Prabhasa did not ask her why, as I almost did. I stopped only because I saw a tear slide down Mother’s cheek. Prabhasa just acknowledged her

words with a bent head. I did the same, holding the flower close to my chest and looking down upon its coarse, blue-white petals.

‘I still cannot help you,’ said Mother, ‘because I am past bearing even one child, let alone eight! Alas, the water of the lake cannot return a woman’s womb. What you need, Prabhasa, is a tender young virgin of fourteen – which is what little Jahnvi here will be in five years.’

Prabhasa looked up, and for the first time that morning, looked closely at me. I returned his gaze and tried to learn what it was he thought while he stared. Mother had taught me the importance of reading men’s thoughts from the way they looked, but this one gave up nothing. His jaw tightened when his eyes came to rest on me, as though he had given me a tiny nod, but his emotions were as blank as the white flatness of the rock.

Finally he said, ‘Yes, my Lady.’

‘It is a good thing to wait these five years, I think,’ said Mother, ‘because Hastina is still being ruled by Pratipa, is it not?’ Upon a nod from Prabhasa, she continued, ‘Yes, and Ganga cannot belong to Pratipa. No, I am convinced that we need to wait for the next king to arrive. How old is his son now?’

‘He will turn fourteen this winter, my Lady.’

‘Ah, yes, so two more years for his kingmaking, and give or take two more before the old king hands over to the new.’ Mother took my hand in hers and pointed at the apple by her feet. ‘The time will be ripe then, for them and for us. I do not think even Jahnvi is prepared just now for what you propose.’

‘Yes, you are right, my lady, Ganga.’

‘Will you take this word back to Indra, Prabhasa, and tell him that we ought to wait – that Hastina’s time has not yet come.’

‘I will.’

At a gesture from my mother the man got up, wrapped his garment about his body, and with a final bow to us both, departed down the steps that led to the Rock. For a minute we sat in silence listening to the murmur of the river down below, mother's hands caressing my own, her breath on my cheek. 'Jahnavi, my child.' She gathered me in her arms and clutched me close to her. 'It is time for you to grow up. And it is too soon. Yes, it is too soon! If only you could be a child just a little bit longer.'

'No,' I said, cross, wriggling free of her grip. 'I want to grow up right now!'



I wish that I knew what I was saying then, but like all children, I was in a hurry to grow up and be one of the big people, take part in their conversations, have men speak to me as they do to my mother. I realized only after I had become one of them that it had come too soon, as my mother said, much too soon . . .

And yet this is not the true beginning of the tale. It is merely where I first came to be part of it, so perhaps in my mind I have set it as the beginning. But this is not my tale. This is the tale of the Great War, of the men and women that have played their part in bringing it about, of the victors and of the fallen. The tale of the Great War began not with a nineyear-old girl's burning wish to grow up, but with the theft of a cow.

The theft of a cow, and a curse.

Book One

R I V E R M A I D E N

O N E



The sky went from blue to golden-orange, as it did every day at dusk at the foot of Meru. Arundhati, wife of Sage Vasishtha, looked up from the jasmine garland in her hands to the sky. There was no red ball of fire perched anywhere on the Western horizon, and Arundhati felt a momentary unease at that. She had been down on Earth for the last six moons, so she had gotten used to looking up at the sky in the evenings and finding the setting sun. But the anxiety quickly passed; she had been here on Meru before. As long as she lived up here she would not see the sun, only his yellow plume splashed across the sky; she would not see the moon either, only her cool, silvery light beaming down on Meru's slopes.

Arundhati sat at the doorway to the hut, her legs crossed, her fingers weaving the thread around the flowers two at a time. Without the moon to look at, the only way to keep time here was by counting each day. Men who ventured up here from Earth always spoke, on their return, of how time shrank – they would come for a day, or perhaps a week or a fortnight, but on their return they would find that many months and years had passed on Earth.

That was as it should be, for no one on Meru kept time. Time did not matter to the people of Meru.

Arundhati reached for her sandal-chalk and traced a short vertical line on the thatched door, next to the one she had drawn the previous day. The time to break her fast would arrive in two days. She tied the chalk to the end of her sari and picked up the half-finished garland again. She stopped for a moment to smell the jasmine buds in her basket, closed her eyes, and sighed. No flower on Earth had a scent like that.

The row of five alpine trees that stood to the left of their hut swayed as one. The fallen leaves of the mango and guava trees in the front yard floated up, swirled among the airborne blades of grass and fell to the ground again. The northerly breeze brought with it the soft smell of oncoming rain. From the neighbouring shacks, children ran out and assembled in the clearing. A calf pranced around them and butted a youngster on his behind, mooing excitedly.

Arundhati pulled herself up, a hand to the door. The sage would be on his way back now with the berries. He would want some fresh milk to go with them. She placed the basket of flowers and the garland by the fireplace and smoothed her hair. She turned to face the mirror and flicked away stray spots of vermillion from her forehead and reshaped the mark into a perfect circle. She pulled out the stick of polished teak that held her hair together and proceeded to tie it again in new, crisp knots. If the sage had been around, he would have laughed and said Nandini did not care for such niceties, and she probably did not, but for Arundhati, Nandini was the only goddess that mattered. If she, Arundhati, was mother to everyone at the ashram, Nandini was mother to her.

She stopped.

There had been no answering thought when she spoke the word 'Nandini' in her mind. Considering her reflection closely, she repeated the name again – this time with poise and deliberation – and waited. Still nothing. It was as though the cow was no longer at hearing distance. How could that be? Even if she were at the outer reaches of the ashram by the mangrove trees, she would have heard her.

A sudden chill shot down her back. Could it be . . . but who would dare lay hands on the most prized possession of Vasishta? And yet what other reason could there be for this silence?

She closed her eyes for a long minute. When she opened them, she heard the clack of her husband's walking stick on the granite outside. She saw his silhouette – bent, shaky and rickety – fill the doorway. In his free hand she made out the shapes of three berries.

He asked her, 'Where is Nandini?' His voice was quick, thin and breathy.

'Gone, my lord.'

'Gone?' The voice stayed the same, but Arundhati, from long years of familiarity, sensed anger rise within her husband. The bond they shared with each other was not unlike what each of them had with Nandini. No doubt he had thought of Nandini too, and no doubt he had failed to receive the answer that had always come in the past. 'Nandini does not "go", Arundhati,' he said. 'She will never leave us of her will.'

Arundhati knew in her heart that it was not true, as she knew that her husband knew it in his. Nandini belonged not to one man or to one god. If she had decreed that she should live by Vasishta's hut here on Meru, it was of her own desire. And if she did decide to leave them, who could stop or question her?

But even Arundhati did not think that the Mother Cow would leave without telling them. Even if there had been anything wanting in the care that she received here, she would have told them of it.

‘She has not left us, my lord,’ Arundhati murmured. ‘She was taken away.’

Vasishta stood up to his full height, held up his walking stick in the air and threw his head back. For a while he closed his eyes, and the haggard lines on his face deepened. Then he said, in a relieved but tired whisper, ‘The Vasus.’

Arundhati looked up to face him. ‘They were here at midday with their wives, my lord. They must have come when I was offering my prayers, for otherwise they could not have—’

‘Let me summon them,’ said Vasishta angrily, and hobbled out into the yard.



The Elementals stood in front of her in a row. It was by their magic that the climate on Meru was controlled. No one but these eight knew the Mystery of controlling the elements at will. Each of them had had to spend his entire life learning and practising the Mystery of his own element – so that they knew not much about each other’s craft either.

For that was how it was on Meru. The air, the water, the plants, the fire and the animals, each had their own Mysteries, and it was impossible for one man to master them all.

‘Mother,’ said one of them stepping forward, and bowed low to her. Arundhati recognized him as Prabhasa, the Elemental of the sky. With a sweep of his hand and an incantation he could turn the starry sky black with thick clouds. The orange of dusk, the blue of mid-morning, the light of the

moon, the twinkle of the stars, they were all his magic. He was the one who banished the sun and the moon from the sky on Meru, but somehow coaxed them to retain their essence.

‘I have brought Nandini back, Mother,’ he said.

‘So you have, Prabhasa,’ said Arundhati sternly. ‘You do not get rewarded for things that you ought to do.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘Neither will you escape punishment for what you have done,’ she said in a gentler voice. ‘Nandini is not just a cow, Prabhasa. She is one of the High Sage’s eyes. Did you really think it would be that easy to take her away?’

Prabhasa did not say anything. He held his position of respect, and bent his head a little lower. Behind him stood the other Elementals: Agni, Prithvi, Vayu, Antariksha, Aditya, Chandrama and Nakshatrini. All their heads were bent, their gazes cast low, their palms joined.

‘All of you live long in your mortal bodies,’ said Arundhati, in a low, singing voice. ‘And you live forever through your Mysteries and through your successors. Why, then, did you need the milk of Nandini?’

Prabhasa held his stance, but Arundhati saw the seven Vasus standing behind him exchange a few troubled glances.

‘It is for Nandini’s milk, is it not, that you took her away?’ she asked.

Prabhasa finally said, ‘Yes, Mother. My wife wanted it for her friend who lives on Earth—’

‘Are you telling me,’ Arundhati said, ‘that you took Nandini as a gift for an Earth-dweller? For a human?’ She felt anger within her rise, and her eyes smarted with it. ‘Immortality for a human?’

‘My wife—’

‘Do not blame your wife for your foibles, Prabhasa. There is no smaller man than one who hides behind his wife!’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘And Prabhasa,’ Arundhati continued, ‘do you know what life at ocean-level is like? Do you know the terms of life on Earth?’

‘I do, Mother, yes.’

‘You do, but you seem to have forgotten them. They do not have your Mysteries, Prabhasa. They do not know how to control the elements like you do. They do not live as long as you do because they do not know about the water in the Crystal Lake. They do not live after their death because they do not pass on their memories to their successors. They, Prabhasa, are not immortal. You do know all of that, do you not?’

Arundhati saw Prabhasa’s neck muscles tighten, and immediately regretted her harsh words. After all, he was a Celestial. While a mistake had been made and punishment for it had to be given, did she have the right to speak to him in so rude a fashion?

She relented. ‘Prabhasa,’ she said in a kind voice, ‘in a world where death spares no one, my child, the gift of immortality is in reality a curse. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘What part did your brothers play in this?’

Prabhasa said, ‘Only the part of keeping it secret, Mother.’

Arundhati got to her feet and wrapped her sari around her shoulders. She extended her arm and placed a hand on Prabhasa’s head. ‘It pains me to punish you, O Sons of Prajapati, but as you sow, so you shall reap – whether it is on the barren lands of Earth or the life-giving ones on Meru. For the crime of stealing the sacred cow from High Sage Vasishta’s ashram,

and for the folly of trying to bestow immortality on one from the mortal world, you will be born, all eight of you, in the world of men.’

She allowed her hand to bear upon Prabhasa’s head for a moment. ‘As for the rest of you, you will see life inside a mother’s womb, but those ten moons will be the extent of your ordeal. Seven days after you are born, you will return to Meru.’

She turned her gaze to the man standing under her outstretched hand. ‘But you, Prabhasa – you will live a long life, a life as close to immortal as anyone could live on Earth. You will see what it is to be immortal in a world of mortals. You will see the true nature of the gift your wife wanted to give her friend.’

Prabhasa waited for a minute. Then he looked up.

‘That is not all,’ Arundhati said in a voice that was almost a whisper. ‘That is not all. You committed this crime because lust for your wife clouded your mind. In your life on Earth, Prabhasa, there will be no such woman to lead you astray. You will go through life never experiencing, but always in complete awareness of, the pleasure – and the pain – of female companionship.’

There was another silence. Prabhasa waited for Arundhati to speak, and when she did not, he said, ‘As you wish, Mother.’

‘You will have what no man around you will – immortality. You will not have what every man around you will – union with a female. One of them is a boon, Prabhasa, and one of them a curse. You will know in due course which is which.’

‘As you wish, Mother.’

Arundhati lowered her hand and sat down on the ledge. She felt a great fatigue wash over her. A cold sweat formed all over her body, making her sari cling to her. Something cold trickled down her spine and she shivered.

In a voice low and weak, she said to Prabhasa, ‘Go northward of here where the Lady of the River lives. She will be of help to you.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

Without fuss, without any further words, the Vasus left. Arundhati leant on one arm and threw her head down, panting, looking through white strands of hair at the dancing shadows of the alpine trees. She heard in her ears a buzz, which started off low but slowly drowned out all other sounds around her. Even Nandini’s thoughts shrunk to a faint whisper somewhere deep in a distant corner of her mind.

It would be a while before she would regain her strength. She felt her stomach churn and threaten to turn itself inside out. She had almost forgotten what it felt like to curse someone. A curse came out of that part of you that was black, and it nurtured all that was bad inside you and brought it to the fore, made it bigger and made you feel small and weak. She had heard Sage Vasishta say once that that man is truly good who has the ability to curse but still cannot, for that means there is no blackness in his heart.

A breeze blew; a cold, harsh one that made her curl up and hug her knees. The alpines bent toward her as if in concern, and she thought how nice it would be to get up and run to them and get lost in their shadows. But she did not move. From the distance she thought she heard Nandini call out to her in the voice of her mother. From somewhere far away, from another world it seemed, the sound of running water came to her ears, low and clear.

She closed her eyes.

T W O



Relected in the oval copper plate in front of her, Ganga saw her mother's arms circle her from behind. A thread of twine rolled over her shoulders and dragged something heavy up her chest, allowing it to come to rest between her small, firm breasts. Tiny beads of water still hung from the ends of her black hair. A few of them dropped onto her lap when her mother, after having pulled the ends of the thread into a knot behind Ganga's neck, held her by the shoulders and kissed her on her left cheek.

When she saw the moonstone, her eyes sparkled with a fourteen-year-old's glee and her hand shot up to caress the crystalline surface. It looked orange now, in the light of the two candles that sat on the two sides of the mirror, but Ganga knew it to be blue. Just as her nipples, tight and upright, now appeared red, though in the fresh light of day they would wear the most delicious shade of fleshy pink. And her skin, pale and white in natural light, now appeared golden yellow.

She reined in her wandering mind – she had lately been given to admiring herself a bit too much – and focused on the reflection of her mother. 'Bribing me with the moonstone will not work, Mother. I am still most displeased with you and that man who is apparently the god of dawn.

He could be the lord of Meru for all I care; he does not tell us what to do and where to go. River Maidens are not the dancers of Indra's court, to step this way and that as His Majesty pleases.'

The Lady of the River took Ganga's hair in her hands and ran her fingers through her locks, straightening them and sliding the water droplets off. 'I have always wondered whose hair you have, Jahnavi,' she said. 'It is most certainly not mine. Might it be that of your father?'

'Oh, you have beautiful hair, Mother,' Ganga said, sitting up, lapsing back to her petulance. 'You cannot talk me into this, Mother. Not this time!'

Her mother said wonderingly, 'You have a quick tongue too, most unsuitable for the future Lady of the River. Where did you get that? Certainly not from me.'

'I wonder a great many things about you too, Mother. For one, why do you give that man so much time? Surely he is not as important as you are . . . Say, who is my father? You have never told me, have you?'

The Lady smiled and started braiding her daughter's hair, pushing tufts of hair between her fingers and then pulling them out. She rubbed away the final drops of water on the girl's shoulders. 'River Maidens,' she said at last, 'are not born of any man. They are gifts from the goddess herself, the goddess that gives us life.'

Ganga pouted. In the last five years she had come to know some of the Mysteries, and she believed what her mother said, but she also knew of the rite that took place by the big oak on the northernmost peak of Meru every harvest season. It was a rite that the Lady of the River participated in every year until she bore a daughter who would become the Lady after her. Other ladies from all parts of Meru came to this rite, and so did the men. Ganga had not seen this with her own eyes, but she knew from the thoughts and feelings she now shared with her mother that this rite carried on deep into

the night, the fires burning, the preceptor chanting hymns, the air carrying the scent of burnt fat and melted ghee, and that in every corner of the corn field that surrounded the oak, a man and a woman would find their own little world into which they would escape.

Ganga felt a dull ache between her legs at the thought, and as she rubbed her thighs together, she saw her nipples had perked up, solid and full. Even without the link that had come to be between mother and daughter over the last five years, the Lady of the river would have guessed what was on Ganga's mind.

'You have grown into a woman, Jahnvi,' she said, ignoring her breasts and narrowing her eyes instead at her hair. 'But you have heard what Prabhasa said; your place is not at the oak up here on Meru.'

'Yes,' said Ganga, her voice suddenly loud and garrulous. 'Just because a human sage had to curse the Vasus, I have to now go through all of this, before my training is complete—'

'Your training is complete, my child. You have not been instructed in all of the Mysteries, yes, because I am still the Lady of the River, but you have been instructed in enough to carry out what is needed of you.'

'But you want to use me!' Ganga raged. 'For the sake of a human sage and his words, you are sending your daughter away from Meru! Will you have it so that I never return, that you never see my face again?'

'Jahnvi,' said the Lady, smoothening the girl's forehead, 'will you not listen to me? This is not about just the human sage, for we are all as human as he. You have heard that Indra wanted you to go, and you know Indra is the king of us all . . .'

'But Mother, the Lady of the River is slave to no man on Meru, not even Indra. It was you who told me so, and yet this time you do his bidding without so much as a murmur of protest. Why?' She turned around to face

her mother, cupped her cheek with one hand and looked into her eyes. ‘Why, Mother? Why are you so anxious to send me away? The mountain is full of maidens that can be sent on the very same errand. Why does it have to be me?’

The Lady took Ganga’s hands in hers. She leant forward so that their foreheads touched, and upon her lips ran a quiet prayer. ‘This was going to be your last lesson before you left for Earth, Jahnavi. As reluctant as I was to reveal this to you, perhaps it is for the best.’

She closed her eyes and pressed down on the younger girl’s knuckles with her thumbs, bidding her to do the same. Ganga shut her eyes, and when she felt another touch of her mother’s fingers over hers, she understood her cue and mouthed the incantation that would allow them to see together.

As a girl growing up, Ganga had heard tales of the great sages who would scale the highest points of Meru and perform austerities of such intensity that they would gain enough power to absorb the strength of a lightning bolt with their bare flesh and bones. When she had first fused with her mother, that was what she thought was happening to her. Every strand of hair on her body stood on its end, her limbs swayed, her mouth uttered chants in some foreign tongue, and within her mind she felt cold tendrils reaching out and groping, groping, groping, and finally achieving a grip so that it could hold and pull, and when it pulled, her body stiffened as though water had been sucked out of it in one whiplash, whitening it. Ganga had been aware then only of their linked hands; no, her mother’s hands holding hers and squeezing them dry, making the blue veins almost glow in an eerie light against her pallid, lifeless skin, so much so that she thought they would burst.

That first time her mother had prepared her for a week before the event. But now, two years and a few hundred such viewings later, it came to Ganga as naturally as did breathing. All she felt now was a momentary tightening of an invisible knot in her stomach. She had learnt to match the pull of her mother's mind with the pressure of her own; their hands danced together such that neither dominated the other; so that they no longer seemed like teacher and student, merely two friends fusing their minds.

In spite of the illusion of equality, Ganga knew that she was the seer and her mother the sender, for without bidding, a cloud of dark grey covered her eyes completely. Here and there, when Ganga squinted, she saw a pounding, pulsing, purple spot. She thought it strange, because rain occurred on Meru as everything else did – in the right amounts, when it was required, where it was required. This violent sight of the sky about to let loose its contents had never been seen on Meru, and just as she was wondering what it was, one of the purple spots fell off to leave a hole, a hole through which a beam of golden light poured forth.

The hole grew bigger as she threw her head back, and so did the rest of the black cloud, and it was only then that she realized she was being carried towards the hole, which was now so big and so bright that the darkness of the curtain that surrounded it had receded, and now she was moving through the hole. The golden brightness of the light stung her eyes, forcing her to cover them with her hands and turn her face away.

For having looked at the Lady of the River with lust in your eyes, Mahabhisha, you will be born on Earth.

My Lord! If that is your will, I only wish I be born as the son of Pratipa, he of the Kuru race who rules over Hastina.

For a fraction of a second, Ganga felt that these names were strange to her, and at that very instant she was flooded with knowledge of the day at

Indra's court where she had caught the eye of the king from Earth; of the outrage she had felt at the unreasonable punishment meted out to a man who was after all serving his base instincts. She heard herself question the all-knowing one in a voice that was small and distant, as though it came all the way from the base of the mountain. Why was a man deemed to be manly only if he came unto a woman at the oak, not otherwise? If the goddess had planted such needs in men, did it speak well of us to punish them for it in the name of her will?

And then Indra spoke:

My lady, Mahabhisha will stay with us here on Meru. His essence will take birth as the son of Pratipa, and I promise you that you and he will unite in the Earthly realm just as you both wish it, though there is no such possibility here because he is an earthman and you – you are the foremost among our women.

And then a thought came and shook her close, down to her bones. A voice thin with disease and weak with age whispered into her ears: *The right thigh is reserved for a daughter-in-law, my lady.* When she opened her eyes she saw the clear stream of the river wind down the snowy mountain and her mother – yes, her mother, when her hair had been darker and richer and her skin smoother and shinier – on the sickly man's right thigh. *I will accept you as a wife for my son, O Lady of the River. And I will instruct him so he knows you when he finds you.*

She had not been told it was so, but the man was Pratipa, she knew, and she knew with equal certainty that the man's son was Mahabhisha. She was moving again, backwards this time, away from the light so that it became less painful and the hair on her skin relaxed and no longer threatened to burn in the brilliant light. She moved back through the hole again, and just as she opened her eyes and raised her arms, fingers clawing out to reach for

that now single bright spot in a thick mass of grey cloud, a liquid of purple flowed over it and covered it, inch by inch, until she was again looking up at blackness and bulging spots of purple.

Only for a moment she thought of the other purple spots and when she would uncover them all. The next instant a name entered her mind, and before she knew it she filled up with it, that dull ache returning to her inner thighs and pushing them apart with what felt like a real force.

Then physical senses returned, and she felt the touch of her mother's fingers entwined in hers, her mind's tendrils disengaging and leaving her, pushing her away as she swayed on the bed and shot open her eyes to see her mother watching her, with blood in her eyes and a smile on her lips.

'Mother!' she cried and threw her arms around her. She buried her nose in the crook of the Lady's neck and shut her eyes tight, aware of slow, scalding tears travelling down her cheeks. She did not know why she was crying, or what that prodding pain was in her chest. 'Mother . . . ' she said again, unable to speak further.

'There, child,' her mother said, cradling Ganga's body against hers. 'You now know the reason you have been chosen for this task.'

'But mother, it was not me. It was not me or you, was it? It was the Lady before you that had fallen in love with Mahabhisha.'

'We are all one, Jahnvi. You carry with you all my memories, and those of the Ladies that came before you. You carry them as though they were yours, and that is why you feel that ache to meet him, that longing in your heart.'

'I do not like it!' said Ganga.

'I did not either when I first came by it, my child,' said the Lady kindly. 'But it is the lot of us River Maidens that we will inherit our mother's burden one day, and at the time of our death, we will pass them on to our

children. You have not learnt all the Mysteries yet, so you will not know whence some of your emotions arise. But that is your lot, my child. You will have a second coronation when I am closer to my deathbed, when you will become the Lady of the River yourself.'

'Oh, Mother.' Their breasts heaved as one when they inhaled, and Ganga relaxed at the soothing touch of her mother's hand over her hair. Her own hands were clutched tight together behind the lady's shoulders, and now she disengaged them and caressed the older woman's back. 'I crave for him, Mother,' she whispered, 'and yet I do not know who he is and what he looks like.' And then, in hope: 'Do you think he will know me?'

'He is the king of Hastina, and both of you will know each other when you meet. Have no fear of that.'

The Lady fell silent then, and Ganga was aware only of her hand caressing her hair, beginning at the scalp and travelling right down to her lower back with each stroke. It was a rather uneasy silence, one in which Ganga felt her mother start speaking a couple of times only to falter back into quietness; so Ganga asked, 'Mother, do you fear for me?'

The Lady sighed. 'Not for your person, my Jahnvi. As the queen of the kingdom you will face no troubles. And I know what you are thinking now, that Mother worries endlessly, and maybe there is truth in what you think. I know you think now that all you need in your life is to meet him and be his queen and his wife and companion, and that if that one thing were granted to you, you would give up all else, even your future as the Lady of the River. Is that not so?'

She was holding Ganga's head by her cheeks, and was looking into her eyes. Ganga shook her head. 'No, Mother, not that. Everything else, perhaps, but not my future as your successor.'

‘You say that now,’ said her mother and smiled. ‘But I see in your eyes that it is not so. I am not worried about that either, Jahnavi, for it is not in the near future that you shall be required to return. Perhaps the wish to return will arise within you when the time is right. Or perhaps the right time is when the wish to return arises within you.’ She shook her head, and a faint smile appeared on her face. ‘No, child, that is not what worries me.’

‘Then what is it, Mother? If I could in any way lessen it, I would.’

‘My worry is for you, Jahnavi. The light in your eyes that I see now when you think of him – I see that light go out, one little flicker at a time. That which you need the most right now will be your biggest regret, and I want you to know that I would not have done this had there been another way.’

‘Mother,’ said Ganga, and broke into a nervous laugh. ‘You speak as though I am being led away to slaughter! If there is no physical harm in this, I will take great pleasure in doing it, for your sake and for the sake of the people of Meru. I promise you I shall never blame you for what happened, Mother. This is my word.’

The Lady laughed too, and Ganga thought there was a little cynicism in it, a note of ‘you are still a child’ that brought bright red spots of resentment to her cheeks. An angry thought came to her mind, but she caught it before it found form on her lips. She turned her head away instead.

‘This haughtiness might come in use to you on Earth,’ said the Lady. ‘Why, the king of Hastina might even like a wife with a tongue between her lips. All I say is that keep in mind that there might come a time when you hate me, and if that ever happens, try to remember that I had no choice and that it is all for the best.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

The Lady got up from the bed and blew out one of the candles. She took the other in her hand, and holding it in front of her, made her way to the door leading out to the front room. At the doorway she stopped, and Ganga saw her figure silhouetted against the orange light, framed by the dim rectangle of the door, beyond which was darkness. In later years during her time on Earth, whenever Ganga thought of her Mother, it was this figure that would spring up in her mind: this one with her back turned and about to walk away through a door into an unknown, distant darkness.

‘You will sleep alone this night,’ said the Lady, and her voice already had the cold, faraway tone in it. ‘Prabhasa will arrive at dawn.’ And she moved on, leaving the room black but for the soft glow of the moonstone at Ganga’s breast. Ganga held it up to her eyes and stared at it for a minute, trying to make out its shape in the darkness. She lay on her back and brought it to her lips, to plant a kiss on its cold surface.

Then, setting it to rest between her breasts, she said softly to the dark room, ‘Yes, Mother.’

T H R E E



The Lady of the River sat cross-legged on the porch of her hut draped in her black cloak, her face grim. Her eyes seemed to consider something in the deep distance; yet Ganga, seated on the rock in the courtyard, facing Prabhasa, knew that her mind was locked onto what was happening in front of her. The day had not broken yet; only the far eastern sky was streaked with a light shade of red and orange. Over to the west, the sky still dripped black and a fair number of stars shone closer to the horizon.

Ganga had woken up by herself an hour ago, and it had not been difficult, for she had slept fitfully. She had gone down to the base of the White Rock and picked flowers for the morning worship. She took a dip in the river and prayed, first to the goddess of Water whom she served, then to the Sun who was the giver of life, and finally to Mother Nature. When she returned to the hut she found her mother awake and cleaning the porch. Upon seeing her, Mother asked Ganga to wear her white breast cloth and gown, which was reserved only for the most auspicious events. When Ganga placed the jasmines at her feet, her mother tied three of them together and placed them in her daughter's hair, just behind the left ear.

‘There,’ she said. ‘Now bring two pots of the river water, child, and seat yourself here.’

Ganga’s hand now rose to her ear and with her fingers she felt the petals of the jasmine. In front of her, seated on a similar rock to hers, in the same cross-legged position, was Prabhasa. When she had seen him five years ago she had thought he was an old, forbidding man with a ready scowl on his face. But this morning he was pleasant, and, she thought with a hint of bashfulness, handsome. His brows were thin, like a maiden’s, and they framed his eyes so that one’s gaze would always be dragged down to them. And his eyes were almost square-shaped and sharp, unpleasant at first glance, but when he spoke they seemed to take a life of their own – so much so that Ganga had to avert her glance to be able to listen to what he was saying.

‘You have grown into a beautiful lass since I last saw you, my lady,’ he said, and Ganga remembered he had hardly seen her then; his eyes had been only for her mother. But now she was whom he wanted. He smiled at her hesitantly and when she returned it, he smiled more widely. ‘Today is a happy day for me – nay, a day of relief – for this is the day I travel down to Earth to serve my penance.’

‘You will come with me, my lord?’ asked Ganga and frowned, puzzled.

‘That is what I have come to tell you,’ Prabhasa answered. ‘I do not think it is part of the formal education of a River Maiden to know the Mystery of incarnation, but in your case I will have to tell you.’ He turned to look at the seated figure of the Lady for a moment then turned back to Ganga. ‘To answer your question, child, yes, today you will take me with you to Earth – but not just me. My seven brothers as well.’

Ganga felt a pang at the change in his address. Suddenly she was ‘child’. She tried not to let her anger show. ‘If that is so, I am afraid we will

have to call for a bigger barge to carry us down. The barge we have can carry three people at the most—’

‘No, Jahnvi,’ Prabhasa said, a smile still on his lips. ‘You will carry us, yes, but not in this form. When the people of Meru take birth on Earth, they do so through a part of themselves, so that their duties here on Meru are not neglected. We live dual lives, one here and one down below.’

Ganga felt her mouth parting. This was the biggest Mystery of them all, save perhaps the one which told of how the water of the Crystal Lake came by its magical powers. ‘The quality of our life suffers due to this,’ said Prabhasa. ‘We feel as though part of our bodies are on Earth, where the elements are at the mercy of the gods, and the other part up here, on dear, delightful Meru. It drains us of our life, and we grow older sooner, because after all, we are living two lives at one time.’

‘And the Crystal Lake does not help?’

Prabhasa shook his head, and his smile became sad. ‘No, the Crystal Lake only delays our deaths, not prevent them. Every living being has to die; the gods alone are immortal. We only have a cousin of immortality with which we ought to be content – and I suppose your mother has taught you the Mystery of transference.’

Ganga nodded. ‘So you will live shorter than your father because of this.’

‘Yes, half as long, to be exact.’ He lapsed into silence for a while, looking over Ganga’s shoulder. Then he said, ‘But it is all fair. I have sinned, and this is my penance. I will still live longer than the oldest earthman, so what have I got to complain about?’

‘So you . . . will be my . . . son?’

‘That is so.’

‘And you will live both his life and yours at once?’

Prabhasa sighed. 'I would it were as simple as that. I will live my life here, but perhaps once in a while I will see what your son sees: the suffering of life on Earth, the loss, the misery, the wars. Or perhaps I will be robbed of a little contentment of my life here every day that he is alive. But Ganga,' he said, shaking his head and leaning forward to look into her eyes, 'your son will be his own man. Have no fear of that! He will have his own life. He will have some of me in him, but that will be all. The penance is mine, not his. The quality of my life will suffer, not his. If anything, his life ought to be better than that of most the earthmen.'

'Because of your image in him?'

'Yes, my lady, and do not forget, he will have your blood in his veins too. The blood of the River Maiden is the most precious of all female blood on the mountain.' He raised his head and looked towards the east, and she saw a beautiful orange glow cover his face. It was only then that Ganga noticed that the sky had lightened. There were no stars to be seen but at the very corner of the western sky. 'It is time,' said Prabhasa, and poured out water from the pot into two earthen vessels. With both hands he raised one vessel to his lips and closed his eyes as the water slid down his throat. Then he stretched his arms out to her, the same vessel cradled in his palms.

She took it and put it to her lips. Just as the water touched her mouth, Prabhasa said, 'Repeat what I say in your mind while you drink.' And with eyes closed tight, she listened to the words sail out of his mouth and enter her, deep enough to reach her soul, and then she heard her own inner voice repeat them, in the same whispery way that her mother spoke. It was the voice of a River Maiden – nay, it was the voice of the Lady of the River.

She opened her eyes after emptying the vessel. It had not been a long incantation, but Ganga felt as if she had woken up after a blissful sleep by the Crystal Lake. When her eyes focused on Prabhasa, he held out to her a

small bundle wrapped in white silk. When she took it in her hands and made to open it, he said, 'Now is not the time to open it, child. But I will tell you what it is. In that bundle are eight strands of hair, one belonging to each of us. When you get with child, you will drop one of the strands into a vessel of water, and with as little ceremony as possible, drink from it. When the water enters you, say the words that I have just taught you.'

Ganga felt the bundle with her hands. The object was small enough to fit into her palm, and it was hard and round to touch. If Prabhasa had not told her what it was, she would have guessed it was a chalk of sandal. Then she said, suddenly struck by his words, 'My lord, I do not remember the words.' She became frantic, and she bent her head in an effort to recall the words that had entered her no more than a minute ago, but nothing came to her. 'I do not remember them!'

Prabhasa smiled, and in the light of the rising sun he looked like the God of Light himself. Even the curled locks of hair around his ears, that Ganga had disapproved of ever since she first saw him, shone with the velvety blackness of a panther's mane. The morning birds tittered about them, and for a moment Ganga forgot all about the forgotten words and wished she could run her hand down his jaw and feel his arms circle her waist.

She caught herself, and unbidden, she blushed and looked guiltily out of the corner of her eye at her mother. This man, she told herself, was going to be her son! And so were all of the other Elementals. It did not become a River Maiden to go lusting after every Celestial in sight. But then, was it not Mother who had told her not to be ashamed of what the goddess had given her? If this body was given to her by the goddess, so were its desires. Did it not mean, then, that all her thoughts were those of the goddess too? Her mother's face was as though set in marble. It appeared as though she

was witnessing a scene somewhere far away in both time and space, or perhaps, Ganga thought, she was looking inward with a veil thrown upon her face.

‘It does not matter, my lady,’ said Prabhasa, and it was only after a moment that Ganga realized he was referring to the forgotten words. ‘They will come to you when you require them. I have seen that they have entered you, and I see where they lie. They will not fail you when you have their need.’

She joined her hands and bowed. He returned the gesture and got to his feet. Walking up to the hut, he bowed to the Lady and murmured, ‘Tonight is auspicious.’

The Lady nodded with the same distant look in her eyes. ‘Does she know all that she needs to know?’

‘Yes, my Lady.’

‘Then you may go.’

As he passed her, Prabhasa’s eyes met Ganga’s, and with that one look she knew that whether the Lady of the River had felt her desire or not, he certainly had. For no reason she thought of the oak tree and the harvest season. She thought of the smile on Prabhasa’s lips now, crooked, falling away to one side, as though he mocked at her. Or was he throwing at her an invitation?

That thought sent chills, not altogether unpleasant ones, down her back, and she broke the gaze and turned her head away, listening to the sound of his tread recede until it faded away.

‘I do not know what to tell you,’ her mother said.

They held hands and walked down the wet rocky steps lined with green tufts of grass. Her grip was easy and loose, but her mother held onto her like Old Vasishtha held his stick, as though she would fall if she let go.

‘This is new for me. Only seldom have I gone to Earth, and only a little do I know of the ways of that world. I wish to give you advice, child, but I do not know what will be good advice and what bad,’ the Lady said.

They stepped onto the grassy bank. Ganga saw the black boat anchored to one side, and as they arrived, the oarsman got to his feet and stretched an arm tentatively towards her to escort her aboard. She turned to her mother and said, ‘There is nothing on Earth that can harm a Celestial, Mother. You have trained me well.’ She saw no smoothening of the creases on her mother’s forehead.

‘Use the sight,’ her mother told her. ‘I may not come to your aid, but I will listen to you. And if the need is dire, I will come.’

‘Mother,’ said Ganga, taking the hand of the oarsman but still facing the Lady, ‘I will be well. Please do not fret over me.’

The Lady inhaled deeply, and with a nod of decision she took a step back. She lifted her chin and clasped her hands behind her back, at once assuming the controlled, dominant gait of the Lady of the River. Her face became inscrutable and stone-like, and her voice, when she spoke, was cold. ‘Fare well.’

Ganga got into the barge and made her way to the farther end, her back turned on the White Rock. She heard the snap of the rope being cut, and the boat sliced through the water at a steady, quiet pace. As they gathered speed, Ganga realized that her heart was pounding with joy. Since she had fused with Mother the night before, she had been aware of nothing but a deep, gnawing urge to get away from Meru and go to Earth; because Earth was where he was, and that was where she had been promised that she would be one with him. Her mother, the White Rock, the Great River, the Celestials, the Crystal Lake – all of them put together did not matter to her at that moment as much as Hastina did.

She did not look back even once at the receding image of the Rock, and of her mother.

F O U R



Ganga sat at the edge of the riverbank and watched the checkered reflection of the overhanging peepal leaves in the black water. The crescent moon hung low in the sky, and Ganga looked up to search for a star next to the bottom tip. It was said that a star appeared by the crescent when the omens were good, and tonight, Prabhasa had said, was the night that the king would come looking for her. Why then was there no star by the moon?

Something – a frog, perhaps – jumped into the water and disturbed the steady current. Ganga murmured an incantation to keep lizards and insects away. She smiled at the thought of a snake crawling up to her and biting her. She was now as far away from the Crystal Lake as she would ever be, so a snakebite was sure to be fatal. What would happen then to the Vasus' grand plan? Who would bear the great warrior that Mother had seen come forth from her womb?

She closed her fingers around the corner of her upper garment that had been tied in a knot. Her fingers traced each of the eight strands of hair that lay buried within it. Yes, she thought absently, she had at least eight sons in her future, the eighth of whom—

There was a sound – a soft rustle of the leaves – behind her, and even as she straightened her back and reached for the dagger at her waist she heard a male voice say in a whisper: ‘The gods are with you, lady. A moment longer and I would have shot you.’

Ganga looked over her right shoulder at the man who had appeared from behind the tree, arrow set in bow and string drawn back. He wore riding clothes: a red tunic was tied around his torso so that it hugged him, and it went around his left shoulder, leaving his drawing arm bare and free. He could have been any hunter in Hastina, but Ganga saw the golden lining on the white drawn-up dhoti, and the faint gleam of a diamond on each of his sandals. The face too was not that of an everyday hunter. His cheekbones were drawn in and his chin jutted out. From underneath the coarse beard, on his left cheek, a black scar rose and made its way up to his ear. The moustache he wore was pointed and shaped to curl upwards, as was the royal way.

His bow lowered, but with the arrow still set in it, he took a step forward and frowned at her. ‘This is not the place or the time for a young lady to be out alone,’ he said. ‘I have not seen you in these parts. Whose daughter are you?’

Ganga allowed a smile to appear on her lips. Still looking over her shoulder, she said, ‘And who is it that asks me such an impertinent question?’

‘If you think me, your king, impertinent,’ he said, ‘perhaps I should leave you here to let some hunter or a pack of wild wolves find you, my lady.’ He dropped the bow to his side now and returned the arrow to the quiver. He leant on the trunk and folded his arms over his chest, watching her.

‘Does it suit the king of the land to make eyes at every hapless maiden in the woods? Is that what the high kings of Hastina are wont to do, my lord, ride along the banks of the river in the hope of finding a lady to rescue?’

His voice caught, and it came out hoarse and angry. ‘You have a mouth on you, girl. The Kuru kings have never laid a hand on a maiden against her wishes. If you were from around these parts you would know that. You have not yet told me whose daughter you are – your robes tell of a wealthy family, and yet I cannot say I have seen you before.’

Ganga turned and let her upper garment slip down her shoulder, just enough to give the king a glimpse of the curve of her neck. ‘You have not seen me before, O King, nor have I you. But your father has told you about me. I can see in your face that he has.’ She smiled at him, and with a gentle wave of her wrist the current of the river beside them quickened, filling the air with its murmur.

The king cast an eye at the river, but answered her question. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘he had.’

‘You have your father’s face, my lord, King. I saw him when he came up to the Ice Mountains all those years ago, praying for a son. I asked him to take me for a wife, but he said he wanted a son, not a wife.’ She saw him lift the corner of his mouth in suspicion at her words, and she added: ‘I could not believe it too, O King. Perhaps the long journey up the mountain had dulled his eye for beauty. How else do you explain him disallowing me?’ She gave him a little glance. ‘You have not had that long to travel, have you, my lord?’

‘No.’ He walked to her, looking upon her full in the face. ‘Who are you?’ he asked in a respectful whisper.

‘You’re no longer concerned with whose daughter I am, then?’

‘If you were up at the Ice Mountain before my birth, lady, then you cannot be one of us humans. You must be one of the immortal nymphs they say roam Meru’s slopes.’ He looked at her questioningly.

She smiled at him and shook her head.

‘Then you must be one of the divine dancers from Indra’s court. Are you Menaka, who drew the great Vishwamitra away from his prayers? Or are you one of the Gandharvas, who sing for the gods and guard their nectar?’

She smiled, amused by his quaint excitement. She flashed her eyes at him and said, ‘Does it matter, my king, what race I belong to? Everything on Earth is given us by the goddess; so am I and my beauty. Does a thirsty man ask of the origins of a river before he drinks from her waters?’

The king’s eyes moved sideways and considered the river. Ganga saw the reflected moonlight play on his face in blue, restless lines. The current sped up just a little, and a wet breeze blew from over the water, steady and scented, much like the ones she was used to on Meru. For a second she wondered if there was the Vasus’ hand behind it all – the calm flowing of the river, the clear, cloudless sky, the twinkling stars, the fragrant air and the moon with the faint, smoky shape of a star near its bottom tip – or was it just her imagination?

‘No,’ he said, looking about him in bemusement. ‘It is as if the Holy Lands have come down to the Earth, is it not? I have been here, right under this very tree, many nights in the past; not once have I seen it so beautiful. Is it you, my lady’ – when he looked down at her a frown creased his brow – ‘or are my eyes playing tricks on me? Perhaps I shall wake up any moment now and find it all gone.’

She covered the distance between them in two sprightly steps. She took his hands in hers and held them; hard and calloused they were to the touch,

and her fingers disappeared under his heavy palms. ‘This is not a dream, King Shantanu, and I will tell you something about me, too, for it is only fair that you should know. You were right in saying I am not of this world. I am a Celestial, and I come hither from Meru.’

She felt his hands, after a minute of limp fumbling, tighten around hers. ‘You have come,’ he said, in a voice that bespoke certainty and yet carried a tone of disbelief, ‘to offer yourself to me.’

‘I have, Your Majesty. There is divine blood flowing within me. I will give you sons that are heroic, valorous; they will be Gods here on Earth, and Hastina will become a second Amaravati.’

For a second she saw his eyes shine brilliantly and she felt a little pang in her heart; while what she told him was true to an extent, there was no denying that she was deceiving him, that she was using his weakness for sons against him.

As though following her thoughts, he said, ‘Why me?’ Ganga noticed that the grip of his hands on hers had slipped, as the first doubt crossed his mind. No human, no matter how great, was a match for a Celestial maiden. In the heart of his hearts, Shantanu knew that. Ganga smiled into his eyes.

‘My lord, King,’ she said softly, ‘we are but small parts of a long tale, the beginning and end of which even I do not know. I do, however, know more than you do, but I must beseech you never to ask me. You will come to know of it when the time is ripe, I promise you that.’

His voice came out gruff, petulant. ‘What if I refuse?’

‘I do hope that you do not,’ she said, not raising her voice or looking away. ‘I see in you the image of a man I once wanted, a man who wanted me. I see in you the image of your father, the virtuous king Pratipa. I chose you among all the kings of the land because you rule over Hastina, and you

are a descendant of the Kuru line. There is royal blood in you, my king, but do know that you are not the only one.'

His eyes grew in size and she sensed anger rise in him, but she went on in the same measured tone, quietening him before he could say a word. 'The bank of the Great River is a long one, my lord, and there are sixteen great kingdoms stretching out all the way to the ocean. If you do not take me on my terms, one of the kings that rule the lands west of here will.' She lifted his hands and guided them to her cheeks, looking up into his eyes as she did. 'I promise you a son, Your Majesty; a son who will make your name ring along the length of North Country. All I am asking for in return is a little patience.'

His face softened, and he swallowed once, then a second time. 'Kings have never been ruled by their queens . . .'

'I do not intend to rule you, my lord. You will be my king, my husband, my protector, my master. I will serve you with all my heart and love. But I ask you never to question my actions, for there will come a time when you will hate me. I want you to know, right at this moment, that whatever I do, however horrible it may seem, has a reason behind it, and it is something I cannot help. Is that acceptable to you?'

He said, 'You are asking for a boon before you have even wedded me.'

She touched her lips to the knuckles of his hands, one after the other. Then she said, 'It is not a boon that I ask for, O King. In return I give you a son, I promise everlasting glory, not only for you but for the city of Hastina, for the lineage of the Kurus, and for all your descendants. They will be emperors; they will rule over the sixteen great kingdoms as high kings. All of that, and of course, my beauty, my body, my soul, my heart – they are yours. Is that not a fair return for what I ask of you?'

He still appeared unsure, but his resolve was broken; Ganga felt it in the touch of his hands. They were clasped around hers in a loving grip. ‘We will have to get back to the palace,’ he was saying, ‘consult the priest for an auspicious hour . . .’

Ganga ran a light finger over his scar. ‘You asked me if I was a Gandharva maiden,’ she said and smiled, stepping closer to him and guiding his hand to her waist. ‘I am not, but I know of their code of marriage. There is no bigger goddess than Mother Nature, my king, and if you desire to take me as your wife, there is no better place, or a better time —’

He bent down to her and closed her lips with his, and as she dissolved into his embrace she untied the knot of his quiver and then that of his tunic, feeling the fabric give way under her hands. Her own upper garment had fallen to the ground, and as they lay down, with him cradling her in his arms and easing himself on top of her, she looked up over his shoulder to find the moon.

At the bottom tip of the crescent, now there was a solid white star.

F I V E



A cold, forbidding wind hit her full in the face as she emerged from the palace and walked purposefully to the outer courtyard. She wrapped the woollen cloth around the babe and held him closer. His tiny hands tapped against her breast, and she could feel the hardness of his teeth on her nipple. She bit her lower lip and walked on past the outer gate into the streets.

The midwinter feast had take place the night before, on the fifth dark night after the last monsoon rain. The astrologers at Shantanu's court predicted that winter would come early this year and stay for a few moons longer than expected; some of them had measured the width of the Ganga and warned that the Ice Mountains were getting colder by the year, which meant that there would be less and less water to go by. In time, they said, even the Great River might dry up and become a trickle, forcing the great kingdoms to move eastward and westward, in search of the oceans and their salty waters.

Ganga had thought those notions strange and had laughed at them, but now, as the deathly night wind turned her face white, she wondered if there might be some truth to what the astrologers had said after all.

There was warmth by her bosom, though, in the incessant patter of fists against her breast and the eager suckling on her nipple. The warmth entered her through him and spread within her with an intensity that surprised her, but then she recalled that her son was the incarnation of Agni, the Elemental that played with fire. The past seven days, ever since his birth, he had given her no glimpses of his divinity and she had begun to wonder if the Mystery had worked as intended. Now this show of his prowess relaxed her.

She had taken the strand of hair and dissolved it in a cup of rainwater as Prabhasa had told her to, and had recited the incantation as well as she could remember it. There had been a couple of places where her mouth caught at the words, but it was overall well done, especially for someone taking part in their first Mystery. She had drunk the cup of water in one gulp on the ninth day of conception, said her prayers to the Mother and to the Elemental, and she had waited for confirmation that it was all going as planned. But there had been nothing. At least before Shantanu got her with child, her mother had spoken to her every now and then through an occasional whisper that came to her on the wings of the north wind. But once the Mystery was complete, there was complete and utter silence.

Now, ten moons later, confirmation arrived in the form of a sleeping infant at her breast that warmed her up with its touch.

She walked past the street, using only her moonstone to guide her. The fire-keepers were also asleep tonight, she thought, casting a quick eye at the unlit fire-staffs on the sides of the street. The night after midwinter feast was meant to be for relaxation and love. Ganga knew that in each of the homes that she passed by, wives and husbands lay together in their beds, and she suspected that even the bachelors and the maidens found ways to get together this night, perhaps out in the paddy fields down south or by the bales of feeding hay that stood in rows near the city's northwest corner.

People said the new moon made sin run in their veins, and restraining oneself during the dark night made one purer, even if they did it in anticipation of the following night, when they could give in under the cover of near-darkness, unseen. Perhaps that was why it was custom not to light the fires on the night following midwinter. Perhaps there were things that were best done in pitch blackness.

Ganga knew that Shantanu had wanted her in his bed tonight. He had been very patient with her all through her time she was with child, and he had not forced himself upon her; for that, she was grateful. She had made arrangements that he would be well looked after – her ladies-in-waiting took turns going to his chamber every night of the nine months she had carried the child, and she had given each one of them detailed instructions on how to conduct themselves – but there was something that a slave could not give a king in bed that a queen could. Ever since the birth of their child, she had seen the quiet desire in Shantanu's eyes. Tonight, the night after midwinter, he would not have held back.

But she had something she had to do too, and she was not in the mood for frolicking on a night such as this; so she had sent her favourite companion to him, with word that she had a bad stomach and that she would join him the night after. Lost in her thoughts, she made an absent note to herself to make sure that none of the women had gotten themselves a belly from their visits to the king, and if they had, she would have a silent word with the elderly matron who prepared their meals.

And suddenly she thought: how very much like a queen I have become!

Her moonstone threw a line of feeble bluish light out in front of her, and she walked out of the city walls into the woods, clasping her son in a tighter protective embrace. She wondered how much the little one knew. Did he have the awareness and abilities of the adult Celestial? Would he cry out in

fear or hatred when thrown into the river? Or would he just disappear under the current without a whimper?

She hoped that the current would be strong tonight, strong enough to sweep him away before he had the time to open his mouth, or his eyes.

The faint gurgle of the river reached her ears, and though she was walking slowly, her heart quickened, and she held her little one away from her chest, lest he woke up to the throbs. She had heard her mother speak of the pangs of separation from her sons – all the river maidens had to give up their sons for fostering, and stop childbearing at the birth of a girl child – and in the silliness of youth she had yearned for such a feeling. Mother had then warned her to be careful of what she wished for, and at the time Ganga was leaving for Earth she had said that her wish was about to come true.

Ganga had prepared as best as she could for this moment. Ever since the boy had been born, she had had one or the other of her waiting-women look after him. One of the new mothers took him to her breast, and it was only today, when there had been no one about, when she had felt his puffy arms kneading her breasts that she had given in. She had kept herself away from his chambers and had only seen him three or four times in the last week, however hard it was to engage herself in other matters.

And yet, after all that, now all she wanted to do was turn and run back to the palace and feed her boy till he was full, till his hands would plead no more, and she wanted to rock him to sleep upon her breast and croon to him through the night.

Mother, she thought, what punishment is this? If the blood that flows in my babe is that of a Celestial, he is still the son I have carried in me for a whole year. Could the will of the gods not have been done in a manner less harsh to me, Mother? Is this the price one pays for being a Celestial? Do the hands of the river maiden, the next Lady of the River, have to be awash

with the blood of infants, just so the will of the gods be done? And what of this young one, what does he know of the will of the gods?

She opened his fist with her fingers and wrapped them tightly in her palm. She knew that her mother had felt only a part of the pain; she had had the comfort of knowing that her sons were being reared safely at another place. She had not had to send them to their deaths by her own hand. Ganga had thought that the awareness within her of who her sons really were would have made her task easier, but as the riverbank got closer and as the murmur of the river grew into a hungry growl, her eyes pricked her deep within their sockets, and tears flowed down her cheeks. Ganga did not wipe them off, instead she allowed the cold wind to dry them.

When she arrived at the bank she held the babe on one side and let the cloak drop to the ground. She lifted her head and looked defiantly at the peepal which stood a few hundred yards down the bank from her. She could only hold her gaze for a minute, though, for the next moment her eyes dropped and a sob shook her. With her thumb she gently disengaged her finger from the boy's fist, and held him up in front of her in both hands, gazing at him in the blue light of the moonstone.

She could not yet tell whose features he bore; definitely not of the Agni she had seen up on Meru. His nose seemed to carry the same crooked curve that she had seen on Shantanu, and his lips and ears appeared the very miniatures of her own. This boy would have been his own man in his own world, and just because the wife of a sage decreed it, this boy – this boy who would grow up to be high king if he were allowed to live – had to die.

But as one conversant in the Mysteries, she knew that a chain had been started from the anger of a human, and that the eighth son of Shantanu would carry that chain forward into the future, right to its very end. She knew not the intricacies of what was about to unfold, but that was what was

destined to happen. Her duty was to let that come to pass. If she were to use her own sense of will and allow this child to live, who knew in which direction things would turn? She remembered her first lesson as a river maiden, one which her mother had imparted to her at the place where the Great River was born: duty was paramount; so it was, and so she would fulfill it.

She held herself up and stretched her arms out. The boy's left leg curled over his right, and in the faint blue light she saw his eyes shut. She closed hers too and murmured a prayer, she knew not in whose name. Then, with a little nod of the head and with her own eyes still closed, she let him drop.

There was no cry. There was no splash as the body hit the water. It was as if the river had cradled his fall and wrapped herself around him. All she could hear was the flow of the current, calm and subdued now – yes, she would be, now that her hunger was satiated. Ganga opened her eyes, looked at her trembling hands and thought: your hunger is gone, is it not, Mother? Are you glad that you made me kill a helpless young thing? Her hands dropped, her legs threatened to buckle underneath her. She somehow held her balance and thought weakly: and this is all only the beginning . . .

There were footsteps behind her. Ganga knew without looking who it was. She sunk to her knees on the sand and bowed her head.

‘Ganga, my queen!’ said Shantanu, hurrying to her and crouching by her. He held her shoulders in his hands and leant forward so that he could look into her eyes. ‘My queen,’ he said, softly, ‘what is this? How do you come to be here at this time of night, alone, unprotected. It is not right that the mother of my child . . . Where is my son?’

She did not begrudge the possessiveness he felt. It was a matter of course that all children, though borne and delivered through the mother, belonged to the father, as the mother herself did. It was truer if the child was

male, and truer still if he were a firstborn. Ganga raised her head and looked into Shantanu's eyes.

'Remember your oath, my lord, that you swore by that very tree. Do not be forsworn against the gods, for that will only bring disgrace to the clan of the Kurus.'

He shrank back at her words and flung a desperate glance at the river before looking back at her, his face contorted. 'You,' he said, 'you, tell me it is not true, my lady. I beg of you! Tell me it is not true!' The scar on his temple appeared to burn a hateful red.

'Do not give voice to your thoughts, Shantanu, king of the Kurus' she said, in a low, clear voice. 'I swore to you that I shall give you a son, and I shall. But for that to happen, you have to keep to your oath. Have you forgotten it?'

'But my lady, my queen, he was your son too! How could you cast him off thus? And why? Will you not even tell me why?'

Her voice softened. 'I will, O King, but when the time is right. Do not think I do this of my own free will, or even that I do so without grief. He was my son more than he was yours. As I told you the day you met me, there are bigger tales afoot than ours, and all we can do is abide by our duties.'

'And your duty is to kill your son?'

'That is so. And he will not be the only son of yours to meet this fate. As pained as you are by what has happened, I must warn you of what is to come.'

His own face softened now, and he came closer to her and took her hand in his. 'What great sins you must have committed to earn such a curse, my queen. Someone as pious as you . . . ever since you became my wife

nothing but wealth and prosperity has touched the land of Hastina. To think someone like you has to carry a weight so cruel . . .’

She lowered her gaze to fight back the tears, and that made her shake like a leaf and sink lower to the ground. Then she felt his arms go around her and hold her up, and his chin pressed down on her shoulder. He whispered into her ear: ‘I will never be forsworn of my oath, my queen. I will be with you forever.’

Ganga closed her eyes and allowed herself to melt into his embrace. She knew the futility of his words, yet she persuaded herself to believe what had come out of his mouth to be the truth. Oh, what she would give for it to be the truth!

He guided her up to her feet, held her by the shoulders and looked straight at her. ‘You have lost so much strength, my queen. I feel I can break you like a twig under my hands. Bearing the child has not been easy on you, and neither has this winter chill; and then this ghastly deed that they would have you do—’ he shook his head. ‘Ganga, it is not a journey to be taken alone. Do not forget that I am with you. Whatever you do, Shantanu, the high king of Hastina, your lord, the father of your children, is right by you, and he will never question your actions.’

‘It will not be easy on you, my king,’ she said, when she found her voice amid sobs. ‘Nor is it easy on me. Perhaps you are right. Perhaps it will be easier if we walk this path together.’ The river let out a drawl, a dark, shadowy sound that filled her with foreboding. She hoped it was not the sight showing her a glimpse of the future; she hoped that what she had said would hold true, that Shantanu would never break his promise. Perhaps after she had finished her task, she could give Shantanu the sons she had promised him.

Even as she thought it, she knew she was being foolish. If she stayed back here on Earth, who would go up to Meru and become the next Lady of the River? She was ashamed that she, a river maiden, had allowed her thoughts to be centered around men – first her husband, and then her sons. Mother, she thought, what is this pitiless game? Why am I thinking thus? If I feel like this a year after being married to this man, what will be my state after seven years? Will I want to come back? Mother, will I be forced to forswear you? Do not allow that. Take me away now!

Shantanu had picked up her shawl, and after brushing off the dew that had settled on it, was wrapping her in it. ‘Come, my lady,’ he said, taking her hand and leading her away from the river. ‘It is time we get you into a warm bed.’

Ganga did not resist his touch. She walked with him, step in step, and after they had gone a distance she looked over her shoulder. She thought she saw her mother on the surface of the water, white hair open to the breeze, in a black robe that hung loose over her body. She was looking after Ganga and smiling.

S I X



The moment she was awake, Ganga turned around to make sure her son was next to her. He was sleeping unusually well today. Over the last two weeks he had been bothersome both while feeding and before sleeping, keeping the working-women on high alert at all times. Ganga had had to nurse her nipples with palm oil to soothe the pain of the bruises he left. Everybody said it was the heat. He had been born a moon prior to midsummer, and even with the constant fanning by the servants and the wet mats of hay that hung by the window to cool the incoming breeze, the dry heat left his throat parched and caused a pink rash to appear under his arms and on his thighs.

At two months, the boy's features had just started to take form. Ganga could tell he had her hair and her eyes; the rest was Shantanu's. She would cover the upper part of the boy's face and marvel at the resemblance his mouth and chin bore to his father's; and yet when she removed her hand, he looked nothing like him. His ears were a little bent at the top, and they looked like neither hers nor Shantanu's. The priest had said it meant that he would live a long life.

The priest had given her a cold stare as he had said those words, and so had the minister and the other courtiers that were present in the hall. Ganga had been the mother of seven sons who had died of mysterious reasons. The wealth and bounty that had accompanied her to Hastina in the first year had run out (as was expected; the elements did not bow to a human's will), and as each year passed, and the queen lost one child after another, the whispers across the city grew louder. Some said Shantanu should cast this wife away and take a new one. The king was getting past his youth, and so was his young wife. His duty to the kingdom dictated that he took a wife who could give him healthy sons, one of whom would rule after him.

Ganga wondered why Shantanu had not heeded his people's advice. She knew better than to think he had had no sons at all by any of the chamberwomen he had bedded these last eight years. She had seen young children about the palace that had his crooked nose, but before she could find out more about them, they would mysteriously disappear. She had the prudence not to take up the point with the king, and to be fair she did not mind Shantanu's other sons. None of them were begotten by a woman of high birth, so they would never have a claim to the throne. Only her sons – or those of any other woman of royal birth, if Shantanu were to take another wife – would grow up as princes and be trained as kings.

She did not have illusions of love between her and Shantanu – all such emotions had long died away – so it could not be loyalty to her that kept him from taking another wife. And it was not as if he had not had offers; kings from as far as Anga in the East to Gandhara in the west had come bearing alliances and gifts. Hastina was a stronghold that stood on the fertile land between Ganga and Yamuna in the middle of North Country. It never thirsted for water, never hungered for grain, its people were a happy lot who loved their king, and when time came – if rarely – to defend their

lands, they did not hold back in desire or in valour. Friendship with Hastina and the Kurus was something all clans of the empire wanted.

But still, Shantanu would receive the kings with their retinue and their gifts, feed them for a moon or so and send them back, their mules and elephants loaded with gifts to take back to their lands. He did not say yes to the hand of a single maiden that was offered him, and Ganga could not help but think it was because he wanted his first surviving son – and therefore the future king of Hastina – to be born of her. She had promised him a son all those years ago and he was going to hold her to it. Perhaps after he was convinced that she had given him a son, he would take other wives; any princes born of them would be subsidiary to her son.

She smoothed the brow of the babe and played with his small, balled-up fists. She tried in vain to find in him the essence of Prabhasa. There was no serenity in his features that would indicate the shine of the new dawn. This boy fidgeted and whimpered constantly, in sleep, in play, while feeding – why, even now, from the depths of sleep, he would sometimes twitch and sneeze.

The teak trees in the courtyard swayed to a gentle breeze. Ganga picked up her son in both arms and carried him out to the window, so that he could catch some of the wind and be comforted. He shook in her grip and reached out to her. She gave him her finger, and with her lips close to his forehead, hummed softly to him. With her free hand she pushed the mat away and held him to the open window.

Behind her she heard steps, heavy, shaky and sullen. It was not uncommon for the king to stop by her chambers after a night of drinking and dice, but tonight she must tell him she could not lay with him. She could drive him off to the room of her waiting-woman that adjoined hers, but she had not warned her. Even a waiting-woman would not take too

kindly to a king waking her up from sleep so that he could take from her what the queen had denied him.

‘What are you doing?’ he said, in a slow, heavy voice.

She turned and bowed. ‘My lord, King, I was not expecting you here this night.’

‘I know you were not.’ He staggered, slowly, to the bed and leant against it. Lately he had started to get the barber to shave him clean, and Ganga noticed that made the scar more visible. Men were meant to wear their scars boldly, she had heard, that it meant they were great warriors – which was sheer idiocy, of course, because anything could cause a scar. Shantanu got his when he had gone hunting a deer and had fallen against a rock.

It was funny, she thought, how men derived their pride and held on to it. The more it slipped away from them, the harder they groped. She moved closer to the window so that the incoming breeze would catch her son’s face.

‘Stop!’ he said, and advanced towards her, but stumbled and fell back on the bed. ‘Stop!’

‘My lord?’

‘You have killed the last of my sons,’ he said. His speech slurred. ‘I will let you kill no more!’ He propped himself up on his hands and looked straight at her. ‘Witch!’

Now she turned to face him, wanting to strike him across that scar he bore, but realizing she felt no anger for him. So this was how it was going to play out, she thought. She walked to him in measured steps, staring him down. ‘Do you forget the oath you have taken, my lord?’

‘Ah! Oath! You are always quick to remind me of my oath! What of yours, woman? You – you swore you would give me sons! Divine blood,

was that not what you said?’

‘You have your son right here, my king.’

‘And I had seven more before him. What happened to them? And now, this babe lives two months for what? To be thrown out of a window?’

Ganga kept her voice calm. ‘I took him to the window so that he would catch some air.’

He covered his face in his hands and started to sob, his great shoulders shaking. ‘I married you for the son you promised me, and you have kept me waiting for eight years! Eight long years! I have lost my youth in the hope of one mad promise made to a witch! Oh, may the gods curse you with all they have, you wretched woman!’

‘They already have, my lord.’

‘Ah, let me not hear you say those words again. Look around you – look at what the people of Hastina are saying. King Shantanu is a fool to be with that woman who cannot give him a healthy child. Yes, have you not heard those words? Everyone says them, lady, everyone – even the servant-girls that you send me to on nights such as these.

‘And why do I not listen to them? Because you – you harlot! – you promised me a son that would be like the very gods themselves. And while the world laughs at me and thinks me a lovelorn idiot, you remind me of my oath. Now I ask you – what of yours!’

She felt pity stir within her; after all, how much patience could a man hope to have? Shantanu had displayed an enormous amount of indulgence all these years, and in the last two months she had entertained hopes that perhaps the king would keep to his oath forever, but she had been foolish to think so. How could any man live by terms such as these? It had been eating him all these years, and now it had eaten him down to his last shred.

But when she spoke, she found that her words were tinged with fury. 'Do not talk to me as you do to my waiting - women, O King. They will bear your words because they are in your employ. I am not. I do not belong to you.'

'A wife belongs, whole and soul, to the husband,' said Shantanu.

'A wife of this world, perhaps, but not of mine. I am a Celestial, O King of the Kurus, do not forget that. A river maiden. A waiting Lady of the River belongs to no man and serves no man. Understand that, and be thankful that you have had me.'

'Thankful?' He looked up at her in disbelief. 'Thankful for the murder of seven of my sons? Thankful for making my subjects laugh at me? Thankful for inciting the scorn of my astrologers, the weary eye of my priests, the ridicule of my ancestors? Pray, tell me, lady, which of these things ought I be most thankful for?'

She gathered up the cloth with which she would cover her son. 'I have heard enough, my lord. You are not in possession of your senses; perhaps that is why you have said things that are innermost in your mind. You have broken your oath, King Shantanu of the Kuru race, and may your race be damned for that.'

He sat up straight at her words, as though jolted from his stupor. 'Wait,' he said haltingly, with his arm half-raised. 'Wait, my lady—'

She stood up to her full height and raised her hand. 'The time for waiting is past, O King. You have broken your oath, but I will not break mine. You shall have your son. This very boy will be brought back to you when the time is ripe, but you have touched my person for the last time, in this life or the next.'

'Wait, Ganga—'

‘I have warned you before, O King,’ she said, unrelenting, ‘that the day you speak to me in tones unworthy of a Celestial – no, a human – that will be the last day I spend with you. All these years you have proven to be worthier than most men, but this night, you have proven yourself to be a man after all. And for that I leave you.’

‘My lady, my queen—’

Ganga turned and closed the door behind her, her son still in her arms. She made her way through the corridors she had roamed as a queen, through the courtyard that had bustled with people each time she had delivered a child, through the streets that had both celebrated her and shunned her, through the woods where she had first held Shantanu’s hand, where she had first known the magic of his touch, to the peepal where it had all begun.

She went to the dark barge that bobbed up and down on the river, its sides raking noisily against the rocks on the bank. A small, dark oarsman bowed low as she stepped over. She stood on the other edge from him, facing his back as he turned away to twist the oar around in the water, and after a final look and a bow to the peepal, she said, ‘We will go.’

S E V E N



They entered the cave of ice and trudged along resolutely against the thinning current, and just as she thought the river could not get any narrower, the oarsman stood up straight and bowed in her direction, placing his oar by his side. Then he turned his back to her, and raised his arms high above his head. Ganga knew that if she could see his mouth his lips would be moving, and his eyes would be glazed. She herself had chanted the spell countless times during her training; the spell that would open the gates to Meru.

She did not know quite when it happened, for the very next minute they were floating on a broad stretch of water, the oarsman allowing the boat to slide along, using his paddle merely to guide. The cloak around her body loosened, because there was no wind or cold, and she heard her son gurgle contentedly against her bosom at the pleasant fragrance that came at them from all sides. Night Queens were in full bloom to their right, and to their left a row of apple trees bore shiny, succulent fruit that seemed ready to fall at any moment on the soft grass below.

Even after all these years, she thought, it was all the same. When they came upon the bend that led to the breast of the mountain, she saw a line of

young girls walk along the bank up the mountain in the direction of the Crystal Lake. They wore their hair in single plaits thrown over their right shoulders, and in their hands they held earthen pots that carried water from the river. So the Lady of the River was still active, she thought, smiling to herself, imparting wisdom and knowledge to the maidens from the court of Indra and from other parts of the mountain. At the end of their first lesson, after a week of fasting, the maidens were sent to the river, and from there in a single file up the mountain to the Crystal Lake, so that they could have their first drink of the divine water.

She fingered her own tresses in reminiscence, and realized that her hair was open and thrown on both sides of her neck; very unfitting for a river maiden. Not very long ago, she had been one of those girls with an earthen pot in her hands, making the trek up to the Crystal Lake. Perhaps it was the thirst after days of fasting that made the water of the lake seem so delicious and smooth; so much so that it slid down her throat and filled her being; or perhaps there was really some truth to what the people of Meru said about the lake's healing powers. She would know for certain only on her next visit.

She tried to remember the last time she had fasted, and it made her flush in shame. In the last eight years, she had questioned her mother, the Lady of the River; in moments of anger she had even used harsh words upon her, but she had not once thought of staying true to her training as a maiden. Not once had she kept the fast of the new moon. She looked down upon her person and thought: no river maiden ought to be so well fed and full in her person. Look at those women, Ganga, and look at you! What right did she have, if she had not the will to stay a maiden, to expect that Mother would take care of her and be fair unto her? There were no favours to be had anywhere on Meru, least of all from the Lady herself.

Nothing had changed, she mused, looking around as the barge continued to ease forward. Men who had made the trip up here from Earth complained of how time seemed to come to a standstill here, and how their visits always left them wanting more, and discontent and unhappiness came over them on their return to Earth.

Yes, she thought, looking at the grape vines over to her left, time came to a halt the moment one passed through the gates of Meru at the base of the cave of ice. On the other side, there was a world of change and uncertainty and turmoil; here was a world of constancy, of tranquillity, of an unchanging and unchangeable form. When there was no question of change, where was the necessity to take note of time? When one knew the next day would be the same as this, the next moon the same as this, the next year the same as this, what did it matter how many days, moons, or years passed?

The end of their journey came into her view. The White Rock rose a hundred feet up into the air, as if a mountain herself, and right at its base, a spring bubbled forth and carved a path down the mountain. Ganga was too far away to see the spring clearly, but she had been up by the base of the Rock enough times to know what it looked like.

What pulled at her gaze, though, was the figure in black that stood by the riverbank some hundred feet up the stream, where the river narrowed so much that the barge could not pass. The hooded figure stood with her shoulders slightly bent, and from within her cloak a twig-like arm stretched out, holding a dark-brown stick. The top of the stick branched into two, like a river breaking into its children, and at the tip of the longer arm was a tuft of mossy green.

‘Mother!’ she whispered, and stood staring as the boat kept its unfettered pace. When they came close enough that she could see the wrinkles on the figure’s arm, Ganga cried out again, ‘Mother!’

The boat anchored next to the bank, and when she stepped onto the grass her skin prickled, and then she began to run, holding on to her baby with one hand, sobbing. ‘Mother Ganga!’ she cried out, and stopped an arm’s length away from the figure to look up at her. Then she knelt on the ground and bent her head, placing her son on the wet rock between them.

‘I have come, Mother,’ she said.

‘So you have, Jahnavi,’ the older woman said from beneath her hood. The voice was deep and it rumbled, and the boy perked up to look around him in alarm, biting his lower lip and about to break into a whimper. ‘Is this the boy they say is Prabhasa reborn?’

‘Yes, Mother, though I cannot be sure I followed the Mystery right, with this boy and the ones that came before him – he does not look anything like Prabhasa—’

‘They do not take after the looks, my girl,’ said Mother, her voice at once gentle. ‘I know you have done everything asked of you. I see in this boy the calm of the morning.’ She threw her hood back, crouched down and laid the stick to her side. ‘Do you not like my voice, child?’ she asked the boy, who shrank back from her and looked at his mother in fear.

She picked him up by the arms and drew him close to her bosom, crooning into his ear softly and rocking him. Ganga felt a pang of envy at how easily he had shed his fear and now showed no sign of discomfort in her embrace, playing with stray strands of her dark hair and giggling when her lips touched his ear.

‘I have not held a babe ever since I had you, Jahnavi,’ she said, as though reading her thoughts. ‘Have you thought of a name for him?’

‘I had thought it proper that you should name him.’

‘Ah, he has the looks of a God, does he not? He has taken after you, child, though he will grow up to look like his father – no, not Prabhasa.

Shantanu. That is perhaps just as well, for when he goes back and makes a claim to the throne, onlookers ought not to question his parentage.’ She paused and looked at Ganga over the boy’s head, and Ganga lowered her gaze. Once again she spoke in answer to her thoughts, not to her words. ‘Sons born of the river maiden will always be fostered, Jahnavi,’ she said. ‘This one’s life is destined to be on Earth.’

‘Why?’ asked Ganga sharply. ‘Just because a sage willed it so? Why do I have to give away my son to a king who does not know my worth?’

‘Because King Shantanu has no more sons in his future. Hastina needs a king.’

‘Oh, Mother, of what importance is Hastina to us? We live up here, on Meru. What happens down on Earth ought to be none of our concern!’

‘Speak not of things that you do not understand, girl,’ said Mother, and though her voice was harsh her face was kind. ‘All of creation is important. All of us need each other, the people of Meru and the people on Earth, and dare I say, the people of the forests and the hills too. Human blood ought not to spill, my child, whether it is on Meru or on Earth. The gods do not like it.’

‘The gods!’ Ganga said. ‘What does anyone know of the Gods and will, or if even they exist?’

Mother opened her mouth to speak, and for a moment Ganga saw her eyes blaze, but the next moment she had calmed down and extended an arm towards her. ‘Come here, Jahnavi, my daughter. Let us not quarrel on our first meeting.’ Against her will Ganga went to her, squatted by her knee, and rested her forehead on her lap. Her mother’s palm rubbed her cheek in slow circles.

‘Let us not speak of things that incur the wrath of the gods, my child. I know you are angry, as I would be if I had to do all the things that you have

done in the last eight years. But it is over now. Your life here is about to begin. You will be the Lady of the River after me, and you will have a daughter whom you will love as much as I do you, my Jahnavi. For now, let us not question that which has fallen unto us to do.'

Ganga closed her eyes and said, 'I want to keep him, Mother.'

'And you will, darling. He needs you too, now. But a time will come when he will want to go away, in search of what is in store for him. You will not wish to keep him then, for it will be against his wishes. So do not let it worry you right now, dear.' She tucked her hair behind her ear with one hand, while cradling the boy under the crook of her other arm and planting kisses on his forehead every now and then. 'You have grown into a woman, Jahnavi, and you do not look like you have been fasting much.'

'I was a queen on Earth, Mother,' said Ganga sullenly. 'I could not have asked my waiting-women to fast me unto death!'

'You are still a queen, and you will be a queen for all your life. You have not drunk of the Crystal Lake in a long while too. Your skin bears signs of age that mine yet does not. Perhaps if you resume your duties at the house, in three moons' time you will be ready for a walk up to the lake.'

Ganga nodded and whispered, 'Perhaps.'

'But today, you will sleep, my dear. We were promised visitors at nightfall.'

'Who?'

'Just close your eyes and sleep, child. You are back home now.'



Ganga opened her eyes, and for a short minute she did not know where she was. Then her eyes adjusted to the weak orange light, to the big dark shadows on the mud roof and on the wall. Through the half-open thatch

door she spotted the night sky and a handful of glittering white stars. She closed her eyes again and murmured a prayer of gratitude – that it had not all been some cruel dream of homecoming; she really was back home.

‘Mother?’ she whispered.

‘Yes, dear.’

Along with her mother’s voice her ears picked up someone else’s presence in the room. She propped herself up on the cot and peered into the darkness. All she could hear was a pained, unsteady sound of faint breathing. She at once knew who it was, and her first instinct was to struggle to a sitting position so that she could join her hands.

‘No,’ said the man in the shadows, and heaved himself onto his feet. He stepped into the light and bowed to her. ‘Greetings, my Lady. I trust the current of the river has been kind to you in your journey.’

‘Yes, High Sage Vasishtha,’ said Ganga, trying her best to avoid looking straight at the sage. He looked much more aged than she remembered him; the spots on his face were darker now and more numerous. The whites of his eyes had paled into a dull yellow. The fire had long gone out of them. His voice, which Ganga remembered to be as deep as the rumbles they heard from within the White Rock, was now a mere extension of his breath – thin, hoarse and laboured. He had always held the stick as far back as Ganga could remember, but this was the only time she felt that he needed it. He stooped over it, and as he fingered his white beard, she noticed how light the hair had become.

She stiffened when her hand, which had been groping the sheet on the cot next to her, found nothing. Startled, she looked at her mother, and when she saw her boy in her arms she relaxed.

‘He has the soul of the morning in him. What is he called?’ Vasishtha asked.

‘We have not named him yet, Sage,’ said the Lady, waving the boy from side to side, blowing upon his face, smiling down on him. ‘I have thought it best to leave it to you, who knows best among us all how he might fare in his life—’

‘Ah, we only think we know, my lady. How simple life would be if we could foresee everything. How simple, and how dreary! All we can foresee with certainty at the moment is that this boy will grow up to be king.’ Then his face clouded in doubt. ‘And yet that might not come to pass.’

Ganga’s hand flew to the moonstone at her breast. ‘No, Sage? What could come between him and the throne?’

‘Any number of things, my child. For one, King Shantanu might have other sons—’

‘I have heard he does not have any more sons in his future.’

Vasishta sighed. ‘So it would seem,’ he conceded. ‘But these are merely things we read by looking up at the stars. Who is to say the things we see always come to pass?’ He stared at his staff for a moment. ‘The king might not take him for his son, and if he does, the people of Hastina might not like it. Also, what of the neighbouring, clamouring kingdoms that will have grown in size and power by the time this boy grows into a man?’

‘High Sage,’ said Ganga, and she was aware of a pleading note in her voice, ‘do I have to give him up to a life on Earth? Can I not keep him?’

The sage eyed her sharply for a moment, as if admonishing her, then smiled at her. ‘You have grown from when I last saw you, child. You are a woman now; a mother, and you speak like one. But also keep in mind that you will be the Lady soon and your words do not befit a Lady of the River.’

Ganga lowered her gaze, stung. ‘I beg your forgiveness.’

His voice never rose; it was still gentle, soothing, tender. ‘It is the lot of every mother to let go of her son, child. You may have daughters in your

future that will stay by you, learn of the Mysteries, and you will live through them and serve the water that runs down our mountains in the form of the Great River.' He stopped again, the lines of his face at once deepening. 'You may, but you may not . . .'

The Lady looked up from the baby and asked, 'Did I hear you right, Sage? My Ganga does not have daughters in her future? But how can that be?'

'I do not know,' murmured Vasishta, 'I do not know . . . but who can tell what happens and what not? All we know is that this boy here will need to be sent down to Earth; what will happen there – only the gods know.'

Ganga kept her head bent. She heard the words – no daughters, no sons, no one in her life. Once Mother is gone, she will be here, all alone, with no one by her side. Will the Mysteries die inside of her? And then she fell out of it and chastised herself; a river maiden was trained for a life of solitude. It had been her years on Earth, where she was waited upon by attendants every minute of the day, that had spoilt her. No matter. She would regain her poise, however long it took.

'It will be a hard life,' Vasishta was saying. 'The years of strife are on the horizon. The Great Kingdoms are all reaching an age of strength and prosperity. They will war with one another, and perhaps this boy's valour will unite them all.' Ganga started to look up in hope at the sage's words, but she saw him shake his head. He said, 'Or perhaps his valour will only serve to break up the land.'

'Either way,' he continued, 'he needs to be trained for hardships. He needs to be taught the Vedas. He needs to be taught the science of weaponry and arms. He needs to be taught the practice of weapons and their safe use.' He trailed off, looking down at the boy again. 'Yes, a life full of strife – a boy such as this can only have one name.'

He pounded the ground with his stick and got to his feet. 'Devavrata,' he said. 'That will be this boy's name.'

Ganga saw a flicker in the flame that lit the room, as though something dark and invisible had passed through it, and for a fraction of a second their shadows on the wall wavered; but just as she narrowed her eyes at the candle the flame was bright and steady again.

EIGHT



Ganga Speaks

The memory of the days following Vasishtha's visit to our hut are dim in my mind. It is the effect Meru has on you; time and life acquire such rigid constancy that one day is just like the next, and the memory of one fades into the other. The only sign of the passing time comes from the slight lengthening of the day in summers, and for those who make regular trips to the lake, the skill of reading the season from the level of the water comes as a matter of course. Everyone knows, though apparently no one knows why, that the Crystal Lake drops her level by at least two finger-breadths in the cold months.

The first three years stand strong in my mind, for Devavrata had not yet been taken away from me. I still hear the first words he spoke, the patter of his first steps, his little hands wrapped around my finger, the wail that he let out when he had his first fall on the rocks by the riverbank, and I still feel to this day, when my dreams wake me in the midst of the night, his hungry teeth upon my breasts.

It was only when he was taken away to Vasishtha's ashram at the age of three that my training as a river maiden resumed; and though I say resume, I may as well say start, for I was worse than the newest novice in Mother's hut. Eleven years – eight of them on Earth – of living in pleasure and comfort had done their harm. Mother said that Devavrata's fostering was the best thing that could happen to me, because as long as he was with me, I would not give my duties as a maiden their due care.

'And you are fortunate, child,' she said, 'because you know where your son is being fostered and by whom. You can go and visit him whenever you

wish. Look at me, I have had three sons, and all of them have been taken away – if rumours are to be believed – to Indra’s court. Aside from that I know nothing.’

Mother was right, of course. For a river maiden sons were expendable. It was a daughter that would carry on the work of a Lady and keep the Mysteries of the Great River. At this time I began to see Mother’s hair turn grey around the ears and near the scalp, and she would look at me expectantly every time I returned from the oak after keeping the rites of the harvest season. And year after year, I would not have any news to give her.

All around me I saw women who were older than me walk about with growing bellies; some of the maidens that I instructed in the Mysteries got with children, some after their very first visits. There seemed to be fertility everywhere but within me, and with each futile trip to the oak, Mother’s cold stares stabbed me harder, even though now that I look back at it, my own guilt may have made me bitter towards her, for her words for me at the time were nothing but gentle.

‘You have given birth to eight children, Jahnavi,’ she would say, running her hand through my hair to comfort me. ‘That is more than any of these women ever will; and it is twice the number of times I have gotten with child. Even if you do not have another child, know that you have had more than your share already.’

But in her face I read disappointment. No Lady of the River had ever failed to produce a daughter, and there was no record of any Lady before her who failed to reproduce in spite of wishing to do so. All of them had voluntarily stopped keeping the rite of the harvest after giving birth to a daughter. River maidens were held in high regard on Meru as symbols of fertility, and yet here I was, barren as the oldest hag on the mountain at the age of five and thirty.

‘I may have given birth to eight children,’ I cried at her, ‘but I was bidden I kill them by my own hand! Shall I be thankful for that boon as well, Mother?’

‘We all do what is required of us, Jahnavi, without complaints. I told you the day you left Meru that there would come a day when you would hate me, and let me tell you this again. You may think your lot is unfair, and that your life is more unfortunate than the rest of the Ladies that have come before you, but it is not so. Yours has been the easiest life of all the Ladies.’

‘Easiest!’ I said. ‘I killed seven of my children, gave the eighth away, and now I cannot give birth to another child to succeed me. Do you not see the price I had to pay, Mother, just to let a human’s curse come to pass?’

Mother looked at me with that marble-like face of a priestess, one that she assumed when she was in a state of extreme anger, and said, ‘Do you not see, child, what you gained in return for the price you had to pay? Dare you cast yourself the victim in all that has happened!’ And when my gaze lowered and tears dropped on my thighs, her voice softened. ‘Jahnavi,’ she said and sighed. ‘Do not commit the folly of counting only your misfortunes, my dear. That road leads straight to misery.’

‘Do you mean I am not miserable now?’ I said. ‘Look around me, Mother. All over the mountain women older than I am are going about preening themselves, and look at me! You say my time on Earth has given me motherhood, but what motherhood is it when you cannot rear your child, feed your child, watch him grow? Of what use are the gains in the world when I cannot give myself a successor like you have?’

Mother raised her arm, and for the first and last time ever, struck me across the face. ‘Dare you not speak in that manner with me, girl! You speak like a maiden of twelve, not a lady of thirty-five. You ought to be ashamed, Jahnavi.’

I held my palm to my cheek, and my eyes burned. ‘Mother, at least let me keep Devavrata here on Meru.’ I took her hands in mine and pleaded. ‘That is the least you can give me.’

‘Devavrata is now fourteen. He is entering his last year of study,’ said Mother.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘he could stay on here, can he not? I will at least have the pleasure of keeping one child close to me.’

Mother let out a deep breath, freed her hands and gingerly touched my cheek on the spot where she had struck me. ‘You are yet to break free of the bonds of love, my child, and when you do, you will see that this is all very futile.’

Mother was right, of course, but that night, as she cradled my head in her lap and sang me to sleep, only one thought filled my mind. The pain on my cheek had reduced to a dull thud, and the words of her song carried me away to a place where nothing seemed to matter. But even in my dreams that one thought appeared wherever I looked and mocked at me.

I would do everything in my power to keep Devavrata on the mountain, and Prabhasa was going to help me.

N I N E



With one eye on the vessel in his hand, Prabhasa beckoned her to a granite platform in front of his hut. Ganga saw his lips move, and grey fumes leave the vessel and stream up toward the sky. ‘Watch,’ he said, and turned to the east. When Ganga followed his gaze she saw a white ball suspended over the horizon, and the sky around it seemed to be hazy and filled with smoke. Had she never been on Earth, Ganga would not have known what to make of it, but as it was she felt she was looking up at the sun on a frosty morning.

Prabhasa waved his arm and the ball disappeared. The haze and smoke were gone too, leaving behind a patch of brilliant blue that melded perfectly with the rest of the sky. Prabhasa turned to her. Ganga had last seen him on the night of the harvest rite, which was only four months ago, but Prabhasa appeared to have aged even in that short time. There were lines on his forehead and on the corners of his mouth that Ganga did not remember seeing on their last meeting, but then she realized that she had been seeing him only at night, in the light of the harvest fires in the shadow of the oak. This was the first time she was seeing him in the bright light of day since that morning on which he had imparted to her the Mystery of rebirth. His

hair was still as rich as it had been on that morning, but the red streaks had given way to white, and the locks around his ears now appeared thin and forlorn.

‘Is it not time yet, my lord,’ said Ganga, ‘to hand over your duties to someone younger than you, perhaps?’

Prabhasa looked hard at the vessel in front of him, holding it between his fingers and allowing it to sway from side to side. ‘Perhaps,’ he said, and then broke into a smile. ‘Are you calling me old, lady?’

‘You know you are! All the other Elementals are now training their younger wards, I hear. Why not you, may I ask?’

‘Ah, they all have young wards to pass their Mysteries on to. When I find mine, I will too. Until then, one has to carry out one’s duties.’

Ganga watched his hands vacantly play with the earthen vessel, and the curious frown with which he stared at it. She noticed that his arms and legs were now wiry when once they had been strong and burly, and she realized she had been right even though she had meant her words in jest. Even though he drank of the Crystal Lake, Prabhasa did not look like he would last the decade. The water of the lake gave men a long and healthy middle age, but once physical signs of age appeared to the naked eye, it did not take long for the limbs to turn sickly, for spots to appear, for disease to set in, for death to occur. Ganga felt a little stab at the thought. It would be painful to say goodbye to him.

‘I could perhaps suggest someone to you, my lord, Prabhasa,’ she said.

‘I did not know river maidens kept knowledge of the young men on the mountain, lady.’ Then he said with a crooked smile, ‘Or perhaps it is only just that they do.’

‘Come, my lord, I am too old for games of that sort. There are enough maidens on the mountain that are half my age with twice my charms. None

of the young men so much as look at me.'

'They may have ripeness of body, but true womanhood is balance of the mind and the heart, and that can only belong to the Lady of the River, which you will become in a short time.'

'Oh, Mother thinks I behave in ways unfitting a river maiden.'

'That you do, of course. But so did your mother when she was your age, my girl. Do not pay too much attention to her words. She worries for you, that is all, and she would like to look after you all her life and yours if she could help it.' He looked at her closely. 'That is what all mothers want, is it not?'

Ganga flushed. 'I think Mother means well. I do think that I behave like a child sometimes.'

'You do, but with your mother you are allowed to, my lady. It is only after becoming the Lady of the River that you will know how to be one. And perhaps in years to come you will chide your daughter too, with a staff in your hand and a scowl in your eye.'

Ganga laughed and said, 'Perhaps I would, but I do not have daughters in my future, my lord.'

For a moment she saw a cloud come over his face, but he recovered almost immediately. 'That is well. You could adopt a girl who you think will carry on your tasks the best. I do not have a son myself, as you know.'

'But how is that possible, my lord? You have a wife; you have kept the rite of the harvest for as long as I remember—'

'Ah, Ganga, you have spent too long in the land of men. You have forgotten the ways of life here on the mountain. The children belong to the mother here, and it is impossible to tell who has fathered whom – unless, of course, the resemblance is plain to see. My wife has not conceived in a long time now . . .'

Once again she saw the muscles of his face twitch, and she felt a certain kinship for him and his feelings. He was going through the same thing that she was, and though he made light of it with his words, she could see that not having a successor bothered him more than he admitted it.

‘There is also work to be done,’ he said, dropping the vessel down on the floor in front of him with force. ‘There is some probing required in the mysteries of the weather, and I do need a bright young man to take over from me – someone who can pick up my work and carry it forward.’ He sighed and shook his head. ‘The next Prabhasa ought to bring about a few changes in the way we control our climate here on Meru. How am I to do that if I do not have a successor – any successor – at all?’

‘You are wrong, my lord,’ said Ganga, and he looked up curiously at her. ‘You do have a son, a son who is on Meru now. He is being fostered at the ashram of Brihaspati. You planted him in my womb many years ago, on a bright morning just as this.’

Prabhasa understood, but he shook his head. ‘That boy has other things in his destiny. A life on Earth is written in his stars. That is what Indra decrees.’

‘Indra, or the sage whose wife cursed you for a trifle?’ Ganga sat up in her seat, her eyes widening in anger. ‘That curse was meant for you, Prabhasa, but look how much hell it has caused in mine, and how little it has changed yours. Does it even seem to you that you have been cursed, Prabhasa?’

‘It does not,’ admitted Prabhasa. ‘But I told you my life has been cut short because of the boy’s birth. Whether it seems like I have been cursed or not, my lady, I have been, and I am paying for it with half my life. Surely it has not robbed you of half of your life, lady Ganga?’

‘That may be so, but let us not fight, lord Prabhasa. He is your son, if not in looks, certainly in spirit. He will be perfectly suitable to carry out your work after you. Do you not think so?’

Prabhasa faltered for a second, but then said firmly, ‘It does not matter, my lady. He is not going to live here by Indra’s decree.’

‘But why, my lord? Do you know why they are so firm in letting the boy go to Earth? The curse was to give you a birth in a human body, but that is already fulfilled. What difference does it make then, whether the human lives here on Meru or on Earth?’

Prabhasa said, ‘It is my knowledge that the boy needs to become the king of Hastina. Being of the royal line of two Celestials, he will be able to bring peace to the land which is now gearing up for an epoch of violence and war.’

‘But the great kingdoms have been at peace for such a long time now.’

‘The longer the age of peace, my lady, the bloodier the war that will eventually come.’

‘And they want one of Meru people to be on the throne of Hastina when that war happens?’

‘Yes,’ said Prabhasa. ‘That is as far as my knowledge goes. The great kingdoms are all acquiring power now, and each of the kings believe that they can rule over all of North Country. If this boy becomes the king of Hastina, the pack will have a clear leader, and war will be put off.’

Ganga listened in silence for a minute. Then she asked, ‘But how does it affect the people of Meru what happens on Earth, my lord? We live our own lives, and they live theirs. We have everything we need up here on the mountain. Why should we assume the role of protector and peacemaker to the earthmen?’

Prabhasa smiled. ‘That is related to my own Mystery, lady. On Meru we have controlled the climate to be comfortable for life, but not everything we need can be born in this climate. For instance, we do not keep bees here on the mountain, and yet we have honey. We do not rear silkworms, yet we wear silk. We do not breed horses, yet our explorers get the finest horses every season to scour the edges of our known borders. From where do you think we get these? I have not even started on the list of plant varieties that we cannot grow on Meru because of the controlled climate. We do not have coconut trees. Our weather is too cold for mangoes. Rice and wheat only grow on the foothills of our mountain – not enough to feed our whole population. We love dates but we do not grow them. We grind tamarind and make pickle out of it, but have you ever seen a tamarind tree on our mountain? From where do you think we get all these?’

Ganga remembered the night she had first met Shantanu by the peepal tree. Her words to him had been that there were bigger things than the lives and times of two people. Her own words now came back to her. There were things about that were bigger than her life and her curse and her son. She stared at Prabhasa.

‘We get horses from the rocky kingdom of Gandhara,’ said Prabhasa. ‘They have the best horse trainers. Hastina gives us all the silk and cotton we need. Our salt, my lady, comes all the way from Anga, which lies on the shores of the Eastern Ocean. And what of metals?’ He smiled at her kindly. ‘You understand now, why peace on Earth is important to peace on Meru? If the great kingdoms go to war, they will not have enough to feed themselves, let alone trade with us.’

Ganga found her voice. ‘Lord, you say they trade with us. What do we give them in return?’

Prabhasa said, ‘What is the one thing that we have that they do not?’

‘The Crystal Lake.’ The words leapt out of her mouth even before she knew it.

‘We give them our services as doctors, as healers. We have a group of healers of whom Dhanvantari is the head. You have seen them descend the mountain and head for the plains, I am certain.’

Ganga nodded. She had not herself seen them, but from within her mother’s memories she recalled figures clad in white walking down the grassy mountain path, chanting verses.

‘But this balance cannot be kept forever,’ said Prabhasa, his voice deep and severe. ‘The earthmen will learn the art of healing from our physicians soon enough. Many of the kingdoms already have their own practitioners. If they arrive at a stage when they no longer need us, why will they still send us the things we need?’

‘Is there nothing else that we could give them in return?’

‘We have fruits that are juicier than those on Earth, we have grains that are bigger than theirs, we have wood that is cleaner and softer, but they trade within themselves for these things. If we were to offer them these, we would have to compete with the kingdoms—’

‘And,’ said Ganga, ‘if we transport materials from Meru to Earth, they will know of the mountain and its location. And they will come and find us.’

Prabhasa inclined his head. ‘That is so, and we cannot have that. So the answer is no, my dear. We do not have anything but our healers to give them; and on rare occasions, perhaps some water from the lake.’

‘So if we could grow everything we need here on Meru ourselves, that would mean we would not need the earthmen.’

‘It is never so simple as that,’ said Prabhasa and smiled. ‘But yes, our reliance on the earthmen would reduce, and that is to our benefit.’ His

brows came together, and though he leant back and relaxed against the wall, the muscles of his face became taut. 'That is what I have been trying to do with the weather here on Meru. If I could make certain parts of the mountain hot and dry while leaving the other parts wet or cold, we could grow all kinds of crops. But the Mystery needs probing. At the moment I can only change the weather as a whole. If I make one part of the mountain cold, the whole mountain freezes.' He sighed, and slowly shook his head.

Ganga said eagerly, 'Do not brood over this, my lord. Your son will help you!'

'I do not have a son.'

'Ah, what does it matter what we call him? If he is not your son, then he is your person. He is my son born of your seed. He is Vasishta's favourite pupil. He has learnt the science of arms from Parashurama, and now I hear nothing but good tidings from the ashram of Brihaspati. He will make a worthy successor, my lord, of that I am certain.'

'But he is meant to go to Earth . . .'

'But what if he ascends to your role and accomplishes all that you have set out to accomplish? I know for certain that he has promise. If you give him the necessary guidance, he can solve all of Meru's troubles from here, without ever having to go to Earth!'

Prabhasa lost himself in thought for a time. He took a deep breath and said, 'Yes, I suppose I could ask for an audience with Indra and propose this —'

'Oh, we do not ask. We cannot run the risk of them denying us.'

'Then how do we—'

'Oh, Prabhasa, do give it some thought. There have been the earthmen on Meru before. There are the earthmen here right now.'

'Yes,' said Prabhasa, nodding. 'There are the sages, their wives—'

‘Yes, yes,’ Ganga said impatiently, ‘now what is the one thing – the one thing – that they are not allowed to do? What is the one place that is kept secret from them? What is the one thing that separates the earthmen from us?’

Prabhasa made to speak, then paused and thought.

Ganga nodded at him. ‘You understand. It is the Crystal Lake. We give Devavrata the secret to the Crystal Lake, we make him drink from its waters, and he will become one of us. Indra cannot banish someone who has drunk of the lake to Earth – no, that would be breaking the tradition of centuries.’

Prabhasa thought some more, and finally nodded. ‘But will Devavrata drink of the lake? Will he not protest?’

Ganga got up to her feet and clenched her fists. ‘Whatever we are doing,’ she said, ‘we are doing it for the good of the mountain, for the good of the race. You know that, do you not? You agree with me, do you not?’

Prabhasa nodded, frowning and rubbing his jaw.

‘Then you will not speak of this to anyone, my lord,’ said Ganga. ‘In return for your silence, I will give you the best Elemental of the weather that the mountain has ever seen. He will single-handedly finish your work, and he will bring you, his father, all the glory that you have deserved in your life.’

She saw approval enter Prabhasa’s features. The hardness of his smile let up; the frown disappeared; the lines on his forehead smoothed. She knew she had played it just right, and so she bowed to him and took his leave lest he change his mind.

As she turned and walked along the path that led to the base of the Rock, she looked about her and found that it was a bright, golden evening. The grass felt cold and wet and a whiff of the approaching rain hit her

nostrils. She threw her head back to face the gathering grey clouds and laughed at them, freely and merrily. She skipped down to the valley and hummed an old song of the river that her mother had taught her. The words had never flowed from her lips with the kind of smoothness they had now, and before she could finish the first line she broke into a laugh again.

For a plan was beginning to form in her mind; a plan that should work; no, would work.

T E N



In front of the high grey gate, raised on a pedestal and surrounded on four sides by dancing water fountains, stood a white marble statue of a woman. She stood with her waist bent to one side, and her arms wrapped around an ornate jar. On her lips lingered a smile, coquettish, inviting, and at the same time shy. Her garment was replete with hangings and design, with beads of different shapes stitched onto the fabric on her chest, around her neck, and on the ends of her sleeves that covered her upper arms. It was a world removed from the plain garments that the women of Meru preferred; and people who chanced upon the statue for the first time would wonder – if they did not know the legend – about the identity of this girl, whom the engraving at her feet lovingly called Mohini. Under the name there was a smaller engraving. It said: ‘The Brightest of the Dark Ones.’

After prostrating to the statue, Ganga stopped for a handful of water from the fountain. The tale of the lake was the oldest surviving legend of Meru people, and every child, when it was taken to the lake for the first time at age four, would be seated in front of the statue and be told how the lake had come into possession of the people of Meru, and why it was the most important natural resource of the mountain. If anything united the

various people of Meru and their varied, divergent Mysteries, it was the waters of the Crystal Lake.

When the first of the Celestials had come to Meru, driven this way by the men of the south who had taken over the plains, they had set up dwellings closer to the bottom of the mountain where High Sage Vasishta's ashram now lay. The legend said that one of the early Celestials was a man called Vishnu, who one day travelled so far up the mountain that he discovered dwellings of a different kind – built of rock instead of mud and hay; peopled by men of skin thick as the hide of cattle, and mouths big enough to swallow the biggest apples whole without biting into them. They wore clothes fashioned out of the skin of dead animals, and in this they were similar to the forest-dwellers on Earth, but their weapons of hunt and war were far more advanced. Vishnu chanced upon them when four of them had cornered and killed a mother bear and her cub in the woods, and though their methods lacked a certain amount of thought and ingenuity, they made up for it with their brute force.

Vishnu called them the Mighty Ones, but because that seemed more like a term of admiration than despise, the rest of the Celestials decided to call them the Dark Ones – after the colour of their skin.

For a time these two peoples did not meet, except for instances when Celestial explorers occasionally scaled up the mountain to eye on the Dark settlements. They appeared oblivious to the presence of the Celestials, and did not show any ambition to expand their boundaries. When the Celestials had gained a firm enough footing, they began to study these natives.

It was immediately clear to them that the Dark Ones lived longer than they did, which was surprising because they were hunters, and they spent more time in combat with the elements and with animals of the forest than did the Celestials, who relied on tilling the land and domesticating animals

for produce. Not only did the Dark Ones live longer, the Celestials saw that their wounds from hunting in the forest – and fighting amongst themselves for a dead chief’s spot – healed in no time at all.

It was around this time, when the Celestials were mulling over the secrets of the Dark Ones, that Vishnu fell in love with a girl from their village. A dark girl.

For many moons they roamed the mountainside and the valleys, and to this day people of Meru hold records of all the places they visited in each other’s company: the White Rock and the spring of the Great River where they first met, the oak under whose shade they were first twined as one, the cave of ice under whose shadows Vishnu swore that he would take her as his wife, for then and evermore.

And of course, there was the Crystal Lake.

Whether Vishnu had asked her or she had showed it to him of her own will was neither important nor relevant. But it was said that on the first night of no moon in the month of Falguni, when the rest of her clan was busy in drinking and revelry, she took him by the hand and walked him through the grove of apples that surrounded the lake, and when they got to the bank she knelt next to the water, immersed her cupped hands in it, and brought them up to his lips.

That was the first time a Celestial drank of the Crystal Lake.

Vishnu knew as soon as he drank the water that this was the secret of the Dark Ones, that this was what gave them their strength and longevity. As he drank, he felt his own life stretch longer, his muscles seemed to surge with the lost vitality of his youth, his skin seemed to become softer, his eyes brighter, his soul purer.

But as he lay with Mohini that night, he also knew one thing: the Dark Ones would not part with the lake readily. It had to be snatched away from

them, and if they were to be successful at doing that, he would need the help of Mohini.

And so over the next month, just before the sun would disappear over the Western Hills, Mohini would come walking down the grassy slope, the jingle of her anklets filling the air, pitcher held against her waist, a smile on her lips. And the Celestials would line up in a single file with earthen vessels in their hands, each one kneeling in front of her as she measured and poured out water for them to drink. She became known as the girl with the pitcher.

On the night of no moon the following month, the Celestials set out with their weapons in the direction of the lake. They had guessed correctly that this was the night on which the lake would not be guarded, and they set up sentries within the grove, with Vishnu himself guarding the bank along with two other Wise Ones, Brahma and Shiva. When the lake was secured, a band of men were dispatched – their bellies bulging with water – towards the camp of the Dark Ones. They found every last man at the camp in deep slumber, and the Celestials took knives to throats with as little fuss as was possible.

But soon they started waking up, and in their panic the Dark Ones rushed in the direction of the lake, where they were ambushed by the waiting Celestials. Some managed to get to the bank, only to find the sword of Vishnu on their throats or the spear of Shiva pierce their hearts. Not one Dark One got to the lake that night, even though as many as three hundred men fled from the camp towards it.

Back at the settlement, the Celestials had captured all the women, children and elderly, and when it was clear that the battle had been won, Indra, the leader of the band, blew his horn thrice, upon which the men from the lake arrived, headed by Vishnu and Shiva. Celestial women and

children came from the foot of the mountain at the signal too, and stood on the edge of the village, huddling together in the starlight, unable to decide whether to be jubilant or shocked.

Vishnu turned to the cowering captives, and said to them thus:

‘Do not fear us, Mighty Ones. We did not intend for blood to spill this night, but your men are brave, and valour runs in their veins. We ourselves have been driven up the country from the plains, and I have seen with my eyes the lives of my brethren taken by swords of encroachers, so I know what you must feel now. I understand your anger, but I also invite you into our clan – those of you who can find it in your hearts to look ahead and not over your shoulders. The blood that runs in you is noble, strong-willed and passionate. These are attributes we lack in ourselves, and we would like it if some of your maidens will take some of our young men as husbands. In return we will give our maidens in marriage to your young men – those that have survived, and those that will be ready in a few years.

‘I ask but one thing of you, Noble People, and that is to distance from your hearts the hatred that must be burning within you at this moment. If you cannot forgive us, then you will leave us and try your fortune south of here, where the plains and the forests will greet you and – I hope – will shelter you. I mean you no harm, but if you cannot be a Celestial, you cannot be on Meru. Meru now belongs to us, and the water of the lake will be ours forevermore. Those of you that join us will do so in full knowledge that you will have to abide by our rules, our customs, and become one among us.’

Mohini was the first to emerge from the gathering, her eyes fixed on Vishnu. People who knew her as the girl with the pitcher could not recognize this woman who now strode in their leader’s direction, hair disheveled and untied, arms thrown to the side, palms facing out, lips

quivering, eyes ablaze. She stopped an arm's length from Vishnu and spat full in his face, and just as he wiped his face, she leant back and spat on him again, this time with a loud, hateful grunt. Then she turned and walked off.

A great many of them followed her down the mountain, but a good number of women – almost all of them young maidens – stayed back. The Wise Ones and the rest of the Celestials took wives from among them, and with the coronation of Indra as high king on the peak of Amaravati, order was established. Vishnu retreated into the woods to continue his study of the Mysteries of snakes, making only one request before he left. In front of the fortified walls that had been erected around the lake (for the Celestials were determined to take better care of the lake than their predecessors), he asked that a statue of Mohini be erected – not in the image of the vengeful woman who spat in his face, but that of the smiling girl whose anklets jingled as she walked down the slopes of the mountain every evening with a pitcher poised over the curve of her waist.



Ganga lowered her hood and showed herself to the guard at the gate. He bowed and stepped back, and as he did so the gate swayed open quietly. Ganga looked over her shoulder for another look at Mohini; even allowing for some liberty to the imagination of the sculptor, she was beautiful. No images exist of the other Dark Ones, but in all tales and legends they were called ugly, timid and spineless. But how ugly could the men have been if the women were as beautiful as Mohini? They may have been dark-skinned, but if Mohini's figure could be taken as a specimen, they had beauty fit for the gods; definitely more pleasant to look at, Ganga thought, than any of the people of Meru.

Of the Dark Ones not much was known after they had left the mountain. In the early days the Celestials would comb the mountain and the woods and drive away the remaining outcasts who had been hiding in hope of staying undiscovered. Then the study of the Mysteries started. Meru retreated into the clouds and concealed itself in a maze of magic that was unreachable to anyone but the Celestials. The Ice Cave, once a gateway to the foot of the mountain, was now a flat, featureless White Rock, a dead-end – unless one knew the right words.

If Meru itself was made inaccessible to men, the Celestials thought, the Crystal Lake would be forever hidden.

Once or twice Meru had been under siege; nay, not Meru, but its entrance, the Ice Cave, by the forces of the Dark Ones. In her mind's eye, from her grandmother's memories, Ganga now saw the Celestials move as a swarm of bees down the slope, with Indra on his white elephant at the very head, his jagged sword in hand and pointing forward. The battles had always been one-sided; with the Crystal Lake on their side, and the magic of the Mysteries to go with it, the Celestials could not lose to mere rocks and clubs, no matter how strong they were and how numerous. Even if the forces of the enemy would break the black rock at the back of the Ice Cave, they would still need to enter Meru to do any serious damage. And ever since the gates had gone up, in all these ages, not a single drop of blood – Celestial or otherwise – had been spilled on the mountain due to war.

She wrapped her hood around her head again and walked along the path that had been paved through the apple trees. This was the densest cluster of apple trees on the mountain, and when she looked around her she saw nothing but fallen leaves – some white, some yellow – and red and green fruits. When they were children, she and the other maidens used to run among the trees and pick out the tastiest green apples that had fallen to the

ground the night before. Now she spotted a particularly shiny and smooth apple to her right and she looked upon it longingly.

But she was not a young river maiden any more. She remembered what Prabhasa told her about how important apples were to Meru and forced herself to walk on, feeling the weight of the hood on her scalp. It was heavier than normal because she had stuffed it with the material she had brought back from Earth. It resembled cotton, but it was softer and puffier to the touch. She had seen it being used to clean toiletries on Earth. What had caught her interest – and at that time it was just a passing interest – was how well the material absorbed and retained water.

She came to the clearing and stood at the bank of the lake. It stretched out in front of her like a giant emerald, and she wondered – like she had done so often in the past – why the lake got its name when the water was so murky and green, and when you gathered some of it in your hands, you would see little green things swimming in it. And yet when you drank it they did not get stuck in the mouth or in your throat. The water slid into your throat like it was nectar from the gods themselves.

The shape of the lake was that of an egg, and at the larger end of it there was a stump of granite that signified the spot at which Vishnu had his first drink of its water. Ganga knelt on the muddy bank and bent over the surface of the water. She placed her lips to the surface and drank directly from the lake, like a doe. With every gulp she stopped and uttered a prayer. When she was done she removed her hood and spread it out on the water. With both her hands she pushed it down, feeling it bulge. There were advantages to being a river maiden, she thought happily; she would not be questioned on regular visits to the lake, and would even be allowed to take a dip in it. It was a deserved gesture of respect for the foremost woman on Meru; also, it was deemed that it would help in the probing of the Water Mysteries.

She tore off an end of her cloak and tied it around the hood before she put it back on her head, taking care only to make a loose knot. She checked her reflection in the water to ensure that the guard would not notice anything about the size of her head. Once satisfied with her appearance, she got up to her feet and stepped back.

Then, after a respectful bow at the stump, she turned and began to retrace her steps along the path.

E L E V E N



‘You have come to see your son,’ said Brihaspati. The preceptor of Indra’s court wore a fair, clean, hairless, smiling face. His hair was cropped short, and the red sash that went around his shoulder was made of the finest silk. His white dhoti was spotless. He had a large book in front of him, and as he turned its pages, Ganga noticed the bright yellow rings that adorned four of his fingers. Similar rings, solid and gleaming, hung off his ears.

Her breathing had become laboured because of the altitude at which Brihaspati’s ashram was located; it was one rung below the hovels and farms that belonged to Yama, Indra’s chief judge. Directly above Yama were the gates to Amaravati, where the other, more important Celestials dwelt. She joined her hands in greeting and sat by Brihaspati’s feet. He looked up from the book at her and smiled. He clicked his fingers a couple of times, at which a boy, his face smeared with sandal paste, arrived with a vessel of water in his hands.

‘You will get used to it, child, if you give it enough time.’ Brihaspati said to Ganga as the boy handed the vessel of water to her. ‘The higher you go up the mountain, the harder it gets to draw breath. But I am surprised

that the Lady of the River has come to the Preceptor of Indra. I do not suppose you are planning a long visit?’

‘No, my lord,’ said Ganga, catching her breath best as she could. ‘But I do want to make regular visits henceforth, if that is permissible to you.’

‘Who on Meru could deny the Lady of the River her request?’ said Brihaspati agreeably. ‘You can come here whenever you want, my lady. I only ask that you do not intrude upon our ablutions.’

‘I only wish to meet my son after the day’s work is over, my lord.’

‘You are his mother. You love him well, and so does he. You have not seen enough of him all these years, have you, my lady?’

She shook her head and looked down at the ground. ‘No, sir, not nearly enough, but I understand there are bigger needs than the needs of one mother.’

‘That is so,’ he said, his voice at once grave. ‘That is so, yes. But I see no harm in letting you spend some time with him when you arrive here. I can always spare Devavrata for an hour or so.’

‘I will be forever in your debt for that, Preceptor. This is his last year on Meru, and only the goddess knows when I will see him again once he leaves—’

‘Yes, my child,’ he said, and Ganga saw in his smile a compassion that she had sought and been unable to find in Vasishta’s, who was said to be the kindest High Sage of the earthmen. ‘Do you want to see him now? He is dispensing justice as we speak.’

‘Justice? What does he know of the ways of Meru?’

‘I have been teaching him,’ said Brihaspati. ‘And these are not lengthy or hard problems to solve, so do not worry that he might err. Yama takes up all the significant cases and leaves to me the trifling ones. Come!’

He got to his feet with surprising alacrity for a brahmin, and beckoned to her to follow him around to the back of the house. He stopped by an open window that looked into the main room of the hut, where Ganga could make out four figures by the light of the lamp. On the ledge, Devavrata sat cross-legged and erect, hands resting on thighs.

Even to her eyes he cut an ungainly figure. He was at the age where men were caught in the change from child to adult; they croaked when they spoke, they tumbled when they walked, and in general managed to lend to whatever they said or did an air of distinct unpleasantness. Even when Devavrata sat still in a pose of rigid discipline, Ganga thought he looked like a stork in meditation. His limbs were too long for his under-developed muscles, and though one could see that there was a childlike softness to his features and his curly black hair, handsomeness was some way in the future yet, when his body would fill out to fit the proportions aimed at by his limbs.

Ganga sighed. Girls seemed to make this change from child to lady in almost an instant, at the batting of an eyelid, with the appearance of breasts. But with men there was a period of at least four years (sometimes more) in which looking upon them with a straight face was nigh on impossible. It was perhaps a good thing then that he was now at a place where no maiden would set eyes on him, for if one did, it was hard to imagine her giving him a second look, save, perhaps, to have another laugh.

His limbs were much like Shantanu's, she thought. If he took after him, he would never be big or husky like Prabhasa had been in his prime; his would be a lean, slender frame, though no less strong for it. Shantanu could wield the mace with as much adeptness as did the best wrestlers in Hastina who weighed twice as much as he did, so perhaps Devavrata was headed that way; but even then he needed to put more flesh on his bone.

‘Agni, lord of fire,’ said Devavrata, and Ganga cringed at the childish squeak that accompanied his words. How would the Celestials – nay, anyone – take him seriously when he spoke like that? ‘And lady Swaha,’ he said. ‘I have heard your complaint, and also your request, but I must deny it.’

Ganga looked sideways at Brihaspati in shock. No one spoke to the foremost of Celestials that way, except perhaps Lord Yama himself for whom justice was king. Even if Devavrata was now entrusted with the role of Yama, he was merely a boy whose voice had not yet cracked, and he was addressing the foremost couple on Meru. Brihaspati had a smile set on his face, and it broadened when his eyes met hers. Inside the room Ganga saw that the flame in the lamp had swollen and swallowed the wick. She saw, more clearly now, the thick-set face of the lord of fire seated cross-legged on the floor, staring at the boy with thinly disguised malice.

‘You do not know whom it is you are addressing, boy,’ he said, and his voice resembled the slow rumble of thunder just before a downpour.

‘It does not matter who you are, sir, when it comes to the water of the lake. You already have a son who is being fostered right here in this ashram. What need have you of another?’

Agni sneered. ‘An earthman enquiring of the need for a son. Boy, the High Sage down below has not been teaching you well enough, has he?’

Devavrata ignored the question. ‘Even Indra gets only one son, Lord Agni.’ He turned to the lady and asked in a softer tone, ‘My lady, did you not eat the petal of the forbidden flower before you lay with your lord?’

She bowed to him, a gesture for which Ganga was thankful. ‘I did, lord,’ said the lady, ‘but it did not have the desired effect.’

‘If the petal is ingested at the correct time, with the correct incantation of the Mystery as it enters your body, there is no question of

ineffectiveness.’ Devavrata’s voice carried the certain finality of one who had been practising the Mysteries for centuries. Ganga allowed herself an inward smile. It was precisely those who had not practised the Mysteries that stood steadfastly by their infallibility. Everyone who practised them knew that Mysteries – even Mysteries – failed from time to time.

‘The water of the lake is our most precious resource, my lord and lady,’ said Devavrata. ‘And we may not use all of it because some of it gets taken by the doctors down to Earth, in return for all that we receive from the Great Kingdoms. It is therefore essential that we all follow the rules that have been set for us. While exceptions are granted if there have not been enough births in a given year, that is not so for this year. We are already over the allowed number of births, and yours will be a further burden to the people of Meru.’

‘My wife’s pregnancy is a burden, and an earthman tells me this?’ Agni said. ‘I will take this up with Indra.’

‘Even Indra is bound by the same rules, my lord. The lake does not discriminate between king and plebe, and neither does the goddess of justice. Winter will cause the level of the lake to retreat, as it does every year, and for every extra person taking birth on the mountain, we will have less water to go around for the ones that are already present. You know that, and yet you have requested that the birth of your child be exempt.’

‘I am Agni, the foremost of the Elementals. I am the reason why your Great Kingdoms give us so much – out of fear of me! If I do not get an exemption, who does?’

Devavrata’s voice was still cold. ‘The year has been a tough one, sir, so I am afraid I must deny you. So my lady and my lord, hear my verdict: if you bear a son, you will cast him away the moment he is born. If you have a daughter, you will give her up for fostering at the settlement of the Lady of

the River. It has been learnt that the river maiden is past child-bearing, so your daughter will be her successor.'

Agni opened his mouth to say something, but Devavrata raised his arm, scrawny but sturdy. 'Men are dispensable, Lord Agni. We only need as many men as is necessary, and no more! But we need more women, for without them we will perish. The mountain can take on the burden of a few extra women, but not that of a few extra men. You know this, sir, you who have studied the Mysteries and shaped the mountain from the very beginning of time – I do not presume to tell you the way of the world, but you leave me no choice.'

The fourth man in the room, a short, stout, dark man, was writing down every word of the proceeding. When Devavrata saw that his pen had stopped working, he turned to him and said, 'Please take this to your master and tell him that I have passed judgement.' He turned to the couple in front of him. 'If either the lord or the lady has a complaint to make against my verdict, please approach Lord Yama.'

Agni snorted and got to his feet. 'Ha! A complaint to Lord Yama; yes, that is going to fix it. I know full well how I can get my way, and I am not going to ask you, boy, what I am to do. Come, Svaha!' He stormed out of the room, and at his exit the flame in the lamp returned to its original size. The lady got up, and with an obedient bow in Devavrata's direction and a mumbled apology, followed her husband out. The stout man left too, having gathered his items.

'A simple verdict,' said Brihaspati after some time. 'I just wanted to see if the boy had the courage to give it to someone of such high standing.'

Ganga said slowly, as they stepped away from the window and walked to the front entrance, 'There will not be any trouble from Agni?'

Brihaspati laughed, and signalled to the boy who had earlier served her water that he was to clean up the yard. The boy came running, broom in hand, and got to work on the porch. ‘Agni knows full well that he is in the wrong. If this was with Yama he would not have even made a sound. You know what they say, when a dog knows that he cannot bite, he will make sure that he barks nice and loud.’

They walked into the hut through the front door. Devavrata still sat in the same pensive manner, features tied into a knot. ‘You did well, my boy,’ said Brihaspati, and gestured to another young man who scrambled and brought three mud vessels of water for them.

Brihaspati took the biggest of them and lifted it up over his mouth. After gulping the water down, he turned to his ward. ‘I cannot help wondering, though, Devavrata, if Agni had not been right; has Vasishta taught you about the moral laws that govern Earth?’

Devavrata did not reply at once. Ganga saw that his face was troubled, and she could tell that the questions in his mind were the same that were disturbing her. She wanted to assure him that all would be well, but she did not know that for sure. Neither did Brihaspati, in spite of the lightness with which he dismissed her concerns.

‘I was taught,’ said Devavrata, ‘that justice and moral laws are absolute, whether here on Meru or on Earth.’

‘Nothing of the sort!’ said Brihaspati, and a queer smile spread on his lips. ‘We are not gods to strive for absolute justice and for absolute morals. We are men! We can only strive for the highest good of the highest number. Today you denied one man’s pleasure for the well-being of the mountain. That is the only justice there is, and that is the only moral law there is – do whatever is in your power to uphold that, whether here on the mountain or on Earth.’

‘I have advised a mother to cast away her child,’ said Devavrata, looking away into the distance.

‘I repeat, my boy.’ Brihaspati’s voice came low and heavy, and now his lips were pursed together. ‘We are not gods. We do not aspire to any standards of morality. We merely do whatever ensures the welfare of the mountain. The mountain is important, the people who live on it are important, nothing else.’

When Devavrata did not answer, Brihaspati said again, ‘The gods are part of nature, my boy. The fire you see in that flame, the water you drink, the air you breathe, these are gods. The Ladies of the River call her a goddess, and if I could borrow that for a moment, all we can hope to do as men is to probe her Mysteries, and use them so that our lives can be better.’

‘But that is not how it happens on Earth,’ said Devavrata.

‘No, my boy.’ The smile returned to Brihaspati’s face. ‘There is no Crystal Lake on Earth, so the laws are different. But keep in mind one rule that is the master of them all, no matter which world you find yourself in. Follow that and you will have kept the paramount rule of justice.’

‘The greatest good of the greatest number.’

‘Yes, easier said than done, easier done here than on Earth.’ Brihaspati struggled to his feet with a groan and finished his water. ‘It is the first night of the waning moon, and I must sleep on an empty stomach. But I will not ask you to fast tonight, Devavrata, for your mother has come to have a word with you, and I smell something tasty in her bundle.’ He smiled. ‘Greatest good of the greatest number.’

He signalled to the boy again, who brought out two banana leaves washed with scented water and laid them out for Devavrata and Ganga. Devavrata slid down to the floor and smiled at her for the first time that

evening. Ganga smiled back. From the other room they heard the low voice of the Preceptor, chanting a hymn that spoke to the spirits of the night.

Ganga untied the knot on her hood.



‘You have not been eating well,’ she told him.

‘I eat as well as I can.’

Ganga held her hood in both hands and squeezed it, letting the water drip into the vessel underneath. She maintained the pressure of her hands on the sponge and shook it. Then she tied the scarf around the sponge again and wrapped it around her face. She nodded at the vessel.

‘Drink it,’ she said.

‘It is not clean,’ said Devavrata, staring at the water closely. ‘There are green things swimming about.’

‘It is the cleanest water you will ever find. Drink it.’

For a time his face was puzzled, but Ganga saw realization dawn upon it. ‘Mother, does this water belong in the Crystal Lake?’

‘Yes.’

‘But I am not permitted to have it. The lake is only for permanent dwellers of the mountain.’

‘Do you think I do not know that?’ she asked hotly. ‘I did not come here to ask you to drink it. I came to tell you to drink it – as your mother.’

He gave her a little bow. ‘If it is your command that I should do so, I will, Mother. But in doing so I will be breaking the rule of the land that has nourished me all these years. Is this your wish too?’

‘My wish is to keep you here on Meru, my son,’ said Ganga. ‘Do you not want to stay on Meru?’

‘My teachers have told me that my destiny lies on Earth.’

‘What do these teachers know of destiny? Man chooses his own destiny. It does not choose him! You tell me what you want to do, Devavrata. Do you really want to go to Earth?’

Devavrata bent his head and ran a finger along the edge of the folded banana leaf on which he had eaten. He traversed a circle around the leaf and sighed. ‘I do not know that world, Mother,’ he said, and Ganga heard a note of pleading in his voice. She at once knew that her son was afraid. ‘I do not know how it will treat me, while here – here I know every meadow, every orchard, every inch of the land. I am happy here.’

‘So you should be,’ said Ganga. ‘Earth is nothing like Meru, my son. I know, I lived there for eight years. I lived the life of a queen, but mark my words, life as a peasant on Meru is richer than life as a royal on Earth.’

‘Is that so? But High Sage Vasishta—’

‘If High Sage Vasishta likes Earth so much, why does he live here with us for nine moons of the year? Perhaps one should ask him that.’

‘I did! He says it is for his health. He says the air of the mountain keeps him healthier and makes his step lighter.’

‘Well then that is settled, is it not? Earth will not keep you happy, my child, that much I do know. Where your destiny lies, you shall be. Who decides that? Not the High Sage, not the Preceptor, and certainly not Indra.’

Devavrata lifted the cup again and peered at it. He was about to put his mouth to the brim when they heard sounds of horse hooves coming towards the hut. Ganga stiffened and reached for her dagger, but Devavrata stilled her with a raised hand. His own hand had gone to the sword by his side. The sounds were of horses in full gallop, an occasional neigh accompanying the regular clangs of metal shoes on stone. It reached a crescendo, and Devavrata sprang to his knees, ready to push himself on to his feet, but then

the sounds receded. He continued to listen for a time and only once he was convinced that the horses had passed did he relax and sit on the floor.

‘Must have been the explorers returning from a mission,’ he said. Ganga detected a note of wistfulness in his voice. ‘They have the best horses in the country, Mother.’ He craned his neck and stole a glance at the moonlit path along which the horses had disappeared. ‘And they ride with such grace!’

‘Misplaced grace,’ she said firmly. ‘If you are going to live on Meru, I will not have you become an explorer, Devavrata. Half of them never return to the mountain.’

‘But Mother, what will I do if I stay back?’

‘You will go to Prabhasa, the Elemental, and you will learn the Mysteries of the weather from him. You will deliver the mountain from dependence on the earthmen. That will be your work.’

‘But – will he have me?’

Ganga smiled upon her son. ‘He will be pleased to have you, child. I have spoken with him already. Now, drink the water, and do not – do not – let anyone know that you have drunk of the Crystal Lake. I will give you a drink of the water every week for this whole year, and we shall need tell people only at the end of it. If they ask. Do you understand?’

Devavrata nodded, and lifting the cup to his mouth, downing its contents in one gulp.

T W E L V E



By the time she got back to the hut, the moon had set. The night sky was covered with layers of blue-grey clouds that reminded her of the cotton fields in Hastina. In spite of herself, her heart missed a beat at the thought. The midwinter feast would be approaching soon, she realized, making a quick calculation in her mind. The city would be making grand preparations – feeding brahmins; worshipping cows; fattening up roosters, hens and goats. And they would be spreading cotton sheets on the fields so that they would catch the winter sun and dry up. In the first year of their marriage, Ganga and Shantanu had once or twice stolen out to these cotton heaps by night, without guards or companions, and had lain down under the stars. When the fluffs of cotton had caught enough sun and lost the moisture within them, they crackled and broke in one's fingers. On the first night the king had placed two balls of cotton in her hands, covered them with his own, and squeezed them till they popped.

Through a hole in the clouds a patch of the north sky was visible, and the pole star blinked down at her. Why should she think of Hastina this night, and why should she miss it so? She knew the answer; it had been the riders of Indra that had taken her back to Earth, for she had known that

among them would be the rider who must have gone to the south and to the Great Kingdoms. The disdain she felt for Hastina did not erase from her heart a desire to know the happenings in the city; after all, its people had worshipped her as queen for eight long years; eight good years. And ever since she returned to Meru, her hatred for Shantanu had tapered off into indifference, then over time into sympathy, then into respect – and even a detached fondness. Shantanu acted in a way more honourable than any earthman in his place would have; any other king would have executed his queen the night he discovered her killing his son and heir to the throne. But Shantanu had not.

For eight long years he had found it in his heart to forgive her, to understand her, to love her, even though with each passing year she saw a little bit of his love die, as though bit by bit all that was good in him was washed away with the death of each of his – and her – sons. Her anger toward him the night he disowned her had been as much at herself and at the cruelty of fate – an expression of despair at coming so close to being his for life, only for his will to give way and break at the last moment. If he had not drunk that night, if she had not carried Devavrata to the window and opened the curtains for some air, if she had found it within her to hold her tongue, to send the king away to one of her waiting-women, if they had just waited for the sanity of the morning to speak to each other . . .

The stab in her heart sharpened, and she stared up at the pole star. She knew that it was not Hastina's fault that she had become barren after eight childbirths, but she placed the blame for it completely on the city, and on its king. Each time she went to the oak, she returned to the hut with eyes full of dreams, and over the next moon she would feel herself get heavier, only to discover upon waking up on her day of the month with blood between her

thighs that it had all been a trick of her hopeful mind. Each time this happened, she found on her lips a curse directed at Hastina and at Shantanu.

In her saner moments she thought it was Vasishta and Arundhati that were to blame, and some days she blamed her mother and on some she had angry words for Prabhasa, but on this night, with the pole star beaming down on her through a patch in the clouds, she recalled the night she had fused with her mother before she left for Earth. The patch of blue sky reminded her of a purple spot in a sky just as cloudy as this, a spot through which she had travelled and seen the love between Mahabhisha and Ganga. That night she had not slept, for the ache to meet Mahabhisha had kept her awake, and it was only a long time later, after she had returned to Meru, that she realized her mother and the Lady before her had lived with that ache all through their lives. And if it seemed that something good that had been her right was being denied her, it was only in return for something good that had been given her over which she had no right whatever.

Perhaps this was why Mother said she was luckier than the Ladies before her, and while Ganga was on Earth, especially during the first few years as queen of Hastina, she believed it was true. But now, on the cusp of becoming the next Lady of the River, the mountain's first barren Lady, she felt the same tingling anger at Earth, at the people of Meru, at fate, and she thought that leaving the mountain for something as ephemeral as love was foolish; in the bargain she had lost the lasting pleasure of her mother's Mysteries, the contentment and security of having a successor to whom she could pass on her knowledge. Going down to Earth, she thought, as the clouds closed around the patch of sky, was the most unwise thing she had ever done, and if she could help it, she would save her son from a similar fate.



When she approached the door of the hut she sensed a movement on the porch. It was neither stealthy nor surreptitious; a fluid, dark form that moved closer to the edge of the porch. An odour of freshly wet mud came to her nostrils, one that she instantly recognized.

‘I have been expecting you, Nishanta,’ she said in a low voice so as to not awaken her mother. ‘What news have you?’

Nishanta coughed and cleared his throat before he spoke. ‘It is hard riding weather, this,’ he said, and wrapped his scarf around his neck two more times so that it covered his chin and mouth. Ganga peered into the darkness; she had never seen the man’s face. She suspected that the voice he used when he spoke to her was also not his own. If she saw him on the mountain during the day, she would not recognize him. ‘Hastina is not the town it used to be, my lady,’ he said. ‘It has problems, both from within and from without.’

‘Is this what you have been told, Nishanta, or have you seen these problems with your eyes?’

‘Aye, I have seen them, all right. Some of the other riders went in search of lands west of Kamboja, and some of them went to the silk making country north east of here, but I went to Hastina. The king is getting old, lady Ganga, and he has no heir to the throne.’

Ganga’s mind went back to the far-off day when Vasishta told her that there were no more sons in Shantanu’s future. She had found that hard to believe. ‘He has enough sons through chamber-maids,’ she said, her voice bitter. ‘What does he have to fear?’

Nishanta laughed throatily. Her moonstone gave off enough light for her to see the faintest white of his teeth. The rest of him was black. ‘Bastards cannot be heirs to the kingdom, lady. You know that as well as I do. They

say he had a son born of the royal line, off a queen who has left him fifteen years ago.’ He paused. ‘Say, do you know anything of that?’

‘I do not,’ said Ganga. ‘I only ask you of Hastina because—’

‘You do not have to tell me, lady. You are the Lady of the River. It is your business, perhaps, to know. Not mine to question why.’

‘How does Shantanu as king?’

‘He is losing favour, that is certain. He has taken queens in the last few years, but these are princesses of the lesser kingdoms to the south; none of the Great Kingdoms would give him their maidens. He is after all nearing forty.’

‘But he has not warred much; he will live long – perhaps long enough to sire more sons.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Nishanta, ‘but the people of the city want an heir, and they will not take to any bastard son of the king. It appears that the long reign of peace is about to be broken, my lady.’

‘Why do you say that?’ she asked sharply.

‘Because if Hastina is left without a king, the other kingdoms will pounce upon it like a hawk would upon a mouse, and they will fight among themselves too for a piece of it, mark my words. Even if the king were to have a son this moment, it will be at least fifteen years before he could be made king, and Shantanu will be five on fifty then – too old to walk, let alone lead men into battle.’

Ganga wondered for a moment if sending Devavrata down to Hastina was not the easiest solution after all, but then she remembered the pain her years on Earth had caused her, and besides, Devavrata did not want to go.

She asked, ‘Does that affect us in any way? Meru people?’

‘I say it does. If the Great Kingdoms go to war, they will not have enough to last themselves. How will they trade with us? Hastina’s cotton

fields will be razed to the ground – aye, I see that happening – and where will we get our cotton then? And salt. Anga has already increased the price of salt that it sends to Hastina; I say it is only a matter of time before she stops altogether. Where will we get our salt then?’

Ganga remembered Prabhasa’s words, and echoed them. ‘We have to grow on our own whatever we need!’

‘Aye, easier said than done, that. People on Meru will have to start working for that, my lady, and what of the Mysteries then? Who will study the Mysteries?’

‘We will have to grow in numbers; breed more, like the earthmen do.’

‘There will not be enough lake water for all of us if that happens – that is if I understand it right. The salt is not the worst of it, of course. The water levels of the Crystal Lake will fall if a war happens.’

Ganga stopped for a minute in thought. The ebb and flow of the lake’s water was controlled by the seasons. It was generally full of water in the summer and receded in winter. No one on the mountain, as far as her knowledge went, knew the Mystery surrounding the lake. Or if it was known, it was a closely kept secret known to perhaps just the Wise Ones. Now here a Rider was telling her that the water level dropped when a war was on.

‘Why should the level of the lake drop?’

‘I do not know, Lady. You will have to ask that of Indra, or perhaps the Preceptor knows too. But we have seen this from the beginning of time; whenever there is a great war in the land, the level of the water in the lake drops, and the amount of water going around the mountain lessens, of course. My great-grandfather spoke of the time when water was rationed so that they were only allowed to drink of it every two moons; not every moon like we do now.’

Ganga knew of that time too, though as the Lady of the River she had access to the lake every week at all times, paucity or not.

‘Wherever we go exploring, we take a record of all the past wars, and we bring it back for the Preceptor to examine. From what I know, all of the times when the water of the lake has receded have been times of war. Some say famine and drought causes the water to go away too, but I am not so certain of that. It is as though,’ and he paused for a long moment, ‘the lake is protesting against the bad happenings in the world. Aye, that is what it looks like to my eyes.’



Later that night, tossing in bed, Ganga wondered at Nishanta’s words. It seemed fantastic that the water in the Crystal Lake should depend on what occurs on the Earth, on plains that were thousands of miles away. But then, the goddess was fantastic. Unknown Mysteries of nature always seemed magical until they were probed; why, did the people on Earth not marvel at the happenings on the mountain when they visited it? What was mysterious and magical to them was ordinary for the people of Meru; why, then, should Mysteries beyond Meru people not exist? And if they existed, was it any wonder that they seemed fantastic and incredulous?

Even today they were no closer to unravelling the mystery of the lake, or how it prolonged the life of the drinker. Even the beginnings had not been worked out. No one knew why at times the lake appeared bare and on the verge of drying out while at others it threatened to flood the apple grove that surrounded it. The Preceptor had undertaken to study this Mystery, and hence recorded the times at which the lake had dried out – but why should that have anything to do with the happenings on Earth?

And yet Nishanta could be mistaken about it all. He was a mere rider, of no great education, of no knowledge of the Mysteries; physically gifted, yes, and highly in favour at Indra's court as all riders were, but no one would credit him with a sharp mind. It was entirely possible that he had heard the Preceptor say something and had twisted it around in his mind to words that he could make sense of; and when he had repeated them to Ganga, of course they had come out with neither reason nor sense.

Hastina would not be the first kingdom in the history of the land whose king died heirless; and it would not be the last. There were ways in which a king could be appointed, and if a few more years did pass without the birth of a son, Shantanu would probably begin thinking of how the kingdom could be best served after his death. He had surrounded himself with able advisors; if he made the mistake of ignoring the city's plight, they would not let him. It was too early yet to think of a kingless Hastina. It was too early yet to think of a war; if the kingship of Hastina were transferred to a worthy youth, he could still unite the lands and extend this age of peace over which Shantanu had presided.

But the danger to Meru – that of depending on the kingdoms of Earth for trade – was very real. If not now, one or the other of the sixteen kingdoms would soon find out the identity of the mysterious doctors and apple-sellers who appeared every harvest season, bringing with them water that healed and apples that tasted like nectar; and leave with assorted items of their choice. Sooner or later they would all awaken to the fact that these men came from further up north where the Great River took birth, and if the combined might of them stood by the cave of ice and knocked upon it, would Meru be able to defend herself?

The only permanent solution was for Meru to become self-sufficient. Nishanta was right when he said that the people of Meru would have to

swell in number in order for this to happen, and their focus would have to shift from the study of the Mysteries to real, physical work, but that would be a small price to pay.

Nishanta was also right in another detail: Meru could grow almost anything that grew on Earth, with the right Elemental controlling the weather – perhaps Devavrata – but no matter what they did, they would still have to depend on the cities on the coast of the Great Ocean for the white mineral called salt. Or was there a way, perhaps as mysterious and as fantastic as the Crystal Lake itself, by which salt could occur up here on Meru?

When Ganga fell asleep she dreamt of the White Rock. She was standing in the knee-deep, ice-cold water of the river and was looking up at the Rock from under her hood. Drops of rain splashed all around her, and when they hit her hands they pricked her skin and plucked at it. But she did not notice the pain or the cold, because in front of her, the White Rock was melting. Each drop of rain, when it hit the Rock, powdered a bit of it and brought it down to the river where it dissolved to form a white, viscous circle at first, but as it flowed down the river, blended into the colour of the water. She went closer to where the powder fell, and she leant forward to take some water in her hands. When she drank it, she found that the water was salty.

T H I R T E E N



‘I dreamt of the White Rock last night, Mother,’ said Devavrata. ‘I dreamt that it broke and fell into the water, and I saw you in the stream.’ He took the piece of wheat cake in his hands and broke it into two. He immersed one piece in a vessel of milk and lifted it up to his mouth. ‘And you tasted the water.’ He put it into his mouth and chewed on it, watching her.

‘I did too,’ she said, squeezing her hood over another vessel. ‘The water was salty.’

‘The White Rock is made of ice, is it not?’

‘Yes.’

‘And there is no salt to be found in it? Have the people on the mountain looked within it?’

She shook her head. ‘They have not, but it is as you say. It is a rock of ice. It will not have salt in it. Salt is only found on the shores of the Oceans, child.’

‘So they say,’ said Devavrata seriously. ‘This morning the Preceptor taught me to make a sweetmeat, with a wheat cake.’ He held up the other piece of cake in his hand and looked at it. ‘Like unto this, but sweet. And

the way he told me, you could not feel the sugar on your teeth, but you felt it on your tongue.’ He dipped the second piece in the milk and took a bite of it. ‘Yes, on your tongue. The vital step is to dissolve the sugar in water first, then heat it on fire until the water is all gone, and the sugar is left . . . it is not hard to bite on, that sugar. It is soft. Very soft . . .’ He played with the piece of wheat between his fingers idly, and watched his mother filling up the vessel with water from her hood.

Ganga said, ‘You were telling me about your dream.’

Devavrata slipped out of his thoughts and smiled at her, and she noticed that his smile was that of a child up to some mischief; the impish, lovable smile of a teenager – not the firm, grand smile of a future king. Ganga wondered if her boy would ever grow up. At his age Shantanu was probably training in diplomacy and statecraft. ‘Yes,’ he said, popping the final piece into his mouth, ‘the dream. It made me think. You know Prabhasa says that all matter is made of the same things – that is, all solid matter. Now water is not solid, so I agree with you that the White Rock has no salt in it, but what about this?’ He pushed the vessel of water aside and picked up a rock. ‘What about this? Is there salt in this?’

‘That is the talk of a child,’ said Ganga. ‘If there was salt in the rocks here on the mountain, do you not think the Celestials would have—’

‘Perhaps they have not asked themselves that question yet,’ said Devavrata easily. He reached forward to return the vessel to its earlier position, and stopped to stare into it. ‘There are things in it, Mother.’

‘You have said the same thing before, and I am telling you, as I told you then, that they are not “things”. They will not get in the way of your drinking.’

‘But what are they?’

Ganga found herself annoyed at the question, at least partly because she did not know the answer. 'I do not know, and it does not matter.'

He took the vessel in both hands and got to his feet. 'It does matter, Mother. And if one can heat water and leave sugar behind, one can heat this water and see what it leaves behind.'

Ganga got to her feet too and began to protest. 'But—'

'Relax, Mother. There is no rule against heating the water of the Crystal Lake.'

'The Preceptor does not know,' said Ganga, suddenly afraid.

Devavrata gave her a sly look. 'He does not have to know. I have a small stove out at the back, and the preceptor is sleeping. It will not take us long to boil this, Mother; there is not much of it. Come now, do you not want to know what is in the water of the lake?'

Ganga, though she very much wanted to, said again, 'The preceptor does not know.'

'Would you that we told him?'

'No!'

'Good.' Devavrata was already walking away towards the outhouse, and Ganga followed him. When they got there he opened the door in silence and motioned her in. Once she went in, the door closed behind her, and there was complete darkness. In a bit, she heard the scratch of stone upon stone, then she saw a spark, and then a flame, and Devavrata's red, elfin grin in its light.

'Are you certain—'

'Ssh.'

He turned his back on her to face the platform, and set the vessel of water above the flame. He hummed an old bard's song as he worked, and after a moment stepped back and folded his hands.

‘We are not allowed to perform tricks with the water of the lake,’ said Ganga.

‘Mother,’ he said, ‘the Preceptor has told me that there is nothing on the mountain – absolutely nothing – that cannot be probed. And is it not so that the lake’s Mysteries are hidden to men, precisely because we are afraid to probe its contents?’

Ganga looked at the stove uncertainly. There was no steam escaping the vessel as yet. There was still time to correct this, she thought; still time to put out the fire and let the water cool, and no one would be the wiser. But she herself was intrigued, now. The little green particles in the water seemed to glow with a faint golden light of their own, and they appeared to be speeding up inside the water as they ran up and down from surface to base. But there was no steam.

Devavrata stepped forward. His hand hovered over the mouth of the vessel, and his eyes narrowed. Ganga felt again that he was yet a child, trying his hand at adult things. He had not the bearing of a warrior, nor had he acquired the balance of a saint. He was still perched on the fence, unaware of which way to jump. And yet this was the boy they were going to place on the throne of Hastina – not if she could help it.

‘The water is not even warm,’ he said, adding another twig of firewood to the stove and blowing upon it through a tube. He dipped a finger into the vessel, gingerly at first, but upon realizing the water was cold he immersed it fully and wriggled it around. ‘No,’ he said, ‘something is not right.’

Ganga’s eyes were fastened upon the million little green things in the water, which were now tiny golden fireflies buzzing around in no apparent pattern or direction. With each passing moment their speed increased, and they left bright lines in the water behind their trails. Devavrata pulled back

his hand and watched. 'What is that?' he asked. 'What are these things, Mother?'

'I do not know,' said Ganga, and this time she placed a hand on the side of the vessel. Not only was it not warm, it felt cold to touch. She looked at Devavrata and whispered, 'The water is not leaving the vessel.'

'But that is not possible,' he said, and Ganga felt she heard a note of petulance in his words. 'That is not possible, no.' He reached forward and placed his own hand on the side of the vessel, only to pull it back as if it were burning hot. 'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'It is not possible.'

'It is possible,' said Ganga sternly, 'because it is happening in front of our eyes. Perhaps the water of the lake is not water at all. Perhaps it is something which looks like water, tastes like it, feels like it, but is not it.' She removed the vessel from the stove and placed it on the side. The green things grew dimmer and slower, and their trails became less and less brilliant until they were no longer visible in the darkness. Once again all they could see was the husky reddish-brown flame of the stove. Ganga took another empty vessel and filled it with water from the water-pot. When she placed this new vessel on the stove it began to simmer and fume in less than a minute.

Mother and son watched the water boil, and in less than five minutes the vessel was empty. Ganga held it with the help of two wooden sticks and held it up. There was a black, circular smudge of soot on its base.

Devavrata turned and left. Ganga set the hot plate aside, and picking up the cold vessel in both hands, touched it to her left eye, then to her right, and went out to where he was sitting. The air outside had grown chilly now, and the sky appeared to take on a darker shade, which made the stars seem like they had drawn closer. She hunched her shoulders against the cold, and

in her palms the vessel warmed up. She balanced it upon the rock between them as she sat down. Both of them sat staring at it for a long time.

‘If the water does not go up into the air,’ said Devavrata at last, ‘where does it go every winter?’

‘Perhaps into the ground?’

Devavrata shook his head. ‘Water ought to escape into the Earth in summer, Mother, is it not, for it is in then that rivers and lakes dry up and the sun is at his harshest? But the water of our lake overflows the bank in summer; they say it sometimes flows as far as the first apple trees.’

‘It does,’ said Ganga.

Devavrata laughed uneasily. ‘Perhaps this is why they call it the Great Mystery. Where does the water of the lake go, and where does all the excess water come from? And you say it must not be water at all, this – this – thing that the lake holds.’

‘Well,’ said Ganga, her voice low, ‘I know water. I am to be the Lady of the River. Anything that does not rise up into the air when heated is not water. And water does not have the powers of healing that the lake does. So whatever this may be, this liquid that we call water, I do not think it ought to be called that, but it quenches thirst, and it gives life, so what else can the people of the mountain call it?’

‘Water or not,’ said Devavrata, picking up the vessel with one hand, two fingers sliding easily underneath the base, ‘I am going to drink it.’ He held it up with languid grace, and looked at it with a careless smile. Ganga saw that he was trying hard to appear at ease, but she could see that he was shaken by what he had seen. Now the act of drinking the water was for him a victory over it, and he was not yet old enough to see how hollow it all was – his bravado, his fake poise, his victory.

Just a boy.

He brought the vessel to his mouth with one hand, his other arm hung loosely over a folded knee. He kept his eyes open as the water entered him and travelled down his throat. At that moment he could have been any one of the men at the harvest feast by the oak, licking barley juice off earthen vessels and casting them away carelessly. A word of rebuke came to her lips but she held herself. Ceremony ought to be a reflection of reverence. What was the need for ceremony when the emotion that ought to be at its heart was not present?

‘You are angry, Mother,’ he said when he had set the empty vessel away. ‘You look at me now like I saw you look at the White Rock yesterday in my dream.’ When she was about to shake her head he held up his arm. ‘You know, Mother, the one thing that I have marvelled at about the dream all night?’ He brought his knees together and wrapped his arms around them, looking at her grimly.

She did not say anything.

‘It was how fast the stream was flowing,’ he said, looking away in the direction of the Rock. ‘The current by the Rock is quite slow and pleasant, but in my dream it was a torrent, Mother, and you were standing right in the middle of it, steady as a rock yourself. And I remember how smooth the stones were at your feet, and how your feet never slipped on them, and I wondered how you kept your balance so easily.

‘And I also wondered how the stones at the bottom of the stream came to be so smooth; all the rocks on the mountain are sharp and jagged. Why are these so smooth?’

Ganga said, ‘The water dissolves them and makes them that way. Over a long period of time water can blunt the sharpest of rocks.’

‘But where does the rock go? It must get carried out by the river down to Earth, and perhaps it all gets taken to the Great Ocean.’

‘Perhaps,’

‘Perhaps that is why the Great Ocean is salty, then, with all the rock material that the rivers bring to her. I wonder – yes, I wonder.’

Ganga thought, for a smallest fraction of a second, that Devavrata was not a boy any more. He spoke like an adult – not quite like a warrior, no, though he might yet grow up to be one, but like an Elemental who was bent upon studying and unravelling the Mysteries of nature. In that sense he was Prabhasa’s son much more than he would ever be Shantanu’s.

‘I wonder,’ he was saying, ‘yes, I wonder what would happen if there was a lake where water could go nowhere – it could not seep into the Earth like our Crystal Lake does, and it does not flow because it is not part of a river. It would only go up into the air when the Sun is hot, and when the rains come down, it fills up again.’

‘Do such lakes exist?’

He nodded. ‘They do. The riders speak of the people of the Matsya Kingdom who tell tales of such a lake; the lake of death, they call it, for in this lake no fish will live, and the Matsya people fight with a fish on their banner. No one has seen it, it is true, but they say that the lake sits on the other side of the Rocky Mountains.’

‘By the wastelands?’

‘So they say. The Nishadas in the mountains might know of it, but if it does not support life, they will stay clear of it too, and they might not tell us where it is. For men to whom the Mysteries are the same as magic, anything that does not quench thirst or support fish cannot be water. But we know the Mysteries, Mother, and we know that the Great Ocean does not quench thirst, nor does it contain fish of the kind that swim in our lakes. Yet that is water, and I think that this lake contains water too, this Dead Lake.’

‘I do not understand,’ said Ganga. ‘Even if it is water, what is it to us? We have enough water for everyone on the mountain. What need have we for more?’

‘Oh, Mother!’ said Devavrata, and his eyes shone. ‘Mother, it is not the water we ought to be after. We ought to find this lake, not for the water she contains, but for what she hides in her bosom.’

‘How do you know what she hides in her bosom?’

‘I do not,’ he said, and for a moment the glow on his face was replaced by a crease of uncertainty. ‘I do not know. But I cannot be wrong; for if the lake is present on a rocky mountain, there is no place for the water to go but up, and as it dissolves the rocks in her bed, little by little every second of every minute, where does the rock material go? There is nowhere for it to go, Mother, for unlike the water, it cannot travel up into the air. So where does it go?’

‘I do not know, and I do not think you do either,’ she said, in a tone crueller than she intended.

‘I do not *know*, but there is but one answer to that question, and that answer is nowhere! The rock material does not go anywhere; it stays in the water, dissolved, and when the water goes up into the air, the material stays back, like the sugar did so that I could make a soft sweetener for the dish. But only, this material, Mother, is not sweet.’

He spoke with a certainty that scared her. She had seen similar strength of will and thought in the brahmins from Earth, and she wondered if he had picked up this trait from Vasishta and Parashurama. The former had been dulled by his years on the mountain, and he now started all his sentences with ‘I do not know’, but Parashurama was known throughout the land as a sage who did not know the meaning of ‘perhaps’. Or was this Shantanu’s blood speaking through him – the arrogant, almost bull-headed belief in his

ability to solve problems, and the unshakeable conviction that his solution was right; that it *had* to be right.

‘It is not sweet, this water. No, Mother, if you were to taste the water of the Dead Lake, I promise you that it will be salty, for the water has broken down the rocks over the ages, and it is doing so even now, as we speak, bit by bit. How does rock become salt? Perhaps that is a Mystery that we ought to probe some day, and perhaps we will be able to make our own salt, but for now, if we can find this lake . . .’

‘Devavrata, you do not even know it exists.’

‘It does exist, Mother. People on Earth ask each other if Meru exists, if we exist, but we do, do we not? Perhaps not in the same manner that they think we do, for they have heard tales of us that they repeat to those who would hear, and with each telling the tale changes. But what gave birth to the tale? Something real. We are real though tales about us are not always; and in the same way the Dead Lake is real, though the tales about her may not be.’

She heard him through, heard him refer to himself as one of Meru people, and hope sprang up within her. If he felt enough kinship for Meru to regard the earthmen as outsiders, it meant that he had no wish to leave the mountain and make for the plains. And if this were true, if he could somehow be right about this Dead Lake and the salt that she holds in her, and if the people of Meru could stake a claim upon this lake, that would be enough to convince even Indra that he ought to stay back on the mountain and study the Mysteries of the weather. If he could probe this deep without so much as ever being near a Mystery, how much could he achieve with training? And once he probed enough into the weather to enable Meru to grow whatever she wanted, what need did they have of Earth and its men?

‘I will go with the explorers the next time they ride,’ he said, decisively. ‘Some of them might know the whereabouts of this lake. If none of us do, we will find it. But of course, we will need to be careful about the route we take. We cannot fall under the sight of the Matsya people, or even the Nishadas. They must not know who we are, or what it is that we are seeking.’

Then he began to describe to her the path they would take, along the base of the Rocky Mountains, traversing them so as to make sure they did not neglect combing them edge to edge. He told her how they would keep away from the woods, how they would handle any unforeseen contact with either the Fish or the Mountain people, how they would have to use magic as a last resort to intimidate or distract, and while he talked, her eyes grew weary. She wondered if he had been thinking about this for a long time or if he was making it up as he spoke. He sounded to her like a general about to wage a war, knowledgeable about the terrain of the Rocky Mountains. When and how he gained this knowledge, she did not know. The people of Meru had not participated in violence for many, many ages now, and their knowhow of battle strategy was pitiful. This was definitely the blood of the earthman in him; there was now no doubt about that. The edge they had over their enemies was their knowledge of the Mysteries, and their ability to keep the mountain concealed from the outside world. None of them had the spirit of adventure that Devavrata now displayed; even the explorers did their jobs on orders from Indra, and their remunerations had to be hefty.

Her eyes grew heavy, and she lay down on her side on the grass before him, arm stretched out under her head. His voice grew more and more distant, and she swam in images of the Rock, the running water of the stream, and her own bare feet seen through the clear waters set against the dark, smooth rocks.

Then the image wavered, and there was silence.

FOURTEEN



Ganga Speaks

I have thought often of that night by Brihaspati's hut, where I slept to the sound of Devavrata's words, and the more I think of it, the more certain I am – it was on that night that his weaning off from me and from the mountain began. If I had stopped him that night, if I had dissuaded him from his tall plans, perhaps I could have persuaded him to join Prabhasa in due course – for his mind was already bent that way – and perhaps events of a different nature would have come to pass. But I say this with the benefit of hindsight. At the time I was taken in by his words as much as he was, and I was enamoured too of the Dead Lake that lay hidden somewhere deep in the breast of the Rocky Mountains. I thought if he were to indeed succeed in bringing salt to Meru, that would give him the seal of approval from the Celestials.

But Vasishta would say all this thinking is unnecessary. Whatever is to happen, does happen, sometimes in ways we foresee, sometimes in strange, mysterious ways. So perhaps even if I had acted differently, the same events would have come to pass but through different means, and I would have sat here – exactly where I am now, lamenting my choice, just as I am doing now.

The Wise Ones say that acceptance is the only true way to happiness; acceptance of the fact that we do not have a say in what must happen, and that the harder we try to change that which is fated, the more we contribute, unknowingly, to bringing it about. I thought giving Devavrata the water of the Crystal Lake would keep him on the mountain for longer, but I had forgotten to take into account that he was halfearthman. The water of the

lake is said to clear men's minds and set them free. So if I had not given him the water, would he ever have thought of the Dead Lake? Would he ever have set out in search of it? One could say that I was responsible for Devavrata finally leaving the mountain, but then, once again I hear the Wise Ones say: only that happened that was fated to happen. So maybe I was just a pawn in this game the goddess was playing, and if I had not heeded her commands – well, she is not short of pawns.

The only true secret to happiness is to accept that we have no control over our fate. But this acceptance is not easy to gain; perhaps that is why there are so few that are truly happy. There is no 'what if' in the minds of the happy; there is only 'what is'. That is the only truth. That is the only relevant detail. So I will confine myself with telling you what happened, and will cast away for now the pontifications of what could have happened had I acted differently.

Devavrata spoke to the Preceptor the day after he told me his plan, and Indra approved of what he said. Devavrata had already perfected riding a horse under Parashurama's guidance, so he was given a stallion and was sent westwards along with Indra's best explorers. For six months there was no word, but then they arrived – all but the two men they had lost in the mountains – on the night before the harvest rite by the light of the new moon. I saw Devavrata alight in front of the Preceptor and hand over to him a bag spilling over with white crystallized powder, and I could tell that he had been right all along, about everything. He had filled out in the time he had been away; perhaps the constant riding had given his muscles the necessary exercise to grow. He now wore a beard, and I saw that he wore his hair long too, so that it covered his ears, and in his eyes I no longer saw innocence. I never saw him after that sporting that childish grin again. Devavrata had grown into a man.

The people of Meru, with no exceptions, loved him. The maidens, who had six months ago sneered at him and turned away at his approach, now sought him out and spoke shyly to him, and after he had passed they held each other and giggled. Indra gave him a medal crafted at Kubera's mine, with an image of the Great Rock etched on it. Within four months of his return to Meru, the mountain had its own functioning salt mine on the banks of the Dead Lake, and the reliance on Anga and the other Great Kingdoms, for salt at least, had ceased.

The path to the Dead Lake was known to but a few, and Indra decreed that it would be another Mystery. Nishanta was chosen as its keeper, and the explorers were entrusted with the responsibility of guarding the secret of the salt mine, which was shrouded in the same kind of magic as the Ice Cave, making it invisible to the naked eye unless one knew where, when and how to look. So it was that the explorers got their own Mystery, and because the Celestials did not trust them enough, Brihaspati was appointed their 'guide', which meant they had to take his permission for all matters related to the salt route.

For Devavrata himself there was no dearth of accolades. Indra offered him a place at his court among the other Celestials; some said he ought to be made a Wise One. I said he should be given the role of Prabhasa, because Meru was yet to probe the Mystery of the weather. No one seemed to remember that he was destined to go to Earth at the end of that year. He had been utterly and completely accepted as one of Meru people.

Of course, it was a situation that was agreeable to me. I had always expected to fight with the Celestials and the Wise Ones to keep him on the mountain, and now none of that was necessary. Devavrata could have asked for anything on the mountain and the Celestials would have given it to him without a murmur. He could have even asked for a bigger portion of the

lake's water than he was entitled to; such was the amount of respect he commanded. Everything was, so I thought, working out well.

But fate had other plans. Devavrata asked for the one thing that none on Meru had in their power to give; he asked for that which Meru wanted to extricate itself from. He asked for that which I had done so much to distance him from; he asked for that which no longer had to be his fate unless he wished it so.

He asked for Earth.

F I F T E E N



‘What?’ said Brihaspati, the smile stricken off his face and his eyes widening in astonishment. ‘Did I hear you correctly, boy?’

‘Yes, Preceptor.’ Devavrata stood to his full height. ‘I do not wish to live on Meru any longer. My destiny is on Earth.’

Ganga did not say anything. The three of them sat in the front room of Brihaspati’s hut. Devavrata had just returned from an audience with Indra. He had bid him to stay on the mountain, and in return had offered him anything his heart desired: wealth, position, power, women. But Devavrata had said that his heart’s desire was to leave the mountain and make for the plains of Earth, and that he would seek out his father in Hastina and succeed to the throne after him. Ganga remembered the night on which he had spoken to her of the earthmen as ‘them’ and of the people of Meru as ‘us’; how certain she had been that night that Devavrata thought of Meru as home, but something had changed – something had happened on that visit to the Rocky Mountains and the Dead Lake; something that had killed his love for Meru.

She wanted to ask him what it was that had conspired to take him away from her, and a hundred other questions, but she kept her silence. The

Preceptor had questions of his own, it seemed, and he looked intent on getting their answers. If there was any proof required that Devavrata's decision had shocked the entire mountain, one needed to look no further than the Preceptor's face; never in Ganga's life had she seen him so drained of peace, so wrought with agitation.

'The mountain has given you everything,' said Brihaspati, looking upon his disciple with fire in his eyes. 'We have reared you like one of our own. We have never looked upon you as a half-blood, even though you are! And this is how you repay us all? By walking away from us when we most need you?'

Devavrata turned away and folded his arms over his chest. 'The mountain does not need me now,' he said, and Ganga noticed, for the first time, how deep his voice had become, and how hoarse and careworn. She could not believe that this boy was yet to complete his sixteenth year. He was no longer gangly as he was when he left the mountain, but he had not turned burly like Prabhasa. He was still slender, and his arms reminded one of a maiden more than a warrior; but now there were scars on his wrists and his forearms, and there were marks on his shoulder where the twine of the quiver cut into his skin.

'The mountain has a salt route now,' he said, 'and it will serve the people for a long time to come. You do not need me to keep it working, Preceptor, and the people are equipped well enough with magic and weapons to ward off any attacks on the Dead Lake, even if some the earthmen were to somehow break through the film of magic that surrounds it. You are safe, Preceptor! You do not need me.'

Brihaspati said, 'So you think you can repay all that the mountain has done for you by giving us a Mystery to keep?'

An uncaring, distant look came upon Devavrata's eyes, and his thin features went lifeless. His lips set themselves tight against one another, and his nose, which jutted out like a hawk's, withdrew just a touch. The muscles of his jaw moved and tightened, and he said, 'Yes, Preceptor, I do.'

Brihaspati stood staring at Devavrata for a time, eyes ablaze, and Ganga feared that he would place a curse upon the boy. But in a moment he recovered. He sighed with his shoulders slumped about him, and shook his head in despair.

Ganga knew Devavrata had been right. He had repaid whatever debt he owed to Meru by his addition to the Book of Mysteries. Only the wisest of the Wise Ones had added new Mysteries to the Book, with most ordinary dwellers of Meru contenting themselves with studying the existing Mysteries so that they might someday add to them. So to suggest that Devavrata still owed a debt to the mountain was laughable. And Brihaspati knew it. If anything, the mountain owed a debt to her son; it was his magnanimity that he was not making any demands of the people of Meru. All he was asking was to be allowed to leave – but why? What had caused him to turn his back on them so?

'You will not survive on Earth,' said Brihaspati, his voice rasping. 'They will feed you to the vultures, those barbarians. Do you think you will descend upon them and teach them the ways of the mountain, and do you think you will create another Meru on Earth?' He laughed shortly. 'You will fail.'

'I do not intend to create another Meru on Earth, Preceptor. One Meru is burden enough for Earth to carry.' He now faced his master. 'Do you not agree?'

'I do not know what you mean.' Brihaspati turned away, and Ganga thought she saw something furtive move in his eyes as their gazes briefly

met.

‘I think you do, Preceptor,’ Devavrata said. ‘Of all the people on Meru, setting aside the Wise Ones, you are the only one who knows. I know that you know.’

Brihaspati sighed again and turned to look at Devavrata. He walked to him and placed his hands on his shoulders. As he looked up at him he suddenly looked very old; the smooth skin of his face ridged with lines, and his breathing laboured. ‘Why, boy? Why now?’

Devavrata did not unfold his hands, nor did the frosty shape of his face alter. He looked down upon his master and said, ‘I knew only when I returned from the Dead Lake, Preceptor, and I stayed these two moons just so I could pass on the Mystery as I knew it, so that the people of Meru might not suffer. I was repaying my debt to the mountain, in your words.’ His gaze hardened. ‘But now the debt is repaid – many times over – and now I want nothing of this life, for I know the secret that the Wise Ones guard with their names and with their lives.’

‘But – how do you know? I have not ever told you of it. I have been sworn to secrecy.’

A smile appeared on Devavrata’s lips, but his eyes remained hard. ‘Some invent Mysteries, Preceptor, and some keep them; but that is not all. Some might come along and discover a Mystery without being taught it, like I did. I would that I did not – the gods know that I am being truthful when I say that – but I did, and now that I have, I cannot stay on the mountain any more. I do not know how you do, Preceptor.’

‘You do not get to judge me,’ said Brihaspati, his voice hard, his hands clawing at Devavrata’s shoulders.

Ganga took a step forward, her arm raised. ‘What?’ she asked. ‘What is it that you are speaking of, Devavrata?’

‘I am speaking of the oldest Mystery of them all, Mother,’ said Devavrata. With his hands he gently held the arms of the Preceptor and walked him to the sitting dais, on which she had once seen him dispense justice. (How long ago that night seemed!) Leaving Brihaspati slumped on his hands, Devavrata walked back to Ganga. ‘The oldest Mystery of all, the Mystery concerning the water of the Crystal Lake.’

Ganga felt her mouth dry up. ‘You mean,’ she managed to say, ‘you know how the water comes by its healing powers?’

He shook his head. ‘No, I do not know that, but I know where the water goes every winter and why it overflows the bank every summer.’ He bent towards her and held her by the shoulders. ‘You were right, Mother!’ he said. ‘You were right when you said the water of the lake is not really water. It is something else.’ He threw his head back and laughed. ‘Yes! It is something else indeed! It is the life force of every living being on Earth.’

The walls of the hut began to close over her, and she kept her balance only by holding on to her son’s arms. ‘You are crazy,’ she murmured. ‘Crazy!’

‘Am I? Why is the Preceptor letting me speak, then? I tell you, Mother, I am right about this. I have not felt more correct about anything else in my life; no, even when I thought of the Dead Lake I had my doubts, but in this I have no doubts whatsoever. I am sure. I am sure of it all!

‘In winters the crops die on Earth because there is no sun, and the animals die too in great numbers. This causes the earthmen to die in larger numbers in the winters, because there is no game to hunt, there are no trees to cut, there are no plants to eat. And so the water of our lake recedes.

‘In the summer the opposite happens. Except on the wastelands by the Rocky Mountains, the land is filled with plants, and therefore life abounds in its millions, and the Crystal Lake flows over its banks and swamps the

apple trees. The Great River flows at its strongest, for it is in the summer that the White Rock melts the most; and therefore life throughout the Sixteen Great Kingdoms thrives, and we on the mountain have enough water to last us the season.'

He was in between them both now, hands tucked behind his back and pacing back and forth. His voice reminded her of her mother; he spoke in the same low, clear, firm tones of a priestess dispensing knowledge of the Mysteries to her wards. Ganga walked back until she met the wall, and leant on it, watching him.

Devavrata said, 'When I travelled down to the plains and over the mountains on Earth, I saw many things that I did not see up here on Meru. The weather is unpredictable; some days we would set out expecting it to rain and preparing for it, only to be baked in the sun; and on others we would set up camp for a clear night only for winds to blow our tents away.

'There is disease in the air on Earth. Animals and trees – and people – die of the foul air that roams the lands. We have rid ourselves of the poisonous air through our Mysteries, but as I asked Mother that day, when we got rid of it, where did the disease go?'

He stopped and looked at Ganga. 'There is only one place it could go, Mother. We drive the poison in our air down the mountain towards the plains. When was the last time we had a death that was unforeseen, Preceptor? We do not seem to have deaths of any other kind but those that nature brings down upon us, and yet down there men of all ages die of different things – like disease and ill-health.

'And the water of the lake gives us such long lives. If it is indeed true that the water of the lake contains the essence of life in this land, then our drinking of it is upsetting the balance. Is it not, Preceptor?'

Brihaspati shook his head, holding it with both hands, his eyes closed. ‘You are not meant to speak of these things,’ he chanted. ‘You are not meant to speak of these things.’

‘Oh, yes!’ said Devavrata. ‘We are not supposed to speak of it because it is such blasphemy.’ He swirled around to face Ganga, his face contorted. ‘Mother, every time a person on Meru drinks of the Crystal Lake, he is drinking of someone else’s life. For every moment you have added to your own life by the water of the lake, a moment has been taken away from a life form on Earth. We drink to our lives, Mother, and to their deaths!’

‘No!’ shrieked Ganga, but she could not summon the courage to stand up to her son. She slunk further back against the wall and turned her face so that her cheek rubbed against the rough surface of the mud wall. ‘No . . .’

‘Yes,’ said Devavrata, his voice at once low. ‘The goddess of Nature – the goddess you believe in – does not play favourites. The men on Earth are as dear to her as the men on Meru, and yet how is it that we live longer lives? There is a balance to nature, Mother; if we live longer than we ought to, it is only because we are snatching from the people of Earth the life they ought to live.’

‘But,’ she said, and she found that her mouth had dried up. She wet her lips with her tongue and said, ‘But how is this possible? How is life there . . . water here—’

‘The Dark Ones that lived on the mountain before us were smaller in number, and they used the water of the lake only once in a while – you know how bloody that story is, Mother, but the story of the ongoing use of the lake, the story of everlasting life on Meru, is one of murder – murder not just of humans but of animals and trees also. We drink the water of our lake and purify the air with our Mysteries, and in doing so we let loose disease and death on the people of Earth.’

He panted like a hungry wolf, and his eyes smoldered red. Ganga recalled the change that had come over him ever since that visit to the Dead Lake, how he had retreated within himself, how the smile that had once played on his lips was now no longer visible, how he had maintained a distant indifference to the commotion that was happening around him – the accolades, the medals, the cheers. She now knew what had caused the change. Ganga knew then that Devavrata had stepped over the line, and he would never turn back. He had picked his future, his destiny, his world – and it was not Meru.

‘Do you understand now, Mother,’ he said, hurrying over to her and looking into her eyes, ‘do you understand now why the people of Meru need the earthmen to hold their peace? Because if they are at war, too many will die, and the people of Meru will not have enough water to drink. And now you know why Celestials cannot increase their numbers because if the numbers on the mountain rise, the use of the lake will become more and more indiscriminate, and more people will die on Earth, and that might start a cycle that the Celestials cannot stop.’

He turned to the Preceptor. ‘Is it not so, Preceptor? Is it not true that you have to keep this balance of death and life? The water of the lake is like the juice of barley seeds that we drink at harvest; we cannot live without it – nay, we do not want to live without it – and though we distribute death by drinking it, we again replenish it by sending our doctors far and wide to take care of the diseased. How mighty of us, eh, Preceptor! How mighty of us!’

‘You are not meant to talk of these things,’ Brihaspati was babbling, groping for words. ‘You are not meant to talk of these things.’ Ganga tried in vain to remember the staid, smiling face of the Preceptor she had seen all

these years. Now he was staring open-eyed and open-mouthed at them both, repeating the same sentence over and over like a child.

Devavrata folded his arms and turned his back to them. ‘The people of Earth speak of Meru as a place where the gods dwell, and in moments of despair wonder why the gods – who are sometimes so benevolent – also punish them so. We feed them and let them grow only to eat them and cut them down, but then we feed them again and nurture them, only to cut them down again.’

‘It is the will of the Goddess,’ said Brihaspati.

‘Will of the Goddess!’ Devavrata thundered, and when he turned upon Brihaspati, the old man shrunk away and covered his face, and Ganga wondered for a wild moment if her son would strike the Preceptor. ‘Not one among us – not one, Preceptor – knows the will of the Goddess. That such a lake exists is proof of the fact that the Goddess does not have favourites, only men do. And your power over the earthmen has blinded you, Preceptor, and so you force your will upon the Goddess, knowing full well that she cannot speak for herself.

‘But one day she will,’ he continued, looking up at the skies. ‘She may not speak to you in words, but she will speak to you in the only language that you understand – the language of blood. Blood will flow on the slopes of Meru; and this time, Preceptor, it will be the blood of the Celestials. Mark my words!’

Brihaspati staggered back to his seat and regained some of his composure. Smiling nervously he said, ‘You cannot place a curse, Devavrata. You have undergone none of the training required of a sage, so your words are merely words. They will not come true.’

‘Oh, I would that they do,’ said Devavrata bitterly. ‘I shall pray to the goddess all my life that my words come true some day.’ He walked towards

Ganga, his arms spread wide. ‘Mother!’ he fell to his knees and covered his face in his hands, calloused and thick were his fingers now, which were once tender and soft. ‘Mother, god save us all. God save us all!’

‘Indra will not like that you have spoken of all this; indeed he will not like it that you know of all this. If you dare to tell anyone outside this hut of what you know—’

‘Oh, keep your secrets!’ he said, and spat at the ground in the direction of Brihaspati. ‘Keep your hellish secrets! I shall tell no one. If I tell this to the people of Meru they will ask for your heads, O the Wise One. Do not think I do not know of it.’

Brihaspati smiled; not the kind of smile that Ganga had seen on his face before. This one had malice in it, and the sly pleasure of someone who knew he had his opponent just where he wanted. ‘Is that what you think, son of Ganga? If the people of Meru were to really know the truth about the Crystal Lake, they would all call for larger rations! You do not know human nature, my boy, you think everyone is a saint – like you are.’

‘Come what may!’ said Devavrata. ‘It would disrupt life here on the mountain.’ He looked up at his mother even as he addressed his words to the sage. ‘Life that is as innocent as life on Earth, life I would not wreck out of anger at you, the Wise Ones. Consider that my repayment for the debt I owe the mountain!’

Ganga pushed herself away from the wall at last and went to her son. She clutched his head to her bosom and planted a kiss on his forehead.

‘Mother, God help us all if these are the only Gods we have.’

‘These are not, child,’ she whispered to him. ‘None of us on Meru are gods. The goddess is watching down upon us all, and those on the Earth, and you are right, son. The mountain is as dear to her as is Earth.’

‘You say you do not know the will of the goddess,’ said Brihaspati, his voice regaining its edge now. ‘But perhaps it had been her will all along that we should find the lake, and perhaps whatever is occurring now is in accordance with her will too. When no one knows what the wish of the goddess is, who can tell what is right and what is wrong?’

Devavrata pulled away from his mother with a grunt to face the Preceptor. ‘No goddess will wish life on some of her sons at the expense of others.’

Brihaspati laughed and now Ganga saw kindness and pity on his face. ‘You have not seen enough of the world, son of Ganga. You will find out soon enough that the life of self thrives upon the death of the other. That is the only law of nature that is immutable. Life feeds on death, and death feeds on life; we here on Meru are only trying to live up to that ideal; the ideal that your goddess has written into all that she has created.’

Devavrata stumbled to his feet and joined his hands at Brihaspati. ‘I do not have the power to debate you on matters such as these, Preceptor. I know that I have drunk the life of my fellow beings, and though my own life must extend because of it, the thought of it sickens me. From now on I intend no part in all of this. I will go to Earth and serve to keep peace in the land, not because I want Meru to prosper, but because I want Earth to prosper.

He stood up straight now and let his hands drop to his sides. He thumped his chest and said, ‘And you, the people of Meru, Preceptor, could perhaps find it in your hearts to stop feeding on your fellow men and accept, as all of us ought to do, what the goddess has in store for us. Do not try to control her, for at the end of that path lies only ruin.’

Brihaspati opened his arms. ‘The goddess has given us all of this. We are only accepting it.’

Devavrata sighed, and his shoulders sagged. He walked to the door and looked out at the rocks, the rocks on which Ganga and he had sat that night, and shook his head. 'Then I must go alone. I must go alone in search of what the goddess has in store for me.'

Ganga followed him, and just as they were passing the doorway, she heard Brihaspati say in a whisper, sorrowful tone, 'Earth will shred you to pieces, son of Ganga; to pieces!'

S I X T E E N



Night had fallen, and Ganga estimated from the amount of moonlight reflected off her moonstone that it was mid-month. She saw from the lines of chalk on the front door that sixteen days had passed after the last full moon. It was not auspicious to embark upon journeys or tasks on nights such as these, but she would not say that to Devavrata, for she knew what he would say.

He would say that the moon and the sun belonged to no man, nor did the stars. That this night was as good as the one preceding it and the one following it; all that was needed to make a journey was a clear purpose of will, and the rest were all tales. He had not bothered to check upon the times when he had left in search of the Dead Lake, and had that not gone successfully? He was to take the barge down to the plains this night, and he would alight at Hastina, if all went well, in the early hours of the morning.

The Lady of the River sat on the cot with her chin buried in her chest, eyes closed, whether in sleep or thought Ganga did not know. She herself sat by the water pot, with her mother's upper garment in her lap. The cotton had got caught in a nail on the bed and torn, and Ganga was now patching it up with a round piece of silk that had arrived from the plains the night

before. But silk burned Mother's skin, more so in the afternoons when she sweated more than usual, so she lined it with a carefully cut portion of cotton and stitched them together. She had twine in her mouth and a needle and the garment in her hands, and she squinted at the garment as she held it up against the lamp.

Devavrata sat closer to the main door with his head thrown back. When Ganga looked up, she saw him staring vacantly at the ceiling. His bare upper body was smeared with dust, and the thread that his teachers had made him wear was now soiled and brown. He would need it no more, she thought, watching him run his fingers along its length. In Hastina, he was going to be a kshatriya. He would strip the thread off his chest, wear his hair short like kings did, and perhaps even shave off the beard. Now, with his legs stretched out and arms thrown on the floor by his sides, he looked more like a brahmin in stupor than the future high king of the land.

The light that streamed in off the door cast a shadow of him along the wall, and Ganga found herself shrinking away from it. Ever since she had heard Devavrata speak with Brihaspati about the Mysteries, she had been aware of a thin feeling of fear whenever she thought of him. No one without the Sight could have known all that Devavrata knew, and it was inconceivable that a mere earthman could, unaided, make all the inferences he had.

'The water,' said her mother, not raising her head. Her health had deteriorated rapidly over the last year. They said the water of the lake only sustained the middle period of life. Once old age crept in, it closed in with relentless haste. Her voice was now not much more than an aged, weak whisper. 'It was the water you gave him, Jahnvi.'

'But everyone on Meru drinks the water, Mother, and none among them have seen what he has seen.'

‘But who among Meru people have human blood in their veins? The earthmen who arrive on the mountain are not allowed near the lake; perhaps this is one reason why. Perhaps none of the Wise Ones know what effect it has on an earthman – or half an earthman.’ She ran a tongue over her pale lips and looked at the boy. ‘Perhaps it awakens the Sight. Or perhaps’ – and she turned to face Ganga – ‘it is your blood that has given him the Sight.’

‘But Mother,’ said Ganga. ‘You have sons too, and none of them have the Sight.’

‘Ah,’ the old lady croaked in irritation. ‘Who knows how he got it; he must have got it somehow. It was either your blood or the water of the lake. One way or the other, it has happened.’

Devavrata rolled his head to the side to look at the old woman. ‘I do not have the Sight, Lady. I did not make use of any Sight to know what I know.’

‘Aye, that is the nature of the Sight. You are still young, and it will come upon you unbidden, and you will not know it when it does, but in time you will come to learn how to use it.’ She nodded at Ganga. ‘Jahnavi herself is only just beginning to use hers, for she lost practice during her years in Hastina, and she had had to learn everything again when she returned. Do not renounce it, because you cannot. It has already chosen you. Embrace it and put it to the best possible use.’

‘But, Lady,’ Devavrata protested, ‘it did not require the Sight to see this. It was all very apparent, right from that night when Mother and I tried in vain to boil the water of the lake. After that it was rather simple to connect the waxing and waning of the lake with the life and death cycles on Earth. And when I went there and saw for myself, it made my beliefs even stronger. All I had were guesses, I know, but I intended to get the truth out of the preceptor regardless. As it turned out, I did not have to.’

‘Do you not remember a dream, perhaps,’ said the lady, ‘or a vision that suggested to you the secret of the lake? Something that must have sown in your mind the seed of an idea – something must have occurred that made you see.’

Devavrata thought for a moment and shook his head. ‘I just knew.’

The old lady smiled at him. ‘That is the Sight, then, my boy. In your mind’s eye you saw that which to all of us was invisible. Perhaps if you could stay on Meru you would become one among the Wise Ones. It is said that the Wise Ones see deep into the future and plan for it, and sometimes, with deft touches here and there, avoid situations that might be unnecessary.’

‘No, that is not for me. My life is on Earth.’

‘And you just know this too?’

He looked up at her suddenly, as if she had spoken out his innermost thought. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It was when I rode down the plains to the Dead Lake, and when I was striding about on its white banks, that I knew.’ His eyes met his mother’s, and Ganga smiled at him.

‘You knew of the water of the lake by then?’

He nodded. ‘Yes, I did. It filled me with revulsion for the whole mountain, my lady, and it still repulses me now. I will be a happy man indeed when I descend upon Hastina’s shores tomorrow morning.’

‘How many such lakes are there, Devavrata?’

Devavrata sighed and shook his head. ‘I do not know. But it cannot be the only such lake in the world. There are lands beyond the eye can see, and some say there are lands of men beyond the Great Oceans. Our explorers have been to lands beyond the silk country to the north, and some have crossed the mountain ranges on whose foothills the Kingdom of Avanti

resides. We are by no means alone, my lady, and it does not seem to me possible that only one such lake exists.'

'Are we going to find them?'

'Meru people want to,' said Devavrata, 'and that is why the explorers are looked after so well by Indra. We know what we are looking for, so perhaps it is only a matter of time before we find it.' He paused and looked away for a second, thinking, and then said, 'The explorers told me this when I went with them, and of course that made my convictions stronger.'

'How do we know how far the power of this lake extends, Devavrata?'

'They have been cataloguing the wars and natural disasters in all the lands they visit, and the Wise Ones compare the dates with the waning cycle of the lake. As our knowledge stands now, the lake draws its power from about as far as the Great Kingdoms.'

'So there will be a lake on the other side of the mountains then, which behaves like our lake, but acts on the life in that region.'

'That is likely, yes. But perhaps it is also possible that this lake is a mistake of nature, and hence unique. Perhaps there are no lakes like it anywhere else in the world, but I tell you, my lady, I would not bet my life against Meru people finding more lakes like our Crystal Lake.'

'And then?'

Devavrata laughed mirthlessly. 'And then what? The lifetimes of Meru people would increase, they will have more water to drink, and by then the weather Mysteries will have been probed enough to cut off their reliance on the Great Kingdoms . . .'

'Do you really see that happening, Devavrata?' the lady asked.

He looked at her with interest, and Ganga felt as though he got caught by her choice of words. Sure enough, he said, 'I do not *see* anything happening, my lady, and I suspect this will all be long after my time is come

and gone. I am merely telling you what I think might happen.’ He paused for a moment, then as though for emphasis, said in a low voice, ‘I do not see the future.’

‘You might wish you did when you get to Earth, my child. Only a magician can live among the earthmen peacefully.’

Ganga spoke up then, for the first time that evening. ‘It is not true, Mother. The people of Earth might not live the same lives as we do here, but their lives are no less valuable than yours and mine. I have lived among them; there is nobility on Earth too.’ With a glance in her son’s direction, she added, ‘Perhaps more than could be found here on the mountain.’

The Lady trained her eyes on Ganga and held her gaze for a long time. Then she shrugged and said, ‘Leave me alone, you two, all this talking has tired my muscles.’ She turned to Devavrata. ‘You, boy, you ought to take care of yourself down on the plains. Over there it is often not the noblest that survive, but the strongest.’

‘So they say, my lady,’ said Devavrata and got to his feet and bowed to her.

‘Now go,’ she said, waving them away. Devavrata left the room and stepped outside. Ganga folded the garment twice over and placed it next to the water pot. She tied the loose ends of the string around the needle and left it on the garment. When she reached the doorway, her mother called out to her. ‘Give him the moonstone, Jahnvi,’ she said. ‘The boy will have use of it.’

When she joined him out by the steps, she took off her necklace and placed it in his hands. ‘Give me your medal.’ She nodded at the golden disc that hung on his chest. ‘You will have no need of it where you are going.’

He obeyed her, and after they had exchanged their ornaments, fell to his knees and touched Ganga’s feet. She raised her hand, palm faced down over

him, as she knew she had to, but when she opened her mouth to bless him, she found that no words came out. She had thought she would be dismayed that he was leaving the mountain, that moroseness would fill her, that she would at least cry, but all she felt was an overwhelming sense of vacuum, like somewhere deep within her, she was aware of a thudding sensation – dull, soft and unrelenting.

He picked up his bundle of clothes, and as he was about to descend, Ganga said, ‘Promise me one thing, will you, child?’

He stopped – this figure of him with his bundle slung over his shoulder, along with that of her mother’s silhouette, would burn itself deep into Ganga’s mind. The words that came out of her mouth at that moment too would stay with her for a long time to come, and she would wonder, long after the gates to Meru had come down forever, how big a role those words had played in shaping the events that occurred.

‘Promise me, will you,’ she said, ‘that you will do all in your power to keep your father’s happiness?’

He did not hesitate. He turned so that she could see his profile. He still wore the face and hair of a brahmin, and when he held his head high and said, ‘I will,’ she thought she was looking upon the next Wise One.

His hands were not made for weapons, she thought, but for the Book of the Mysteries. His mind, that alert, searching mind, ought to have been given to the probing of the wonders that the goddess hid in her breast, not to carve strategies and tactics of battle and bloodshed. But no, her time had passed. His had begun. He was no longer her son. She remembered Vasishta’s words that every woman had to give up her son for fostering at some time or the other, and she now saw the wisdom in the High Sage’s words. The line of men was always measured by the father. Yes, the mother bore him, fed him, carried him, reared him, but it was the father whom the

son ought to follow, and it was the father's deeds and name that the son ought to emulate. That was the way of the world, and it was neither cruel nor kind, for the world does not care for the whims of man.

So it was right that from now on he was no longer the son of Ganga. He was the son of Shantanu.

And the son of Hastina.

Book Two

F I S H E R - G I R L

O N E



The couple and child sitting at the opposite end of the ferry from the girl were barely clothed. The man wore a white bundled turban that towered over his head, and under his bristling moustache, his lips sucked on a roll of tobacco, the blackened tip moving as he talked, and rings of lazy grey smoke fading into the evening sky. A dark speck, the size of a small honey bee was perched on his right cheek, and every now and again the man fondled it with his forefinger. A mass of hair – most of it black – tangled and matted upon his chest.

The ferry girl noticed that the man's bronze skin was taut and smooth, and there were no visible signs of flab around the torso. Even his wife, dressed in a soiled sari that had once been bright, was lean and healthy. The girl guessed from their bundles of clothes that they were washermen. Or perhaps, she thought, casting a glance at the wheel they had set down in the middle of the ferry – upon which their son sat – they were potters.

'What is that smell, Mother?' the boy said, piping up and sniffing at the air. They had just left the bank of Hastina and were making their way across the river. The girl met the boy's questioning gaze with a smile.

‘Shh!’ The mother pulled him into her lap and slapped him on the thigh. ‘Have I not told you to be quiet?’ She stole a glance across the ferry at the girl, and immediately looked away at the wet sandy bank of Hastina. The girl leant back and used the weight of her body to pull at the oars, propelling the ferry forward. She felt the first tug of the current at the boat. In this season the Yamuna flowed at her strongest, no more than fifteen feet inward. She shifted her position on the ferry to one side so that she could row at the correct angle to negate the flow of water. The mouth of the ferry protested and shook behind her. She heard the rough, black wood of the base creak and snap – and for a moment a cloud passed over the boy’s smooth face, but she smiled brightly at him, and he smiled back, his wrinkled nose pointing straight at her.

The receding bank of Hastina was a golden carpet in the light of the setting sun. This was the season in which the Yamuna washed over her bank almost every morning, and when she retreated she left the sand moist and soft. If she could give it a closer look, the girl knew that she would find footprints littered on the sand – of birds, of children that had come to swim in the river that afternoon, of lovers, perhaps, who had stolen away the night before to walk alongside the river together after the moon had risen. But from where she sat the sand slopes looked so fine in the golden light that for a moment it was easy to believe they had never been soiled by life, and the woman sitting opposite her, perhaps thinking similar thoughts, sighed as she gazed upon it.

‘I wish we did not have to go,’ she said.

‘Aye,’ said the man, and took a puff on his tobacco roll. ‘You are too soft, woman. You cannot fall in love with a place these days.’

The woman pulled the boy closer to herself. ‘We were born here, you and I,’ she said sullenly. ‘And so was our son.’

‘So what, I ask you.’ The man looked in the opposite direction, towards the deep end of the river and the other bank, which had just come into view. ‘When I was born here we had a king. Who is the king now, I ask you. Eh?’

The ferry girl listened with faint interest. The fisher-people made their homes along the bank of the river and lived in self-contained settlements. They made occasional trips to the city, yes, but that was on market days when they would exchange fish for grain and clothes. They did not take much interest in the running of the city, for it did not affect the way they lived their lives. The city, in return, took only as much notice of the fisher - people as was necessary in matters of trade. As far as the people of Hastina were concerned, the Great River was Ganga. What occurred on the banks of the Yamuna was of no concern to them. So long as the high king got his dues and so long as the fisher - people kept their peace, neither disturbed nor interfered with the other.

There had been a kingmaking at Hastina not too long ago, but tales had emerged and spread as far as the riverbank that the boy whom King Shantanu had crowned as his heir was not born of the royal line. The king’s many bastards had returned to stake a claim on the throne, and the king, now that his days of virility were far behind him, had taken the prudent route and made him king without murmur.

‘They say the boy is the son of the old queen we had all those years ago,’ the woman said timidly, looking up at her husband. ‘He does look like the king too . . .’

‘Ah, rubbish,’ said the man. ‘That old queen was a murderess. Do you not remember how many children were born to her only to vanish on their seventh day?’ His eyes fixed on the ferry-girl now, as though he were noticing her for the first time. ‘They say the queen used to kill her sons in the river as soon as they were born, that her sons were human sacrifices for

the good of Hastina, but these people are hopeless romantics. What good did it do us, I ask you. Those eight years we had the coldest winters we had ever seen. And no sooner had the queen left than the summers returned.’ He bit off a tip of his roll and spat it into the river. ‘Aye, it was good riddance, that queen.’

‘But that boy looks like the king too,’ the woman said. ‘He has the same hair, and especially the shape of his nose – I went to the kingmaking, I did, and whatever they said was right. Everyone there said he was the king’s son —’

‘Of course he is the king’s son, woman! Even the blindest dog in the city would know that! But he is just a boy. Get that into your tiny brain. He is no king, and he is no fighter. Have you seen his arms? They are no bigger than mine. What do you fancy he will do when the vultures swoop in on us, eh? They have had a long time to prepare, those birds of prey ...’

They approached the other bank, and the girl rowed them to a clearing that sloped upwards and away into the forest of Khandav. Night was beginning to fall now, and in the last light of dusk, the path that led away from the bank into the thicket of trees that clumped together in the distance, looked more red than brown. And it looked narrower than it did in the light of day, for the branches of the trees seemed to hang lower after nightfall.

The man gestured at her to row the boat away from the bank. ‘Not here, girl,’ he said. ‘Not in the forest! We wish to go to the kingdom of Surasena – further, much further along this bank.’ Something behind her then appeared to have caught his eye. ‘Say, is that an island? I did not know there was an island here.’

The girl said simply, ‘The mist covers it, sir, at this time of the year.’ She looked over her shoulder, keeping her eyes focused on the path along the bank through which the boat sailed. She did not look at the island to

their right as they passed it. Indeed, it would not have been in the regular rowing path had they made for Surasena's bank right from the start. A breeze now blew from that way, though, and brought with it a faint whiff of dew sprinkled with the scent of ripe guavas. Unbidden, in her mind's eye she saw the long-forgotten image of the patch of soft green grass set in between two sturdy guava trees, and if she let the image stay in her head she knew that soon enough another image would spring up in its place – of a young girl leading by the hand a bearded man in saffron towards the patch of green.

'The Yadavas are a race of men,' the man said loudly, and the girl found herself back on the ferry. 'Not of boys who want to play at men's sport.' He turned to his wife. 'You mark my words, woman, in under two years there will be a new king on the throne of Hastina. This boy will not last.'

The couple's son, who had sniffed happily at the air all this time, now asked again, frowning: 'Mother, what is that smell?'

The woman looked at the girl again. 'Not one more word from you, you rascal!' she said, and slapped him again on the thigh. To her husband she said, 'And you think the Yadavas will attack Hastina?'

'What if the Yadavas do not? The Panchalas are no slouches. The big Kuru kingdom is now asking to be attacked by crowning a fifteen-year-old king, and I shall not be surprised if the armies of all the Great Kingdoms come knocking on Hastina's door for a piece of the carcass. No, oh, no, that is not the city for us.'

The ferry-girl looked to her left. They were approaching the sharp bend where the river broke from its southerly flow and made for the southeast, and a few hundred leagues on, they said, it became one with the Great River and flowed on to kingdoms that lived on the shores of the Eastern Ocean, and finally into the ocean herself.

Here, right on the bend where Yamuna changed her course, the ferry-girl docked her boat length-wise along the bank. She drove her two oars into the muddy water on either side of the ferry to steady it, skipped out onto dry land, and turned around and held her hand out to the boy.

The boy still twisted his nose at her, but he took her hand and stepped onto land. 'Hold on to these oars,' she cautioned the couple. 'Do not tip her over.' She turned to the boy now and said, 'You wanted to know what the smell was?'

He looked up at her in the darkness, and the ferry-girl thought she saw a shadow of fear cross his face. She held her forearm to him so that he could smell it, and she smiled at the grimace on his face. 'That was the smell. It is the smell of the fisher-people.'

'You smell bad.'

'Do I?' She bent down, hands on knees, to look him in the eye.

He nodded at her.

The man and woman were still making their way out of the boat, lugging the bundle of pots and clothes along. The ferry-girl led the little boy a few paces away from the bank and whispered to him, 'Do you want to see some magic?'

'Magic?'

She reached into the crook of her blouse and brought out a little cloth bag. After untying the knot she slid two fingers through the mouth, and when she brought them out again, their tips were swabbed in a white, powdery substance. She rubbed her fingers on her palm, then rubbed both her palms together. 'Watch, now,' she said, and ran her hands once over her arms, shoulders and face. 'There, that should do. Now, do you still smell me?'

A breeze blew over the water, a heavy, moist breeze. The girl smiled at the boy's changing expression. His eyes widened, first in surprise, then in pleasure as he lifted his face and inhaled breath after deep breath, sighing after each one.

'I do!' he said. 'I do, I do, I do! But you do not smell bad any more.' He reached for her hand and grabbed it with both of his to examine it. He found, of course, that it had not changed in appearance. It was still calloused, yellow and hard. Then he touched his nose to it, and sighed again, this time louder than before. 'Ah,' he said. 'This is magic!'

'I told you,' she said to him and smiled. 'Now will you keep this secret for me, child? I will give you some of the powder if you do.'

'You will? Really?'

'Give me your hand.'

He rubbed his hands on his sides and stretched them out to her. She dipped her fingers into the bag again and dabbed them on his palms. 'There, that should last you for a long while.'

'Oh!' he said, rubbing his hands and arms and face, then smelling his palms with his eyes closed. 'I will now not take a bath until this smell fades!'

The boy's parents came trundling along from the bank and stood by them. The father sniffed at the air in suspicion and the mother exclaimed, 'How wonderful it smells here! I wish I could find where it is coming from – but it does not seem to come from anywhere, does it?' Her eyes rested for a moment upon the fisher-girl, as though wondering where her stench had gone, but then she got lost in her surroundings again. She threw her arms out and said, 'It seems to be – just everywhere!'

'Mother!' the boy said. 'Mother! Mother!'

Out of the corner of her eye the ferry-girl gave him a look that calmed him down, and he covered his mouth with both his hands, giggling and shaking his head at his mother who bent down to him. The father, having finished a close survey of the place, tossed a coin in the ferry-girl's direction. 'Keep that, girl.'

'Thank you, sir,' she said, bowing.

'Now if we had to ever row back the other way to Hastina, we would like it to be you, girl. Are you always around here?'

The girl nodded. 'Yes, sir. I am the daughter of the king of the fisher-people that live on the other bank. I am generally to be found floating about the river, so if you need me, all you need to do is come by here and call out my name.'

'Aye,' said the man. 'What is your name, then?'

The girl paused and exchanged a look with the boy, watching the bright young pair of eyes that were regarding her from behind his mother's waist. 'They call me Kali in the settlement, sir,' she said. 'The dark one.'



Kali lay back on the ferry and watched the blue-black sky littered with stars. She held the oars with a light grip and allowed the boat to float at the mercy of the current. With the moon high up in the sky, and after the rain that had come down in the evening, the Yamuna was expectedly calm and pleasant, playing to the whims of the north breeze.

Her eyes grew heavy, and as was her habit she tried to locate the image of the fish in the night sky. Her father had once told her that the best time to find constellations in the sky was after the moon had gone down. On the clear nights that he took her out on the sandy banks of the Yamuna, she was only keen on rushing up and down the film of mud that the river left in her

wake. But he would drag her over to the dry areas, lay down on his back, seat her on his stomach and take her hands in his to trace patterns in the sky. Once he pointed out the shape to her, she would see it clearly, as though the stars had invisible white lines joining them. Then a wave would crash against the bank and she would look away, only to look back at the sky to find the pattern gone forever.

She had never been able to find the constellation of the fish. Her father had told her it was one of the harder constellations to find, and it needed patience – much like catching real fish did. She knew the general location in the sky where the shape was supposed to stand with respect to the pole star, but it was hard to find a shape when there were no lines joining the dots. Her father had also said that the best way to find the fish in the sky was to let it find you. You just stared and stared at the stars, neither searching nor probing, and when you least expected it, it would jump out at you and look you in the eye – and once you found it that way, it would be impossible not to find it whenever you looked.

But then her father said so many things; not all of what he said made sense. For instance, he told her that she had a brother who now ruled over a kingdom to the west by the Rocky Mountains, a kingdom which fought with a fish on its flag. He was her twin brother, her father said, and that she was destined for bigger things too, like her brother.

But had that been anything more than a doting father's wish for his daughter? The boat swayed in the midnight air, and an old song of the fishermen came to her lips. Eyes still closed, she gripped the ends of the oars and began rowing, one stroke forward, one stroke backward, and she sang.

When the question arose in her mind whether she really wanted bigger and better things than the Yamuna, the fisher - people and the ferry, she

thought the Kali of a year ago perhaps would have said no. She would have been perfectly content to live on as the princess of the fisher-people, row passengers from one bank to the other, assist her father in matters of governance, and of course, when the time came, choose the ablest fisherman as a mate and have children who would grow up to be rulers of the people. As lives of fisher-people went, there were few privileges higher than being an integral part of the royal line, and the Kali of a year ago would have wanted no more than that. She would have expected no more than that.

But the Kali of now was different. A year ago she had been a small, thin girl of fourteen with a squeaky voice. She had worn her hair in two tightly woven plaits, just like all the other unwed maidens of the settlement. The skin on her face was coarse and cracked, and no amount of bleaching with even the freshest cattle-dung cured it. Her arms and legs were long and stick-like, and when she walked she did so with a queer stoop to the front with her head bent, and needless to say none of the boys in the settlement gave her a second look. But most of all, there was the smell. No matter how many times she bathed or went swimming in the Yamuna in a day, the smell of fish never left her person. In the settlement it had gained her the name of Matsyagandhi, and they teased that they could tell she was coming from a mile off. Some of the elders said that it was as if she had been born of a fish – so stubbornly did the stench cling to her. That story grew with each telling, and in no time she was being called the fish - born.

Her father did not discourage these people, nor did he ever show signs of being angered by their remarks. But he did accede to her one request to let her row the ferry across the river. Her education had been all but complete by then, and perhaps he thought his daughter would gain much by

mixing with the inhabitants of the city. On Kali's part, she was overjoyed to be away from the settlement.

Now all of that had changed, of course. Her voice now carried rich dulcet tones, and though it was a bit too deep for her liking, it was better than any one else's in the settlement. Trained in the course of nights like these when she floated by on the water and crooned to herself, her voice had become proficient enough for her to accompany the bard at settlement gatherings. Physically, too, she had filled out, and unless the reflection of the Yamuna (or her eyes) was lying to her, her limbs no longer were like those of a eunuch. Her chest too had broadened noticeably in the last year, enough for the men to look up from their tasks – even if it was for but a moment – when she passed.

And now the smell had passed too, save for those few times when she wished to smell, for a change, like her old self, and put away her little bag of musk dust, like she had done this evening. She knew for certain that without her fragrance all her looks of a divine dancer would come to nothing. She had taken two of the best men of her settlement in the last year, one of them by the big washing boulder and the other on the riverbank in the banyan's shade. She was under no illusion that while her physical attributes helped her in wooing them, they would not have followed her if she had still carried her old scent.

She had become more skilled too, both at keeping watch on her own cycle and at handling men's desires. When she sought out men in her settlement – and she often did – it was only during her waning cycle, when she knew that even if the man were to ignore her pleas and lose himself within her (which happened rarely, but more often than she would have liked), he would not get her with child. The one time she did get with child had been trauma enough; but the sage had been the first man she had

known, and by then she had not yet the knowledge of the woman's cycle, nor of the herbs that the old fisherwomen knew of that would 'lessen the weight' of a woman's belly.

The pale gibbous moon hung in the sky to the left, and from long months of practice she immediately knew that she was on the fifth night of her waning phase. She would wait two more nights – just to be sure – and then perhaps another trip to the boulder or the riverbank ought to happen. It had been twenty-one days now since she had last lain with a man, and now just the thought of a warm body against hers in the cool night made her nipples perk up. She had not yet decided whom she would take, but old Bihu's grandson had just begun to look up at her with those big, innocent eyes of his, and though he was younger than she was – his voice had cracked only last year – he had the slender, wiry frame that none of her other lovers had had, and she had noticed how strong his hands were the other day when he tore open a fish length-wise with his bare hands.

Yes, she thought, I think I will take Bihu's grandson – what was his name? – the night after tomorrow. But again, unbidden, she thought of the sage, for it was to him that she owed her present life, and if getting with child was the price she had to pay for all that she had right now, it was a small one. She felt nothing for the sage but a vague sense of gratitude; even that was only feeble, for she had not received all that she had without giving away something of herself. She wondered, detachedly, whether her son was still alive, and if so, where he was being fostered.

It was then that an image forced itself upon her, one that she had not seen in a long while, but which was so clear and fluid that she wondered, in that same detached manner, if it was happening right there in front of her. She saw herself on the bank of Hastina, heaving the ferry over to the anchor - pole with the rope slung over her shoulders. And she saw, in the distance,

the upright figure of an unkempt man with a staff in one hand and a silver vessel of water in the other.

She closed her eyes and let the images take over. They stayed still for a moment, so still that Kali could see the droplets of water suspended in the air, frozen in time. But then the vision started moving – the droplets fell, the girl heaved, the boat rocked and scratched the edge of the bank, and the man in the distance walked up to the river.

T W O



‘Will you take me across the river, fair maiden?’ said the sage, and as he bowed, Kali saw grey ash drop from his forehead into the water. On looking more closely she realized that he had ash smeared all over his body – his arms bore the dusty look of one who had not washed in a long while, and on his torso, she could see the man’s ribs stretch his lifeless skin, and further down, his pelvic bones extruded toward her on both sides. His legs were mere bones clothed in a loose layer of skin, and Kali wondered when the man had eaten last. She had heard of men who retreated to the mountains in the north and denied themselves food and water in the hope of uncovering the Mysteries of this world and the world beyond. She had always thought the idea silly, that by renouncing material possessions one could gain a peek into the workings of the higher plane – if there was one.

But a look at this man’s face made her wonder. His features were set in a shape of extreme relaxation, as though nothing could stir them out of their stupor. His cheeks were riddled with dark spots, and his mouth was hidden behind a thick black beard that grew in every direction possible. Yet his eyes sparkled with a slow black fire, his smooth forehead bespoke the peace

within, and the lips sported an ever-present smile – not that of mirth, but that of knowing.

She suddenly realized that she had been staring, so shook herself out of her daze and said, perhaps more sharply than intended: ‘It will cost you a silver coin, old man. This is no charity boat.’

The sage reached into his sack and produced a coin, laid flat against his palm. Kali noticed his hands were soft and unblemished like a woman’s, though at the very tips of his index and ring fingers she saw brown burn marks. She let go of the rope around her shoulder, and the ferry sank back into the water. She stepped into it and took her seat on the rower’s side. From the west she saw black clouds approach, which filled her with pleasure and anxiety in equal measure – she loved the rains, summer rains even more so – but the Yamuna could be a hard beast to tame during a downpour.

She gestured to the man to hurry. ‘Come on, sir! I will get you to the other bank before the clouds gather!’

The man hurried to the boat, threw his sack and staff in, placed the vessel of water carefully on the plank of wood, and helped himself over with a moan of effort. Once he had seated himself, Kali started paddling, first turning the boat around so that she could row backwards, and then using the full breadth of stroke to send the ferry along the straight line leading to the other bank.

It was only after they had reached close to the deepest part of the river that Kali noticed that there was fog about – fog on a summer morning! She could make out the figure of the sage only vaguely through the thick curtain of heavy air. He looked as though he was a shade approaching her from a far-off world, and when he spoke his words seemed to echo in the semi-darkness.

‘Do not despair, fair maiden,’ he said. ‘The smoke will clear.’

She wanted to tell him in no uncertain terms that she did not despair, that she had no reason to despair. She knew the Yamuna well enough to row through it in pitch darkness. A clap of thunder rended her ears just then, and the right oar slipped out of her grip. She became aware of drops of rain rapping against the wood of the ferry, and the skin on her upper arms.

The shadow of the sage moved closer to her and emerged from the screen of smoke. He took her free hand that had let go of the oar and patted it. ‘This rain, too, shall pass, fair maiden. Do not fear.’

A sudden thought occurred to her. She pulled her hand away and got up to her feet. ‘Is this your magic?’

He stood up too and offered her his hand, from which she shrank away. The smile did not leave his face, and there was another clap of thunder as though answering her question. ‘I do not have power of this nature, my lady,’ he said. ‘If I could make it rain to sate my own base impulses, I would make it rain every minute of the day.’

Kali relaxed; the ferry glided along the river at an unfettered pace, and the raindrops that had been harsh on her skin a moment ago now appeared to kiss her softly before slipping away. The dust on his skin was being washed away too, she noticed, and clean brown skin began surfacing over his chest, his face, his arms and his shoulders. Instinctively she reached out for his forearms and rubbed the wet dirt away, and she saw that his hands were indeed like a woman’s, although the burn-marks were now clearer.

He held her hands in his, and looked into her eyes. For a moment there was no rain, fog or thunder. There was just the floating barge, the gurgling water, and the softness of his fingers over hers.

The sky rumbled again, and she emerged from her trance, shaken. She pulled her hands away and turned around. She crossed her arms over her

chest and stood with her head bent. She didn't know why the heat refused to leave her face even in such weather; she didn't know why she found the sensation so pleasurable; and most of all, she didn't know why she was ashamed.

The sage moved closer, and his arms came to rest on her hips. He whispered, 'There is nothing to be scared of, my dear, nor are we doing anything wrong.'

She moved further away, right to the edge of the ferry now, and the boat bent lower so that the mouth of the ferry almost touched the surface of the water but it continued to glide by. They had been sliding along for a long while now and Kali wondered why they had not reached the other bank yet. Even the air seemed pure and fresh; yes, there was something about this all. It was definitely his magic. The summer rain, the mist, the sounds and smells of this new, fabulous world that was very like the Yamuna but was not quite it, the way the ferry glided without bobbing with the current, as though they were skimming by on a layer of freshly formed ice – yes, this was all his magic.

All of this for what purpose? Just because he wanted to have her? Stick-legged, freckled, pig-tailed Kali? Matsyagandhi Kali, whom all of the men in her settlement turned away from? Now here was a man from the mountains up north, a man of wisdom, a man who studied the Mysteries of the universe – he desired her, and was willing to create a world of magic right here on the Yamuna just for her. But what of her settlement, her father, her people? She was the daughter of a king. Could she give in to a sage's magic like this, here on the open waters of the Yamuna, on her ferry? What if the mist was to lift before—no, she could not. She should not!

She turned around, and instead of saying, no, pushed him away and said, 'Not here, sage,' and gave him her hands. 'Not here, for if the mist

was to lift—’

‘The mist will not lift, my dear,’ he said quietly.

‘Even so,’ she said, ‘we must be close to the bank. The people on the bank will see us. They will hear us.’

‘They will not.’ She felt his grip on her hands tighten now, and a chill went down her back. She summoned all her will and pushed him away, gently. ‘Sage, I beg you, take a seat. I will row us to an island I know. And once we are there . . .’ She felt the heat rise in her cheeks once again, and she lowered her gaze. ‘Some patience, sage, is all I ask.’

He walked back and stood at the centre of the boat, his arms folded, and watched her with a thin smile on his lips. Kali sat back down and took the oars in her hands, and the mist lifted just enough for her to know where they were. They had floated downstream a bit too far, and to get to the island she would have to now row them back against the current.

She turned the boat around on its centre, and as she started heaving back and rowing, stroke after slow stroke, she kept her eyes firmly fastened on the sage’s blackened feet, determined not to look up. Her arms grew weary and they ached but she kept at it, and over her shoulder she saw the shore of the island approach. The mist descended upon them again, and for a wild moment she wondered if they were lost, because when she looked for the bank she saw nothing but a thick white cloud of solid smoke. The sage had retreated into the shadows again, and then it suddenly struck her that she did not even know his name.

Her right oar then scraped against what sounded like rock, and with relief Kali guided the barge along the bank, feeling around with her oar after every short paddle. She stopped when she spotted a patch of green through the heavy mist, and looked up at the ghost-like shadow of the sage.

‘My name is Parashara,’ he said, his voice distant. ‘Is it time for us to alight?’



The grass on the island wore a yellow, parched look, and the tangled blades lay close to the earth. Kali did not find anything strange in that, for it had been a harsh summer; even that morning had been hot and sunny before the sage arrived. Now the air hung heavy and moist while the Earth still remained baked. Bunches of white wildflowers peeped out on either side of the narrow path on which they walked, hand in hand. Every now and then a bright chrysanthemum would appear, drooped and downcast, her orange petals dotted with dew.

She took a step ahead of him and held his hand behind her. She crossed the bushes and pushed aside the leafy branches that concealed the clearing. She murmured a word of warning to the sage to watch out for the thorns on the stem, as she gingerly held one between her fingers and moved it aside so that they could pass.

When they stepped out into the clearing, she heard a soft gasp leave the sage’s lips and smiled to herself. Two guava trees stood in the middle of the island on a raised mound, farther away from the water than all the other trees, and yet their trunks were strong, the branches sturdy, the leaves green as though it were the middle of monsoon; and though Kali had not been to the island in a month, she knew that the fruit they bore was as succulent on the tongue as it was alluring to the eye.

The grass surrounding the two trees was fresh, soft and green with life. While the rest of the island appeared to have been worn down by the sun, here on this little patch of Earth, spring seemed to be ever-present, throwing open her arms to welcome them.

This was magic too, she thought, with a wary eye on her companion.

‘These trees are old,’ the man said from behind her, as if answering her thoughts. ‘Their roots dig deeper into the Earth than those of the other trees here. They can reach the water of the Yamuna that flows underneath.’

She led him to the trees and let go of his hand. She untied her upper garment, spread it out on the grass, and sat on the very edge, facing away from him, her knees folded together and bent to one side. She leant to her left, and with her free hand plucked out a blade of grass and rubbed it between her fingers. Her hands were rough to the touch, unbecoming of a maiden’s, but her fingers were long and thin, and her fingernails were near-perfect ovals. If one were to merely look at them and not touch them, she thought, her hands were not that bad; perhaps one would stop short of calling them beautiful, but they were certainly not unattractive.

‘The garment is not big enough, Sage, for the two of us,’ she said, her voice low.

He stepped onto the brown cloth, set his sack, staff and vessel on the grass, and sat down. She stole a glance over her shoulder. He sat straight, cross-legged, his hands wrapped around the balls of his knees. He could have been sitting down for a meal, thought Kali, or his prayers. ‘If I am to share this garment with you, fair maiden, I wish it were smaller.’

‘Do not call me that,’ she said sharply. ‘You can see me. Why do you insist on calling me fair when I am – like this?’

‘Ah, but fairness is not what you wear on your skin, my lady, or how you smell. It is what you wear on the inside.’

She flung the blade of grass into the ground, stung. So he had noticed the stench. Of course he had, how could anyone miss it? She realized she had been hoping all this time that some of his magic had worked on her too, that the rain had washed off her smell like it had the dust on his body. Now,

suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to rush to the boat and row back to the settlement; this man and his magic be damned.

‘You are angry, my lady,’ he said, in the same removed tone. ‘You do not like the colour of your skin.’

‘No!’ she said. ‘I do not! I am the darkest person in the settlement. They tease me. They say they cannot see me at night if I do not wear white.’ She paused, thinking of the people of her settlement, and groaned in disgust. ‘And look at me! My hair is short, my arms and legs – my face – no, no, how can anyone like me when I look like this?’

He moved closer to her and rested an arm on her shoulder. ‘My dear lady, you are but fourteen. Your days of beauty are ahead of you. Why do you despair so?’

She turned around, clasped his hand in both of hers and said, ‘Do you really think so?’

‘I know so, my lady,’ said Parashara. ‘A maiden comes into full bloom between the ages of fifteen and eighteen; some come by their times before others, and some after. I see in you a beautiful lass – I daresay that if I were to pass by the river in a year’s time, you will be as beautiful as the divine nymphs themselves.’

Her heart leapt at his words, and she looked into his eyes, searching for signs of amusement perhaps, or of deceit, but she found none. She saw nothing but a calm, unattached sincerity. She dropped her eyes and shook her head. ‘I wish you were speaking the truth.’

‘I am speaking the truth.’

She wanted to tell him that it was difficult to trust the words of a man who was so consumed with desire that he created a mist around the island just so he could lay with her. But the words stopped in her throat. After all,

she consented to his advances; she felt the same desire he did. To blame him – especially when he was being so gentle – would be cruel.

So she said instead, ‘Even if you were speaking the truth, who would cast even a glance at someone who smells so foul?’

The sage began to say something, but stopped himself and nodded. ‘You are correct. I may have something for you.’ He pulled his sack onto his lap and plumbed among its contents. ‘Ah, yes, here it is.’ He held in his hand a small cotton bag tied around the mouth with twine. ‘A pinch of this on your hands and no man will be able to resist you.’

She took the bag from him and opened the knot. She reached in with her thumb and forefinger and smelled the powder that coated her fingers. When she closed her eyes she heard his voice: ‘I have not washed in a long time, my lady, and yet I do not reek. It is because of this very powder.’

And it was due to the powder that he had seemed so irresistible to her, she thought. Otherwise how would she have even thought of laying with a man such as this – sickly, diseased, hairy and untidy – yes, this was part of his magic. She applied the powder to her hands and then over her arms. In the sage’s eyes she already saw desire begin to deepen as the first whiffs caught his nostrils. Yes, she thought, this did work; except there was only one trifle . . .

‘What will I do once I run out of this powder, O Sage? Will you not teach me how to make it?’

‘That is a secret only allowed the high sages, my child.’

She smiled, for she sensed a slight wavering uncertainty in the sage’s rebuke. He was drinking her in with his gaze now, and he was, at this moment, more man than high sage. It was at such times that men were most vulnerable. (Later Kali would wonder how she knew that, for she had not

known men before Parashara – and when no answer would come, she would put it down to a maiden’s god-given intuition.)

‘Are high sages allowed to lay with fisher-maidens on the banks of the holy rivers?’ she asked coyly. ‘You must have known many women in your travels, Sage. Is that not so? You must be skilled, therefore, in the arts of pleasing a woman.’ She sidled up to him so that he could smell her better, and saw with pleasure that his breath quickened when she moved closer. ‘Hmm?’

He reached out and gripped her wrist. She tried to break free, but he would not leave her. ‘Do not take me without my consent, Parashara,’ she said, surprising herself with her courage. ‘The act of love ought to be pleasurable for both of us, and if you take me against my will, it will be pleasurable neither for me nor for you.’

‘Ah,’ he said, and let her go. He moved away from her to the edge of the garment, but she followed him, anxious not to let her advantage slip. ‘But if you tell me the secret of your fragrance here, Sage,’ she said, her voice at once dropping low, almost to a whisper, ‘I will submit to you and your body fully. I will let you take me here, under these very trees, on this very garment, wet and inviting as it is . . .’

‘I will tell you,’ he said. ‘I will teach you the mystery as soon as we—’

‘No!’ she said, and immediately broke into a pleasing smile. ‘No, Sage, not after’ – she gave him her hands to hold – ‘for what will I do if you forget your word afterward? It has to be before. *Now.*’

Parashara thought for a moment, then nodded and pulled his sack toward him again. ‘It is not a long chant to remember, so I will not write it down – how much Sanskrit do you know, child?’

‘My education is complete.’

He looked up at her. ‘I doubt that, but it is perhaps complete enough for you to remember what I am going to tell you.’ He took out an old book tied together with rope and undid the knots. He handled each leaf with care, turning them over and murmuring to himself. Once or twice he laughed, and on occasion read out from the pages in the manner of a child committing a difficult lesson to memory. As time wore on, Kali felt a stab in her heart – the sage no longer seemed aware of her presence. It seemed to her that he had forgotten the purpose for which he had opened the book. She leant forward and cleared her throat.

‘Yes, yes,’ he said, not looking up. ‘It is your verse that I am looking for, my lady. Here it is.’ He peered into the book and moved his finger along the lines on the page, his lips moving in silence. Then he closed his eyes and looked away for a moment before snapping the book shut and turning to her. ‘Come,’ he said. ‘Come closer.’ And he breathed into her ear the couplet.

She repeated the words back to him, and when he nodded in approval she asked, ‘So all I have to do is chant this verse and the powder will appear?’

He frowned, puzzled. ‘How will the powder appear from nowhere, girl? Is this what you mean by a complete education?’

‘Then what else do I need to do?’

‘Look for the flowers that are pink in colour and are shaped like the face of a monkey. You will find them in most woods before the monsoon rains begin. You will need to grind the petals of these flowers into a fine dust, and into this dust you will add a stick of salted sandalwood and grind it again. Dry this powder in direct sunlight for seventeen hours, and mix it in the vibhuti of Rudra.’

Kali asked, ‘And the verse?’

‘You chant it all along, over and over again.’

She joined her hands and bowed to the sage. ‘I will forever be in your debt for this gift, O Sage.’

He smiled at her and pushed his sack away. ‘Let us not speak of forever while the here and now stretches before us.’ He extended his hand to her, into which she placed hers and smiled.

‘There is one more thing, O Sage.’

His face hardened. ‘Another thing?’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘one last. I have never been with a man before and I – I am the daughter of a king . . .’

‘Do not worry, my lady, I will be gentle with you.’

‘Oh, that is not of my concern, Sage,’ said Kali, ‘but can the daughter of a king lose her virginity before she is betrothed? Will my name not be blackened when I get married and my husband announces to one and all that his wife has known someone else?’

The sage smiled. ‘You are right. There is but one solution to this quandary.’ He pulled her close to him and looked into her eyes. With his lips barely touching hers he breathed in, deep, and closed his eyes. ‘Ah, you smell like the Devi herself, my lady.’

She struggled, trying to draw away from his mouth, from his body. ‘You have not given me your word yet,’ she said. ‘Will you give me my virginity back after you have taken me?’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘Your word?’

‘You have my word, you will be as virginal after our union as you are now. You have my word!’ His arms tightened around her now, and his hands groped on her back, fumbling with the knot of her garment. He placed clumsy, hurried kisses over her forehead, cheeks, the tip of her chin.

She stopped struggling now, for she had gotten all that she had wanted, and gave in readily to his embraces. She dragged his lips down to hers, and when they met and locked she heard him sigh throatily. She rolled over on top of him, straddling him between her thighs, and with her hands she pushed down on his chest, covering his nipples with her palms and digging her fingernails into his skin, deep enough to leave marks. He groaned again.

Around them the mist thickened.



When she awoke she was instantly aware of two things. One, she had slept the soundest sleep of her life: she heard the birds titter in the trees, and when she craned her neck and looked toward the edge of the sky it was a golden brown, so she had either slept through the day or through the night. The grass under her back was soft as she had always known it, but it was not wet as it had been that morning. If not for the cramps in her inner thighs, she would have dismissed the morning's happenings as a daydream of a lovelorn fourteen year old.

The second thing that hit her, at the same time as the first but with a lot more force, was that she was alone. When she threw out her arm to her side she met with nothing but her cast-off garment, and when she looked around, there was no sign of the sage or his belongings. But a leaf from his book had been set under a rock, away from the grass patch, and it fluttered in the breeze. She got to a sitting position with a lazy moan and realized her body ached more than she thought it would, but at the same time she felt stretched out and relaxed. She pulled the page from under the stone, and saw that it had the verse written on it. Under the verse were the instructions he had given her.

He had been gentle as he had promised, but it had still hurt, especially that first time. But as the morning passed and they returned to each other's bodies again and again, the pain lessened, and eventually disappeared. She could not remember now how many hours had passed after that first time before they had collapsed on the grass as one, exhausted, panting, content. He had also left her the fragrance, and the method of creating it whenever she wanted.

On an impulse she slid her hand down to her thighs. If he had kept all his promises, why did he leave her in her sleep? A little doubt crept into her mind. She felt herself with her hand, gingerly at first, then with increasing desperation, and when her doubts were fulfilled, she let out a cry through clenched teeth.

He had not left her a virgin. The promise he had given her was a lie, and therefore the swine had left before she came to her senses, knowing full well that he had foresworn his oath. She gathered her knees in her arms and rested her cheek on them. Rocking back and forth, she let the tears roll down onto the grass, and stared at the dirt-ridden garment by her side, fighting the temptation to rip it to shreds. She closed her eyes and willed herself back to her senses.

When the anger had abated, she thought long and hard. One thing was clear: there would be a child. She had heard that the holy men from the north valued their seed so much that they did not reproduce frivolously; even if it were not so, they had come together not once or twice, but a number of times that day. She tried to recount which day of her cycle it was, but could only make a guess at it, and that guess put her right in the middle of her fertile period.

Yes, she thought calmly, there was going to be a child, and if that had been Parashara's idea all along, how could he have blessed her with

virginity, granting for a moment that it was within his powers to do so? How could a virgin bear and deliver a child? Perhaps after she had given birth (if she decided to) her virginity would come back to her, but even that was a far shot in the dark.

Parashara was gone, and he was not coming back. She knew it before they had lain together, and there was no use pretending now that she had not. Whatever happened from now on, she knew she was on her own. She picked up her garment and wrapped it around her shoulders. Then she got to her feet and walked back to bank, where her ferry waited, bobbing up and down in the water.

THREE



Every time Kali thought of that summer morning when the mist descended upon the Yamuna, the last image she saw was of her walking away from the patch of grass toward the boat. Some days she was wrapped in a red garment, some days in yellow; on some days the bushes in her path bore thorns the size of needles; on others the terrain was bare and brown and dead; sometimes the boat creaked and waved as the river crashed against the bank; at others it stood steady as though anchored to the bottom of the river. But at all times the flurry of images stopped with the frozen sight of her person departing the two trees. Everything stopped midair; the flying blades of grass, the particles of dust, the fallen leaves that had risen up in a burst of wind, her hair, open and no longer in plaits, arrested in mid-flight.

Even this time it was the same. The night had darkened, the stars had brightened, and the moon had shifted its place further eastward. The fish constellation still eluded her, and her hands plied upon the oars, allowing them to skim the calm, shimmering surface of the river so that the ferry remained in gentle, steady motion.

She had no recollection of how she had returned home that evening, but her father had acted in no way different, and save for looking askance at her crumpled upper garment, had asked no questions. He had mixed some freshly cooked long-grained rice with curried fish with his bruised hands and seated her next to him on the mat. He had told her excitedly about the bounty of fish they caught that morning, of how the summer rain came at the nick of time and drove the fish that lived in the deeper waters closer to the ocean downstream, straight into their fishing nets. He said the market day for that week would replenish their depleting wheat stocks, and when she coughed on her curry he had hurried to get her a vessel of water.

Even when she missed her next cycle he did not question her. On the night of what should have been her third – and most painful – day, he returned from the river with his net hanging over his shoulder, and after he had slung it on the wall in the eating room of their hut, he sat down to dinner and served himself the head of a fish. He ran his fingernail down the side of the meat to carve out the soft portions, and not looking up at her, said, ‘My sister married into the people that live on the north of Khandav, closer to the edge of the kingdom, where the mountains begin.’

She wrapped her arms around her knees and cradled her chin between them.

‘It will do you good to visit your aunt for a few months,’ he said, still carving the fish with his finger. She saw scales and strands of cooked meat litter around the head, as the eye stared at the roof. ‘She will take care of you. She is also one of the Elder Women in her settlement, so she has knowledge of the herbs and plants – if you decide to—’

‘No,’ said Kali.

Her father nodded hurriedly, still evading her eyes. ‘*If* you decide to, that is all. Even otherwise, she will take good care of you, and she will

advise you on what to do further. They will find a mother, some or the other maiden who cannot bear children – there are enough of those, even in our settlement.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Some rice?’

Kali served him a ladleful, then another; when she brought it a third time he covered the plate with his hand. She returned the ladle to the vessel and replaced the lid.

‘It will do you good. The weather is nicer up there. They say the summers are not as harsh as they are here. It is closer to the mountains, you see. You have been with me all your life, Kali. Perhaps this is as good a time as any for fostering in the hands of a good woman who will teach you the ways of a lady.’

‘I will go, Father,’ she said.

‘It is not necessary for you to go right now,’ he said. ‘You can leave in’ – he cast a worried look down at her stomach – ‘perhaps two months.’

‘Yes.’

And so after two months, just as her belly had begun to swell, she went up to the settlement that called itself the Bhrigu clan, where her aunt took ‘good care of her’ as her father had predicted, for the necessary time. She was fifteen, so the birth of the child was smooth and easy. Two days later, her aunt asked if she would like to hold the baby.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Please make arrangements for my journey back home.’

When she returned home, she noticed that people in the settlement, especially young men, were staring at her. She wondered what her father had told his subjects; she heard whispers among the ladies that Kali had gone up north to live among the fairer fisher-people, and that they had bestowed her with gifts of youth and womanhood, for it had not escaped their notice that Kali, who had been scrawny and lean when she left, was now endowed with shape on her chest, on her hips, and on her limbs.

It was on her return that she started practising the Mystery that Parashara had taught her, and after that it had been all plain sailing. She could now command any man in the settlement, not only from the authority of the king's daughter – which she had always had – but with the confidence of a woman who knew of her sexual worth and was proud of it.

Her thoughts went back to the grandson of Bihu who had caught her eye. Matsyagandhi was now a thing of the past. They now called her Yojanagandhi, in awe, and marvelled at the powers of the fairer fisher-people who had given her the gift of such divine smell. Some maidens followed her night and day, pestering her to share with them her secret, and though she did not reject them outright, she never told them the truth either, preferring to educate them on ways of washing themselves better so as to get rid of the smell of cod that stuck to them so stubbornly. Her fragrance, they said, travelled as far as a yojana, and her legend grew with the telling. Her passengers wondered out loud wherefrom the scent arose, and when they realized she was the source of it, they gaped at her as if she were the nymph of the Yamuna herself. She thought of the boy whose hands she had held that evening. He would tell his friends of the magic. His parents would tell all that they knew about her, and they were not the only ones.

Lately people in richer clothes had begun to come to the Yamuna, not to be ferried across to the other bank, but just for a pleasure trip on her boat. Some of them had even asked her hand in marriage, but for one reason or the other she had always said no. In her heart of hearts she felt that all of this had happened for a reason, and while being a wife of a rich merchant from Hastina was alluring, especially given her current life, she could not help but think that there was something bigger in store for her. She was beautiful, yes, but there were many beautiful maidens in the kingdom, some of them undoubtedly more so than her, but allied to her beauty she had

something else. She had her intoxicating secret, and the experience of having understood men and their desires, and of handling them.

She roused herself to sit on the rowing platform of the boat now, and started stroking with purpose towards home. It was already late, and if she stayed longer, Father would worry. She cast a fleeting glance over her shoulder at the branches of the banyan that stood on the island, and a smile spread on her lips. She smiled in amusement at her fourteen-year-old self, pleading with the sage to keep her virginity intact, and her sense of loss that night when she discovered that the sage had betrayed her.

The ferry picked up speed and cut across the river. A few more strokes and she would be on the bank. The sage had not betrayed her, of course. She now understood. What she had asked the sage for was only a physical embodiment of virginity – the one that men understood and worshipped. Of what use had been her virginity to her when she was disliked and ridiculed wherever she went? Of what use was that layer of bubble-like skin between her legs when it bound her to the chains of men's wishes, when it could not free her, when it impeded her from knowing herself, from thinking for herself, from loving herself?

Her strokes became bold and wide now as she entered the deep part of the river, and she let the flats immerse completely so as to gain the most momentum from the flowing water. Now she was free! Her desire for men did not shame her any more; she had discovered that it was something to take pride in, to revel in. She lived touched by many, perhaps, but touched by only those men she admired and who admired her in return. She took charge among the people of the settlement and participated in her father's court, she understood men and their affairs, the way of life of the fisher-people that she had noticed when she was being fostered with the Northmen, and she put that knowledge to good use in her own settlement.

She was respected by men and women alike, and when she sought men for her bed, something she never attempted to keep secret, they came to her with stars in their eyes.

She knew now that that was virginity; being pure in thought and action, being unafraid as long as your actions have nothing immoral about them; and taking pride in the gifts that the gods have given you, and spit back on the shame that the world insisted on heaping upon you. Of all the maidens in her settlement, she knew, she was the most virginal.

So Parashara had not deceived her, she thought, as the bank came into view and drew nearer. In her innocence she had thought of virginity as a physical thing which one wore about oneself like a garment, but he had taught her that it had nothing to do with the act of laying with someone. Parashara had taken her on the island, and had taken her physical virginity, yes, but in doing so he had given her the only kind of virginity that mattered to a woman. He had taken her virginity, and in doing so he had made her a virgin for life.

The ferry docked by the bank now, and she jumped out into the water and caught the anchor rope and inserted the end of it through the two oar-hooks on the ferry's side. She carried the two oars out on to the sand and heaved them over her shoulders. Her bare feet sank into the mud as she traced her steps along the river, in the direction of the settlement. Yes, big things were in store for her, she knew not how she knew, but it only mattered that she did. She knew that word of her magical fragrance had spread far and wide; how long before it reached the king? They said the king was lonely and forlorn, and he was also in search of a wife, even now that he had named an heir to the throne.

She had made it a point to go into the city these last few months, therefore, and on each of those occasions she had taken care to perform the

mystery just the day before. Once she had dared to go as far as the outer walls of the king's palace and made conversation with the guards. Now the people in the city – rich and poor, young and old – all knew her by sight and by smell. How long now before the king heard of her?

The king would hear of her sooner or later, of that she had no doubt. The king would come here, too, to the bank of the Yamuna, looking for that fragrance about which everyone in his kingdom was raving. All these days he had been high king in both name and duty, therefore time might have been rarely available. But now he had a crown prince sharing duties with him – he had been crowned less than a month ago, and already the kingdom was abuzz with tales of his valour and kindness – so now, surely the burden on the high king would ease a little. She knew the king organized hunting parties towards the end of summer, and if he should wish to perhaps go into the forest of Khandav to hunt a deer, she would be right at hand to ferry him across.

The first dim yellow lamps of the settlement came into view, but all she could really make out were smudges of black, some moving about, some stationary. This in the city of Hastina which was hailed as the richest of the sixteen Great Kingdoms, where the citizens reportedly never wanted for food or water or clothing. She sneered; the king would need to make a trip through the hovels of this settlement just for a night to know that was not true, and then she corrected herself – it was not as though the king did not know. The fisher-people lived like the lowest of outcasts on the bank of the Yamuna, ignored and hated by the people inland, and if she could somehow persuade the king . . .

The kingmaking of the crown prince, irrespective of his lineage, meant for her only one thing – the day of her meeting with the king had drawn near. Summer would last no more than a month from now, and the Khandav

was teeming with game. The king would come before the first monsoons arrived, of that she was sure. She looked up, lips set tight, to see her father at the door to her hut peering into the darkness, lantern in hand, and when he saw her, his face lit up. Yes, she thought grimly, the king would come before the first monsoon.

And she would be ready for him.

F O U R



She sat in the middle of the room with one leg stretched out and the other folded, her knee laid flat on the ground. From the bowl next to her, she picked up a fish and slapped it on the board at her foot. Pinning it down with her left hand she inserted a knife into the anal opening and slashed the full length of its belly with a snap.

Closer to the main door, by the light of the oil lamp, her father peered into a sackfull of rice grains and searched for stones. Every now and then he picked something up, blinked at it through squinted eyes, and cast it away. It had been a happy day for him today; the monsoon rains had come the week before, and though the river was in spate and it was not altogether safe (last monsoon six fishermen and their boats had been lost in the river), the bounty made the risk worth taking. The women of the settlement now had plenty of work on their hands in the evenings – feeding their men and lending a helping hand with the carving and salting of the day's catch. Kali herself had become busier than she had been all summer, so she had to cut down on the number of hours spent with the ferry at the riverbank. With the Yamuna's mood being the way it was, there were no passengers about anyway.

But Kali still made it a point to walk down to the ferry with her oars and take her out onto the river, even if to just exercise her arms and feel them flexing against the current. She would let it float downstream for a mile or so and then row against the current. Her father worried for her safety when she did this, but she was judicious in picking her days for drills such as these. She only went out on clear days following clear nights, and in the mornings when the river was at its calmest. In this season, the clouds generally gathered around mid-afternoon and thickened towards the evening, and downpours, when they occurred, lasted well into the night.

The skies had been clear that morning, and out by the riverbank she had seen a chariot drawn by black horses, bearing the banner of the sun. She had deliberately turned away and started untying the anchor for her boat, all the while aware of at least two pairs of eyes considering her from a distance. She had pretended not to notice, and had gone about her regular exercises, floating down to the island and rowing back up against the current. When she returned after her first lap the chariot was gone.

When she was in her hut, she heard some commotion outside, of people yelling instructions at each other, and the sound of hooves pounding the sandy Earth. Then she heard sounds of footsteps leading to her front door, and Bihu's face appeared in the doorway dripping with rainwater. 'Chief!' he said, 'The high king wants an audience with you.'

Kali smiled to herself, and while her father was putting together a bumbled response, she said, 'One king wishes to speak to another, Bihu. Please tell him to enter the hut and take his seat, if he will.'

Her father and the Elder stared at her, one aghast, the other downright scared. Bihu lowered his voice and spoke to her father. 'Chief, the high king is here. The high king of Hastina. You will not even step out of the hut to welcome him?'

Kali prodded the insides of the fish and then placed the tip of her knife on the base of the fish's tail. With a dig and a slice, she snapped it off. 'We heard you the first time, Bihu. Will the high king not see us in our own house? Is our hut so beneath him that he wishes to speak to us outside in the rain rather than here, by the warmth of the lamp?'

'The maiden is right,' came a deep voice from behind Bihu, and Bihu fell away, bowing. In the doorway stood Shantanu, in his red riding clothes. He carried no weapon. On his head there was neither crown nor turban. His wet hair was matted together in clumps and strewn about on his shoulders. A black scar ran from his left ear down his jaw, and as though to wear it all the more proudly, perhaps – for Kali knew that men loved their battle marks – he had shaved himself clean. He wore a milky white dhoti which had been tied up to reveal his calves, and along his left leg, she saw a layer of fresh mud which travelled down to his foot. His sandals were coated with brown on the sides, and round specks of watery mud spotted the skin on his toes.

He took one step into the room with his arms tucked behind his back. With the air of a general, he surveyed every inch of the room, his eyes lingering for a moment at the fish Kali was splicing. 'The maiden is right,' he repeated, and took a step toward her and stopped. Kali saw that his breathing had deepened. His eyes narrowed at her, his eyebrows knitted together, first in bafflement, then in growing wonder. 'By the gods,' he whispered, 'it is true.' He threw a glance at her father and then returned to her. 'Whatever the peasant-folk say about you is true.'

'I do not know what they say about me,' said Kali, turning the fish over on the board while holding his gaze. The knife slid under the gills and moved across, and with two soft cracks chopped them off. She smiled up at him. 'Will the high king do us the honour of joining us for dinner?'

The king did not reply at once, and she could tell from the entranced look on his face that he was wondering about the smell that filled the room. 'It is unlike anything I have ever smelt,' he said, looking around suspiciously. 'It is almost divine, this air, not what I have heard a fisherman's hut would be.'

'So you have never been in one, my lord, king?'

'No, I have not,' he admitted, then looking behind him at the seating stone he asked, 'May I sit down?'

Her father jumped up and dusted the stone with his shoulder-cloth, bowing low and muttering a litany of apologies. Kali held the jaw of the fish in her left hand and pulled the gills away with her right. She separated the guts from the body and placed them on the side. After the king had sat down and accepted the vessel of water her father had brought for him, she said, 'Do you not find it strange, my lord, that you have never before visited the chief of the fisher-people that supply your kingdom with fish?'

The king said, 'There is nothing strange in that, lady. A king has many duties to attend to. Indeed, I have never been inside the house of a weaver, or of a tailor, or of a water-carrier. That does not mean I do not care for them.'

'But your weavers live in houses built of bricks, my lord. Your tailors wear the richest of silks, and my father – the king of the settlement – has less flesh on his body than your water-carriers.'

Her father bowed to the king before he could answer. 'Do not take her words to heart, my lord. We are all very happy with our lot – yes, we are.'

'Father!' Kali dropped the knife on the board. 'You have an audience with the king. You have a chance to right all the wrongs that the kingdom has done to us—'

‘Wait a minute,’ said the king. ‘What is this about wrongs? No citizen of my kingdom has been wronged to my knowledge.’

A laugh broke out of Kali. ‘Of course you believe that, King, for that is what your advisors tell you. But you have never come here. Aye, you prefer the coast of the Ganga for even your hunting, they say. And I hear you walk among your people and ask of them accounts of their grievances. Yet you have never come among us. Why is that?’

Shantanu hesitated, and for just an instant Kali wondered whether or not to push further. Nothing would be served if he got up and left in a huff. But even in the hesitation, his eyes sought her out and lingered on her, and she thought she read in them the same curious enchantment that she had once read in Parashara, and then in other men she had lain with. She decided the risk was worth taking.

‘I will tell you why, O King. You have never come to us because you – and the people of your kingdom – pretend we do not exist. Yes, you know we do, because you see us on every market day peddling our fish, and you want our fish, but you want nothing to do with us, and do you know why? Because we smell! So you cast us off to the bank of the river and let us alone, only noticing us when we have to trade, and even then you see us as necessary evils rather than one of your own kind . . .’

‘Please do not listen to her words, my lord. Kali, go inside and cook that fish!’

The king put his hand up to stop him. ‘Wait, sir, let your daughter speak. Go on, lady.’

Kali got to her feet and took a step closer to Shantanu. ‘Even today,’ she said, ‘you came to meet me because you have heard of my fragrance from the people of your kingdom. You people do not see us until one of us smells differently, do you? And we are dark-skinned, darker because we go out in

the sun and catch the fish that you love to eat so much, and our hair gets dried and our skin breaks with the salt in the water, and you push us further and further away, as far as we will go, right to the edge of the river. And you keep the land – the good land – to yourself.’

‘Enough,’ said the king. ‘That is not true.’

‘It is not?’ she asked. ‘Look around you, my lord. Do you see one fully clothed man or woman? Do you see one house in the settlement that has more than one lamp lit in it? Do you see one house built of brick and wood? Do you think that we like living this way? We do not, my lord, but what choice have we when our king has forsaken us?’

The king stood up too, and clasped his arms behind him. ‘I will speak to my treasurer on my return,’ he said. ‘I will give you enough gold from the treasury to build yourself some warm homes, and purchase for yourself some silk clothes. Is that not what you desire?’

Kali shook her head. ‘No, sir. That is not what we desire. What we desire is for our children to go to the same schools as the other children in the kingdom, for our sick to be cared for by the same healers, for the dead to be cremated with the same respect. The fisher-people are your people too, my lord, king. All we ask is that we be treated that way.’

‘But surely you need something more than that?’ the king looked around and asked. ‘These dwellings need mending, and so do your fishing nets, I notice – that cannot happen without gold.’

‘If you give us what we ask for, lord king, we will earn enough by ourselves to mend all that needs mending.’

‘I will give you what you ask,’ said Shantanu, ‘and I will give you more.’ He turned to the chief. ‘I have travelled to both tips of the country, sir, and in the eastern kingdom of Anga I have seen fishermen who live off the coast of the ocean. Everyday they take their canoes and wade into the

sea for their catch, and they fortify their canoes with copper beams and iron nails. I will have them brought here for you so that you can build better boats which will protect you.’ He looked outside. ‘In weather like this, the Yamuna is no less ferocious than the Great Ocean herself.’

The chief bowed to the king and signalled to Kali to do the same. Kali did not. The king went on: ‘That is not all. We get our salt from Anga too, and so far you have had to get your salt by means of trade for your fish. Henceforth I will order for an allowance of salt for your settlement, so that you can salt your fish at no expense to yourself. I shall also instruct weavers from the city to attend to your nets so that they are mended, and they will also weave for you some nets with smaller holes than the ones you have here, so that the little fish do not get away.’ His mouth turned upward in a smile. ‘I have tasted some of the small fish up in the east. They are a pleasure to chew on.’

Kali did not smile back, though she could not help noticing that the king had pleasantly handsome features, if somewhat ageing. She had seen old portraits of him once at the market, but only from a distance – the royal stall always attracted quite a crowd – and she remembered that as a young man he had worn a beard, perhaps to cover up the black scar. Though his jaw was not that prominent, he had a strong, sturdy smile. Kali could not help but think that a beard would make him look much more a dacoit and less like a king. The scar was unsightly to look at at first, but now she felt it lent his boyish face that much needed splash of masculinity.

‘For the next five years the children of your community will attend any school in the city that they wish free of charge, by my personal mandate. If any school refuses you admission, you come straight to me and I will see to the matter. There shall be no discrimination against the fisher-people in my kingdom.’

‘And though the young maiden has refused to accept my generosity in the matter, it is my personal wish that I make up for all the neglect the Kuru kings have heaped on your settlement, Chief, and to that end you will have royal carpenters and architects visit you over the next few months, and they will furnish the bank with new cottages, built of brick and wood.’ He stole a glance at her. ‘Much better houses than those the weavers and water-carriers of the city live in.’

‘Thank you, my lord,’ said the chief.

‘Also,’ said Shantanu, ‘henceforth, your entire settlement is invited to participate in the midwinter feast, and a representative of yours – as elected by you – will be on hand at my court to voice your concerns.’

‘Thank you, thank you, my lord,’ the chief said. Kali wondered what the catch in all this was. The king was now here in their hut, so he was free to mouth whatever he wished. But when he went back and was surrounded by his advisors, would he remember all his promises? She thought it would be no surprise if the king were to leave now and things got back to the way they were, with no sign of the salt or the gold of the weavers or the architects. But if that were the case, why did he have to promise them anything? He was the high king; he could have easily stormed out of the hut and they would have been powerless. But if he really intended to give all that to them, what was he after? These were kings, she told herself, kings trained in the art of statecraft and diplomacy – if these people gave with one hand, they demanded with the other. What was it that this king wanted?

It was then that she caught his glance, and beneath the warmth and admiration she saw that sense of entitlement all high kings, she supposed, possessed. While all the men she had known before now had looked up to her, deferred to her will and served her, here she saw a man who wanted her for himself – and only for himself. It made her shiver, what she saw in his

eyes, but she also filled with warmth that she had never before known. If this man wanted her, it meant only one thing: that she was going to be queen of Hastina.

Kali, the high queen of Hastina.

But there was a catch, she thought, reining herself in. There was always a catch. The high king had taken many lovers after the first high queen left, and whispers throughout the kingdom spoke of how many bastard children he had sired and where each one was being fostered. Some said he had sons in kingdoms as far as Anga and Gandhara. Did she really want to be one of those long-forgotten lovers of the high king? For men, desire was desire, and marriage was marriage. They did not mix the two. And if all the king could offer her was desire, what need had she for him? She had plenty of men right here in the settlement who could give her that. A king's desire was no more or less special than a fisherman's.

The king was telling her father what more he would do for the fisher-people, and while the chief fawned over him he said, 'Have you thought about whom you will send with me as your representative, Chief?'

'No, sir, but I am sure I will send you one of my ablest men—'

'Might I make a suggestion?'

Her father looked at her, tensed, and said, 'Yes, my lord, of course you can.'

'It seems to me that the ablest man in your kingdom is not a man at all.'

The king relaxed, but his face was still drawn tight. 'The queen's chambers at the royal house are very comfortable, Chief, and your daughter will have the company of maidens and men alike – people who might be difficult to meet here in your settlement.'

'My lord, are you asking my Kali to take a place in the queen's chambers?' There was incredulity in his eyes, but his mouth quivered in

bubbling joy.

‘Yes,’ said the king, ‘your daughter will be a worthy addition to the maidens that look after the queen’s chambers, but she will not find it very taxing until I find my son a princess, and for Hastina a queen. She will represent you and your settlement at my court, and I will consult her in any matter where I might need assistance.’ She saw his eyes move to consider her for a moment, then turned back to the chief. ‘And of course, if a time might come when she wants to wed a man – and there is no dearth of upright men in my court – I shall see to it that she gets her heart’s wish.’

‘My lord!’ said her father. ‘She would be so lucky to be at your court – in the queen’s chambers – my Kali—’

‘Be quiet, Father,’ said Kali.

‘Huh?’

‘I said, be quiet.’ She turned to the king. ‘The high king’s ways with the maidens of the queen’s chambers have been woven into legends, and the balladeers of Hastina’s streets sing them as paeans to his manhood.’

‘Kali! How dare you—’

She saw that the king’s face had hardened, and the scar seemed to grow toward her a touch, as if threatening to strike out at her. A ridge appeared on his forehead, caused by his brows coming together in dark frown. His eyes, though, retained their composure and regarded her calmly.

‘Oh, come now, Father,’ she said, soaking her words in acid, ‘It is you who have told me of how many kingdoms foster in their courts one of the high king’s sons. And pray tell me, what is known of these sons or of the women who have given them birth? It is as if they never existed.’

The first signs of realization appeared on the king’s features, and Kali thought she saw a thin line of amusement cross his lips. She spoke fiercely, intending to strike that smile off his face. ‘Perhaps that is what the high king

does to the maidens of the queen's chamber; he will get them with child and then find noblemen in his court – those fine, upstanding young men – to take them as wives, and so carve for himself an alliance and for his son a family.'

Her father shook like a leaf and took a step to where she was standing, his arm raised. 'I command you to stop that filthy mouth of yours! You uncouth, ungrateful wretch—'

'So ungrateful, Father, that I do not want to be another of the generous king's forgotten lovers? That I do not wish to give birth to another of the king's many forgotten sons? I wonder, Father, if I will be the representative of the clan in the king's court or in the king's bed. Does it matter to you at all, I wonder!'

'You!' He swayed in fury, caught her by the arm and struck her full across the face.

She shut her eyes and staggered back. Her head swam, and hot tears forced themselves out onto her cheeks. She wrenched her eyes open and spoke through the pain. 'You only care about your settlement; it will not make the slightest difference to you how he will treat me.' In spite of her effort, to her dismay, her voice broke, and sobs shook her body. She tried to find her voice, but only a thick whine came out. She nursed her cheek tenderly with her hand, but the room moved about in circles.

Her father advanced on her again, and she saw his arm tighten and begin to rise. She closed her eyes and readied herself for another blow, but the king's voice came to her ears. 'Chief, stop. I will not have you hit a lady in front of me, even if she is your own daughter.'

'But, Your Majesty,' said her father, 'she said such things about you—'

'Some of which are true. A lady like her perhaps deserves more.' He looked at her and asked, 'Tell me, my lady. Speak without fear of your

father. What is it that your heart truly wishes?’

She kept her head down, swabbing her swollen, throbbing cheek. ‘If the high king wishes to help the settlement, and that the kingdom and the settlement come together, and if he really wishes to take me back to the royal house, I must go as his queen.’

‘His queen!’ her father said, eyes wide.

‘And that is not all,’ she went on, her courage returning and her hand dropping to her side so that she could stand up to her full height. ‘If the high king takes me as his queen, he has to swear that any sons I give him will one day become high kings after him. There is no honour in being a queen if one does not see her sons take the throne.’

Her father began to say something, but the king stepped forward and pushed him aside. ‘You have a cheek on you, girl, for speaking in that fashion with the high king. Are you not aware that I have named my heir already? The whole kingdom attended his kingmaking. And now you ask me, the king of the land, to take your hand in marriage, and you demand that I make your sons kings?’

‘I do,’ she said, looking up to meet his gaze. Her eyes still smarted with the tears that had flowed when her father slapped her, but she did not blink. Shantanu towered over her, and she realized that his lankiness was only an illusion caused by the stoop he carried. When he wanted to, when he drew himself up and held his hands on his waist like he did now, he looked every inch the warrior they said he was.

He breathed over her for a long time, lips pursed tight. Then he stepped back and broke into a smile. He shook his head, looked away and said, ‘No girl has ever spoken to a high king like that and lived.’ Then he rubbed himself under the chin. ‘But I think you will. I shall take no notice of your impertinence, for you have brought to my notice the grievances of all your

people. So you will live, but know that you have pushed the line a little too much, young lady.’ He turned to her father. ‘You have a feisty daughter, Chief. Perhaps you should marry her off to a good man soon.’

Kali felt anger well up inside her in waves, and she spat the words out. ‘One word from me, King, and all the young men of your kingdom will come clamouring. And unlike you, they will give me whatever I ask of them.’

The certainty on Shantanu’s face wavered for a second. In the same bold voice that she thought was at least a little pretentious, he said, ‘Be happy for my forgiveness, my lady. Do not stoke my anger. The men of the Kuru clan do not mistreat women, but if provoked, I will have to forget that you are a maiden who has not yet seen the ways of the world.’

‘In the ways of our world, King, one does not accept the hospitality of a host and insult him with threats; nor does he summon the nerve to forgive him for uncommitted sins. If I may be permitted to remind you, King Shantanu, we are your hosts. It is beneath you to behave like so, asking for a maiden from your host in return for gifts that you ought to have given long back as your duty.’

The king thought about what she said, then sighed deeply. ‘You do not understand, my lady. What you ask for is impossible. I have already named Devavrata my heir in front of the priests and the people. I have set him on the throne and I have crowned him in front of the holy fire. How can I go back on my word now?’

‘He does not belong to the blood of the royal line, if rumours are to be believed,’ said Kali. ‘They say he is just another of your ill-gotten sons. If that is true, my sons would have a bigger claim on the throne, would they not?’

‘They would, yes, but Devavrata is not ill-gotten. He is the son of the wife I took sixteen years ago and cast away.’

‘The son of a queen cast away,’ Kali repeated. ‘Such sons do not have a claim to the throne, my lord. A king such as you deserve to have real sons on the throne of Hastina, and I shall give them to you.’

‘But – I cannot do that to Devavrata. He is the most dutiful of sons, the most accomplished of warriors, the most knowledgeable of scholars, and I know that he will be the most loved of the Kuru kings. I cannot deprive Hastina of a king like him.’

‘What Hastina needs, my lord, is a high king that looks after all parts of the kingdom with the same love. Will this son of yours, this son whom no one in the kingdom knows or trusts – is this the son that you wish to be your legacy? Once he is made king, what if riots break out? What if there is unrest among the people, war with one of the Great Kingdoms . . . There is much a new king should accomplish, and with no wars to fight, it is hard to establish his valour in the minds of your subjects.’

‘Yes, yes, I know,’ said Shantanu, troubled.

‘That is why you need a son from a queen, Your Highness. This marriage will seal the friendship of the king with the fisher-people, the children of the river. And the sons you will have will continue the alliance, from atop the throne.’

‘No,’ said Shantanu. ‘No, it is too late.’ He closed his eyes and steeled himself. In a deliberately slow voice, he addressed the chief of the fishermen. ‘Chief of the fisher-people, all that I promised you will be yours. My personal architect will arrive on your shores a few weeks from now, for that is the most pressing need. All the other things I told you will get done too. From this night on, consider the High King of Hastina your personal

friend. Your grievances are mine, and we will strive together for the betterment of the fisher-people.'

Then his voice softened. 'I would have liked to take your daughter along with me to the royal house,' he said, 'and perhaps I would have liked to marry her too, but the throne of the kingdom is not mine to give. Hastina already has a king. I do not even know if I can bear any more children. Given all that, it is absurd to ask for your daughter's sons to be named kings.' He turned to face her and gave her a little bow. 'I shall take your leave now, my lady.'

Without any further words he turned and walked out of the room. It was only after a minute of silence that his father stirred to life and scrambled after the departing king, leaving her alone in the middle of the room. She stood with her hands to her sides, and her shoulders drooped. The pain of her father's slap returned to her cheek now and washed over it in slow, scalding waves. For some reason the tears returned, and for the first time in her life she felt that she had had let a chance slip. Something had come very close to her grasp, and in her excitement she had reached out and closed her fingers around it too fast and too hard, enough to scare it away. And now she wished she could take the last one hour of her life back. Perhaps she would have said different things, perhaps she would have been content being the wife of a king for now. The king was right – when there was no certainty of sons, what meaning was there in asking him to promise his throne to them? It was utterly, utterly, idiotic of her; in her foolishness she had stretched a little too far, believing that she could get away with anything.

Now it was too late. She heard the wheels of the chariot start and roll away in the mud. The king had left, and though she had fulfilled half her purpose – the settlement at least had assurances of progress and inclusion –

the other half, one which only revealed itself to her fully in the course of the conversation with the king, that she had allowed to slip away.

Her father came back into the house and closed the door behind him. They stood staring at each other for a while. Then he said, nodding at the white floating fish meat in the vessel: 'Will you cook that fish? I am hungry.'

F I V E



It was on a similarly damp night two weeks later that Kali found herself looking up at the standing figure of a young boy in the middle of her hut. She thought history was repeating itself, for the man in front of her looked identical to the old portrait of the high king she had seen in the market. He had the same loose limbs, the same gaunt frame and stoop, the same easy bearing which made the elaborate royal costume look merely functional. Where this man branched off from his father was in the face; it bespoke an innocence that Kali had never seen before in any child. The eyes had a touch of blue to them, and his hair was more brown than black. She had heard of brown-haired, blue-eyed men in the kingdoms up north, and for a passing moment, wondered if the king's old queen belonged to some mythical kingdom beyond the hills of ice.

The man's face – littered with stray drops of rainwater – was smooth and unblemished. He had small ears, a flat forehead, a hawk-like nose that jutted forward, and exquisitely set thin, pink lips. He had the chin of a woman; just the right size and shape to accentuate the mouth, and right in the middle of it, just before the neck started, a small dark ridge. Kali could not make out whether it was a mark caused at birth or during battle, but that

was the only sign of masculinity in the boy's face, save the rough hair littered all over his jaw and cheeks. She suddenly had an overwhelming urge to care for this boy – and she wondered why it was that she thought of him as 'boy' even though she was no more than a year older than him, if that.

He was surely Shantanu's son. No one who looked at this boy and the king would ever doubt that. But there was in this man something Shantanu did not possess – and it was all in the eyes. He bore the look of one who had seen much and known much; although his countenance was smooth and relaxed, he somehow gave the impression of a deep personal worry that ate at him at every moment.

It was clear that he was not from the known country, or the kingdoms to the north. A youth such as him would have been noticed, and rumours of him would have spread. Tales would have been spun about him like they had been about Shantanu's other sons, and Kali could not help but think that this son of Shantanu was the foremost of all, the best of all, and the most fit to be king. So if anything, the rumours would have been louder, harsher, more urgent. But until the boy had appeared in the capital, as if dropping out of the sky from nowhere, there had not been so much as a whisper about him. No one knew he existed until he arrived and calmly made his claim to the throne.

But what were the people thinking? Could they not see from one look at this man's face that he was the one true king that Hastina deserved? She had not yet heard him speak as much as four words in his high-pitched, cracked voice, but she was already certain that if he were to become king, Hastina would be in safe hands.

A sudden thought stopped her. Hastina would be safe, but what about the settlement? The king had read out to them from a long list of promises

no more than two weeks ago, and he had promised to personally attend to each of their complaints; but neither carpenter nor weaver had come from the kingdom. Now, after two weeks of silence, the king's son had come, no doubt to persuade her to follow him back to the royal house into the queen's chambers where she would rule – until Shantanu found a wife for this boy.

Hastina was a big city, and all the machinery that looked after her was already in place. It had been established by the long line of excellent kings that the Kuru clan had produced. This man would carry the legacy forward, of that she had no doubt, but the settlement was still sprawled on its fours. Someone needed to hold it by the hand and pull it up to its feet; it then needed to be taught to walk before it could run on its own. So if it came to a choice between Hastina and the settlement, she had to choose the settlement, which meant that she should not budge from her position.

Her father had welcomed him into the hut and sat down on the ledge facing him. The demeanour of the king of the fisher-people had changed from two weeks ago. Gone was the deference, the eagerness to please, the incessant cowering, the stammering words, the fear-stricken eyes. Now he leant back against the wall and noisily sucked on a big roll of tobacco. 'I know why you have come here, Prince,' he said. 'But my daughter has already given his Majesty her answer.'

The boy cleared his throat. His voice resembled the whine of a timid animal when cornered; it was the voice of a teenager who had just entered puberty. But Kali saw that he had long passed the age at which the voice ought to have deepened. It was not the voice of a king, but it suited the boy-like appearance the rest of his body carried. 'My father, the king has been most dejected these last two weeks, Your Majesty,' he said, 'and it is not good for the kingdom to have her king in such a mood.'

‘I do not know how we can help it,’ said her father. ‘My daughter will not ruin her life just to keep the king of the land happy, Prince. She is the daughter of a king herself.’

‘I am aware of that, Your Majesty.’ The boy’s head stayed bent, and his eyes were fixed on a point on the floor between the three of them. His arms were folded, and his legs were planted apart. He had come dressed in a bright white tunic that had been washed and pressed, and five of his fingers gleamed with diamond-rings. She did not know this for certain, but she guessed the chariot that had accompanied him bore gifts of various kinds – sweetmeats, gold and grain at the very least. If she accepted them she had no doubt they would be of help to the settlement – it had been a harsh summer, and the first two weeks of monsoon had not been as bountiful as expected. But there were bigger things to aim for, she thought. Even her father realized that they now held the better part of the trade, and since they held the power to set the price, they should ensure that they did not set it too low.

‘I have not come to ask you again on behalf of my father, sir,’ said the boy. ‘The king does not know that I am here. I have come to you of my own will, for I see that the king is weary of heart, and I would not be a dutiful son if I did not strive to lift the weight off his mind. So I have come to offer you what you asked for.’

‘Do you know what my daughter asked your father for?’

‘I do, Your Majesty. The lady asked my father that he shall marry her and give her the position of queen at his side on the throne of Hastina.’

‘That was not all,’ the chief said.

‘And she asked that her son would ascend to the throne and rule as high king. I have come to tell you, sir, that I consent to both requests.’

Her father smiled at him, the same smile of amusement that Kali had seen on his face numerous times when she said something grand or foolish. Even he felt the same way she did, she thought. This prince was just a boy, no matter how grand his words. Perhaps one day he would grow up to be a fit king, but he was not one yet, and perhaps that was why the people of Hastina were not convinced. They wanted a king to defend them against enemies and rule them with compassion; not a boy who gave an impression of one who was fumbling about his way in the world. It was that appearance of submission in his manner that had caused her father to talk to him the way he did. Shantanu commanded respect and fear, even among his own people. This boy, divine as was his appearance and the light on his face, seemed to elicit nothing more than smiles of sympathy and condescension.

‘Your words are worthy, Prince,’ her father said. ‘But have you given them any thought?’

The boy’s expression wavered a little, but he said, still not meeting the chief’s eyes, ‘All I have thought of is my father’s welfare, Your Majesty, for that is what ensures the welfare of the kingdom.’

‘Admirable sentiments, Prince, but you have been named the next king of Hastina by the king, your father, Shantanu. Surely you have not forgotten that.’

‘I shall give it up if only the lady would come back with me to the royal house.’

The chief’s smile broadened and he shook his head at Kali.

Kali turned to face the prince and said, ‘Your father will not accept it. Will he?’

‘I shall make sure he does, my lady,’ said the prince, and Kali noticed that he bent a little lower when he addressed her. ‘My father, King

Shantanu, still has ruling years left in him. I am not yet fit to be high king; he knows that, so do the people.'

Kali got up to her feet. The prince stood at least a foot over her, and it amazed her that she still thought of him as a child. If he had been one of the men of the settlement, she would not have thought twice about inviting him on a moonlit night to the riverbank. But somehow she could not shake off the feeling that this man was just a child; a boy who needed to be mothered, cared for. 'Do not do this to yourself, Prince,' she murmured.

He did not hear her, or he pretended not to. 'And your other wish will be granted too, my lady. Your sons will be high kings after the current king, my father. Of that too I will take an oath in the name of the only goddess there is, the goddess Bhagavati, the goddess of nature.'

From a distance, a low, rumbling sound of thunder came to her ears. It had been that kind of monsoon this year; a lot of thunder and lightning, but very little rain. All they had gotten after the first two days of downpour were drizzles and dew.

Her father said, 'That is not enough.'

The prince waited, his stance unmoved, his arms still rigidly wrapped around his chest.

'That is not enough, Prince, for you assume that things will remain throughout your life as they are now. You will get married in due course of time, and your wife will find a place in the queen's chambers at the royal house. What will the position of my daughter be then?'

'That of the high queen; that of the mother of the future kings.'

'Ah, but what if your wife gives birth before my daughter does? Your son will be the first of the royal line, and he will have a higher claim to the throne than my daughter's sons.'

The prince said slowly, 'I give you my word that it shall not be so.'

‘Your word means nothing, my boy,’ said the chief, his voice gentle, ‘when the rules of statecraft say otherwise.’

‘My wife and my child shall not disobey my words.’

‘Even the most righteous of sons disobey their fathers, my Prince. Why, are you not here without your father’s knowledge? Are you not giving your word to someone you do not know without consulting your father? What if your sons do the same?’

Kali began to see the prince draw breath now, slower and with more conscious purpose. ‘I swear that only after your daughter gives birth to her son shall I give birth to mine.’ She was reminded of an old story of a woman who had lost her husband to a disease, and when the lord of death appeared and rode away with the soul trapped in his noose, she followed him and asked of him question after question, eliciting from him boon after boon, until he tangled himself up so in the promises he gave her that he had no choice but to release the lady’s husband. She felt this was a bit like that, her father extracting boons one after another from a mere boy so that his daughter would get her wish. There was only one conclusion to all this, and she had seen it from the very first of her father’s questions. It was inconceivable that this boy had yet to see where the fisherman was leading him. Perhaps by the time he did, he would have been dragged too far into the maze to turn back.

‘Even if my daughter gives birth to the eldest child,’ her father was saying, ‘princes – especially ones who have a claim to the throne – have been known to suffer unfortunate accidents in the past.’

‘Your Majesty!’ said the boy, his voice rising above a reverential whisper for the first time. ‘I think the royal house of Hastina has enough resources to protect the life of its heir-prince. Only the gods could protect her people if that were not so!’

‘Prince, it is not easy to protect a man when his enemies live in the same house as he. Heirs to the throne have met uneasy deaths in the history of all the great kingdoms. It is foolish to assume that Hastina is any different.’

The boy sighed, and after two more deep breaths, he said, ‘I shall then not have any children, and this too I swear in the name of the goddess.’

One more step closer, thought Kali grimly, but she could not deny that deep in her heart she felt excitement stir and simmer. If her father played this as she would, two more oaths could be teased out of the boy-prince. She felt a pang at the sight of him, and wondered for a moment if she should put a stop to all this, but the image of the settlement loomed in her mind’s eye, stretched on the red bank of the Yamuna, a settlement in which houses were built of brick and wood and people wore clothes of silk and finely spun cotton. Fate had placed in their hands an opportunity – the prince had come to them without consulting his father or any of his political advisors – and it would be foolish of them to let it slip. The price had been agreed upon; now all that was left was to settle on the terms.

Her father said, ‘Your wife will not take kindly to that. Our scriptures speak of a woman’s life as fulfilled only after she has given birth.’ The prince opened his mouth to say something, but her father interrupted him. ‘And do not say your wife will never disobey you, Prince. A man who thinks he controls his wife is a knave.’

‘Then,’ said Devavrata, stiffening, ‘I will not take a wife as long as I live.’

‘But you will take other women from the queen’s chamber, Your Highness. And sooner or later, you will have sons by them, like your father did. Why, they say you are one of His Majesty’s many sons by waiting-women.’

‘That is not true.’

The fisherman waved him away. 'Be that as it may, my fear is real. Kings have sons through marriage, but they can have many sons outside of marriage too, and if something were to happen to my daughter's sons, it is your sons who would have the first claim to the throne.'

The prince did not say anything, and in his tired face Kali saw the first realization of where this conversation had headed right from the beginning. She saw him flinch just a little, and his shoulders sagged, but in his eyes she saw no fear or pause. It was as though the realization of the task ahead and the decision to go through with it happened at the same time, and in the next instant his body relaxed, and the lines that had begun to gather on his face disappeared.

'There is only one thing to do, then,' he said, and though he had not sighed, Kali could hear the fatigue in the boy's voice.

Tonight the boy would grow up, she thought. No, he had begun to grow up already.

'Henceforward, I shall not lay with a woman lest I be tempted to sow my seed inside of her. There shall be no circumstance in which I will break this vow, which I take here in front of you, under the full gaze of the five elements, and under the eye of Mother Bhagavati, the Goddess who watches over us all.'

There was another clap of thunder, this one louder and longer than the last one. Kali could not help but think that it was the goddess voicing her displeasure. In her mind she rejoiced, because she was now queen and it was assured that her sons would become rulers, but in her heart, a nameless fear welled up like smoke. She had heard it said once that nothing in the universe comes without a price; that in every instance you received something you wanted, you had to give up something you had, and in every instance you lost something, you gained something you did not have. The

Goddess was a trader herself; she gave not without receiving, and she took not without giving.

Today I have gained something, Kali thought, at the cost of Devavrata's loss. The people of her settlement had gained something too. But if that tale of the goddess was true, it was also true that Kali and her settlement had lost and Devavrata had gained. But what was it that she had lost, and what was it that the prince had gained? Neither of them would know, perhaps, until a good many years had passed. But she knew – with the same deep certainty she had known that the king would come for her – that the goddess would demand her price for what she had given her this night, even as she would compensate Devavrata for what she had taken from him. She had reminded her with that ominous slap of thunder that she was watching.

The prince stood to one side of the room and clapped his hands. An old man carried orange bundles into the room in his arms, one by one. After he had placed them all inside, he handed a parchment over to Devavrata and departed. Devavrata rolled it open and read from it: 'I have come bearing two hundred coins of gold engraved with the head of the king, eighty kilograms of rice, twenty kilograms of pulses, and seventy-five kilograms of freshly ground mutton. I have also brought for you sweet cakes made of rice flour and honey that had come to us all the way from the kingdom of the fish. I have brought this all to you, Your Majesty, chief of the fisher-people who guard our banks, as bride-price for your daughter in marriage to my father, King Shantanu of the Kuru race. Do you accept the gifts that I bear in the king's name?'

'I do.'

Devavrata turned to her. 'Do you, my lady, accept the king as your husband?'

'I do.'

He turned back to her father. ‘Your Majesty will henceforth have no right over the maiden whom you have reared and now handed over into the loving protection of her husband. King Shantanu holds all rights over your daughter, Kali, and you will defer to him in all matters relevant to her. Is that understood?’

‘Yes.’

He closed the parchment and tucked it into his waistband. Joining his hands in greeting, he bowed in the direction of her father. ‘Please prepare the maiden for her journey to the queen’s chamber at the earliest. I shall wait outside in the chariot.’ He turned and left without looking at her.

There was silence in his wake. Now too, like they had two weeks ago, her father and she looked at each other for a long moment. Then she pulled down her drying cloth from the nail in the wall next to her and made her way into the darkness of the kitchen. She opened the door to the backyard of her hut, and setting her cloth aside, disrobed. There was rain in the air that night, so much so that she could smell it in the breeze, and somewhere to the north, a line of white lightning cracked open the sky. She bent down to pick up the vessel of water in both her hands, and with a prayer to the goddess upon her lips, turned it over her head.

SIX



Satyavati Speaks

The wise folk of the forest that I now reside in tell me that when a man looks back on his life, he only sees that which casts him in noble light. Memory of things past is but another means by which men bestow upon themselves nobility and grace that they do not deserve. Perhaps it is due to this reason that when I think back to that rainy night on which Devavrata escorted me into his chariot and instructed its driver to ride to Hastina, I no longer remember the excitement that I must have felt in my heart. All I remember is the question that kept pounding from inside me – much like the hooves of the white horses that thudded against the rocks underneath as they dragged us toward the city gates – a needle-like pain that took birth deep inside my chest between my breasts and prodded against my skin, eager to tear me open and fly out to its freedom.

What is the price that I will pay for this?

I am certain that at the time the question was only embedded somewhere deep under the veil of my conscious mind, and on the surface I was bubbling with happy anticipation of being the queen and the king-mother, and of seeing my settlement take its first steps to prosperity. But all I can remember now is the needle in my heart – perhaps because that shows me (to myself) filled with remorse for what I had done, and in my heart I have always known that for my actions of that night, remorse was the only right emotion to feel; not joy, not elation, not hope, not thrill, all of which I must have felt with more force than was perhaps appropriate. But then I was a maiden of sixteen, with little knowledge of what was appropriate and what was not.

For if I had known then what I know now, I would have stopped Devavrata from taking that terrible vow which is now splitting the Kuru clan into pieces. All that I wanted for my settlement, Devavrata would have done as the high king, without any need for my sons to take the throne. His sons would have been bigger heroes than mine were, and perhaps if his line were allowed to continue, the conflict that we now see rending the land of Hastina might never have come to pass.

What good did all my planning and plotting do? Hastina now has only one son, and in the streets of the city they chant not the names of my sons that had ruled on the throne, but the name of the one who had stood by and protected them, cared for them, disciplined them, developed them and reared them like a father. Whether he ever held the title or not, Devavrata was, and is, the king of Hastina. The names of Chitrangada and Vichitraveerya are all but forgotten now, and so is the name of Satyawati. This was the price that the goddess exacted from me. I was to have all that I wanted and yet have nothing; he was to give away all that he had and yet gain everything.

When we arrived at Hastina that night, the chief astrologer at the court of Shantanu questioned the prince's authority in giving oaths that were beyond his stature, and cautioned to the king that a prince crowned once could not be removed from the throne without due thought. Devavrata replied that being king held no interest for him; that his father's well-being was more important to him than the whole world's wealth; that his happiness was vital to the good health of Hastina; and that he was giving up the kingship of his own will. He removed his crown and placed it at his father's feet that night, and as he stood up, Shantanu held him and said, 'You are the son every man dreams of, my boy. If you do not want to be king, you do not need to be one.'

The astrologer then said, ‘My king! The sons of a fisher-girl will not be able enough rulers of Hastina. While your welfare is paramount to the welfare of the state, giving the kingdom over to kings of staid blood is no alternative.’

I remember now that anger flared up inside me when I heard the old man’s words, and if we had been anywhere but at the royal house I would have struck him across his face. He would have seen how staid the blood of the fisher-folk really was! But now I think back to that day and wonder if he had not been right after all.

To that Devavrata responded only like he could, his voice rising above the astrologer’s and shooting it down. ‘Do you think I have met my death, Preceptor, that you speak of incapable kings? I shall oversee the training and learning of my brothers myself, and I swear that they will grow up to be warriors fierce enough to strike terror into the hearts of men across the land.’

‘I do not question your ability to teach, my prince,’ said the astrologer, bowing low. ‘But I question the ability of the lady’s sons to learn. You will show them the door, yes, but I do not think they will walk through it.’

‘Then I will walk through it with them!’ said Devavrata hotly. ‘I will serve whichever king ascends to the throne of Hastina, and I will see in him the image of my very own father, and if need be I will rule the kingdom in his name until the king learns the wisdom of statecraft.’

They come back to me now, all these words and gestures and actions, and all they do is make me smile. How prescient were the words that Devavrata had spoken that night! And how well he adhered to whatever he said, serving Chitrangada first, and then Vichitraveerya, holding their hands and leading them through the mazes, pointing out the pitfalls and cautioning them against traps. They say that Shantanu gave him a boon that night of

choosing his time of death, but I was there, and I did not witness any boon. Perhaps it is a tale the peasant-folk concocted later on, in the wake of Devavrata's apparently eternal youth.

Is that another price that I have paid to the goddess? Devavrata is only a year younger than I am, and yet I now look truly like his mother. I have not aged any faster than women my age, but Devavrata seemed to have stumbled upon the gift of youth. His hair is still dark, his skin still smooth, his gait still strong, his valour in battle still unquestioned. While I have deteriorated, he has stopped ageing. Even at sixteen, the year before his death, Chitrangada had looked older than Devavrata.

Perhaps that was the biggest price I had to pay then; I had to see my own sons bested by the man I thought I had bested, and in time I had to come to rely on his magnanimity to survive. Only after the death of Chitrangada did I realize how much I have come to use him as my support. The day he brought me news of my son's death I had felt nothing. I now know what I was thinking: Devavrata is still alive. He will look after me.

And he did look after me in all respects, like he would his own mother. He even sought my counsel in matters of the state, for he knew of my interest in the politics of my settlement. The one such incident I remember clearly, perhaps the most important, given how things have unfolded since, occurred at the kingmaking of Vichitraveerya.

It was the year Sarvadhaari, and it was the eleventh day of Maagha maasa . . .

S E V E N



Satyavati looked out of the window from her chamber and eyed the women bustling about in the palace courtyard like ants. She knew that all of Hastina would look the same on this day. It was a day on which her subjects awoke thinking that they could finally look ahead in hope once again, that things were finally going to return to normal, that the dark days were behind them.

But hope came laced with trepidation. Two years ago, on an eerily similar day, they had all felt the same hope. Then, as now, the portents had been good. Then, as now, people had thronged the streets. Then, as now, every face had on it the unmistakable stamp of joy. Then, as now, they had blessed their newly crowned king with all their hearts that he should rule them for a hundred years.

Then their blessings had turned into curses. What would happen now?

Hastina had been plagued by misfortune, yes, but not irredeemably so. Shantanu's death had brought upon the first pall of gloom on the kingdom, but Devavrata (the common folk called him Bhishma) had been on hand to hold the city together until Chitrangada grew old enough to be made king. But two years into Chitrangada's reign, which had been a peaceful and

stable one (she thought), he had lost his life on a regular hunting expedition. That day Devavrata had flown into a rage and had ordered the charioteer beheaded for leaving the king unattended and for allowing him to wander off into the woods by himself, but Satyavati knew no one could be blamed. Kings took pleasure in hunting by themselves, for that gave them the thrill of being unprotected and naked, the thrill of being in a battlefield. And if the high king commanded you to stay your ground and wait for his return, you did it without question.

When they found his body, there had been sword wounds on his arms and neck. His own sword's blade dripped with blood, blood that the people said belonged to a Gandharva.

Then, too, Devavrata had gathered the reins and held them with his steady hand, until today. Today Vichitraveerya came of age, and today Hastina would have her third king in three years. Satyavati wondered what the people of the kingdom thought of that. Her mind went back to those nights on the Yamuna where her father would seat her on his stomach and relate to her the virtues of kingship. More than kindness, more than justice, more than love, more than anything else, people craved for stability in their kings. People did not like change; when it happened they preferred it to be either so swift or so slow that they did not notice. A new king made everyone nervous, and rightly so. The land was replete with tales of kings who had been tyrants so cruel and so mindless that in one generation they would burn the name of their clan to the ground. People lived in that constant fear of encountering a tyrant, so every good king was praised to the heavens, more out of relief than love.

Satyavati walked to the table and seated herself in front of the mirror. She ran an ivory comb through her hair, considering her reflection and disregarding – by long habit now – the faint shades of grey at her temples.

The chin on her cheeks sagged, and her lips had flattened out over time. Her eyes retained some of the lustre they had once possessed, and the secret of her fragrance was still in her possession, but apart from that, aspects of her beauty were leaving her, a little bit each day.

Her body had changed too. Being a queen – and later the queen-mother – meant that an army of servants waited on your every whisper. She had grown up on one square meal a day at the settlement, and as a teenager she had rowed the ferry across the Yamuna, sometimes as often as thirty times a day. Now, just the memory of it was enough to drive her to fatigue.

Then, she had been slim, fit, wiry – like a fisherwoman ought to be. And now – she eyed her hips and her thighs, cocooned in the best and softest material acquired from the Silk Country. They definitely did not belong to a fisherwoman.

She looked up at the picture of Chitrangada as a boy of twelve, dressed in yellow and white, brandishing his sword above his head with shield in hand, staring down a raging bull that had its nose to the ground and was rushing full tilt at him. The artist had taken some license with the details, she knew, for Chitrangada would never have been put in a position where he would have to face an angry bull all by himself. There was also some generosity on the part of the artist with regard to the boy's arms and chest, not to mention the almost adult moustache that he chose to give the prince. Chitrangada had only just begun to grow facial hair when the painting was done. Perhaps Devavrata had overseen the painting himself, and had whispered a quiet word in the artist's ear.

He had been a strong boy, yes, but he was nothing compared to Devavrata. Chitrangada did appreciably well at everything he tried; he was capable with the sword, competent with the bow, proficient with the javelin. He maintained a good knowledge of the Veda, and his grasp of the science

of politics was commendable. But compared to Devavrata, who was perfect at everything he did, Chitrangada always paled.

She felt sorry for him. All his life he had had to endure being second-best to Devavrata. If he had not had to face that frustration on a daily basis in his young life, would he have been more careful, perhaps, about going into the woods by himself? The words of the astrologer came back to her, and she pulled angrily at her hair. He had said the sons of a fisher-girl would not be worthy kings, and she had wanted to spit in his face that night, but now it had come true. They were kings only in name. They were kings only because their mother robbed the throne for them off a far greater, worthier man. They would rule their kingdoms in his shadow. Their kingdoms, their wives, their families, their very lives would be his gift.

They were not kings. They were beggars.

Satyavati bit her lower lip as she stared at the false bravado writ large upon Chitrangada's face in the painting. Not once did he challenge Devavrata to a duel. Not once! Oh, how she wished he did! She would have been prouder of him if he had died by Devavrata's sword and acknowledged that he was not worthy of the throne. But he had taken it like a leech, gleefully sucking Devavrata for all he was worth and answering to the call of high king.

The high king!

There was only one high king in Hastina. And it was not Chitrangada. It had never been Chitrangada. And she already knew it would not be Vichitraveerya.

Now the charade had begun again, this time with her younger son. And it was going to be no different, she thought. She had seen how Vichitraveerya's face had lit up the other day when Devavrata had told him of his coronation. Over the last few days she had seen every emotion in his

face but the one that ought to have been there first and foremost – shame. She squeezed her lips together, and her face hardened into a sneer.

Kings!

A movement on the left edge of the mirror sought her attention. A figure moved into the room and stood behind her.

‘Mother.’

She did not turn back. She gazed at the reflection and marvelled again how much Devavrata had grown since that day he had come to take her away from her father. He had grown physically, yes; the shoulders had broadened, the posture had strengthened, the features had hardened, but he had grown in other ways too.

Where he had once been shy and modest, he was now outspoken and confident. Where he had once been Shantanu’s loyal follower and disciple, he was now, as the eldest of the clan, quite at home giving orders and seeing to it that they were obeyed. Where he had once been quite content to take his father’s advice, now made decisions as his own man.

It was his face that had changed the most, she thought. It had been the face of an angel once. She remembered what she had felt the night he had come to take her to the royal house. The innocence in those liquid eyes, the softness of his cheeks, the high forehead, the smooth eyebrows, the hawk-like nose, the full lips, the thin-set jaw – it was the face of a god. No, a goddess.

Perhaps it was to hide the apparent femininity of his face that he had taken to growing a beard. It gave his face a permanent look of grim thought. Even when he said the simplest things in the world, it seemed like he was reciting from the Veda. His voice, which had once been a high-pitched squawk, had morphed into something soft and low, rising only a little even in moments of anger.

‘Mother.’

She turned and held her head up to face him. ‘Yes?’ In all these years she had never been able to bring herself to address him as ‘son’. In speech she skipped addressing him directly as often as she could, and when she had no choice she called him by name. But he had, from the very first day, called her ‘mother’. Yes, good old, upright Devavrata, the bastion of all that was virtuous.

‘Our Vichitraveerya is now king,’ he said.

She turned away. Surely he had not come to tell her something the whole kingdom already knew? She ran a hand down the curtains on the window sill and waited.

‘It is perhaps time to think of a bride for him,’ said Devavrata. He was standing at the other end of the large room, and he spoke in no more than a whisper, but Satyavati heard him clearly, like the soft tinkling of a bell in a temple. It was a trick that allowed Devavrata to be the softest speaker in any gathering and yet be the most heard.

She said, pretending to look out of the window, ‘Do you have anyone in mind?’

Devavrata said, ‘Further along the Ganga, Mother, on the southern bank, there is a city called Kasi. It is part of the Kosala kingdom, but is ruled independently by a king named Kasya.’

‘He has a daughter?’

‘Three daughters, Mother. Our spies tell us that each one is as beautiful as the apsaras themselves.’

Satyavati waited. No marriage was just about the bride’s beauty. She had heard much about the Kasi–Kosala kingdom. Legend had it that the region was where the mythical king Rama had been born. His reign later extended to Gandhara in the northeast to Vrijji in the west, and if the legend

was true, he was the first true emperor of North Country. Some writings spoke of how he crossed the mountains that lay to the south of Avanti and made his way through the plains that lay beyond to reach a southern ocean, the existence of which current scholars still debated. The tale described how the king, with the help of monkeys, built a bridge across this ocean and reached an island where a tyrant had imprisoned his wife, Sita. But all that had happened a long time ago, if it ever did. The writings were embellished with fantastic descriptions of flying vehicles and magic. Satyavati had heard them once and waved them aside as fabrications, but for the people of Kasi and Kosala the legend of Rama was the truest of truths, and Rama himself the most worshipped of gods.

They were sister cities, Kasi and Kosala, united by this legend that loomed over them from the past. Throughout history they had not warred with one another, and often kings from the royal house of one married queens from the other. In all trade, they treated each other with utmost friendliness, and to the rest of the land they came to be known not as two entities but one.

Now if there was an opportunity for Hastina to forge relations with Kasi, it meant that two birds could be felled with one stone. But then this would not be lost on the other kings who ruled the land.

‘Kasi is a big part of Kosala, Mother. If Hastina and Kasi enter into an alliance, Kosala will soon join us. And as you know, between Kuru and Kosala lies the kingdom of Panchala.’

Of course, she thought. Panchala had not made any active moves of threat yet, but it was Kuru’s neighbour, and though it extended inward from the riverbank instead of along it, making it reliant primarily on trade for their foodgrain, their people were the best stone-crushers in the land. The back of the kingdom nestled into the rocky hills that gated the Ice

Mountains that lay beyond, and in exchange for food, Panchala exported the best weapons, marble and cooking oil. News had come, some from spies and some from passing wayfarers, that Panchala was stockpiling her weapons. On an official front there had been no open declaration of violent intent, as there had not been from any other king, but it never paid to be wise after the fact, and it always paid to be wary.

If Panchala decided to launch an attack, it would be to Kuru that she would turn, for Kuru was the land that had access to the banks of both the Great Rivers, and it was rich in foodgrains and fertile land – the one thing Panchala lacked. Taking on the might of Kosala and Kasi was the other option, but it was a foolish one. No one in history had ever subjugated those two lands with might, and Panchala would fail if she tried.

‘Kings of equal strength cannot stay friends for long, Mother,’ Devavrata said. ‘We have an opportunity now to be proactive and strengthen our position. If we enter into this alliance, we will have Panchala surrounded geographically. We will have the lion’s share of Ganga’s waters, and we can force them to trade a larger volume of their weapons. We will have access to other cities as well that lie beyond Kasi, like Anga and Magadha.’

Anga and Magadha were smaller kingdoms, smaller than most of the Great Kingdoms in both area and number, but they lay on the shores of the sea, and therefore they were defended well. Satyawati had heard tales of Anga being attacked by the Vatsa kingdom many years ago, when Hastina was ruled by Pratipa, and though the Vatsan forces outnumbered Anga’s ten to one, they had to retreat after eighteen days of siege in which they had not managed to fell even one of the outer fortress walls.

Yes, she thought grimly, access to Anga and Magadha would be advantageous, even if it were friendly to begin with. It would be nice to get

the people of Hastina to think of those faraway kingdoms as friends, and build roads to those cities so that people would be encouraged to visit them. Perhaps once enough people had visited and some of the mystery surrounding the kingdom had worn off, they could dispatch spies in guise of merchants and craftsmen to make their homes there, and little by little Hastina could gain vital information of how Anga could be attacked and taken.

Even if Hastina never planned to attack the shore cities, it would be good to get close to them, if not for anything else but to keep an eye on them.

Satyavati asked Devavrata, ‘Which one of them do you have in mind for Vichitraveerya?’

Devavrata folded his hands and looked straight ahead. ‘We cannot afford to have rivals in our friendship with Kosala, Mother. If the three princesses go to three different kingdoms, Kosala’s affections will be divided, and what good will that do us?’

She smiled up at him. He had held exactly the same pose that night in the hut – arms folded over his chest, legs pulled slightly apart, shoulders bared. And then she had thought he was nothing more than a boy. The face had not changed much in the intervening years, and he had not aged at all except for the beard which had grown thicker and the voice that had withdrawn into itself. But now she felt he was a man – a man who knew the ins and outs of polity, who knew when to take up weapons and when to win people over with words, and overall, how to assure Kuru’s continued dominance as the foremost of the sixteen Great Kingdoms.

‘So it is going to be all three of them,’ said Devavrata, not meeting her gaze.

Satyavati could now see in her mind's eye what would happen. Other kings would come to the groom-choosing with exactly the same idea as Devavrata. Men were simple beings, she thought, looking at her foster-son's deep-set eyes. If they did not get what they wanted by fair means, they took it by force and fought anyone that got in the way.

But what was fair and what was unfair at a groom-choosing? The three princesses would not choose the same man, even if the man was Devavrata. So if he planned to bring all three princesses back to Hastina, it meant only one thing: that he was not going to wait for the princesses to name their choices. He would throw out a challenge to all the assembled kings to fight him if they wanted the princesses. Satyavati wondered how many would dare to take on Devavrata – though he had not fought in a battle yet, she had seen him display his skills of warfare in the sporting hall last season. The quiet confidence in his eyes that he would not fail to bring the princesses back to Hastina did not surprise Satyavati – because she felt it too.

‘Will you take Vichitraveerya with you?’ she asked.

He shook his head. ‘Vichitraveerya is not yet a soldier, Mother. There is danger in this trip; not to me, but if he comes, to him.’

‘You are going to persuade the king of Kasi to give away his daughters to a prince they have never seen?’

‘Yes, Mother. I will go forth bearing gifts, and I will take with me records of Hastina's heritage. That ought to be enough for them. They do not need to see our king.’

‘And if they refuse?’

‘When they refuse, I will fight them.’

Satyavati said, her voice pleading: ‘Take Vichitraveerya with you. Let him fight by your side.’

‘No, Mother. There will be danger.’

‘So what if there is danger? He is a king! Let him win his own wives! Let him confront danger!’

‘No, Mother. I will face the danger. Vichitraveerya is still a boy. He has much to learn in Hastina, of governance, of politics, of people.’

Satyavati closed her eyes and sighed. She often wished that Devavrata would not take his word so seriously. She could see that he blamed himself for Chitrangada’s death, and now he was going to make sure that Vichitraveerya did not have to fight even when circumstance called for it. But he knew as well as she did that if a man’s time came, a man’s time came. If not by weapon, then perhaps by disease . . .

She started. There was that same sense of eerie certainty that she had been aware of that night when she floated by the river and thought of Parashara (how distant and strange that name sounded now) – she had the same feeling of ice slipping down her back, of sweat gathering on her brow. She knew at that very moment how Vichitraveerya would meet his end. Chitrangada had at least died a king’s death, sword in hand, locked in combat. Her second son would not have even that. His would be the kind of death at which a kshatriya would spit.

Devavrata’s hands touched her feet. Her hand hovered over his scalp in blessing, her fingertips lightly touching his hair. It was on such occasions – when Devavrata’s body was so close to hers that she could smell him – that she allowed her mind to dwell on the fact that they were both almost the same age. Had she made a grave miscalculation in trying to manipulate Shantanu into marrying her? Perhaps if she had agreed to the king’s request and had come to the queen’s chambers as a maiden, who knew how things would have turned out? Was it too far-fetched to imagine that one day she would have fallen under the sight of the then crown-prince and married him instead? Before she had broached the topic, Shantanu had not spoken of

marriage. What had he had in his mind? Perhaps he had intended her to marry his son the whole time, and it was she who had forced the idea into his head.

This was the price that the goddess extracted from her; that she would always look back on her life and wonder just how things would have turned out if she had acted differently. Round and round her mind went, swirling, swirling, like some whirlpool in the Yamuna in which her ferry spun and spun, making her dizzy, and in her eyes the constellation of the fish stood out sharp and bright, but it spun too . . .

On another world, she thought, in another time . . . how she wished now that they had been in the settlement, he a fisherman, she a fisher-girl, with no kingdom or kings or thrones to think about; only the Yamuna and the ferry and the early morning summer mist hanging low on the water. Through the smoke screen he would step out and look upon her. The man bore marks of the bow-string on his wrists, and his shoulders were cut by the twine of the quiver. All over him he had scars of various lengths, some mere bruises, some cuts that dug as deep as an inch, some fresh and still oozing with pus, some old and blackening. And she would stand on her rowing seat and let go of the oars to stretch her hands out to him in welcome, and he would come into view, the smoke clearing from his face, and the old smell of musk hit her nostrils . . . and she saw that Devavrata had come to her on the Yamuna wearing his battle scars, but he smelt of that old smell that she recognized so well, and upon looking up to find his soulful grey eyes she found that he had come wearing the wrinkled face of Parashara.

She shrank back onto the boat now and sat down, looking away from the puzzled frown upon the man's face. She shook her head at him and rowed quietly, the only sound coming from the Yamuna's flow and her oars

playing upon the water. After a long time of staring, the sage sat down. One by one the scars disappeared, and Devavrata's body became Parashara's – the skin loosened, the wrists became old and cracked again, his hands shivered, and with one dejected wave of the hand he dispelled the mists to let the sun shine through on them. They came to the opposite bank and the sage looked askance at her again, but she again shook her head. He paid the coin he had shown her before the ride began and went his way. No boons were asked for, none were given. A fisher-girl rowed a customer across the Yamuna from Hastina to Shurasena, and accepted payment for it. She still smelt of fish, and she would her whole life . . .

And yet in this world where all that was real readily mixed with magic, the mists returned, and now she was helping him out of the boat. But when she looked back to see if he was okay, she saw that the man needed no help, for behind her, watching her with those blue-black eyes filled with desire, was Devavrata. The grip on her hand, she suddenly noticed, was that of a king taking what he wanted, and at that moment she wanted to be nothing more than a man's possession – this man's possession. Let him take me away wherever he wishes, she thought, and she gave way to let him lead her. He strode the island and dragged her along; he walked so fast that she had to break into a run every now and then to keep up with him. With his free hand he pushed away the thorns and bushes that concealed the patch of grass, and when he saw it his pace quickened. The thorns scratched her as she passed, leaving long red lines on her arms, and around her wrist his fingers wrapped so hard that she felt her palm go numb, but she did not care. She saw the patch of grass too and she laughed softly in delight.

When they got to the patch he turned around and picked her up so that he could hold her against the rough hard bark of the tree, and she felt her own legs wrap around his waist, her one hand rising over her head to hold a

low-hanging branch while the other arm circled his neck and pulled his head down to her neck. Brown dead pieces of dust scraped off the tree as her back rubbed up against it, and she felt the jagged scales dig into her back, and she knew they would leave bruises all over her, but she did not care. She moaned to him, and when she heard an answering moan from him – soft and whispery – she tightened her thighs around him and dug her heels into his back.

She saw that his body had changed yet again – it was the wiry, smooth, salted body of a fisherman. Yes, this was it. Somewhere in this world where dream and waking coupled, they could be together, he and she, he a fisherman, she a fisher-girl, with no other sound in their ears but the Yamuna, with no other sight in their eyes but each other, with no knowledge of any other world existing.

Another gust of wind blew, and she opened her eyes. She was still standing in the same way, with her hand outstretched, but now she was back in her own room. From the wall, Chitrangada's portrait looked down upon her. Devavrata was no longer with her. He must have paid his respects and left long ago – did she know how long she had stood there? Now he must have begun making ready to set out to Kasi. Servants and gifts had to be chosen, weapons had to be bundled up and placed in his chariot, horses had to be selected from the stable.

She was not worried about any of that. She knew Devavrata enough to know he would come back successful in his quest. But she did worry about that sight of Vichitraveerya that had visited her. What had shaken her was the sheer force of it, how certain it had made her that she had seen the truth. And if she had, that meant that she would soon be left without sons, and that the seed of the fisher-people that she had placed on the throne – her seed – would be lost without lasting a generation.

She stopped and thought of Parashara, and the son she had borne all those years ago near the northern tip of the Yamuna, where the fisher-clan of Bhrigu lived. She would not be completely devoid of sons. And though all these years she had not thought much about that forgotten son of hers, now, with the arrival of that vision, she knew it was time for her to act. Let Devavrata make his own plans, she thought. I will make mine.

She called her waiting-woman and ordered that the royal keeper of horses was to visit her that afternoon with a map of the North Country.

E I G H T



‘They call me Wise Woman now,’ said the toothless hag that had once been her aunt. Satyavati sat on the raised mud platform that was meant for visitors, and in the middle of the room her aunt rolled onto her side so that she could face her. She squinted at her and smiled, showing her bare brown-black gums. ‘You have not lost your fragrance after all these years, Kali.’

‘They call me Satyavati now,’ she said, and at the mention of fragrance she was once again reminded of how horrible the place smelt. Yet it had been in this very room twenty years ago that she had lived for a whole year, and it had been right in that corner there, by the door to the kitchen, that she had given birth to her son.

‘Ah, yes, of course, Kali is no name for a queen, is it? Shall I call you your majesty, then? Or your highness?’

‘No, kinswoman,’ said Satyavati. ‘You are the sister of my father. You can call me anything you like.’

‘You have been to the settlement after you became queen?’

‘I did, aunt. Not as much as I would like because I had my royal duties to attend to, but I did go, yes. I went when father passed away.’

‘He sent me letters,’ said her aunt, chewing and slurping on her gums between words. ‘He was proud of you, my dear, of all you have done for the settlement. He once said that his settlement was now as grand as Bhrigu!’

‘It is not to my credit, aunt. The king of the land has all the resources he needs to bring about change, but I only have my words.’

The old woman cackled in glee. ‘Ha! You know that a woman’s sharpest weapons are her words, Kali. When you are young you think it is your body, but I tell you, it is not. It is your mouth and how you use it.’ She thought of what she said and broke into another chuckle. ‘So when you say the king of the land, you mean the recently deceased Chitrangada.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Satyavati.

‘But I hear that it was not Chitrangada that ruled over Hastina, but the son of Shantanu. He seemed to be everywhere Chitrangada went, and even now, he seems to have everything in order. Why, the city did not even notice that your son passed away.’

Satyavati cleared her throat and choked back a lump. It was true what her aunt said. Satyavati herself had only noticed Chitrangada’s death in passing, in a detached and distant manner. It had not affected her life in any practical way, and if Chitrangada’s death could not affect the people in the royal house – his own kith and kin – it was no surprise to know that the wider city had not been affected. Yes, they had been scared for their welfare when the news came out, but they had always known that Devavrata was going to look after them. And he did.

‘Yes, I do mean Chitrangada when I refer to the king,’ she said stubbornly, choosing to focus on the question than the commentary. ‘Devavrata might have helped him, but it was Chitrangada who took up the cause of the fisher-people.’ She knew this to be a lie, of course. Chitrangada had not taken any interest in anybody’s cause. He had been too young to

even think of anyone but himself. All he had had time for was his training – archery, riding, the Veda, kingcraft, politics – and women. All progress that had happened in the kingdom during his reign had been Devavrata's work. But while she knew it, she found no reason to admit it to this woman.

Her aunt looked at her and chewed on her gums. Dusk was falling outside, and the light in the hut was growing dimmer. She called out to a boy who came scurrying along and lit the lamps. She barked some orders at him, and turning to her, she asked, 'Do you still eat fish?'

By instinct Satyavati's gaze went to the crushing stone that lay by the kitchen door. She had grown up tearing open fish and cooking it, and now she was being asked if she still ate fish. Her own hands looked to her to be weak and small, much like those of her aunt. If she were to be given a freshly killed fish and the crushing stone now, she doubted if she would know what to do. Perhaps old instinct would take over and she would attempt to break open the skull, but the stone looked so heavy and big now. Would she be able to even lift it?

'I did not ask you if you still made fish, girl,' said the old woman, grinning. 'I know queens do not make fish. But you have not lost the habit of eating it, have you? Do not worry, I will have it scented with sandal for you. I see you keep crinkling your nose. The smell of the place does not agree with you, eh?'

She coloured in shame and gulped. 'I do still eat fish.'

'Good! I will have some fish soup cooked for us then, and I will tell them to get rid of the bones nice and proper.'

'You do not have to do that, kinswoman. I may have lost the habit of living by the river, but I have not forgotten it, nor do I look down upon it.'

She signalled to the boy and gave him instructions on which fish to bring and what size, and after he scampered away she turned to Satyavati

and said, 'As Wise Woman I can take my pick from the day's catch. But midsummer is approaching, the river is as low as it has been all summer. I do not want to impose upon them, you know.' She stared at the front door of her hut for a moment, where the boy had disappeared. 'Your second son was made king last week?'

Satyavati sighed. She supposed her aunt was not called Wise Woman for nothing. 'Yes, he was.'

'You must like it very much – you have become queen, both your sons have become kings.'

'Oh, yes,' said Satyavati, looking away. 'It is everything I have ever wanted.'

'Rubbish!' the lady said and broke into laughter, rubbing her throat as it died away. 'Nobody gets everything they ever want, Kali, not even you. Otherwise you would not have come here today, would you?'

'I am the queen of Hastina,' said Satyavati coldly. 'If there is anyone in the city that can claim to be happy, it is I.'

'Oh, yes? Your lips speak it, my dear, but I do not see it in your eyes, for they have gone pale. Where is the girl with the sparkling eyes? Your skin is sallow and old, much like mine – and how old are you? You are no more than six and thirty, are you? And your hair has started to go grey around your ears. You tell me you are happy, my child, but why is it that I do not see it?'

Satyavati did not reply, and without her knowledge her eyes welled up. She bent her head low so that her chin pressed against her chest. She closed her eyes. Her own words of a moment ago came back to her and rang empty to her ears, for she knew for sure that the girl from twenty years back who had lain on her ferry as it floated by on the Yamuna and stared up at the sky, vainly attempting to find the constellation of the fish – that girl had been

happier than her. Yes, she stank of fish and no one had ever given her a second glance, but she had been happy. Now what did she have? She had everything, and yet she had nothing.

‘It is the price the goddess demanded of me,’ she said, not realizing she was speaking the words out loud.

‘Goddess? Who is this goddess you speak of, girl?’

Satyavati raised her head to face her. ‘The goddess of nature that looks after us all, who fills our rivers with fish and provides for us.’

‘Have you seen this goddess?’

‘I have not, but she does exist. I have seen her signs.’

The old lady chewed on, her lips protruding out each time she ground her gums together. After a time of silence she said, ‘None of us know whether any goddess stands above us, child. You say a goddess fills our rivers with fish so we can eat, but perhaps the river fills up because it is her nature to do so. Perhaps it dries up in the summer not because a goddess has commanded it to, but by its very nature it has to. When you feel thirsty for water, my dear, do you say the goddess has made you thirsty?’

Satyavati shook her head. ‘It is not like that.’

‘Leave it!’ said the old lady, at once irritated. ‘I am certain you have not come here to debate with me about any goddess. Goddess or not, Kali, let me tell you this: the price you are paying now – whatever that price is, for I do not know your thoughts – is not the price the goddess has taken from you. It is a price you pay for your choices, for your own wishes, for your own dreams. Do not blame the goddess for what is the folly of your actions. That is all.’

‘Kinswoman, help me!’ Satyavati got off the edge of her seat and hurried to the edge of the cot on which the older lady lay. ‘I saw that my son is going to die, my second son who has been crowned a few days ago.

Devavrata is going to protect him as well as he can, but he is still going to die. I saw it!’

Her aunt smoothed her forehead with her hand and said gently, ‘You have lost one son, Kali. You fear for your second. It is something every mother before you has felt, and every mother hence will too.’ Satyavati meant to interrupt her but she quieted her down with a finger to her lips. They sat together in silence, her hand rubbing her forehead again and again, pushing aside lost strands of hair. Then she said, ‘You would have made Bhishma a good wife, Kali. I have never understood why you chose his father over him. Had you not gone to his kingmaking?’

‘No, aunt, I had not! I did not know anything about Devavrata at the time the king came to me. I wish I did – oh, I wish I did!’

The old lady smiled. ‘There is no use wishing things of the past, my dear. All our wishes and our hopes have to go into the paths that we must yet travel, wherever they may lead. You tell me you have seen your son die, so perhaps I can guess what it is that has brought you here.’ She stopped her again from interrupting, this time with a shake of the head. ‘No, my dear,’ she said, ‘I do not believe you came all the way here just to see me. Do not look so guilty, child, for it is not a matter of shame. I would not have either if I were you.’

She struggled to a sitting position and patted her lap. ‘Come here, Kali.’ Satyavati lay on the cot now and rested her cheek on the old woman’s lap. It had once been fleshy and soft, but now it felt like she had lain on a withered rock. The old woman massaged her cheek with her fingers. ‘Remember the stories I used to tell you when you were last here, Kali, when your stomach was so big that you had trouble walking?’

Satyavati nodded.

‘Each child that leaves your body is yours, Kali, and it will stay yours, whether you want it or not. By giving him away you are going against your nature – against the very nature of a woman. Perhaps in your language I would say you are working against the wishes of the goddess, and one day she will take the price from you.’

Satyavati asked, ‘Why did you not tell me this when I bore him?’

‘I did not know it myself,’ the old lady said and chuckled. ‘It is only now that I have become Wise Woman. Then I was just an aunt looking after her brother’s daughter who had slipped and fallen.’

‘So this is the price that I pay for letting my son go? That I come back looking for him?’

‘Perhaps,’ said her aunt. ‘Or perhaps the price has just begun and it will be collected bit by bit.’

‘Bit by bit? Over how long, Aunt?’

‘If only we could tell. But I can tell you this – your son is alive and well. He has been sent for fostering at the ashram that lies at the foot of the forest mountains to the north, beyond which lie the mountains of ice. He comes back here to this very settlement once a year and asks after his mother.’

Satyavati got up with a start and stared at her aunt. ‘He asks for me?’

‘He does. Only I know the truth, and I do not tell him. But he comes back every year during the first monsoon and he says “my mother will need me”. I have always thought that was foolish of him, that the queen of Hastina would have need for an uncouth brahmin boy like him—’

‘He – he is a scholar?’

The lady nodded. ‘So they tell me. He ought to be no more than ten and nine years now, but he looks much older and calls himself Dwaipayana, the

island born. I told him that this is not an island, but he would not listen. And they say he has begun a task, a huge task – something to do with the Vedas.’

‘Aunt!’ Satyavati held the older woman by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. ‘When is he due to come here next?’

‘In a month or so, I would say, with the first rains.’

‘Then when he comes to you and asks for me, will you tell him that he is right, that he has been right all along, and that he is to come to the royal house of Hastina and seek my audience? Will you tell him that?’

The old woman smiled at her gently, and shook her head. ‘I will, dear.’

Satyavati got to her feet, and her mind began rushing forward again. Her aunt had spoken the truth; the only hopes and wishes she had to nurture were the ones that lay in the future, not in the past, and now all her hopes rested on her son – not Vichitraveerya, but the one who called himself island born, who would arrive with the monsoons and do her bidding. The line of the fisher-people might just extend further than she had thought it would.

From the kitchen an old familiar smell wafted out. It was pitch dark outside, and the night was quiet but for the croaking of mud-toads in the swamps.

‘It is late,’ said her aunt. ‘Will you stay the night?’

She answered almost automatically, without any thought. ‘I will.’ The smell of the fish or of her aunt’s person did not matter to her any more. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes with a smile.

It was good to be back home, if only for a night.

N I N E



The worship of the fifteen-foot tall marble statue of Shiva was underway. Amba, first princess of Kasi, raised her head just enough so that she could survey the assembly in just one sweep from under her veil. What she saw impressed her. Heralds had been sent out on horseback and on foot in all directions to make the announcement, but in her heart she had always wondered whether the kings would arrive in such large numbers. She was aware of the political reasons why the Kasi–Kosala kingdom was so keenly sought after, but she had thought that in times of peace such as this, the Great Kingdoms would not bother over much to form military alliances. But they had come, and it bore out what Shalva, the king of Saubala – who had been courting her relentlessly this last year – had said: this period of peace was only temporary. Each of the kingdoms were strengthening their position, and each was wary of the others. Amba thought she could feel nervous energy bristling through the hall.

The only picture of calm was Shalva himself, who sat with his arms folded in the third row, and she felt the same self-assurance that he did. All these kings and princes that arrived today did not make any difference to her – though it did to her sisters – for her mind had already been made. She

would not have cared even if the hall had been empty save the king of Saubala, but Ambika and Ambalika needed to make a choice in this assembly. For them the big crowd of royalty was exciting, and Amba felt some of that excitement ripple within her too.

She had long stopped asking herself whether Shalva wooed her just because she was the eldest daughter to the king of Kasi – and therefore was heir to a lion's share in the kingdom and aspects of its governance – or merely because she was Amba. When questioned, the king always went to great lengths in describing her virtues as a woman, but so would every king here in the assembly. There was simply no way to know whether a man liked her for herself or for being her father's eldest daughter, and although it had troubled her in the early days of her friendship with Shalva, it no longer bothered her. For she had come to realize that Amba the woman was one with Amba the princess of Kasi. There was no need to separate the two and wonder what one would be without the other.

Her nose awoke to the rose fragrance of the milk in which the lord was being bathed. From the top rung of the ladder that had been erected next to the white idol, a priest emptied vessel after vessel of milk that flowed in rivulets down the cobra coiled around the Destroyer's neck, his ash-smeared body, the leopard skin that covered his loins, and his calves and bare feet. Involuntarily, Amba began mouthing the words being chanted by the priest who sat by the feet of the lord, dressing the linga with flowers and smearing it with lines of sandal. She murmured a silent prayer to the lord that her sisters would find worthy, heroic husbands too, and that they would make good queens to whichever kingdom they married into. They had been trained in all the necessary disciplines, of course, and they had soaked up the lessons well, but they were little more than girls, and they had had little time – at least compared to her – to practice what they had been taught.

She led her sisters on to the dais and they stood on the edge, facing the assemblage, in a single file. Her father announced: 'Kings, princes and heroes of North Country. My daughters, the princesses of the kingdom of Kasi, have arrived. Let the ceremony begin!'

Amba bent her head and waited for the gong to sound, as they had told her it would at her father's announcement, but for a long time nothing happened. Puzzled, she allowed her head to rise a little so that she could peek at the hall. One man had risen from his seat and was walking up to the dais, holding the hilt of his sword with one hand and his crown in the other, raised up to his chest. He was lanky, and though his face seemed worn and tired, he appeared no more than twenty-five years of age. His limbs were too long for his formidable height, and the way he walked – with his feet pointing slightly outward as he stepped – made him look like an ungainly clown walking on borrowed stilts. If not for the dark well-tended beard that covered his cheeks and chin, Amba would have wondered how he had received admittance into the castle. When he came to the dais he bowed to Kasya.

'Identify yourself, stranger,' said the king.

'My name is Devavrata, my lord,' said the stranger. 'I come hither from the heartland of North Country, bearing good tidings from the court of Hastina.' He paused and looked around him, smiling a little. 'The world knows me better by another name, I am told.'

'Bhishma,' the king said, and that made Amba look at the stranger again. She recognized the name; Bhishma the terrible, Bhishma the strong, Bhishma the ever-youthful, Bhishma the just. This Bhishma?

'Your name has travelled to our kingdom, but I trust this is the first time you have come here in person. I hope Kasi looks after you well, son of Shantanu, and that you take good wishes back with you to Hastina.'

Bhishma laughed curtly, and Amba noticed that his laugh, like his speech, was soft, barely above a whisper, and yet in the silence of the hall it rang out. 'I intend to take something back for the people of Hastina, Your Highness, something more tangible, shall we say, than good wishes.' His eyes turned to her and rested on her just for an instant, and she looked away to find Shalva in his seat. The king of Saubala was staring at the intruder. Gone from his face was the coolness, the quiet confidence.

'Indeed?' said the king. 'If it were not for the vow you have taken, the vow for which you were given your name, I would have made the mistake of assuming you were referring to my daughters, sir.'

'I am indeed referring to your daughters, my lord,' said Bhishma, 'and as for my oath I do not need people to remind me of it, for I shall keep it all my life, whether the world likes it or not.' The words shot out like arrows, but on his lips, concealed behind the beard and moustache, a thin, mocking smile played. 'Hastina has a new king, His Highness Vichitraveerya, King Shantanu's second son by our queen Satyawati, and it is for him that I desire to take your three daughters.'

'He has not attended the ceremony, sir,' said the king, drawing himself up and striding to the edge of the stage to stand by Amba. 'If he is not here, he cannot be chosen. Even if he were here, I might add, my daughters might not like what they see in the son of a fisherwoman.'

The smile stayed on Bhishma's lips, and his gaze did not waver. 'I come here, my lord, King Kasya, as the servant of the fisherwoman's son. Perhaps you would wish to see what this servant can do before you comment further on the valour of my master.'

Amba looked at her father. He put on a brave face, set his lips tight together, and tucked his hands behind his back. But she could tell that he was afraid, though she knew not of what. 'All this talk of valour and

violence does not become you at this time, sir,' he said, 'at a groom-choosing.'

'There will be no groom-choosing, Your Highness,' said Bhishma. 'I am staking a claim here for all three of your daughters, and let the assembled kings – if any may dare – obstruct my path and fight me if they want your princesses for themselves.' He looked around, and his voice became clearer still; not louder, Amba noticed, just clearer. 'Look at the well-tended bodies of your daughters' suitors, my lord, and tell me if any of them would be a match for me on the battlefield.'

'This is a groom-choosing,' said the king again, a little weakly. 'Surely a man of your stature, Bhishma, who has read the scriptures—'

'The scriptures, you say, sir? Do you really wish to know what the scriptures say about the marriage of a maiden? Listen, then, and ask your worthy priests to waylay me if I speak so much as a word in error. O King, there are eight forms of marriage. When a worthy man has been invited, a father may bestow his daughter unto him decked up with ornaments and along with valuable presents. Some fathers marry their daughters by accepting two cows in return. Others accept a fixed sum. Some men take the woman away by force, some wed with the consent of the maiden, while some drug them into consent. Some men approach the woman's parents and obtain their sanction, yet others obtain wives as presents for assisting at sacrifices.'

Bhishma stopped for a second. 'And then, of course, there is the swayamvar, the groom-choosing ceremony, where the woman chooses her husband. But Your Highness, the Wise Ones have proclaimed that the wife obtained by force, after victory over rivals, would be the wife most dearly prized by that man. That is the highest form of marriage, and that is what I propose for your daughters.' He turned to the priest who had been decking

the shiva-linga with flowers. ‘Have I said anything incorrect, Venerable One?’

The king said, ‘I do not want any bloodshed at my daughter’s wedding, sir, whether the scriptures condone the practice or not.’

‘But a battle among the suitors is inevitable, Your Highness,’ Bhishma said and smiled. ‘Did you not see that the kings have all come bearing weapons in their chariots? If your daughters choose their own suitors here, do you really think that the rest of the kings will sit by and wave goodbye to them with smiles on their faces?’ He took a moment and surveyed the room slowly. His eyes returned at leisure to the king. ‘Do you?’

Amba saw that her father hesitated only for a moment, but Bhishma latched on to the delay and said, ‘Kasi is too precious a kingdom not to seek an alliance with, Your Highness. A statesman of your calibre ought to know that. All of these people here have assembled in the hope of being associated with the royal house of Kasi, and most will be disappointed – nay, not just disappointed, angry even. I am only proposing that we dispense with the preliminaries and take care of important matters that will arise anyway.’

The king did not speak, and his gaze lowered. Amba sensed sounds of unrest coming from the assembly, low murmurs nibbling their way through the crowd, a loud call from this corner, a few of the smaller kings springing to their feet and marching off in a huff . . . It was as though her father had agreed to the stranger’s request, and suddenly Amba was gripped with fear. Would Shalva fight this man for her? And even if he did, would he win? One look at his face was enough to tell her what he thought of his chances in a duel with Bhishma. In fact, she thought looking around, none in the assembly seemed eager to take up arms against this man. She no longer thought of him as clumsy – not since he had started to speak.

Bhishma went and stood by Amba, on the other side from her father. He addressed the audience, and his voice still did not rise. 'I am taking the three princesses back to Hastina with me, to be wedded to King Vichitraveerya, second son of Shantanu. I am ready and willing to fight any of you' – he stopped to smile – 'or all of you for their possession.' He pulled out his sword and held it pointed downwards on the granite. 'Vanquish me, O Kings, and you can have these princesses, or be vanquished. The choice is yours.'

Then he turned to Amba and bowed. 'Hastina will take good care of you, my ladies,' he said, and with a further bow in her father's direction, he gestured to her to follow him. His sword now drawn, with the blade pointing skyward, the ruby-studded crown still in his hands, he walked in front of her. Amba followed him, mesmerized, and behind her she heard the steps of her sisters. His steps were slow and measured, and it seemed that with each stride he waited for someone among the now standing kings to jump out and challenge him, but no one did. No, not even Shalva. When she passed him, she bent her head lower still and averted his gaze, her fingers digging deep into the garland until she felt the twine against her skin. Petals dropped at her feet as she walked, and with each step the mutterings on both sides of her, bold in word but fearful in voice, intensified. In front of her, Bhishma walked on, unperturbed.

It was only after they had passed the big oak doorway that the rumbling behind them grew in volume. Now Amba could hear lone voices shouting after them to turn back, and it seemed to her little more than false bravado to wait for the hero's back to turn before abuses could be yelled at him. She knew too that if Bhishma would only turn and raise his sword once more, the crowd would fall silent. But he did not. He led them to his chariot, undid the latch and stood by, holding the door open. He smiled kindly at Amba,

and she found herself smiling back at him. After the three of them had taken their seats, the door closed and Amba heard the latch click.

The kings now stood on the stairs leading to the big oak doorway. Bhishma turned and took a few steps towards the door. Someone from within the crowd yelled, 'I will fight you!'

Bhishma laughed out. 'Will you?'

There was no answer. Another voice said, 'Yes!'

'All of you, then?' said Bhishma. 'All of you on one side, Kings of North Country, and I on the other. Let us see how much the years of peace have blunted your weapons. Are you prepared?'

A moment's silence, then, another lone voice: 'Yes!'

Bhishma turned to his charioteer and gave him a curt nod. 'Are the weapons ready?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Are the horses fresh?'

'They have been feeding and drinking all morning, my lord.'

'By the riverbank?'

'Yes, my lord, as you commanded.'

Bhishma laughed, and Amba saw in his eyes a glint. With a word of warning to his servant to take care of the princesses, he turned to the crowd of kings. He raised his sword and pointed to the river. 'To the Ganga!' he said, and strode away.

T E N



Satyavati leant back on her bed and rested her hand on her forehead. Her eyes struggled to stay open. Ever since Devavrata had come back from Kasi, she had been busy with one thing or the other. The priests had advised rice-serving ceremonies on four different days – one for each of the four classes of men in the kingdom, and then keeping her sensibilities in mind, there had been a separate celebration (comprising specifically of fish) for the men on the riverbank. Each day in the last two weeks she had had to wake up before dawn and run about the palace tirelessly until long after sundown, and it was only now that she had been able to catch her breath. Even this was only temporary, she knew, because before long the wedding preparations would begin.

She sighed and felt a twinge of envy toward the three princesses. In every ceremony, they had been smiling, fresh-faced and upbeat. Weddings were fun, she decided, but only for the people getting married.

Devavrata had been right. The three princesses were like dancers from Indra's court. She had regarded his statement with suspicion at first, because she thought that all the strategic advantages of marrying into the Kasi kingdom must have sweetened his sight. But even she knew

Vichitraveerya was no match for even one of the three princesses, let alone three.

‘The prince to see you, Your Highness.’

News of the battle in Varanasi had reached Hastina long before Devavrata and the princesses arrived. Already composers and balladeers had begun to sing songs on the street in praise of the prince, narrating tales of how the river ran red with the blood of the kings and chieftains that had dared to waylay his path. Some said the severed limbs and heads still lay buried in the sands of the bank where the Great River flowed at its widest. The common folk said Bhishma was Ganga’s son; in some tales the goddess rose from the water in a white wave and fought by her son, turning the arrows and spears that flew in his direction around in their paths and sending them back.

Satyavati knew they were tall tales, each one of them. Kings fought by a strict code of battle, and they fought to injure and maim rather than to kill – no matter how loud and reckless the pre-fight banter was. For all the stories of Devavrata taking on the entire battalion of kings at once, she knew that he probably did so one king at a time, and for all the poems describing how many heads had rolled, it was likely that not even one had – for it did not make sense to truly kill or die for such a small price as a woman. If a kingdom were deprived of a king in so sudden a battle, anarchy would rise, and that would spread like a plague through the land. All the Great Kingdoms knew how tightly twined their fortunes were, and therefore killing and dying did not occur but in the most dire circumstances. There would be other groom - choosing ceremonies in the land, and there would be more opportunities for such political manoeuvring. The kings would have realized that, and once they saw that they could not defeat Devavrata, they would have retreated in peace.

Devavrata must have defeated them all, yes, as defined by the rules of combat, but he must not have had killed any. It was difficult to keep men from weapons, she thought, and these fights that arose in practically every other groom-choosing ceremony in the land were just that – a sport, like children with wooden swords and shields.

When she heard footsteps behind her, Satyavati sat up and turned around. Devavrata had bloody cotton swabs on his arms. An especially big red blot stared out from the left portion of his chest. He folded his arms to cover it up.

‘Was it necessary, Devavrata?’ she asked. ‘You went to participate in a groom-choosing, an auspicious occasion, and you fought with your rivals.’

‘Kosala is a strong kingdom, Mother,’ said Devavrata. ‘We are not the only ones who wanted the princesses.’

‘So you just fought them as if it was a war. Violence ought to be the last refuge of a kshatriya. You know that.’

Devavrata frowned, the way he did when something puzzled him. ‘I gave them a choice, Mother. They did not *have* to fight me. And, I think this little battle did some good.’

Satyavati did not question him on that because she knew he was right. In these long, uneasy periods of peace, every kingdom thought itself stronger than the others; so an occasional fight between kings was needed to keep everyone in their place. If anyone had been thinking of invading Hastina before this battle, they would certainly think twice now. These skirmishes served to re-establish both peace and the pecking order; much like ritualistic clawing and scratching among roosters, thought Satyavati. A few bruises were small price, then, when weighed against lives of hundreds, perhaps thousands.

‘I am sure it did,’ said Satyavati finally. ‘What now?’

‘The priests say the fourth day of Chaitra is an auspicious time for the wedding.’

Satyavati nodded, though inwardly she cringed. Chaitra was no more than a fortnight away. She had less time than she thought. Out loud she said, ‘Send invitations to Kasi and insist that they arrive here well in advance. Send messengers out to all the Great Kingdoms inviting them to the wedding.’

‘Yes, Mother.’

The attendant came in and bowed. ‘The princess of Kasi, Amba to see you, Your Highness.’

‘Let her in.’

Amba came in, keeping her head bowed. Satyavati had not had the chance to meet with her daughters-in-law yet, apart from the light pleasantries they had exchanged on their arrival, but she had noticed that something about Amba was not quite right. She had noticed that the princess always kept her eyes averted, kept shifting on her feet and her mouth was forever caught in the moment of just about to utter something. Satyavati had vaguely wondered why someone of her stature should dither so much, and now, looking at her in her chamber, doubt became certainty: something was definitely weighing on her mind. She touched Devavrata on his arm and motioned to him to leave the room. Amba stepped to the side and bowed as he left. After a moment, Satyavati spoke to the girl.

‘Come, child,’ she said. She was easily the most beautiful of the three; understandable, for she was the oldest. The other two had yet to grow out of their adolescence. ‘What brings you here at a time when you should be resting?’

Amba gazed at the floor and said in a low voice, ‘I have been meaning to speak to you, Mother. I know I should have told Brother Bhishma of this

earlier, but he scares me so. I thought that since you are a woman yourself . . .' She looked up at her expectantly.

Satyavati smiled and extended her arm to the princess. 'Come here, child, we do not need to speak of it standing up.' Amba went to her, took her hands and sat down at the edge of the bed, next to her. 'It is – it is about the wedding, Mother,' she said. 'I know I have sat on this for two whole weeks, and I should have come to you sooner – oh, I know I should have, but—'

'Child.' Satyavati smoothed Amba's forehead. 'This is your home now. I am your mother. You can tell me anything you wish without fear. Has anybody mistreated you here? Has there been anything lacking in the arrangements?'

'No, no,' said Amba, shaking her head. 'It is not that. Oh, Mother, I am so glad to be here, really I am! I am so proud that I was won in battle by the champion of Hastina – what greater honour could there be for a maiden like myself?'

Satyavati did not say anything. She continued to smooth Amba's hair, and took care not to let the smile leave her face.

'But my heart desires another, Mother. He is the king of Saubala, and he is called Shalva; perhaps you have heard of him?'

Satyavati shook her head, but without her knowledge her smile had hardened and her eyes had narrowed. Amba saw this and shrank away a little, but continued, 'His father and mine are great friends and we used to play together as children. He courted me from as long back as I can remember, Mother, and I cannot think of any other man as husband but him. It is true of him too. He has promised that he will marry not at all if I did not become his wife.'

'Was he present at the ceremony?'

‘Oh, yes, he was! It was arranged that I would garland him, and just to tease me he sat in the row behind the foremost kings, just as a game I suppose.’ She looked away, smiling just a little, and her eyes grew distant in thought. ‘But I did not know that Bhishma was on his way, Mother. None of us did. My father did not either.’

That was not a surprise for Satyavati. News of Devavrata’s vow had reached all corners of the land by now, and invitations to groom-choosing ceremonies were sent to Hastina only as a matter of formality. No one expected him to attend any of the ceremonies even as a guest, let alone as a competitor.

‘Did Devavrata defeat him?’ asked Satyavati.

Amba bent her head. ‘Yes, he did.’

Satyavati stood up and clapped her hands once. To the attendant who came she said, ‘Summon the prince immediately.’ Turning back to Amba she said, ‘King Shalva was defeated by Devavrata in open battle, my child. Are you certain he will have the face to accept you as his queen after that?’

Amba said, ‘He has promised me that he would not take another wife in his life before me. He promised.’

Satyavati smiled gently. ‘The promises of a man are not worth much, my dear. Have you lain with him, or are you yet a virgin?’

Amba coloured and twisted her fingers together. ‘I do not see how or why that is relevant to this, Mother—’

‘When it comes to men, my child, this is the only thing that is relevant. You tell me he has courted you all your life; so I take it that you have lain together. For your sake I wish you had not, child.’

Amba’s eyes shot up, wide open and nervous. ‘I am in love with him. Surely it is not wrong to lie with a man you love?’

Satyavati sighed. How simplistic her thoughts were, how straight and narrow, how child-like, how pathetic. ‘It is not wrong, my dear. I did not say you were wrong. But men are not the same before and after they have slept in your bed. If they are going to change, you have to make sure they change to better serve you.’ She stopped and thought: perhaps I am being too cynical. Perhaps this man that she loves is not like the men I have known. Perhaps he will put her before his own wounded pride. So she said, her voice low, ‘Perhaps I am wrong—’

‘Oh, you are!’ said Amba, getting up to her feet. ‘You are, because I have known him all my life; and every part of his being is filled with love for me, Mother. He told me so on every night that we were together.’

‘I hope I am wrong. So you are decided that you will go?’

‘Yes,’ said Amba firmly. ‘I know that the king of Saubala will take me.’

‘Then you will go,’ said Satyavati. ‘Hastina will not have a queen against her will.’

Devavrata appeared at the doorway and waited for permission to enter. At a nod from Satyavati he came and stood in front of them, arms folded. ‘The next time you bring princesses to be wedded to our king, Devavrata,’ said Satyavati, ‘you will also find out what the princesses have in their minds.’

Devavrata glanced at Amba. ‘I did not think any princess would have cause for complaint if she was going to be the queen of Hastina, Mother.’

‘Well, other kingdoms have kings too, and they court princesses outside of the groom-choice ceremonies.’

Devavrata lowered his head. ‘I did not think of that.’

‘You should have,’ said Satyavati. ‘Now we are compelled to send the princess away – a princess that we have won in the field of battle. It does not reflect well on Hastina or on Saubala.’

‘Saubala?’ Devavrata shot a look in Amba’s direction. ‘Saubala is not even a Great Kingdom, princess. It is one of the vassal states.’

Amba did not reply, but Satyavati retorted, ‘If all women thought like you, Devavrata, none of the men in the land who are not kings would have wives. If a woman loves a man, she loves a man, whether he is a king on a throne or a beggar off the street!’

Devavrata inclined his head again. ‘Of course, Mother. I am sorry for my oversight. But I am afraid we cannot send the princess away to Shalva.’

‘Because it will weaken us?’

‘Yes, the eldest daughter of Kasya is one part of a triad. If she were to leave us, the loyalties of Kasi will be divided between Hastina and Saubala, and our whole plan will be foiled.’ He turned to Amba. ‘Princess, take me on my word: the king of Saubala will pass from your mind like a summer shower, and before long you will lose yourself in the splendour of Hastina. You will have sons that will equal me in valour – I will train them to ascend such heights that even the gods will tremble at their names. A great future awaits you here, my lady. You will be queen, you will be queen-mother, and your name will forever be etched as one of our greatest queens. Do not give this away for a king whose lineage is so obscure. You shall not be happy.’

Satyavati smiled at Devavrata. ‘Do you really think you can convince a woman in love with promises of glory, valour and status – all that a man aspires to? You have much to learn of women, Devavrata. I hope this failing of yours will not hurt the throne that you champion with such fervour.’ She felt something tingle within her as she said that, a similar twinge to one she had felt a few times before, when she had known that the king would come for her, when she had seen Vichitraveerya on his deathbed, his arms and limbs brown and wooden and dead . . .

‘I wish to go back to the king of Saubala, my lord,’ said Amba, even as Satyawati held the bedpost for support. ‘Promises of all the riches in the world will not convince me otherwise.’

‘I do not need to convince you, my lady,’ said Devavrata gravely. ‘As a prize of battle you have no say in whether you will be sent away or kept here.’

‘Dare you not speak that way to a maiden!’ Satyawati glared at him. ‘Beg her pardon this very minute, before another word escapes those cursed lips of yours!’

Devavrata pursed his lips and held his silence. Then with a quick exhale of breath he turned to the princess and bowed. ‘I spoke in haste, Princess. Pray pardon my uncouth words.’

‘It is not my place to forgive you, my lord,’ said Amba, bowing in return. ‘Your words are true, even though Mother speaks on my behalf. I am but a trophy, and perhaps I do not have the right to speak of my wishes and of my future, but I thought it right that you know what is on my mind. You are well versed in the scriptures and in the laws of virtue. They say you have been fostered in the north where the great sages reside. Please do as you deem fit, and I shall obey.’

Satyawati said, ‘There is only one thing for us to do now, Devavrata.’

Devavrata nodded and took a step back. ‘Hastina will accrue a loss by sending the princess away to Shalva, if not now, certainly in the years to come. But Hastina is strong enough to bear it, especially since we have two-thirds of Kasi’s wealth still with us. We will stand to lose much more by an unwilling queen than by a sharing of alliance, and since Saubala is but a small and weak state, the damage will not be felt.’

‘And most of all,’ said Satyawati, looking in Amba’s direction, ‘the princess wishes to go to the city where her lover rules.’

‘Yes, Hastina would not want to keep a princess here against her wishes.’ He turned to Amba and said, ‘Two chariots will be made ready on the morrow, Princess. Four men and two women will accompany you on the journey, and I will give you parchments that you could use to gain entry into any of our allied cities that lie on your path. You shall not want for anything, of that I will make certain.’

Amba’s face lit up. Joining her hands together, she bowed first in Devavrata’s direction and then, more deliberately, in Satyavati’s. Satyavati nodded acknowledgement at her. After she had left, Devavrata asked her the same question that had been plaguing her all this while. He said, ‘Will the king of Saubala take her back, Mother?’

And Satyavati said, ‘Amba believes that he will, and for now that is all that matters.’

E L E V E N



*F*ighting old battles again?

She sat by the Yamuna. The terrain around her was completely featureless. The toes of her feet wriggled but did not feel sand trickle between them. Her palms, when lain flat on the surface, touched nothing. There were no trees, no bushes, no scampering animals, no highs or lows. It was just her and the river, extending on both sides as far as her eye could see. To one side was her ferry anchored to an invisible mast. She peered into the glassy surface of the river. Her reflection was sharp and undisturbed.

On the other side of the river, she saw a figure that was both familiar and strange. That beard, that orange dhoti, those wiry muscles, that sacred thread around the shoulders, a staff in one hand and an axe in the other, and most of all, that naked wrath on the face – she had heard of him in countless tales that had travelled down the northern mountains where they said he lived. She tried getting up so that she could bow to him, but she could not. The man was not looking at her anyway.

Bhargavarama, son of Jamadagni.

The frame expanded now and the figure of the brahmin receded. To his right now stood a king with a thousand arms, each holding a weapon. Now Bhargavarama was up in the air at the top of his jump, both his hands holding his axe above his head, moving towards its target: the king's outstretched arm.

When Jamadagni was killed by Kartavirya Arjuna, he of thousand arms, Parashurama vowed he would cleanse the world of kshatriyas. He started with Kartavirya.

Satyavati saw images flit by quickly now, each one dissolving into the next. In one, Parashurama stood with his feet pinning the limbless stump of a body with severed arms lying all about him. In another he was chopping off the head of a king with his axe, his face frozen in an expression of gleeful bloodlust. In another he was in the process of releasing an arrow pointed at the neck of his victim that already bled from a gash.

He wiped out the kshatriyas twenty-one times, once for each time his mother beat her heart in grief at her husband's death.

The terrain became featureless again. She looked down for a moment to catch his reflection. The surface of the river was still mirror-like. Her glance travelled upstream. Aside from the frozen blue line that narrowed and curved out of sight, there was nothing.

And suddenly, something appeared in the distance. It followed the course of the river and grew bigger and bigger as it moved closer to her. When it got close enough, Satyavati saw that it was a sage tied to a raft. When he was ten or so metres away from her, everything froze again. Satyavati looked at the eyes. They were vacant, unfocused, the eyes of a blind man.

This is Dirghatamas, son of Utathya. He was cursed to be blind by Brihaspati.

The terrain changed again on the other side. An image came into focus, gradually. A short, white-haired man with a boyish smile appeared, his arms outstretched towards a woman. Her bearing was defensive, her hands raised as though deterring him. In her stomach, visible to Satyavati, was a crude yellow shape of a human foetus.

Brihaspati approached Utathya's wife when she was pregnant with Dirghatamas. Dirghatamas protested that there was no room for more in her womb, and for that, Brihaspati cursed him with blindness.

Satyavati looked at those vacant eyes again. Brihaspati was the teacher of the gods, they said, and he was one of the Wise Ones. Could he be slave too to the desires of men? The picture changed again. Now Dirghatamas was standing by another woman, his staff raised and his eyebrows set in a tight frown, even as his eyes remained calm and unseeing. There appeared to be a golden halo around the tip of the staff.

His wife complained to him that he was not a fit husband because he was blind. Instead of having him take care of her, it was she who had to care for him. That was when Dirghatamas cursed womankind. He decreed that every woman should only have one man for a husband, whether he is alive or dead. From then on, women with no husbands or multiple paramours have come to be considered sinners.

Another image! Four strong, able-bodied men were tying the hapless sage to a mast. It morphed into another picture of them letting go of him along the river. One of the four brothers was in the midst of a fit of laughter.

His sons sent him down the river, on their mother's bidding. But he was found by the sonless King Vali. In time, Dirghatamas would sire five sons to Sudeshna, Vali's queen. The five sons would go on to found great kingdoms which would be named after them: Anga, Vanga, Kalinga, Pundra and Suhma.

She saw pictures once again come thick and fast; sage Dirghatamas with his hand over the shoulder of a woman in royal robes, while the king stood next to them with his hands joined; the five sons of Vali, each one like the sun himself in glory, in the midst of battles with great kings and huge armies; and then, a panoramic view of the current cities which had been named after them.

A brahmin, Satyavati, fathered the sons of a king.

The terrain went blank again.

Parashurama himself was born to a brahmin father and a kshatriya mother. How do you think the kshatriya race continued to replenish itself even though Bhargava wiped them out so many times?

Satyavati tried to close her eyes in thought, but could not, for something was unfolding yet again in front of them. On the other side of the river she saw almost a hundred kshatriya women with scarves around their heads, carrying babies in their arms. Their faces were all set in smiles, and the air rang with gurgles. A soft female voice hummed the notes of a lullaby over the sounds of cooing infants, and the river chimed in perfect rhythm. All around the mothers, dotted apparently at random, rishis sat on mounds in front of their huts, lost in meditation.

The qualities that have come to be known as 'kshatriya' are passed on through the mother, Kali. Parashurama, when he set out to finish the kshatriyas from the face of the Earth, should have killed the women instead of the men.

The image grew in size and focused on one of the mothers fondling an infant. Satyavati thought: did the valour and courage and strength of the kshatriyas really spring from that loving, tender, motherly caress?

Yes, that was why Parashurama, though by birth and practice a brahmin, was a kshatriya by virtue of all his actions. And that was why

when he set out to cleanse the Earth of kshatriyas, he failed, because all the kshatriya women he pardoned went on to beget sons from brahmin fathers and perpetuated their races.

So it was not the men that were important. All this time she had thought that it was the man's attributes that determined those of his son. Had she been wrong? Had the whole world been wrong?

Look at your sons. Whose attributes did they get?

Their father's! Shantanu's!

Truly?

Yes!

Give it some thought, Kali. It is time to wake up.

T W E L V E



Satyavati Speaks

Perhaps the dream had prepared me, or perhaps I had known it ever since I had the vision which prompted me to seek my lost son in the settlement of Bhrigu, or perhaps it was that the first rains of the monsoon had come and gone and therefore I knew it was time. Whatever the reason, much as it saddened me as a mother, the death of Vichitraveerya did not surprise me. Even on the first morning on which he awoke with cough in his breath and green in his eyes, even as the doctors pronounced that he would be out hunting in no more than two days, I had known that he had begun his final walk.

More and more physicians came and prescribed for him potions of various colours and smells; some came from as far as the Ice Mountains to the north, bearing with them strange herbs which they crushed in golden cups and offered to the king. But they only served to make the cough hoarser, the breathing quicker and the eyes paler. None knew what it was that truly ailed my son, and after all the medicines had been tried in vain, they threw up their arms, all these great learned doctors, and proclaimed that the gods had decreed that the king must depart the land of the living.

I had known that all along.

The one thing that I did not know was whether Vichitraveerya had succeeded in getting either of his two wives with child, but even as I summoned my daughters-in-law to my chambers, I knew what the answer was going to be. It was all to hinge on the arrival of my first son, the island born. But that would come to pass only if Vichitraveerya had not passed on his seed – it remained my duty to make certain, and I did.

Neither of the two princesses shed many tears at his death, and I did not blame them. They had known him no more than two months, and they were still children – old enough to bear children, yes, but too young to feel friendship, loyalty and love. It may have been different if Vichitraveerya had agreed to marry Amba after she returned, thwarted, from Saubala. Devavrata had tried his best to convince him to do so, but the boy had his own ideas of loyalty and love, I suppose. Not for him, this princess who had left him for another.

Amba did not shed tears either on her return. In little less than a fortnight she had learnt lessons that she would remember her whole life – of how men thought and lived. Shalva rejected her because Devavrata had won her in a fair fight and now he could not accept her as his victor's alms. Vichitraveerya rejected her because she had given herself to another. And then, of course, Devavrata rejected her because of his oath. In a fortnight, the eldest princess of Kasi had been rejected by three men, and now she saw her sister, Ambika, sit on the throne by Vichitraveerya's side. She had every reason to weep and bemoan her fate, but she did not shed a tear. I offered her quarters as a royal guest of Hastina for as long as she wanted, and at the time of Vichitraveerya's death she sat by the pyre to console her sisters.

She would leave Hastina soon, and by the next midwinter feast her chambers would be empty. Her tale would lead her through many a strange maze indeed, but that is for another day . . .

The third monsoon rain had lasted four full days, and both the Great Rivers would have flooded and laid Hastina to waste if it had gone on for even a day longer, but the fifth day dawned with clear blue skies and a bright, yellow sun. It was on this morning that a strange brahmin visited the royal house of Hastina asking for an audience with the queen. It was a month to the day after Vichitraveerya's passing.

T H I R T E E N



He could have been no more than twenty, the boy that walked in and saluted her, but he looked as old as Parashara had been when she had last seen him. The ash smeared all over his body, the necklace of brown beads, the yellow-green thread that circled his shoulder and torso, the muddy, grimy hair that knotted and stuck together, and the overgrown beard in which Satyavati thought she could spot small dark insects hovering restlessly – these were all Parashara’s. This boy did not have his father’s fragrance, though. He smelled like all the drains of the kingdom had been emptied on him. She remembered someone saying that sages did not have time for baths and cleaning, that the only time they washed themselves was when the rains arrived. Even if that were true, she thought, this was the middle of monsoon! This meant she was now looking at her son at his tidiest. She would share her secret of the fragrance with him before he had left.

He had wide, bowl-like, unblinking eyes, much like her own. His skin was darker than hers – so dark that it would be best described as a shade of purple. His limbs and the way he held himself reminded her of her fourteen-year-old self, but perhaps here she was seeing things. When she was

fourteen she had just been man-like; what she saw in her son right now were nothing more than signs that he would grow into a man, eventually.

All said, though, Satyavati saw that he clearly held the supple, elongated musculature of the fisher-people, and that their blood flowed in him. But for the outward appearances of a sage, he could have been just another man from the settlement.

‘Mother.’

It was only then that she stirred, and realized that though she could tell that this boy was her son, she felt nothing of a mother’s love for him. She had not expected to draw him close and clutch him to her bosom on their first meeting – she had not been that expressive even with Chitrangada and Vichitraveerya – but she had thought there would be something within her that would spring to life, something that would take her back to her old life on the riverbank and the ferry and the Yamuna. But she felt nothing. Nothing, that is, except a sharp feeling of revulsion at the mass of hair and dust that stood in front of her.

‘I have been told that you summoned me,’ he said. Then his mouth parted in a smile of amusement. ‘I do not believe you know my name. They call me Dwaipayana, the island born, and they also call me Krishna, for the colour of my skin, which I see now that I got from you.’

He smiled like her too, she thought. With a sprinkle of the fragrance on his person, he may just turn out to be a nice, civilized man. She made an effort to hurry over to him and held him by the shoulders to look into his eyes. ‘My son!’ she said, and smiled at him, hoping she was doing enough to hide her disgust. But when he held her back and cocked his head at her, smiling in that knowing manner, she had to look away.

‘You look so much like your father, Dwaipayana,’ she said. ‘Have you met him?’

‘I had not known for a long time who my father was, Mother. But on my fourteenth birthday, when I came to Bhrigu for the first time, the Wise Woman told me that she had known you once, and that she learnt from you that my father was Sage Parashara who meditates in the woods of the northern mountains.’

‘You know him?’ asked Satyavati eagerly. The mention of Parashara, she thought in shame, still made her sit up like a stupid teenaged fisher-girl.

‘No, Mother,’ said Dwaipayana. ‘I have made the trek a few times to the many ashrams that sit on the northern slopes, but never have I met anyone who has known a sage by the name Parashara. All my life I have travelled in search of my father, and although I have not found him yet, I have learnt much from seeing places and people.’ His eyes sought and found hers. ‘I have looked for you too, Mother, and I am glad that at least this search has come to its end.’

‘The Wise Woman spoke of some big task that you were undergoing – something to do with the Veda.’

Dwaipayana sighed deeply. ‘Yes, Mother. That task has only just begun. I have seen many lands in my eight years of travelling and seeking, and everywhere I went, the sages taught me a little of the lore they call the Veda. But the more I have learnt it, the more I have heard it, the more I have studied it, it seems to me that the Veda is too long, too complex, much like a wild bush that has grown branches of all sizes in all directions. I have, therefore, undertaken to simplify the lore and divide it into four parts – so that there shall not be one Veda after I have finished – if I ever do – but four, each one a lore unto itself.’

He let go of her and stepped away, looking in the direction of the open window. ‘This is my life’s work, Mother, and I do not expect to finish it

before many years have come and gone, but there are people who know of this, and they have already begun to address me as Vyasa of the Vedas.’

‘Veda Vyasa,’ whispered Satyavati.

‘Or that,’ said Dwaipayana, half-turning in her direction. ‘But we have spoken enough about me, Mother. What is it that you have summoned me here for? What use could the queen of Hastina have for the lowly son of a brahmin?’

She felt the powdery texture of her own palms, gleaned from his skin, and winced. If she, who had once been a fisherwoman, was having trouble with the appearance of this man – and he was her son – would the princesses of Kasi accede to sharing their bed with him?

‘How much knowledge do you keep of the news of the kingdom, Dwaipayana?’ she asked.

‘I am a man who has given himself to the Veda, Mother. Real life passes me by, and I do not have the time or the interest to look at it. My work engulfs me so that when I am immersed in it, I do not come up to the surface very often to even draw breath. Why? Has something occurred that I should know about?’

‘A month ago to the day, Vichitraveerya, my son, high king of Hastina, breathed his last without leaving an heir.’

Dwaipayana turned to face her. ‘Regrettable,’ he said, and frowned. ‘But Hastina has no fear of being attacked, does she, for her champion Bhishma is alive and well.’

‘So you do keep some knowledge of the outside world, then.’

Dwaipayana smiled. ‘One cannot help but hear such things, Mother. Tales of your foster-son’s valour have travelled as far and wide as my own two legs! With him in the city, I do not think there is a king in all of North

Country who would even think of invading Hastina, whether someone sits on her throne or not.'

'But we need to think of a time beyond Devavrata, Dwaipayana. As much as we would like him to, he will not live forever.'

Dwaipayana cocked his head again, throwing at her a child-like smile. 'He just might, Mother. Many have commented, have they not, on how he does not look a day older than twenty?'

She sighed. Many had commented, yes, but there was no need for that. Devavrata looked no older now than he did on the very first day she had set eyes on him. For someone who professed not to keep any knowledge of the outside world, Dwaipayana seemed to know something about everything. Perhaps he was just playing with her; perhaps he knew fully well why she had summoned him but wanted her to spell it out. 'Dwaipayana,' she said, 'the kingdom of Hastina needs you.'

'The kingdom needs *me*, Mother? I do not know the handle of a spear from its point.'

'No, son,' she said, and found the word came to her with much less effort than she had thought. 'Hastina is now bereft of a king, and as brother to the dead kings on the mother's side, you could sire sons by the queens that would grow up to be kings.'

'But Mother, Bhishma is also a brother to the kings. Why do you not ask him?'

'Why do you think I have not?' She found herself reddening with anger. 'Devavrata will not shy away from the oath he has taken, come what may.'

'My! The champion of Hastina's throne is not willing to forswear a long-dead promise?'

'He is not. Oh, lord, how daft is his view of virtue! But it cannot be helped. I have tried my best to convince him, but he will not budge.'

‘Then there is no discussing the matter further. If Hastina needs me, she will have me. But the queens, the princesses of Kasi, are not pure enough now to be approached by me. They should observe a vow for a year—’

‘We do not have time of that sort, Sage. A year is too long for the city to be without a king. Vultures are hovering on both sides of the Great River. Panchala and Surasena have grown into large, thriving kingdoms, and news has arrived that their armies are growing stronger by the day.’

‘You have Bhishma on your side, Mother—’

‘Devavrata is now our only support, Dwaipayana, and he shall not live forever. All the great men who have set foot on the Earth had to depart it; some had to go before their time. What if Devavrata’s time comes before you deem it fit to lay with the princesses?’

‘You ask for much, Mother, and your reasons are sound. Yet, I cannot offer myself to a woman who has never known and experienced the hardships of penance. How can I, a creature of emancipation, share myself with a woman whose feet have never felt the prick of a thorn?’

Satyavati asked hopelessly, ‘Is there nothing you can do?’

Dwaipayana smiled upon her, and holding the necklace of beads between his fingers he closed his eyes, with his head raised to the ceiling. His lips pursed, and his ears perked up as though he was listening to a message only he could hear. A moment later, his eyes opened. ‘Nine months from now, Mother, on midsummer night, I shall return. Not before, not after. The queens shall be clothed in bark and leaves all this while, and they will have a cup of powdered rice, a glass of curdled milk, and two fingertips of pickle, once a day. They shall wake up no later than the minute of the Creator, just before daybreak, and they shall be the last ones to turn the lamps off at the palace, after the guards and the cooks have gone to bed, no earlier than midnight. They will sleep on the floor with nothing to support

their heads and with no one to fan them. During their waking time they shall observe the vow of silence for no less than ten hours, and their minds they will fill with thoughts of the goddess that rules over us all, even the gods of Meru: Bhagavati, our Mother Nature.'

Satyavati listened, then said in a whisper, 'They are just girls.'

'Then this year will make women of them. Do not worry. They will survive the ordeal. There are enough men in the land who have far less than what I have prescribed them.'

She did not know why she did it, but Satyavati joined her hands and bowed to the sage. The person who spoke to her now was no longer her son. He was a Great Sage, a Wise One. In his twenty years he had seen more of life than she ever would, and had studied and practised more Mysteries than she knew existed. It was as though he had sprung out from his womb all-knowing and fully grown, and she wondered if more and more people who would meet this boy-sage in the future would say the same thing – that Veda Vyasa never had a childhood. He was born a sage, a Wise One.

'Do not fret about Devavrata's fate, Mother,' he said, 'for his life on Earth is destined to be a long one. Nothing will touch him as long as he lives, leave alone the next nine months. Hastina's future is secured – for now.'

'As you say, the Wise One.'

'But I do worry if nine months are going to be enough for what they are going to endure at the end of it.'

'I do not understand,' Satyavati said.

Dwaipayana smiled and looked about himself. 'Mother, your nose crinkles when you speak to me. Your eyes avoid me. But for that one moment of motherly affection you have shown me this morning, you have stood a good distance away from me all this time.'

‘I—’

‘I am certain that as soon as I leave this place, you will have this chamber cleaned. You will have a bath and scrub your body clean of my touch and of my smell. If my mere appearance is such an ordeal for my own mother to bear, how much harder would it be for a woman who has never known me to endure my company in bed?’

Satyavati said, ‘But it does not have to be that way, Sage. When you return to Hastina you will be our guest. We shall treat you as lavishly as we can. That means the best of barbers, tailors, the best scented-oil baths, and the best of women to wait upon you—’

‘Ah, Mother, you would bribe your own son!’

‘I merely think it is hospitality,’ she replied sternly.

‘Even so, I must refuse. You must know that I am not ashamed of my appearance, Mother, and neither do I see the need for change. I am happy the way I am, and if the princesses of Kasi are to beget sons through me, they ought to accept me the way I am. If they are going to bear Dwaipayana’s sons, let them, if for but one night, experience the real Dwaipayana. That will be the true test of their penances.’

He hovered closer to her as he spoke, and the stench from underneath his raised arm hit her nose and made her dizzy for a moment. If her own scent had not been present to nullify his, she doubted the conversation would have lasted this long. The least that Ambika and Ambalika would need to counter him, she thought, was a generous helping of Parashara’s fragrant dust. And she would make every effort to get the girls in line like the sage commanded, and she would make sure both knew exactly what to expect to find in their bedchambers nine moons from then.

Dwaipayana turned and walked in slow steps toward the exit. At the doorway he stopped. ‘We shall meet again, at midsummer,’ he said, and

walked on. To her relief, his smell left with him.

FOURTEEN



Ambika stood inside her bedchamber, facing the closed door, and shifted from one foot to the other. She was dressed in a white cotton sari more suited for chambermaids than for queens. Her wrists, nose and ears were bare, and her hair was tied into a bun by a single thread of twine. For the last nine months she had washed her own clothes, cooked her own food, made her own bed . . .

She looked back over her shoulder. It was not much of a bed, just a thin jute mat wide enough for one person. Tonight there would be two of them, she thought, and wondered how they would manage. But then it was midsummer; the marble floor of the palace made for a cooler, more comfortable bed than the rough, prickly jute. On many nights since the end of spring, Ambika had taken to rolling up the mat and resting her head upon it.

She walked to the window in the far corner. Over in the courtyard she saw a procession of brahmins walk in a single file towards the palace gates, with seemingly heavy cloth satchels hanging on their shoulders, smiles on their faces. Ambika guessed their stomachs were full too, for it was a night the royal house had been waiting for nigh on a year. She looked down at her

own waist; her hip bones jutted out from under the sari, and her stomach sank inward so that she could count her ribs. She took a fold of abdomen skin between her thumb and forefinger and pulled at it. Right under the skin she felt the hardness of bone. She had refrained from looking at herself in the mirror these last two months, because she knew that her hollow eye-sockets and withdrawn cheeks would scare her. She had once heard it said that Princess Ambika of Kasi was as beautiful as Menaka, the dancer in Indra's court. Would anyone say that now?

When Vichitraveerya died and talks were on about what to do about the queens that survived him, she had assumed that sooner or later she and Ambalika would become Bhishma's wives. When Mother first told her that she was the one who had to restore the lost line of the Kurus, she had assumed that it would be Bhishma who would father her children. And the prospect had not been altogether unpleasant. But then she had said it would be Vichitraveerya's brother on the mother's side that would father her children, and that it was a brahmin who resided in the mountains up north.

She did not feel any revulsion at the thought of another man touching her. After all, queens of all generations past had had to endure this at one time or the other. When one looked at it as merely a functional union to facilitate the perpetuation of the race, it ceased to be an unthinkable blasphemy and became more of a necessary inconvenience, like the swallowing of a bitter pill to get rid of a blocked nose, perhaps. Yes, she would have preferred it to be Bhishma – as every maiden in Hastina in her place would – but if it had to be another man, so be it.

She drew the curtain and turned back to walk to the middle of the room. The lamps were burning at their brightest. The attendant had just that evening replaced the wicks and poured oil in all of them. She remembered her mother-in-law's warning about the sage's appearance and wondered if

she should turn them down. Would it all be easier if she did not have to look at him?

But how bad could he be, really? She had seen many sages at her father's palace as a child. Yes, they did not have the same health and vigour as the kshatriyas, but she had never felt that they looked ugly. She had never been the sort of woman who judged people by their looks. Besides, it was not like she was marrying him and she had to live with him forever. It was only a matter of one night. However disgusting he was, would she not be able to grin and bear it for just one night? Did she have to hide behind the cloak of darkness? A bitter pill, she thought, that was all he was. If she closed her eyes and swallowed it, he would slide down and she would not even know it.

No, she thought. Let the lamps stay lit.

Her attendant came into the room and bowed. 'The sage is here, my queen, and he requests an audience with you.'

She nodded. As the attendant retraced her steps out of the room, Ambika stood by the bed, watching the entrance. She prepared herself. Whatever was going to walk through that door, she told herself, she was not going to flinch.

And yet, as he walked in, she flinched. She covered her mouth and turned her face away. Her eyes closed of their own accord.

It was not the sight, as depraved as that was. It was that smell. What was it? Was it the smell of rotting cadavers? Of fresh faeces? Of dried sweat mixed with dirt and grime? Or was it a combination of everything?

She heard the door closing and forced herself to open her eyes to look at him. He was walking towards her with what looked like a smile. But his eyes narrowed, and his black skin folded at the temples, giving his face a look of an irritated grimace. His ropey strands of hair swayed about with

each stride. And his body – it was so thin that he might as well have been a woman.

There were no words between them. He held her by her upper arms. His grip was weak, and his long, grey fingernails dug into her skin. It took every ounce of her will to not break free from him and run. She closed her eyes again.

He pushed her against the wall with such force that it knocked off a lamp, sending it clattering against the floor. He pulled clumsily at the upper garment, and when it refused to budge, tore it off with a grunt. She just stood there, neither helping nor hindering, her breasts were cold to his touch. His fingertips groped and rubbed and twisted. His stench enveloped her. She prayed that he would not bring his mouth to hers.

But he did, and she groaned out of pure disgust. There was an answering groan from him as his rough, salty tongue slithered into her mouth. She felt her lips part. She willed her body to respond to him, but it did not. Even when their tongues met and his lips closed around it, all she could let out was a whimper of loathing.

He moved down on her now. His mouth closed around her nipple.

How much longer? Oh, lord, how much longer?

He gripped her lower garment and pulled it off, scratching her outer thighs while doing so. He fell to his knees with a thud, and now she felt his lips and tongue and hands all over her thighs, and all she could do was to dig her teeth into her lower lip to keep from screaming. He pulled her down to the floor with him, and for a moment she opened her eyes, just long enough to see him push her legs apart and force his dusty body over hers.

Think of him, she thought, at once calming herself, calling to mind all her training of the last nine months. She shut her eyes and fought back tears. Yes, think of him.

Her brows knitted together. She blocked everything out – the smell of the room, the feel of the warm stone floor under her, the night breeze, and mostly that – that thing that was taking her. She imagined she was lying down on the bank of the Ganga, with him. She shut her eyes tighter together so as not to break the illusion. He was now spreading her legs apart.

Yes, think of him!

She was on the banks of the Ganga, and there was a man between her legs, their bodies moving together in a rhythm that matched the flow of the river. She brought her hands to his shoulders, and she wound her legs high around his waist to pull him in closer, deeper. Their hips danced, their lips fused, their embrace melded their bodies into one. She heard his groans and grunts as he dove into her again and again. That voice that never rose above a whisper was now desperate – even helpless. Yes, she had brought him to this.

She opened her eyes. And the disgust came back. She stared at the ceiling. The sage rolled over and picked up his dhoti. He did not look back at her on his way out. It was over, she thought. Finally it was over.

Her bosom rose and fell. With one hand, she felt for her upper garment and wrapped it around herself. Her eyes continued to stare at the ceiling. She had seen the face of the man at the Ganga. Just as she was about to open her eyes, for a single split-second, the face of the man had merged with that of the sage. The sage's smell had awakened her immediately, but for that one fleeting moment, she had beheld the face of the man. It was a familiar face.

But it was not the face of Vichitraveerya.



His face was not quite right, thought Satyawati, as she watched Dwaipayana enter her chamber. She was no expert on men's darker emotions; indeed, often they puzzled her, but when it came to recognizing contentment on a man's face, sexual contentment, she had had the benefit of experience. And what she saw on Dwaipayana's face right now was not contentment.

He sat down on the chair and rubbed his beard furiously, his lips squeezed tight. Satyawati guessed what must have happened, and she thought it strange that Dwaipayana had not foreseen it. Even these supposed men of enlightenment were clueless in matters of common-sense. And no matter how advanced they were spiritually, biological pride still had its place. A man thwarted in bed by a woman still behaved in the same petulant manner whether he was from the woods, the sea or from the royal house.

'So?' she said.

'The princess did not like my appearance, Mother,' he said. 'I felt like I was forcing myself on her.'

She wanted to ask him what else he had expected, but she had not the heart. 'You must not hold it against her, Dwaipayana,' she said. 'She is but a child.'

'That is not what worries me, Mother. The lore says children born out of unwilling union will not be healthy. I wonder if the child born of this shall be fit to rule the kingdom – I hope my concern is unfounded.'

'It does not have to be,' said Satyawati. 'Hastina has two queens, and if one of them does not produce a son worthy of a king, the other one shall.'

'But the other one will be repulsed by me too, Mother.'

'I shall make sure that Ambalika will do no such thing. She will be a much more willing partner, Dwaipayana, than Ambika was.'

Dwaipayana looked up at her. 'I do not doubt your prowess over your daughters. But a part of me wonders whether we should just let fate take

care of this one son. Why have two heirs when one will do, Mother? No two brothers have ever divided up their property without an argument – believe my words, I have seen much of this world. Even when they fight over a measly hut and a broken cot, they are ready to draw blood. That is the nature of brotherhood.’

Satyavati did not speak for a minute. She thought of all the tales of brothers that had come down to her from her father, and what Dwaipayana said was right, of course. Brothers among whom age and hierarchy was well-defined did not quarrel, for right from the start there would be only one successor to the king, and while the younger brothers carried out missions and in some cases ruled small kingdoms of their own, there was only one true king. But here, if Dwaipayana’s words came true, if Ambika’s son did prove to be unworthy of the throne and if Ambalika’s staked a stronger claim to it, what would the people of Hastina do? What would be the right thing to do? Devavrata, being the champion of the throne, would perhaps crown the younger boy king – but surely Devavrata would have the foresight not to do that, because if he did, the royal house would just crumble from the inside, and Hastina would fall.

But then there was the other side. What if they decided to take their chances with one heir and he turned out to be unworthy? Bhishma would not live forever, and with no one to succeed him, or worse still an unfit king at the throne, how long before Hastina became food to the clawing wolves lurking to the west and to the south?

‘I think we should take the chance with two sons, Dwaipayana,’ said Satyavati. ‘I think we can trust Devavrata to hold the royal house together, but if we have a weak king on the throne, even he will not be able to protect it. As great a warrior as he is, he cannot take on the might of the Great Kingdoms alone.’

Dwaipayana nodded, frowning. 'It is not an easy riddle to solve, but I think what you say is for the best. The younger princess of Kasi shall have to bear a son herself.'

'Shall I ready her for tomorrow night, then?'

'No, Mother,' said Dwaipayana. 'Not now. Have the princess perform the same rites as her sister, and make certain that she is devoted to her practice. I shall come back on the last night of spring, nine moons from now, and let us pray that between the two of them, the sons of Ambika and Ambalika will rule the kingdom wisely and well.'



Seated on her bed and waiting, Ambalika wondered if any of this was really necessary. After all, her sister had given birth to a strong, healthy boy. What if he was blind? He would still be brought up like a prince, and he would still be made king when the time came. If anything, she thought, her son would be serving him in the capacity of a helper.

And there was also Bhishma to look after things.

Yes, there was no real need for any of this, but Mother had been so firm. She refused to listen to any of her protests. Being the youngest daughter was only advantageous as long as you stayed at your father's house, she thought, a little petulantly. In the husband's house, no one ever listened to the youngest wife. All the pampering was reserved for the eldest daughter - in - law, even more so now that she was a mother.

She sighed wistfully. How different it had been when Vichitraveerya was alive. She was his favourite. He always told her so. Once or twice every week, he would steal into her chamber and spend the night without Ambika's knowledge. He would take her out on walks, recite poetry to her, sing for her, play the flute for her . . .

No one really cared for her any more. Yes, they made an elaborate fuss after her and pretended to care, and she gave them credit for making the effort, but if only they were not so transparent!

It would be nice to be the centre of attention again.

So maybe in that sense, this was worth it. Perhaps what Mother said would actually come true. Perhaps her son would indeed become king. Then she would be the queen-mother. She would be the one to roam around the palace, giving orders and sending attendants helter-skelter.

She smiled to herself. That would indeed be fun.

Do not shut your eyes.

She repeated to herself the one piece of advice Mother had given her. It was apparently the only thing that mattered. She had not asked why, but if Mother had said it so vehemently, it must be important.

She heard steps outside her door and readied herself.

At first, she thought a large hedgehog had somehow snuck into the palace and was now rolling into her room. The figure that came in had sharp, black, thick hair all over its body, sticking out in all possible directions. Ambalika had heard stories of humanoid creatures that lived among apes and gorillas in the forest. This one was certainly one of them! Those ferret-like eyes, those rat-like teeth, that granite-like skin, that unbearable smell; no, that could not possibly be a human!

Do not shut your eyes.

She leant back against the bedpost and stared at him. She wanted to shriek for help, but her mouth had gone dry. The man's eyes, peering out from under all that hair, were now fixed upon her. He was walking towards her. Oh, how she wished she could turn her face away!

'You are afraid, my dear,' he said.

Even his voice was not human. It was halfway between a growl and a whimper. She kept staring.

‘There is nothing to be scared about,’ he said, and took her hand.

‘I – I—’

‘You know the purpose of my visit?’

She quickly nodded.

‘I will not harm you, Princess.’

He guided her onto the bed. Her eyes never left him. As much as it scared her, as much as it disgusted her to be in his presence, she kept her eyes open, and she kept them transfixed on his person.

He eased himself next to her. ‘You are still scared, Princess.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I am not.’

He smiled through chipped yellow teeth. ‘Take off your garment.’

She nodded, and reached behind her back to slide off the wooden clip holding the garment in place.

‘Both your garments.’

‘Yes, High Sage.’ Her hands went down to her waist and opened the knot.

‘Now, disrobe me.’

She shivered at the thought. He was so close to her now that his hair pricked her. She could see only too clearly how soft and tender her skin was, next to his bony, black and scarred frame. Her breath heavy, she slid a hand down to his waist. Taking utmost care to not touch his skin, she managed to untie the main knot of his dhoti.

Without warning, he closed her hand with his. She pulled it back as if she had touched a hot plate.

‘I – I beg your pardon, Sage,’ she said.

‘No. Undress yourself completely.’

Once again that instinct to close her eyes – was it shame? Fear? Embarrassment? And equally strong was the voice of her mother-in-law to keep them open. Too open. Too wide. So wide that her eyelids had begun to hurt.

She stared at the sage, who was leisurely untying his dhoti. In all this time his eyes had not for one moment left hers. Eyes of a jackal!

‘You – will not hurt me.’

‘No, my child.’

They were completely naked now. She forced herself to keep her gaze from venturing downwards.

‘Are you ready?’

‘Yes, Sage.’

‘Part your legs.’

‘Yes, Sage.’

‘Do not be scared.’

‘Yes, Sage.’

He towered over her, with his hands supporting the weight of his body. He whispered things to her, instructing her to keep calm, directing her on what she should do, asking her if she felt okay.

Yes, she was calm, she told him. Yes, she was okay, she told him. She followed his instructions as best as she could. Her eyes stayed wide open, fixed on the mangled beard that hung over her mouth. She tried her best not to sneeze when his hair entered her nostrils.

The bed creaked under them. The sounds came randomly at first, but soon fell into a rhythm. He kept whispering things to her. She kept nodding and responding. He did not tell her how well she was doing. But the sounds got louder. They got sharper. His grunts transformed into growls.

She kept doing what he had asked her to do. *Do not shut your eyes!*

His growls became louder.

Do not shut your eyes.

His body tightened once, and then again. A throaty, questioning grunt accompanied each spasm.

Do not! Not now!

The bed stopped creaking. There were no more sounds now. He rolled off her and sat on the edge of the bed in a hunch. ‘Are you – finished?’ she asked timidly.

He did not answer. For a long moment, he just sat there with his chin buried into his chest. Then he stood up, his back to her, whisked his dhoti off the bed, wrapped it around his waist and walked out.

It was only after the door had closed that Ambalika allowed her eyes to close.

F I F T E E N



Satyavati smelt the air. With her old fisherwoman's senses she could tell that the first monsoon rain was not far. Her thoughts travelled for a moment to the Yamuna, and her heart longed for the red muddy shore. The fisher-people would be darning their nets now, and they would be driving nails into their boats to strengthen them against the spate that promised to come. She guessed that the farmers would be readying themselves too, furrowing their fields with care and holding their heads to the skies with smiles on their faces. If the rains were to come this night, as was likely, it would be a long and bountiful monsoon to make up for the indifferent one last year, and though the city's granaries were far from empty – the two Great Rivers kept Hastina well fed no matter how sparse the rain – it would keep the kingdom ready for unforeseen crises.

Two small hands tapped at hers uncertainly. Round, puffy fingers closed around her forefinger and pulled. Satyavati prodded the young boy in the ribs and laughed. He was a remarkably happy boy, thought Satyavati, watching him play with her finger, now pinching it, twisting it, feeling it. He liked to be fed on time, but otherwise she had never heard a cry or even an utterance of protest come forth from him. He did not seem to be in any

hurry to bother with things like walking and talking, content instead to lie on his back all day long, throw his feet up in the air, and touch things with his hands and gurgle. It was rather unusual for a five-month-old to be so staid, thought Satyavati, but then there was no hurry either. Too many children grew up too soon only to realize there was nothing great about being an adult. The boy was happy, that was all that mattered. She gave his foot a little tickle.

Three months had passed now since Dwaipayana had left for the woods. He had stayed for a couple of months after the night with Ambalika to make sure that the job was done, for she was just a girl. Those two months he had agreed to be a guest at the palace, and he had not refused to partake of all the earthly pleasures that the court of Hastina bestowed on her royal guests. He had taken the scented-oil baths, eaten the choicest mutton, drunk the best wine, worn the best clothes and lain with the best waiting-women.

Care was always taken with that last ‘luxury’, of course. But just that morning when Satyavati had been seeing to the roosters that had arrived from the poultry for the monsoon feast, her eye had accidentally slipped down Shubha’s waist, and it had caught the hint of pink in the girl’s cheeks. Shubha had been the regular waiting-girl for Dwaipayana that last week. If something had to be done, it had to be done soon.

A knock appeared on the door and the girl entered. She was no more than fourteen, perhaps a year or so younger than Ambalika, but Satyavati saw that there was more of a woman in her than in Ambalika. It was not just the physical features – though they were quite noticeable – but the girl held herself like a lady should. This was not unexpected. Daughters of kings grew up with their feet never touching the ground. Their every whim was tended to, their every cry was answered, their every protest was lovingly assuaged. Was it any wonder then that in most courts it was the waiting-

women and the servant girls that showed more maturity, more understanding, more love and care than their mistresses? Was it any wonder that Dwaipayana had responded to this girl with love, while for her daughters-in-law he had had nothing more than mild derision?

‘How long have you known?’ she asked the girl.

The girl bowed low. ‘Last week, my queen, when I did not bleed on my day for the third moon in a row.’

‘Your belly has grown too. That ought to have told you.’

‘Yes, my lady.’ In the light of the lamps Satyavati could see the girl smile bashfully.

‘Did the sage force himself on you?’

‘Oh, no, Your Highness. He did not.’

Satyavati had not thought so either. The royal daughters of Hastina had grimaced and turned their faces away in disgust at her son, while this woman managed to look past the grime, the ash, the hair and the smell. The oil-baths must have helped too, she thought drolly, but in her mind’s eye she saw in Shubha the image of a fourteen-year-old fisherwoman who had long ago given herself to Parashara. She knew what the girl’s answer to her next question was going to be – a question her own father had never asked her, but she nevertheless must ask in her position as queen.

‘Will you keep the baby?’

The girl hesitated, then looked up to face her. ‘I wish to, my lady, queen. But if you wish it otherwise—’

‘No.’

‘I suppose I can no longer serve here as waiting-woman.’

‘That is true,’ said Satyavati. ‘You cannot. But the queen’s chambers are big, Shubha. I am certain there will be room for you if you wish to stay here.’

‘I do wish to stay, my queen,’ said the girl, and Satyavati saw fear flicker in her eyes for a moment. ‘I do not have a mother who would perhaps have helped me.’

Satyavati said tonelessly, ‘You do not need help, Shubha. Do not think for a moment that you need someone’s help. The goddess has given you the ability to bear children all on your own. She would not have done so if she thought it would put you at the mercy of others.’

‘Yes, Your Majesty.’

‘If you wish to bear the child, I shall see to it that you do so in these very chambers. I shall see to it that the best of my midwives attend to you – for in you grows the seed of the same man who has given birth to this boy.’ She nodded at the sleeping figure of the prince. ‘Perhaps it is not for me to question why the goddess chose you for the mother. Perhaps someday I will know.’

The girl asked, slowly, ‘Then it is true what they say, my queen? I have heard some bards outside the city gates say that the lord Dwaipayana was your son by a sage, that he was conceived on an island in the Yamuna and that was what gave him his name . . .’

‘It is not true.’

The girl shrank back, thwarted. ‘I beg your pardon, my queen. I spoke out of turn. I should not speak of things that do not concern me.’

‘That is true. You should not. Have you eaten?’

‘I have had my lunch, my lady. I shall dine soon, right after I get back to my chamber.’

‘You need to eat well. I will tell the cook from the royal house to begin setting aside a portion of the queens’ food for you. I shall also instruct the women to lighten your load a little bit – not completely, mind you, for laziness is no good for a mother either.’ She stopped. She had the strange

feeling that she heard another woman, an old hag, the Wise Woman of the Bhrgu clan who once had been her aunt, speak the same words in her cracking, dying voice.

‘Yes, my queen,’ the girl was saying.

Satyavati smiled at her. ‘Call me mother.’

The girl’s lips parted and dried up, but she managed to squeak: ‘Yes, my lady.’

‘Now go, child,’ Satyavati said softly. ‘Go and sleep.’

For she is just a child, she thought, after the girl had gone and left her alone amid the dimming light of the lamps. A low, long rumble came to her ears and made the boy by her side twitch and reach out for her. She gave him her hand which he clasped to his belly and smiled, his eyes shut tight in sleep. Hastina had been blessed with bounty this season, she thought, in the open fields and within the palace walls. Not one, not two, but three children would be born to the island born, and by that same intuition that sneaked up on her unawares, she knew that neither of the two children – Ambalika’s or Shubha’s – would be daughters. Her eyes travelled down to her hand where it caressed the smooth skin of the sleeping boy. The blind king who did not want to walk or talk would have two brothers to show him the way.

Shubha’s son would be no more than a servant, no matter what his worth. Neither his father nor his mother was born of the royal line. But Satyavati resolved that he would grow up with the two princes and receive the same training that they did. For the world he might be the son of a waiting-woman, but for Satyavati, all three were her grandsons, her son’s sons. They were all the same to her, be they blind, low-born, or afflicted by illness of some other kind, as Dwaipayana had predicted Ambalika’s son would be. And with all the power within her she would see it come to pass that the three brothers felt that way about each other. If Dwaipayana thought

that brothers always fought for a kingdom, she would prove to him that her grandsons did not.

Ambalika's son would come forth in four months, and Shubha would give birth no more than seven months from now. It was a time of rejoicing for the city of Hastina, Satyavati knew, but as the lamps grew dimmer and the thunder rumbled for longer and longer each time, her limbs ached. Her eyes grew heavy and her body slumped. She rested her head on her outstretched arm, with her one hand still on the boy. As breath after slow breath left her, she wondered if the lamps were draining all the warmth out of her. Her eyes closed. As she teetered between sleep and waking, dipping one way one moment and the other the next, a glimmer of knowing came to her on the wings of the night breeze, whispering in her ear something she could not very well hear but could understand completely, as though she had known it all along.

Hastina's tale was only beginning, the wind whispered, even as hers had all but drawn to an end. With that knowledge, Satyavati slept.

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About the Author



SHARATH KOMARRAJU lives in Bangalore with an ever-swelling stack of books that threatens to one day swallow him. On a typical day he spends nine hours testing software and two writing fiction. (He's currently engaged in a top-secret plan to reverse that balance.) In his free time he can be found either hunched over his laptop, talking to his wife, or munching on roast almonds – or doing all three at once, if the day's good for multitasking.

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