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# ABHAYA AND MAURI

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Sample Chapters



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## **ABHAYA**

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**- Amish Tripathi**

She knew that the danger was coming.

She decided to meet it halfway.

A tale set in the times of Mahabharata. An assertive and idealistic Princess Abhaya meets the enigmatic Krishna Vaasudeva. A bereaved Dhatri, pursued by her own family is saved by Lord Bhauma. When subverted religion becomes a tool in the hands of power thirsty and strikes Bharatavarsha, the land of Aryas, Abhaya finds herself face to face with the impending doom.

Explore the lesser known legend of Mahabharata. If you like to read ancient Indian stories with strong female protagonists, do download Abhaya

## Chapter One

Borders of Pundra, Eastern Bharatavarsha

Lightning. It seemed like the skies had decided to shred the land to pieces. The horses pulling the lone chariot on the highway to Pragjyotisha neighed in fear and slowed to a trot.

“Just what we needed!” Mura remarked, cracking the whip. “It wasn’t a wise idea to come without the guards.” His wavy hair fluttered, loosening the cloth he had wound around his head.

“The Supreme Goddess Kamaksha has her ways, doesn’t she, Mura?” said Bhauma, the Lord of Kamarupa. He balanced himself against the flag post of the chariot as he tightened his silk headgear.

To Mura, his tone seemed unnaturally calm. He sighed shaking his head. They were returning from the temple of Goddess Tara in the Kingdom of Pundra. For reasons not known to Mura, Bhauma always insisted on going without guards while visiting the temples of the Goddess. Pundra, at least, was not very far away from Kamarupa and was a sympathetic kingdom.

“But *Prabho*, in future if you want to travel to the other temples of Shakti which are farther away, would you still want to travel without a guard?”

Bhauma nodded without a trace of hesitation.

“If you say so, *Prabho*.” Mura shrugged and goaded the horses on, wanting to reach Kamarupa as fast as they could. The skies showed all the signs of an approaching storm.

“No,” Bhauma smiled, stretching his arms. Into his forties, his frame commanded the physique that could daunt any warrior. “Not because I say so. But, because the Goddess does. Say we are caught in the storm. That too is her will. In time, we shall realize she willed it for the best.”

It would have made a good speech for a gathering in the temple, Mura felt.

“I am not capable of that faith,” he replied. “Your faith does not surprise me, though, *Prabho*. Not everybody would have been content with a lordship of a mere temple town over the Kingdom of Pragjyotisha.”

“Mere temple, Mura?” Bhauma retorted. “It is the temple of the Supreme Goddess Kamaksha who rules the worlds. Lordship over Kamarupa means the lordship over this world.”

*Is that ambition or mere faith?* Mura shrugged.

“For now, your nephew got a larger territory under his control. What did the Goddess give you, *Prabho?*”

“You, Mura. Is land everything? The people standing by me are my greater boon.” Bhauma smiled. Mura swallowed as Bhauma’s hand rested on his shoulder. “Don’t look at me like that! People are more valuable than land, Mura. If someone is ready to stand by me from the shores to the plains of Bharatavarsha, then a part of Bharatavarsha belongs to me as well.”

Mura nodded mutely. Bhauma’s words always felt inscrutable. But that was the way of men who took to religion, he told himself. The road took a sharp turn and Mura tightened his hold on the reins. His eyes narrowed at the sight of a crowd at a distance. “At this time of night?”

Bhauma did not speak as his eyes too trained on the crowd ahead on the road. “They are moving. Is it a procession of some Goddess?”

*He sees the Goddess everywhere.* Mura stifled a smile. The smile faded as they rode closer. This was no peaceful procession. It was a mob. “They are chasing someone!”

“Faster!” Bhauma ordered.

“They are armed!” Mura gasped as the moon came out of the cloud cover briefly. “We should be at the border villages of Pundra and Pragjyotisha.” His right hand that held the whip instinctively went to the long sword at his waist. The chariot drew closer to the crowd.

One of the villagers was lagging behind the crowd. But not in fervour. “Kill them! This must be a lesson to others!” he shouted.

Bhauma asked Mura to slow down as they drew level to him. “What is the matter?”

“My nephew’s widow, the wretch! She is eloping with that doctor, the son of a whore!”

“We should help them,” Mura spoke low, catching the sight of a man and a woman running from the maddened crowd. “But we will be out numbered greatly!”

“Just keep going,” Bhauma ordered as the horses forced a path through the crowds. He raised his staff at a villager who tried to get into the chariot.

“Catch them for us! Save the honour of our village, please!” someone else shouted.

Mura and Bhauma pretended to take no notice and plunged ahead. The woman was slowing the man down. In a matter of moments, the enraged crowd would be upon them. He felt Bhauma’s hand on his shoulder.

“Pull them aboard!” Bhauma shouted as he snatched the whip and reins from Mura. They rode ahead of the couple. “The woman first!”

Mura extended a hand. “Come with us, we mean to help you!”

The couple looked at each other in confusion but kept running. A crude knife missed the woman by inches. The man looked shocked as he turned back and saw the crowds catching up. He pushed the woman ahead towards the chariot. Mura caught her and pulled her aboard. The man also extended his hand. The woman fell upon Bhauma.

“Easy!” he shouted, looking back. The frenzied villagers had realized their motive. One of them threw a knife that pierced Mura’s shoulder just as he caught the man’s hand.

“Amaranatha!” the woman shouted, extending her hand too.

“Careful!” Bhauma pulled her back. A stone hit him. “Quick Mura!” he shouted.

Mura leaned out, clutching the flagstaff of the chariot for support. “Faster!” He called out to Amaranatha.

The woman screamed something which both the men could not comprehend.

Bhauma suddenly pulled Mura back. “I’ll get him. Handle the reins.”

“He won’t make it!” the woman screamed.

“I got him!” Bhauma stepped back and bent over. He caught the hand of the man. “Now!”

Mura cracked the whip and the horses picked up speed. The man placed one foot on the chariot but stumbled before he put his second.

Another rock hit Bhauma, making him lose his grip on Amaranatha’s hand.

“Noooo...!” The woman screamed as Amaranatha fell to the ground.

“*Prabho!*” Mura shouted as Bhauma stumbled back in pain.

“Stop the chariot! Help him!” the woman shouted. Her eyes widened as she saw the villagers pull Amaranatha back.

Mura’s despairing glance alternated between the bleeding Bhauma and the fallen Amaranatha who had been already surrounded by the irate villagers.

“Kill them all!” some of the villagers shouted, chasing the chariot. Mura’s hand instinctively cracked the whip.

“No! Spare him! I beg you, spare him!” the woman attempted to dismount only to be caught by a weakened Bhauma. “Let me go!”

“They’ll kill us all!” he screamed holding her back.

“I don’t care!” she spat, fighting his grip. “Spare him please!” she shouted at the villagers. Knives and stones rained down upon them.

“Faster, Mura!” Bhauma screamed. Mura cracked the whip again.

As the distance increased, the mob behind them parted and they could see the blood-drenched frame of Amaranatha on the ground. “You should have saved him and left me to die!”

The woman grabbed his sword and attempted to dismount again. “Demons! I’ll kill them all!” Mura too had to hold her back as he saw Bhauma weaken further. “I’ll drink each one’s blood!” She screamed.

“There are more than a fifty of them!” Mura shouted, cracking the whip again.

“Cowards! Both of you!” She spat at Bhauma.

“We tried our best!” Mura protested, seeing Bhauma’s eyes close in shame. “*Prabho!* My Lord almost lost his life trying to help you!”

“Then just let me die!” the woman screamed and collapsed in hysteric sobs.

The chariot sped towards Kamarupa. When the woman regained consciousness, it was almost dawn. The hills of Kamarupa rose before them.

“Is he dead?” she asked.

“Forgive us,” Bhauma said.

She sighed in response and banged her head against the flag post of the chariot.

“No, Devi, no!” Bhauma held her by her shoulders. “A woman’s blood cannot be spilt on this hill of Kamarupa. Goddess Kamaksha will never forgive me!”

“Why didn’t your Goddess save him? If anyone deserves to die, it is me! I was the one who asked him to take me away!”

“No, you don’t deserve to die!” Bhauma replied.

“He didn’t either!” the woman retorted. “My Amaranatha was a Vaidya. His whole life was dedicated to helping others, to saving lives.” She pulled out a bundle tucked to her lower garment. “See these herbs? They can save anyone even from the dreadful *Shivajvara*! My Amara concocted the formula!”

“Those demons in the plains, they didn't deserve him amongst them,” Bhauma replied. “But Devi, the Goddess kept you alive for a reason, trust Her.”

“Just shut up!” she snapped.

“Enough now!” Mura shouted. Bhauma held up his hand to silence him, but he went on, lowering his voice. “We are as sad about not being able to save him. But my Lord does not deserve your anger.”

They had reached the gates of Kamarupa and the gates opened.

“Welcome to Kamarupa,” Bhauma said. The woman shrank back as the city guards surrounded the chariot.

“Our honoured guest....” Bhauma turned to the woman, not knowing her name.

“Dhatri,” she whispered.

“Devi Dhatri. Treat her as the divine responsibility given by the Goddess herself.” Bhauma alighted from the chariot, extending his hand to her. Dhatri pulled her ragged upper garment around herself. “Trust me, you shall not face any trouble in the land of the Supreme Goddess,” Bhauma promised her.

Mura followed them inside. In the light of the sun, something about Dhatri intrigued him. For a villager, she possessed the gait of a queen.

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The temple of Kamaksha, with its majestic pyramidal tower, ornate pillars and intricately sculpted walls was designed as a representation of the universal court presided by the deity, Goddess Kamaksha. The sanctum stood over a high pedestal overlooking a hall large enough to house a gathering of several hundred. The shrine of Kamaksha was a sanctified rock, revered as the *Yoni*, the primal womb of the Supreme Goddess.

“It is the very reason behind the sustenance of life and creation. We exist because she wills,” Bhauma had explained when Dhatri had first visited the temple.

Dhatri’s eyes, however, were fixed on the life-size metallic sculpture of the goddess beside the main sanctum whose eyes glowed in the light of the lamps. The lips of the statue suggested a smile. But the eyes carried an inscrutable spark. They continued to hold her gaze every time she visited the temple. The first time she had seen the statue, she had inexplicably broken down into tears. The gaze daunted her. At the same time, Dhatri could not resist staring at the statue for hours. Even after a month at Kamarupa, her fascination for those eyes only seemed to increase. She took no notice of the sprawling temple surroundings or the intricate sculptures that caught the attention of any usual pilgrim. The gaze signalled assurance. It also signalled stern scrutiny.

“Devi Dhatri?”

She turned startled and found Mura staring at her.

“Relax,” Mura said, holding up his hands, reassuringly. Her eyes, he felt, were like that of a doe that had seen a tiger. “You have been standing here for over an hour. Are you alright?”

She blinked and gave a slight nod. Her bosom heaved.

Mura averted his gaze, and a momentary flutter ran down his frame. “I wanted to apologise for being harsh that day.”

Dhatri nodded again. She managed a smile at the plea in Mura’s eyes.

“Apologizing after a month! Quite a sense of timing,” Bhauma said, exiting the sanctum and approaching them. Mura bowed.

Dhatri's hands joined in salutation. "I...I was harsh too. I should be..."

"No!" Bhauma interrupted, making her look up. "You shall not apologise, Devi Dhatri. I have to say that you were looking quite a personification of rage that day." A smile played on his lips. Dhatri's fearful demeanour after coming to Kamarupa, a complete contrast to her hysterical self the day her lover had been killed, had intrigued him.

Dhatri shook her head. Something made her shiver and it was visible to both men. "I was not myself that day. But I am afraid it was not wise of you to save me. My family is powerful. What if they find me and attack with a force?"

Bhauma wanted to laugh but restrained himself.

"No danger shall befall you here. They can only enter this temple town over my corpse." Mura bowed, his hand gripping the hilt of his sword.

"She might find it easier to trust you when you are in your position," Bhauma said.

Mura looked at him apologetically and stepped back before he left towards the gates. Bhauma smiled and turned to Dhatri. "I would actually agree with him. No danger shall befall you here in this temple town of Kamaksha. This is a well-fortified temple. Above all, we are under the protection of the Supreme Shakti Kamaksha."

"*Prabho...*" Dhatri was about to utter a word of gratitude but stopped when she saw Bhauma's outstretched hand.

"Could I show you around the temple?" Bhauma moved a step closer.

Dhatri nodded, swallowing. He reached out and held her hand. She did not resist but avoided his eyes. A mild shiver ran through her frame.

Bhauma waited a moment and loosened his grip. "Maybe some other day," he said

Dhatri looked up as his hand withdrew. With an inaudible sigh, she turned the other way. The sight that greeted her eyes at the left wing of the sanctum made her gasp and turn around bumping into Bhauma.

"What's the matter?"

"There, that man and woman!" Dhatri exclaimed. "In the temple?"

Bhauma led her out of the temple by her arm. "Maithuna, the ritual of union," he explained. They descended the stairs of the sanctum towards the lower hall of the temple. "Our ways, Devi, are different from those in the plains. I shall not be surprised if they shock you."

"How is sexual union considered a ritual? Is it not an affront to the Goddess?" Dhatri took a step away from him smelling wine in Bhauma's breath.

"On the contrary, it is the most exalted of all the rituals." Bhauma pointed to a series of rock sculptures. "We, the worshippers of Shakti, the Supreme Goddess, don't believe in abstinence."

Dhatri moved towards the sculptures, each of which indicated a *Shakta* ritual. "Are these all rituals? The wine, the meat...." Her hands moved across the rock. The statue of the Goddess having commanded her attention in the past month, her gaze had not fallen on these depictions. "*Prabho*, I want to know more."

"On one condition," Bhauma said, stepping by her side. "Call me by my name."

He sought an answer to an unasked question and covered her palm that was feeling the sculptures, with his. When Dhatri turned to nod, her eyes gave him what he sought.

## Chapter Two

Anagha, Western Bharatavarsha

The night was long. Even more so for someone whose wife was in labour. Dharmasena moved his seat closer to the couch where Vasumati lay. She was in pain. He put his arm around Vasumati and helped her into an upright position, against the headrest of the couch. He pointed at the cradle that was being readied by two maids. In the light of the lamps, the cradle gave new hope. The couple looked at each other and smiled through the pain and apprehension.

The *daadi's* hurried steps spoke more of her eagerness to deliver the heir to the throne than of concern. But, one look at Queen Vasumati brought a frown to her face.

Through her pain, the queen clasped Dharmasena's hand and placed it over her womb. "I wish your *Yuvaraja* arrives today, Dharma."

"A princess is as welcome, *Devi*." Dharmasena pressed his hand gently against her belly. The past months had seen bittersweet debates between them, with Vasumati wanting a boy and Dharmasena wishing for a girl.

"No, I shall not last beyond this..." Vasumati gripped his hand tight as another contraction racked her body. She let out a loud scream.

"Vasumati!"

The *daadi* took the liberty to lay a hand on Dharmasena's shoulder.

"*Prabho*, your presence might be of little help."

The sheer concern in her tone made him rise to his feet, his heart beating faster.

He took himself to the corridor, Vasumati's moans piercing through his being. The priest Katyayana was waiting for him.

The tense look on the king's face told Katyayana everything. He smiled and showed the king, his astrological charts which he hoped would partially shift Dharmasena's attention.

"The Queen's chart shows signs of a girl child, *Annadata*," Katyayana began, "but yours says you will beget a daughter and a son."

“Twins? No wonder Vasumati is undergoing such pain!” Dharmasena exclaimed, his joy and concern doubling.

Katyayana hesitated at the inconsistency that had struck him ever since he began the astrological calculations. In his vast experience, the priest had seen a lot of ambiguous predictions and had seen how reality sometimes deviated from the prediction. That had made him objective about the whole process of calculation and prediction. But he cited this only when the predictions turned out to be disappointing to the ones seeking it. A loud scream from the inner chambers made his heart skip a beat. The silence following the scream was excruciating. The two men stood rooted to the spot. Then they heard it. The bawling of an infant. Dharmasena breathed in.

“Jayatu Anagheshwari!” He and the priest called out in unison to the guardian goddess of the fortress after whom the city was named.

The midwife brought the infant out to the corridor. “It is a princess, *Prabho!*”

“My little Queen!” Dharmasena took the infant into his arms and looked at her with wonder and joy. “And the Queen?” The king turned anxiously to the midwife.

“She is exhausted beyond the limits, *Prabho*. “I need to go back to her.” Dharmasena’s face fell as she retreated into the chambers.

Katyayana saw a cloud in his mind and a momentary shudder passed through his spine. “Anagheshwari!” he whispered, not wanting to increase Dharmasena’s worries by voicing his fears.

Dharmasena cradled the newborn, his heart leaping every time he saw her move in his arms. The infant settled into his warmth and her cries faded into drowsiness. Her half closed eyes rested on her father.

“Father’s pet!” Katyayana exclaimed, touched at the mist in Dharmasena’s eyes. “She is going to take after you, Dharma!” Dharmasena was too taken by the infant to notice the personal address. The priest smiled and continued, “She will excel at anything she sets her heart upon! But the planets choose to show me more about her heart. Fearless to the core, she will become the *shelter, the refuge* to many. She will travel across the breadth of

Bharatavarsha. Her company will comprise of the royalty, nobility and the commons. In other words, she will take after you, *Annadata*.”

*Fearless, shelter, refuge*. The words fell upon Dharmasena’s ears the very moment he saw the tiny lips curve into a smile.

“Abhaya,” he said. “Abhaya, the daughter of Dharmasena”

“Abhaya Dhaarmaseni!” Katyayana raised both his hands in blessing.

“*Annadata!*” The voice rang in the corridor. “Has the heir prince arrived?” *Senapati* Vajrabahu’s words greeted them even before he showed himself in the corner of the corridor.

“It is a princess, *Senapati*” Katyayana corrected him.

“*Mahakala* has sent his spouse to illuminate Anagha!” Vajrabahu remarked removing a string of pearls from his neck and made a circular movement with it over the newborn’s head. He dropped the string into a large plate placed on the table with some jewels already on it, for the palace maids to take their due.

“Quite the time to come, Vajrabahu!” Dharmasena frowned. “Right after I went through the excruciating wait, all alone. Some friendship this is.”

“Forgive me, Dharmasena. My King and Lord had placed a responsibility on me to cover his absence during the night and I was just caught up there. I could not be by my friend’s side.” Vajrabahu alternated his tone between intimacy and formality making Dharmasena laugh.

“All well, *Senapati*?”

Vajrabahu nodded. “The city shall wake up to the celebrations now.” His face turned serious as he sought Dharmasena’s eye. “*Prabho*. Someone wants to see you.”

“At this hour?”

“It is Kadambari, the sister of the Naga Chief Varahaka. The guard would not have entertained anyone else.”

Dharmasena became thoughtful. The Naga chief of the small neighbouring settlement was an important friend and he knew Kadambari too.

“She came with her son. I did not have the heart to refuse, looking at her state.” Vajrabahu added.

“What state?”

Vajrabahu looked to the corner and clapped. He then turned to the king and whispered, “I noticed welts on her body. Her husband seems to have...”

“What? How dare he—” Dharmasena’s eyes widened in disbelief and anger. The sound of anklets made him stop his sentence in the middle. “Kadambari?” His lips parted as he saw the frail woman approach them. Clad in the usual Naga attire, her shoulders, waist and legs were visible. So were the red marks all over. “*Bhagini!*”

“*Prabho!*” Kadambari’s voice broke as she bent low. Her eyes fell on the newborn. “Prince... Princess.” She began to unfasten a silver bracelet on her left hand, the only jewellery on her.

Dharmasena raised his hand shaking his head. “Who had the courage to harm you *Bhagini?*”

“Who else?” Kadambari replied. “The man my brother chose to seal my fate with.” Fresh tears sprung out of her eyes. “I have had enough of this, *Bhrata!*”

Vajrabahu, seeing the King’s joy of becoming a father fade away, intervened and turned to Kadambari. “Stay here in the city, *Bhagini*, till the ceremonies complete. You shall be well cared for. We shall then knock some sense into the hard skull of that imbecile who treats you this way.”

But Kadambari’s eyes were resolute. They remained fixed on the King. “You call me your sister, *Prabho!* Do me a favour. Care for my ten-year-old. I am leaving this province and that man for good.”

Through her apparent weak voice, the three men saw the finality in those words. The solution for a troubled marriage was a social puzzle to which no scripture offered an easy solution. Scriptures had their assumptions and implementation was the prerogative of the rulers, each of them finding his own corollaries specific to each case. Dharmasena’s eyes sought Katyayana’s.

“We cannot stop her, given her claims. Neither by scripture, not by jurisdiction.” Katyayana said, sensing Dharmasena’s potential worries. The Naga chief and his brother in law would have no justification to blame the king for not stopping her from leaving.

“Where will you go, Kadambari?” Dharmasena asked.

“To the south of Vindhya, to the Ashrama of my *guru*,” Kadambari replied. “He is of the *Shakta* order” her tone reduced to the whisper.

Dharmasena’s brows rose, as did Vajrabahu's, and the latter whispered “*The Vaamaacharis!*”

“Manikandhara!” Kadambari called. The ten-year-old boy accompanying her stepped forward. “This is my son. I trust none but you, *Prabho!* I fear to leave him at the mercy of my husband.”

The boy stared at the surroundings, at the unfamiliar people. Dharmasena called him closer and the boy looked at his mother. She nodded. He walked up to the king and felt Vajrabahu’s comforting hand on his shoulder.

Dharmasena saw the boy’s eyes full of unshed tears. A red welt on the boy’s shoulder sent a shudder through his spine. *What kind of a brute would think of hurting a child this young? Kadambari had every right to leave such a husband.*

“I shall take leave, *Bhrata.*” Kadambari bowed and left.

“*Amba!*” Manikandhara called out. But he remained where he was.

Dharmasena knelt to match the boy’s height and smiled. “Welcome to your new home, *Vatsa.* None shall harm you here.” He saw Manikandhara’s tearful eyes drift to the newborn Abhaya. Dharmasena felt that the sight of the newborn could distract the boy from breaking into tears. The words came out without a conscious thought, “Your younger sister.”

“*Prabho!*” Vajrabahu gasped. “Are you adopting him?”

Dharmasena’s eyes conveyed a sense of surprise at his own words. The surprise then gave way to pride and he nodded.

Katyayana’s eyes saw new light as his calculations made a sudden sense to him. Heedless of the reactions of the rest in the room, he strode up to the terrace to catch the movement of the stars as the dawn approached. The excitement in his eyes was visible when he returned.

“A daughter and a son.” Katyayana he said. “Mother Anagheshwari has sent you a son too, *Annadata*.”

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*Six years later*

The sight of eastern skies at the sunrise made Dharmasena’s heart glad, as did the cloud of dust that appeared on the horizon.

“When is *Bhrata* coming?” Abhaya tugged at his arm.

Dharmasena beamed at her and lifted her in his arms, pointing at the cloud of the dust signalling the approaching rider.

“Will he teach me wielding a sword, *Janaka*?”

Dharmasena nodded. “When you grow this tall.” He indicated a height about more than a foot taller than her height.

“When will I grow that big?”

Her questions never seemed to end. The spark in Abhaya’s eyes brought back vivid memories of his dead Queen, making him swallow. Vasumati had not lived long after Abhaya’s birth. But, in Abhaya, Dharmasena felt her virtual presence. Ignoring the question, he kissed her forehead.

“Reserve some love for the boy too *Prabho!*” Vajrabahu remarked, playfully ruffling Abhaya’s short plait. “I think he needs that.”

Dharmasena nodded. Left under Dharmasena's care six years ago --the very day Abhaya was born-- the Naga boy Manikandhara was given the name Vikramasena after the ceremonial adoption. Vasumati and he had seen their joy double. But it had been short lived. The Queen had developed complications and had succumbed barely a couple of months later. The tragedy had not left Dharmasena with much enthusiasm for bonding with the boy. At Katyayana’s suggestion, he had sent Vikram to the *Gurukula* at Avanthi, the very place where he had received his own education. Royal affairs and Abhaya’s toddler years had kept Dharmasena occupied and enabled him to get over Vasumati’s death. The mixed account he had received about Vikram’s progress had left him partly guilty and partly concerned. While

the boy's progress in martial arts was more than satisfactory, his interest in political education was reportedly low. The boy who displayed utmost agility in duelling with opponents more accomplished than himself lacked the initiative that the other princes in the *Gurukula* had. While his teachers admired his honesty, humility and compassionate outlook, they found him lagging in multiple behavioural aspects required in a king. The teachers opined that his troubled childhood was a probable cause for these limitations, and felt that an opportunity to bond with his adopted father would help him gain the confidence he needed. Seeing the sense in this, Dharmasena had summoned Vikram back from the *Gurukula*, resolving to focus his attentions on his daughter and son alike.

"There!" Abhaya squealed, pointing to the horses that stopped at the gates. "Vikrama is as tall as you!"

"*Bhrata* Vikrama," Dharmasena corrected, letting her jump to the ground. Abhaya leapt down the stairs and ran towards the approaching Vikram.

The moment left Dharmasena stunned. Had Vikrama been his own son, he realized to his regret, he would not be standing at the threshold instead of greeting him at the gates. Abhaya was too young to differentiate and her acceptance of the fraternal bond was natural. Smiling to himself, Dharmasena followed his daughter's lead to see Vikram lift her into his arms and walk towards him.

The boy, true to what Dharmasena had been told, had everything to make a father proud. His lanky physique spoke of the agility he was capable of on the battlefield, something his teachers had praised effusively. He restrained Vikram from touching his feet and drew him into an embrace. He was not sure how warm it was but told himself that it would only get better. What he saw in Vikram's eyes allayed his concerns.

Formal introductions were made, involving all the key people in Anagha's affairs. Vajrabahu sensed Dharmasena's restlessness and offered to take care of the rest of day's proceedings leaving the royal family to bond over their morning meal.

"First, tell us a story, *Janaka*," Abhaya demanded as they entered the dining hall

Usually, Dharmasena fed her personally before he ate himself. This was a habit he indulged in religiously as this was the time he got to quench his daughter's never-ending thirst

for stories. This was, he had found, as effective a way as any to impart the values and codes of Aryadharmā in more inspiring ways. And she was not the only one learning. Abhaya's questions were innocent, yet pertinent, often forcing him to rethink age-old legends and the way they were narrated.

"Vikrama, do you know stories?" She turned to Vikram. Abhaya hated to wait for long once her mind thirsted for a story.

"What did I tell you about addressing your elders?" Dharmasena raised a finger.

Abhaya sighed, "*Bhrata* Vikrama."

"How would you address *Senapati* Vajrabahu?"

"*Arya Vajrabahu*"

"And the priest?"

"*Acharya* Katyayana." Dharmasena took the opportunity to shove the ball of boiled rice into her mouth. But Abhaya proved too agile and dodged. "Story!" she demanded.

Dharmasena shook his head and turned to Vikram. "Why don't you ask *Bhrata* to tell you one?"

"Tell me a story, *Bhrata*." She turned to Vikram perching herself on a window sill, beckoning him closer.

Dharmasena could not help noticing her natural way of bonding. A thought struck him as he called Vikram to sit beside her. "Vikrama, tell us what you learnt about our city and the story of your great-grandfather.

"Virasena," Vikram started, watching Dharmasena feed Abhaya the first ball of rice. They exchanged smiles, as he continued. "Our great-grandfather was a soldier in the army of Avanthi, the neighbouring Mahajanapada. He was married to Indusmita, the daughter of a trader."

"Our great-grandmother," Abhaya added. "When they came here, this city was not built. They lived in a forest. Wild animals...."

"*Vatse*." Dharmasena interrupted, this time successfully feeding her.

Vikram smiled to himself and continued. "Great-grandmother's brother was brutally killed by robbers when he was travelling to Saurashtra. The lack of any action on the part of the erstwhile King of Avanthi, troubled great-grandfather a lot and with a band of trusted followers, he left the service of the king. The couple came here with their five-year-old son, Vikramasena." Vikram paused dwelling on the fact that Dharmasena had given him the name of his father. "They set up a camp that provided a safe haven for traders. The initial years were beset with unpleasant encounters with robbers and wild animals. Great-grandmother died fighting a leopard."

"Grandfather Vikramasena was brave and fought with hyenas at the age of ten. He ate pulses, roots and vegetables without complaining. After he grew up, he built the inner wall." Abhaya pointed outside the window. Dharmasena gave up interrupting her. His attention had shifted to Vikram now. On a whim, he scooped out a bigger ball of rice and pointed it to Vikram's mouth. The boy's eyes widened as he stared at him for a moment.

"Aaaaaaaa...", Abhaya prompted him to open his mouth, rejoicing that her eating burden would now be reduced. When Vikram opened his mouth, Dharmasena knew that he had done the right thing in calling him back. Parenting, he sighed to himself, came with many more lessons than managing kingly affairs.

*A new beginning.* He told himself as Abhaya and Vikram took turns in eating and in narrating the story.

"And remember, the Kingdom of Avanthi is our most important ally." Dharmasena prompted. Vikram nodded.

"No." Abhaya protested. "When we went there for Maashivaratri, that Prince, Anuvinda called our city an oversized inn."

"I heard the same from him several times in the Gurukula!" Vikram exclaimed as he recounted his first year there, when Anuvinda, the prince of Avanthi, graduated.

"They are not our friends," Abhaya concluded.

"And Princess Mitravinda?" Dharmasena asked her.

"She is my friend," Abhaya agreed.

"Then how can you say that they are not our friends?"

Abhaya looked at him for a while and chose not to answer. She instead opened her mouth asking for more rice, clearly wanting a distraction from the conversation. She then turned to Vikram. "I shall tell you the story of Queen Vishpala and how she fights robbers with an injured leg. She loses her leg, but then Gods give her an iron leg and she fights the robbers." She gauged the level of interest in Vikram's face with the summary before she nodded and started her narration.

Dharmasena smiled to himself. Avanthi as a kingdom was too important a neighbour to overlook. But Abhaya and even Vikram were young to understand the extent to which Anagha depended on the bigger kingdom. Understanding political dynamics aside, he wanted his children to bond together, something he felt he had achieved. The next day, he decided to tell them about the friends of this city, the Nagas, and of Anagheshwari, the spouse of Rishi Dattatreya, who was worshipped as the guardian goddess of the city.

## Chapter Three

“The ritual Friday worship of Anagheshwari!” Abhaya tugged at Dharmasena’s arm. “Did you forget, *Janaka*?”

Dharmasena smiled to himself, knowing that his ten-year-old had her heart set on the games she played with Katyayana’s adopted daughter after the worship at the temple. Pursing his lips, he said, “You will have to do it by yourself today. I am tired after patrolling the highway to Prabhasa all night.” Keeping the highway secure for the travellers was a task his family had religiously followed. By his time, Dharmasena had sufficient military under him to carry out the task. But he made it a point to personally participate in patrolling the way to Prabhasa every two to three months. The recent reports of robbers waylaying the pilgrims and increased crime required his intervention more frequently.

“Should I?” Abhaya asked, raising her brows. Her father’s absence during the worship meant a lot of things, the most disappointing of which was that she would not be able to sneak away in the middle. On the other hand, the act of standing beside *Acharya* Katyayana and participating in the ritual did make her feel incredibly important. She nodded at him. “And *Bhrata*?”

“Vikram should be coming to the temple directly. He was on highway patrol duty too...” Dharmasena paused looking at the eastern skies through the window. “He might have returned by now. But you must perform the worship.”

Abhaya nodded, tossing her long plait over her shoulder. She took her father’s leave and made her way to the king’s chariot, her personal maid following with a large brass plate containing vermilion, turmeric and other paraphernalia of worship.

“Take the guards with you.”

Abhaya slowed down. Taking the guards meant a reduced freedom to play after the *Pooja*. She pretended not to hear and darted forward, ignoring the maid’s plea. Jumping onto the chariot, Abhaya opened one of the jars that had already been placed on the chariot, and the sweet, warm aroma of Payasaanna, a dish made by boiling grains in sweetened milk, wafted out.

“This should be enough even for the Nagas,” she said. The Nagas, especially the younger ones, hiked to Anagha on Fridays to the temple in the later part of the day. Abhaya had seen her father make sure that there was enough Payasaanna to be distributed to all of them. The priest Katyayana too insisted on generous servings of the sweet to everyone. Dharmasena’s Friday worship was a ritual he preferred to complete before sunrise so that the everyday visitors to the temple were not inconvenienced.

Abhaya nodded to herself, and the maid hid a smile. The maid and other women folk who worked in the royal quarters enjoyed seeing the princess inadvertently mimicking her father’s mannerisms with comic precision. The chariot rode out of the gates of the inner city. The city of Anagha was yet to start its day. It would take a couple of hours more for the markets to open. When they did, they would bustle with activity as traders from the mainland of Bharatavarsha and those who came from the shores of Saurashtra would display their wares to trade in the outer circle of the city. The lone chariot sped towards the outer gates and turned in the north-eastern direction towards the temple of Anagheshwari. They spotted none on the way to the temple.

The day broke as they reached the temple. Abhaya jumped off the chariot and sprinted towards the temple. As she reached up to ring the bell at the entrance, her eyes fell on a prostrate figure covered with a long yellow cloth. Abhaya could only see his curls as he lay facing the wall of the temple, fast asleep.

*Bhrata Vikrama.* She desisted from ringing the bell, and her lips curved mischievously. The maid and the charioteer were still unloading the jars of Payasaanna, and *Acharya* Katyayana was still not at the temple. The life size idol of Anagheshwari caught her attention and she brought her finger to her lips, winking at the goddess. Noiselessly, she approached the sleeping figure on tiptoe. Stifling the giggles that were about to erupt out of her, Abhaya grabbed the dark curls and tugged them hard. The sleeping figure jerked awake.

"Wha—"

It wasn't Vikram. Abhaya’s grin faded and she backed away. “Who are you?”

The young man’s dusky skin and curls had led her to her mistake him for Vikram. But now that his yellow shawl fell from his shoulders, she saw how different he was from her

brother. His eyes, despite the rude interruption, had a spark that made him look as amicable as a prank-loving child. His brows rose, displaying three distinct lines across his forehead, as he looked at her.

“I am sorry! I... I saw you from behind and thought you were my brother...” Abhaya stammered. The young man smiled, and she instantly felt more at ease. The twinkle in his eye told her that he shared her appetite for pranks. She smiled and was about to say something, when unexpectedly, he grabbed her by the waist and pull her over him. Abhaya gasped in surprise. But before she could react, she noticed a third presence – a stranger just two paces away, behind her.

“Look out!” she exclaimed. The young man rose to his feet, stepping in front of her, shielding her from the hostile lanky figure who brandished a sickle.

“You seem to be a traveller with nothing valuable. Turn her over to us and we shall not harm you!”

*Us?* It was then that Abhaya noticed three more dacoits emerge from the shadows. She heard loud bangs on the door of the room where Katyayana lived. The dacoits had locked him in. She then heard a scream from the woman outside. The charioteer rushed into the temple only to be overpowered by two of the dacoits while the other two approached the youth menacingly. The young man only chuckled in response, shaking his head.

“Boy, you are new to Saurashtra. Our enmity is not with you, but with her father who needs to be put in his place. Turn her over to us.” The other dacoit came forward. His appearance was not too different from the rest. But his manner made it clear that he was the leader.

Abhaya glared at the dacoits. “My father protects the traders. My city is built to safeguard the traders and travellers. It is you dacoits who need to be put into place and not he!”

“Shut up!” the other dacoit snapped. “We will cut you into pieces and feed the vultures, girl. And you too, boy, if you try to act smart with us.”

The youth stood his ground, the smile still on his face. The bandit closest to him lifted his sickle. Before anyone could realize he even had a weapon, the young man’s sword stopped

the sickle in mid-air. The clang of metal on metal echoed in the hall. In the next moment, he had disarmed the bandit with a well-timed swing.

Abhaya gasped in surprise. It was two years since her military training started. She had become skilled at throwing short knives at stationary targets. Her lessons in holding a shield in defence had just begun and she was yet to learn to wield a long sword. But she had watched many mock duels on the palace training grounds and she knew a skilled swordfighter when she saw one in action.

The youth's movements were calm and confident, his thrusts deadly in precision. The bandit, apparently untrained except for his brute strength, was no match for him. The charioteer who had been struggling with two bandits let out a scream, as he was thrown to the ground and Abhaya turned her attention to him, drawing out her knife. The next moment, one of the two robbers was on the ground clutching at his side in agony, and the charioteer was left with a single opponent. She was ecstatic for a moment – she had finally put her lessons to use.

The youth was facing off with the leader of the gang. The younger robber who had been disarmed made for Abhaya. With her only weapon gone, Abhaya could only back away. Suddenly, the youth's sword came in between them providing momentary relief. She glanced at the leader who was in a daze and dived in between the clashing men to retrieve the robber's sickle. She did not know how to wield it, though. After a moment's pause, she thrust the weapon into the hand of her charioteer who was fighting unarmed against his lone adversary. She ran to Katyayana's room and unbolted the door. Katyayana emerged from the room and stood stunned at the chaos in the temple. The youth had now engaged all the three remaining bandits at once.

Abhaya watched him mesmerised. There was a curious absence of anger in the youth's eyes. Though he was surrounded on all sides, it was clear that he was unperturbed, and that he had the upper hand. His movements were easy, even playful. It was almost as if he were toying with his adversaries, not fighting them. Katyayana, gathering his wits, went to the big bell that was hung at the corner of the temple. It was used to alert the soldiers in the city and the sound was distinct from the other bell that was rung during the usual worship. He began

to ring the bell five times. The number of the rings was the code that would alert the guard at the fortress.

Almost at once, Vikrama came pounding up the steps.

*"Bhrata!"* Abhaya ran to him.

"What's happening here?" Vikrama drew his sword, taking in the scene. But before he could intervene, two of the robbers fell to the ground and the youth disarmed their leader and held him at the point of his blade.

The soldiers who had arrived with Vikrama rushed to round them up.

"Thank you, Arya!" Vikram said.

"For a moment, I thought that you are Mahadeva in human form, wielding a blade instead of a trident!" Katyanana exclaimed, clapping the youth on the shoulder.

"Can we know your name?" Abhaya asked, her gaze alternating between his face and his long sword.

He smiled, his eyes twinkling. "Two days back, someone named me Ranachora and today, you named me Mahadeva." He laughed. "If my identity changes at this rate, I don't see any meaning in having a name."

"Did you say 'Ranachora'? A coward? Who called you that?" Vikrama asked, his eyes widening in disbelief. "An expert swordsman like you!"

"What do your dear ones call you?" Abhaya persisted.

"Would you want to be one of them too?" the youth asked, nodding at Abhaya.

Vikram stepped forward before she could reply. "Our father is Dharmasena, the king of this city Anagha."

"Did you say Anagha, city of the sinless?" His glance alternated between Vikram and Abhaya. As Abhaya nodded, he continued. "Did a large group of Yadavas stop by here some days ago?"

“So, they are your dear ones,” Abhaya said. “Yes, they stopped by. Their leader’s daughter, Subhadra, is now my friend. But they all left for the shore city two days ago.”

“You are a Yadava then.” Vikram smiled. “Do come into the city and rest for a while, *Veeragrani*. We shall not press you to tell us your name if you don’t want to.”

“We shall find it out, though.” Abhaya chirped, tossing her plait over her shoulder. “Krishna. Subhadra’s brother.” She smiled and knitted her brows. “Son of...Lord Vasudeva?”

Vikram frowned. He remembered that Abhaya had grown friendly with the leading family of the Yadava group and had gathered quite a lot of trivia and insights which he felt was inappropriate for someone her age.

“Abhaya, *Dhaarmaseni*.” Abhaya returned the bow. “And my elder brother, *Vikramasena*.”

“Please,” *Vikramasena* indicated the chariot, inviting Krishna to join them.

“Forgive me, *Vikrama*. I need to go towards the shores now.” Krishna said. Before Vikram could say anything, his gaze turned towards the robbers. “What awaits them?”

“Death, I think,” Vikram replied.

A gasp escaped the youngest of the robbers.

Krishna’s eyes narrowed and put a hand on Vikram’s shoulder “They were trying to abduct the princess so that they could ‘settle scores’ with your father for, I assume, fighting off their kind to protect the travellers and traders.”

Vikram looked at Abhaya and she nodded. He drew her close. A bandit attack in broad daylight was abhorrent in itself, but an attempt to abduct Abhaya? It made his blood run cold. When he turned to look at Krishna, his eyes were moist.

“Send them to me, *Yuvaraja*,” Krishna said. “Do make a request to the King on my behalf.”

“Why? What will you do with them?” Abhaya asked, surprised.

“They shall not rob anyone from today and learn to make a living from hard labour or honest trade, *Dhaarmaseni*.”

“That is not what they are used to, Vaasudeva. You hope to reform them?” Katyayana, who had been listening in silence, spoke.

“They were only afraid to leave what their forefathers did for a living, *Acharya*. Robbery looked legitimate to their ancestors when prosperity was a captive of brute power. But with Yadavas settling on the shores of Saurashtra, we hope to usher in an era of trade that releases prosperity. In this new age, they should be given a chance to redeem themselves.” Krishna said.

“What if they don’t reform and continue in their old ways? What if they harm you or your people like they intended to harm us?” Katyayana argued.

“I hope not.” Krishna looked at the crestfallen faces of the robbers. “Who would like to lose lives doing perilous raids when they can instead live with respect?”

Abhaya saw the leader of the robbers drop to his knees and his three comrades followed suit. *He’s changed them already*. She exchanged a glance at Vikram and nodded.

“Why don’t you come into our city, Vaasudeva? Our father would want to meet the man who saved his daughter and might also agree to your proposal.”

“Another day,” Krishna promised, smiling. “And now that we will be neighbours, the frequency of my visits may make you regret having ever invited me.”

“No, not at all. But how can we let you go with no token of gratitude?”

“Could you lend me your chariot, then? I could use some speed.”

“It is yours,” Abhaya said, this time, not pausing to confirm with Vikram.

## Chapter Four

Kamarupa

“A *Shakta* conclave?” Mura stared at Bhauma.

“You heard it right, *Senapati*.” Bhauma beamed. “Maybe the first of its kind in our history.”

Mura frowned, thinking about the viability of the idea. *Shakta* practitioners in the plains of Bharata chose to remain in secluded places. The job of reaching out to each of the leading practitioners, Mura felt, would be time-consuming. “*Prabho*, hoping that everything goes according to plan, it might take at least two years.”

“Take three.” Bhauma’s words sounded final. “Also, send a word to Bhagadatta, the King of Pragjyotisha to assist us with messengers.”

Mura nodded. He doubted the possibility of assistance from Bhagadatta. A nephew of Bhauma, Bhagadatta’s claim to the throne of Pragjyotisha had fructified only when Bhauma abdicated his claim to the throne. Bhagadatta had committed to provide the necessary military support to the temple town of Kamarupa which remained under the autonomous control of Bhauma. Bhagadatta had stood by his word in the beginning and supported the three layered fortifications of the town. But, of late, Mura had felt his commitment wavering.

“He shall obey us this time,” Bhauma said, reading Mura’s thoughts. “Remember the untimely monsoon that depleted his granaries after he rejected our request to strengthen our military?”

Mura nodded. The rejection to strengthen Kamarupa’s military was the reason why he doubted Bhagadatta.

“The ways of the Supreme Goddess are mysterious, Mura. Bhagadatta would have realized his folly by now.”

The conversation was interrupted by the sound of an infant wailing. Mura stood up from his seat involuntarily. Bhauma too rose from his partly reclined position. The wailing then stopped. Mura sat again, but his eyes were fixed upon the quarters where Dhatri stayed.

“Your daughter is giving Dhatri a difficult time today,” Bhauma sighed.

“I am eternally grateful to her... and to you, *Prabho*.” Mura’s eyes turned back to Bhauma. “When her mother died barely months after her birth, I was at a loss to--”

“She is *my* child. Not yours.” Dhatri emerged from her quarters, carrying Mura’s daughter asleep on her shoulder.

Mura smiled his gratitude.

“Come Dhatri.” Bhauma extended his hand. Dhatri took her seat by his side.

Mura’s memory went back by a decade to the desires that had sprung in his heart, suppressed when he realized their futility. Age had just begun to show in the silvery strands among Dhatri’s curled locks though her face retained the flawless hue of her thirties. But her large eyes now looked like the very home of tranquillity. Her voice spoke of peace that could settle a mind wrought with restlessness. Mura closed his eyes, brushing his thoughts aside. He would not let the devotion he nurtured for Dhatri be sullied by memories of unfulfilled fantasies.

“Let me know about Bhagadatta’s reaction.” Bhauma’s words brought Mura back from his thoughts.

Mura bowed and extended his arms to take the infant. Dhatri shook her head. “You will only leave her unattended in her cradle, *Senapati*. She can stay with me till the night.”

After Mura left, Bhauma inched closer to Dhatri. She returned his smile, shifting the infant to her lap. Bhauma leaned back. “He still loves you, Dhatri.”

“Ten years should have been sufficient for someone to overcome that, Bhauma. I don’t love him and he has never spoken out his heart to me either.” Dhatri was unsmiling.

“I am the one standing in between.”

“No, the choice was mine!”

“Peace, Dhatri, peace” Bhauma raised both his hands. “It is just that the two of you are of the same age and....” He saw Dhatri frown. “Besides, we are *Shaktas*. There is nothing that stops you from gracing him.”

“He never sought me. Even if he had, wasn’t that about my choice, Bhauma? I would not have entertained him.” Dhatri replied. Glancing at Bhauma, she rose to her feet. “I thought we’ve had this conversation before and I had expected to hear something important from you. Not the same Mura issue.”

She carried the infant back to her quarters without looking back. She was placing the child in the cradle when she felt a tug on her arm. Her heart felt reined in. Despite reaching fifty springs, Bhauma retained the vigour of his younger years. She faced him frowning with an effort.

“That made you angry, love.”

Dhatri shook her head. She was annoyed but found it impossible to remain angry with him.

“With you by my side, the world will shortly be mine, Dhatri.”

“That sounds like something a lovelorn boy half your age would say to his equally juvenile beloved,” Dhatri retorted. But gazing into his eyes, she found a keenness beyond all emotional declaration. Bhauma’s modulated tone added to his resolve. She reached out to caress his cheek. The wrinkles that had just begun to appear on his face did not make him any less attractive to her. “What do you mean?”

Bhauma shook his head. “Never mind. There was something more important that I had to tell you, regarding the next phase of your *Shakta* practice.” He saw Dhatri’s eyes widen and smiled. “And it would be the choice of the Supreme Goddess this time.”

“I look forward to it Bhauma.” Dhatri’s hands pressed upon his shoulders. “To be frank, I am tired of the meat, fish and wine rituals now. I mean they are fine, but the practice should progress beyond them, shouldn't it?”

“I am glad you excluded the other two rituals of meditation and sexual union here.” Bhauma laughed. “But yes, there has to be some progress beyond all this. The progress is in invoking the Supreme Goddess within you to become her medium in flesh and blood.”

“Is that even possible?” Dhatri’s jaw dropped. “Within me?”

“It is possible but with a level of great commitment, Dhatri. And you have it in you.”

“How, Bhauma?” Dhatri stepped back. “Would I be possessed by the Supreme Goddess? Would I lose all consciousness and let her take over my body and voice?”

“No Dhatri, that happens only in folklore tales that the village patrol guards in the plains make up to keep awake at night. We, the *Shaktas* are beyond such conjuring tricks.”

Dhatri swallowed and sat on the couch, squirming at the taunt.

Bhauma took his place beside her. “Dhatri, look at me.” The sudden return of authority in his tone made her look up. “What do you wish for those who killed your Amaranatha?”

The memory of Amaranatha had its effect on Dhatri. It was not like he had been forgotten in the last ten years. He was a frequent topic of their conversations in the initial years of her initiation. She also knew that Bhauma’s profuse sympathy for her dead lover had endeared him to her. But in his company and through her initiation into the ways of Shaktism, she had overcome the pain in her heart. The same question in the initial years would have seen her thirsting for revenge. But now, she was past that.

Bhauma took note of her calm and continued. “There are many Dhatri and Amaranathas persecuted in the plains. Every Dhatri, unfortunately, does not find her way to Kamarupa to find succour at the feet of the Supreme Goddess.”

“I seek to end that gore and murder in the name of false honour in the plains. What can we do, Bhauma?”

“That is the Supreme Goddess speaking through you. An ordinary Dhatri would have simply wanted the death of her lover’s murderers,” Bhauma replied. “This is just what I feel.”

“This is just me growing mature, Bhauma. I shall believe in the Supreme Goddess when I can really do something to change the ways of the plains of Bharata.”

“Real change requires them to leave their narrow-minded rituals of abstinence, false beliefs about honour and their irrelevant deities and practices which come in the way of realizing the greatness of the Supreme Goddess.”

“Can we make them realize that, Bhauma? I want to.”

Bhauma saw the resolution appear in her eyes, replacing all traces of doubt. He had waited for this resolution for long. Under his stoic frame, his heart leapt at what seemed like

the fruit of his long- drawn labours. He nodded, looking straight into her eye. “That will need sacrifice, Dhatri.”

“I am ready to make any sacrifice.”

Bhauma drew a deep sigh and rose to his feet, motioning her to remain seated. He walked towards the portrait of the Supreme Goddess drawn on the wall. Unseen by Dhatri, his face assumed a strange pallor. “We shall show this world its place.”

## **MAURI**

She wants to kill the man who others called a God.

Love is but an obstacle in her path

With her father's death shattering her world, Mauri is torn away from everything she had once loved. Anger replacing every emotion within her, she seeks only one thing. To kill her father's killer. Even if the man is none less than Krishna Vaasudeva, the man who people worshipped as a God! Someone stands in the way, reining in her bitterness when she is the least prepared for it. The Rakshasa Prince Ghatotkacha! But by the time love sprouts within her, Mauri has gone too far in her thirst for vengeance. Can Mauri save herself and Ghatotkacha before the consequences of her own actions can destroy both their worlds?

Explore the lesser known legend of Mahabharata. If you like to read ancient Indian stories with strong female protagonists, do download Mauri

## Prologue

*Rakshasavarta - The Northern Forests*

The calm of the night had put every other soul to sleep. The silvery light of the Gibbous moon managed to penetrate through the thick wild cover and lit up the settlement of tree houses that formed the Rakshasa hometown.

*Sleeping in the night when they should be hunting! This had never happened in the history of the clan!*

Alambusha looked up at the spacious treehouse at the centre of the forest settlement. The structure was masterfully balanced with its front corners resting upon the wide branches of two of the biggest neem trees in the forest and the rest of it extended atop a small hillock. The house of the Lord of Rakshasas!

*Wild and regal at the same time. Just like her!*

How he longed to ascend these steps and be greeted by the bowed heads of his kinsmen. But the desire had to remain buried deep in his heart. The Northern Rakshasas would bow to the sister of the slain Rakshasa King and none else.

Alambusha's teeth dug into the mound of flesh of the lamb. The bitter taste on his tongue made it immaterial whether the flesh was properly cooked or not. The yellow flame of the fire in front of him only seemed to mock his helplessness. The helplessness he had felt when the woman he loved chose her own brother's killer over him, the loyal Alambusha. All in his absence! By the time he had returned to the Rakshasa Kingdom, another man was holding the reins of this realm as well as the hand of the woman he loved! The couple's unrestrained moans of pleasure had fallen upon his ears and made his blood boil. Alambusha ached to strangle him in bed, this new husband of the first female chieftain of the Rakshasas. He longed to tear the intruder's flesh off his bones with his bare teeth.

*Think of the look in her eyes then! The horror as he finished off this intruding enemy and then demanded her acquiescence following the Rakshasa code—that would be compensation for the humiliation he had suffered.*

The very thought exhilarated him more than any potful of wild toddy would. Alambusha grinned, tearing into the meat again and letting his mind conjure up pleasurable images. And once he had disposed the uninvited intruder, he would deal with the other obstacle in his path, the unborn child.

The night was fast fading. Glancing at the setting moon, Alambusha jumped down the huge boulder he was seated on and made his way slowly to the tree house, keeping to shadows. What he wished had to be done before the night gave way to the chirping of birds. One of those five hated brothers was always awake by the time the first bird chirped.

He had just put his foot upon the low branch when he heard her ear-piercing cry. *Filled with agony.* He froze. Another cry followed the first one. Louder and more agonised. *Has she taken ill? Was she dying? No, I need her alive!* As much as Alambusha wanted to find out what was torturing her, he was keenly aware of movements in the other tree-houses. He hardly had time to slink away into shadows again before others came out.

A new cry pierced his ears. A cry that was not hers! Alambusha felt his limbs go numb at the realisation. He clenched his fist and watched as jubilation broke out amongst the Rakshasas gathering before the house. Craning their necks at the curtained window of the house, they waited for the first sight. The first sight of their Prince.

Alambusha turned away. As if the humiliation of having an intruder for a King was not enough, he now had to bear the son born of him being announced as the heir! He turned the other way and stalked towards the river. The sounds of mounting celebrations hammered his ears. Despite his quick gait, he was still within earshot when the name was announced.

“Rakshasa Prince, Son of Vrikodara and Hidimba, Prince Ghatotkacha!”

## Chapter One

### *Kamarupa*

The wooden toy elephant lay before her. The elderly guard who had brought it for her was her father's old friend whom she had always pestered for toys like this one. She was unsatisfied with anything her father bought from the traders in the hills below. There was something special about the guard's carving. The toys felt like they belonged to her only when he carved them.

"Even this is yours, child." The elderly guard pushed a wooden rig pulled by two horse like figurines. "Your father wanted to see you play with these." He spoke no more seeing the large droplets of unshed tears in her eyes.

Mauri stared at the toys, gathering them both in her hands. "When did he return? And how did he die?"

"Return? From where?" The guard frowned.

"He had gone really far away. I did not get to see him for months!" Mauri's voice broke, but she was too proud to sob. Silent tears streamed down her cheeks. Yet something in her refused to accept her father's death.

"No, child. He did not go anywhere. He just did not enter the inner premises because of Mahadevi Dhatri's orders." He raised his hand to brush Mauri's head to console the child.

Mauri pushed his hand away and stared at him in disbelief. "He was here all this while? But the Mahadevi told me he had gone far away. Did she lie to me?"

The guard bit his lip, regretting the slip of tongue. He had not known that Dhatri had indeed lied to Mauri to spare her further pain because the eight-year-old would not have understood Mura's crime and punishment.

"Why did she lie to me?" Mauri's question was only a whisper, not really directed at him. And he could not think of an answer that she could comprehend.

A wounded woman had been found in Mura's arms and she had died by the time the other guards reached her. With circumstances showing him as the murderer, Dhatri had cast him out of the inner premises. The elderly guard had never believed in Mura's guilt, despite

all the evidence that had been stacked up against him. And when Mura had finally been vindicated, it was too late. But there was no way of explaining all this to the innocent child who had waited for her father's return with no inkling of what had happened to him.

"My child!"

The voice seemed faintly familiar. Mauri looked up at the door to see a man and was startled. The man bore a stunning familiarity to her father; only his grey hair and a rather worn-out face set him apart.

"I am Smara, your uncle, Mauri. Your father's useless brother." With tears in his eyes, the man held his arms open.

Mauri did not move. "Uncle Smara!" She had vague memories of her father speaking about his elder brother Smara, but she did not remember ever meeting him in person.

"You were an infant when I saw you last." Smara walked up to her and gathered her in his arms.

The guard turned to leave, to allow Mauri and her uncle the privacy to share their grief, but the hustle at the gate caught his attention. He stepped back and lay a sympathetic hand on Smara's shoulder. "It is time, brother Smara."

Smara nodded, lifting Mauri in his arms. *Time to bid his little brother farewell.*

Flames rose, crackling in the logs of the funeral pyre. Slowly, they engulfed Mura, highlighting his chiselled face in a golden hue. *As if Agni, the God of Fire, saluted the man He was about to consume.* The erstwhile commander of Kamarupa glowed in the unearthly light, before finally disappearing into the all-consuming flames.

Tears blurred Mauri's sight more than the smoke emanating from her father's pyre. *How could they burn her father?* Mauri wanted to leap down from her uncle's arms and put out the flames. Helplessness soon gave way to sobs. "Why are you burning him?"

"The brave commander is no more. He shall surely rise to heavens," a bystander said.

"Why?" Mauri was deaf to everything except the question that reverberated in her whole being. "Why? Uncle..."

Smara tightening his grip over her, his own dark eyes welling up.

Mauri stiffened, seeing Dhatri on the pedestal behind them. "Mahadevi! She told me Father had gone somewhere far. But the guard told me he never left. He told me it was she who punished him and kept him from seeing me!"

"Them killed him! All of them." Smara said bitterly and pulled her arm, forcing her to look away from Dhatri. "You shall not go anywhere near her, little one." She struggled against his grip, the accusation in her eyes striving to find their target in Dhatri. He held her tight. Her ninth spring not far off, Mauri was stronger than many of the children of her own age, in mind and body. *Just like his little brother.* He had been unable to save his brother, but he would be damned if he allowed anything to happen to his niece. "She...all of them killed your father."

His words stilled her. Mauri stared at him, teardrops hanging at the edge of her long lashes. "Who all?"

He softened at the sight of the confused pain in her eyes. "Child, I am so sorry! The Gods shall not forgive me for leaving your father alone when he needed me the most! I should have taken him and you away from these barbarians." He went on, unmindful of the fact that she was too shocked to even comprehend his words. "It is not too late. I shall take you away. To where they cannot touch you. To safety!" Smara kissed her forehead.

"Did Lord Bhauma kill him? He was bad. I know he was bad!"

She saw him staring at someone standing near the pyre. She had not noticed the dusky-skinned stranger before. "Who is he?"

"Your father's killer!"

His words sent a chill down her spine. The handsome stranger's image played on her dilated pupils that spat fire. "I shall kill him!"

"Shhhhh! Quiet," Smara hissed covering her mouth. "Child, we are not safe here. Quiet!" Thankfully none around him had heard her.

To her horror, Mauri saw the stranger walk towards them. His solemn eyes and placid forehead belied what he had done. *Father's killer!* A part of her wanted to leap at him and disfigure his face with her nails. A part of her wanted to shrink away, out of his reach. But he closed upon them. She felt her uncle stiffen. The stranger's hand brushed her head. Mauri tried to shake it away, hiding her face in her uncle's chest. The hand rested on her head for a long moment. She feared it would reach for her neck to strangle her. Her skin turned pale and her eyes closed. But then the hand and the man were gone. She heaved and sobbed aloud. "Is he gone?"

"Yes, my child. You are safe with me." Her uncle too seemed relieved. She turned to see the departing form of the dusky stranger. Shame filled her heart. She had let him go. She saw him climb up the stairs leading to the pedestal where Dhatri stood. "Why is she friendly with him?"

Her uncle shook his head "Never believe her again," he whispered. "They are together in this. All the same!"

Mauri watched in helpless anguish. Dhatri ought to have hated her father's killer! She should have tried to avenge his death. But instead, the Mahadevi was treating him like a friend! Then, she saw a third person, a woman, join them. "Abhaya Dhaarmaseni!" Mauri almost exclaimed. "I know her! She is good. She knew father—" Her words faltered when she saw the younger woman approach the stranger and hold his hands with all tenderness.

"Come back home!" The woman announced to all the other women, holding the stranger's hand.

"She is his friend too! Possibly his wife." Her uncle looked away in distaste. "Low-born worms! All of them."

Mauri's fingernails dug into her uncle's upper garment. She rested her head upon his shoulder, his words of consolation going in vain. Something was wrong with everything at Kamarupa! It had killed her father. It would come for her too! "Uncle, do you have a home? Take me there!"

"Of course, little one. There is no way I will leave you at that woman's mercy now!"

Mauri pretended to be asleep on her uncle's shoulder while he braved talking to Dhatri. She was afraid Dhatri would not allow her to leave Kamarupa. But to her relief, the Mahadevi raised no objection.

Before long, the cursed hill was behind them. The bullock cart made its way across the foothills into strange lands with strange people. Mauri kept glancing back till the outline of the hill of Neelachala was no more visible. Something struck her. "Nandini! Uncle, Nandini, my friend. We left her behind, poor thing! They might harm her."

"We are not going back now, Mauri." Smara shook his head. "Don't worry. Nandini will be safe."

"Can I go and see her secretly?"

Her uncle threw up his hands. He was not used to dealing with children. But she was the only remaining memory of his brother and he could not be harsh with her! "Sure, child, when you grow up." Thankfully, she accepted that.

"That man who killed father...," she said, her eyes still fixed on the hill that was no longer visible in the horizon. "What was his name?"

Her uncle paused for a long moment, then decided to tell her. "Krishna...Krishna Vaasudeva from Saurashtra."

## Chapter Two

### *Rakshasavarta, Northern Forests*

The golden rays of dawn bathed the mountain on the horizon with a golden hue. The location was apt, and so was the time. Hidimba, the Chieftain of the Rakshasa tribe stared at the rising reddish ball and then at the boy who stood by her side. She smiled seeing the slight frown on his forehead. A characteristic mark of attention, it also reminded her of someone. Someone dear and lost to her in the past nine years. The father would have been proud to see his son. Tall and agile for his age. Sensitive and perceptive too. *Just like him!*

Brushing her memory aside, Hidimba knelt to meet the boy's gaze. "Ready, Ghatokacha?"

The boy nodded, returning her smile. Wiping away the beads of sweat from his bald head, Ghatokacha unsheathed his weapon, the long knife he was supposed to hunt with. He had been eyeing the weapon with longing all these days. Today, as a Rakshasa of ten springs, he could go on his first hunt.

Her faithful followers taking positions by her side, Hidimba also took up her preferred weapon, nocking an arrow into her bow. The forest pathway opened into the outskirts of the serene hill settlement of Badarika. Dawn was the time when animals that ventured out to the settlement at night returned. A deer, a wild donkey, or, if he was lucky, Ghatokacha might even get to nab a boar! Hidimba and her Rakshasas were prepared for all possibilities. Taking her cue, Ghatokacha raced ahead towards the settlement. She watched him sprint a long distance and then raise his hand in a signal. He had found the hiding place from where he would hunt his first prey!

Hidimba's heart raced. *After all, she too was a mother like any other and this was the first time her son was outside her protection, running free in the wilderness!* She would rush to his aid if he needed it, but she had to show restraint, give him a chance to prove himself. Subconsciously, she gripped the tail-end of her arrow tighter. The next hour was uneventful. Hidimba saw Ghatokacha leap out of his hiding place once or twice, only to have to return disappointed at the false alarm. She bristled internally to hear her aides chuckle at his restlessness. *Which child of that age is not restless?* Soon they were breaking into tall tales of their own first hunts. When the voices got louder, she hushed them and squinted into the

distance. Ghatotkacha had not ventured from his position for a while now. Something seemed unusual. Hidimba was tempted to call out. But she decided to wait. Suddenly, her aide gasped. She followed his gaze and her heart stopped.

*A leopard!* Its treacherous brown skin blending perfectly with the undergrowth the predator made its way towards the forest. Hidimba hoped that it would not smell her son. She hoped harder that Ghatotkacha had the presence of mind to not mistake a predator for prey! Murmuring a prayer, Hidimba crept forward, hoping for the beast to enter the range of her arrows before anything disastrous happened. As she got closer, Hidimba saw the leopard disappear into the bushes. It had already caught its prey!

Thanks to his heightened sense of alertness, Ghatotkacha stayed still. Unaware of his mother closing the distance between them, he pricked his ears at the slight rustle of the dried leaves on the path. Peering through the gaps in the undergrowth that shielded him, he spotted the striped tail. His fingers tightened around the hilt of his knife. But the young Rakshasa prince knew better than to engage a predator like this. He could not see his mother from where he hid, but something told him she would do everything to protect him in case the leopard spotted him. A cry pierced the air.

*A child!*

The unfortunate toddler called out to its mother again and then Ghatotkacha heard a soft thud. A low roar followed. Quicker than his own mind, Ghatotkacha leapt out of the shrubbery and let out a challenging cry. Startled by the unwelcome intrusion, the leopard roared again, baring its teeth. With that warning, it turned back to the now unconscious child. Ghatotkacha cried again, throwing a piece of rock at the cat's rear. The leopard let out an impatient snarl and took the child in its jaws. Ghatotkacha, knowing it was now or never, hurled himself at the predator. From afar, he could hear his mother's cries of warning. But he could not make any sense of them. He caught hold of leopard's hind leg and drove his knife into its side. The predator squirmed violently and attacked him, claws unsheathed. Ghatotkacha barely managed to dodge its hold over his neck, but in the process, got his arms mauled. The knife was still stuck in the leopard's body. Ghatotkacha parried its next attack, kicking hard at the beast's face. But the leopard caught his leg within its jaws and dragged him across the ground. Just then an arrow came whizzing through the wind, but missed them

both. Ghatokacha sensed Hidimba approaching them and staggered towards the child, stationing himself in between the prey and the predator. Another arrow hit the leopard, but not hard enough to penetrate its hide.

The sounds of horns filled the air and the wounded feline retreated into the thickets. Ghatokacha looked at the child he had saved. A boy of hardly four or five years, mauled and wounded. He needed immediate care. Hurried footsteps approached. Hidimba clutched at him, quickly scanning his wounds. She then whirled around, turning her attention towards the hiding predator.

“Wait! The child!” Ghatokacha cried, and immediately, one of his mother’s aides took out water from his gourd to tend to the child.

Hidimba and her aides prodded at the thickets with their spears forcing the leopard to come out, angry and desperate. Hidimba noted the wound Ghatokacha’s knife had caused. The wound had indeed weakened the feline. Hidimba smiled at Ghatokacha’s strength. The leopard, now visibly afraid of the group of armed Rakshasas showed no signs of aggression and growled and crouched low to maintain its defence. Two of Hidimba’s followers took out a net, but she shook her head.

*The boy will learn soon.* Hidimba looked at the beast with compassion. Then, with a deep breath, she leapt at it. She had faced and killed a lot of its kind in her past. Timing her leap with lightning precision, she dealt a blow to the leopard’s jugular. When she landed on the ground, also saw the beast collapse, now bleeding profusely and whimpering. Before long, it lay lifeless, freed of pain by her compassionate blow.

“Take the child to the settlement and reunite him with the parents,” she instructed two of her followers.

Stroking Ghatokacha’s hair indulgently, she pointed to the dead leopard. “The animal would have died as the wound would have festered and worsened, Ghatokacha. It was necessary to end its pain and not leave it to a slow and painful death.”

Ghatokacha nodded, his forehead wrinkling in thought. “We should be kind even in killing.”

His mother nodded and handed him his knife, now deep red with the leopard’s blood.

"Can I hunt tomorrow too?" he asked when they as they walked home, not letting the other Rakshasas' praise of his courage go to his head. Hidimba nodded drawing him closer with a mix of pride and protectiveness. *He will grow into a fine warrior. Worthy of the blood that runs in his veins!*

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*Three years later, at Pragjyotisha*

*Mauri fretted, drawing her knees in close, as she sat on the porch of her uncle's home. Clenching her teeth, she dug her nails into her garment, waiting for her uncle to emerge from inside to pacify her. He was very different from her father. Mura had loved her, and she had always found it hard to disobey him. Smara, on the other hand, did love her, but something about him always made her want to rebel. It gave her perverse satisfaction to ask for things Smara would want to refuse. It had almost become a norm, the whole routine of sulking and refusing food if he rejected any of her wishes till the guilt-ridden man eventually gave in and granted her what she sought.*

*Smara did come out of the door. But instead of his usual placating self, his eyes remained firm. Mauri looked away, remaining her defiant self.*

*Smara walked up to her and sat by her side. But he chose to remain quiet, determined not to accede to this wish of his niece, dear as she was to him.*

*"I miss the temple," she said in a small voice, casting a look at Smara from the corner of her eye to gauge his expression.*

*"The Goddess seems to have left the temple forever, child. It is no longer what it used to be."*

*"The crowds have only increased over the last year, Uncle!" Mauri protested. "Even the children of the neighbourhood go to Kamarupa more often."*

*"No, Mauri. Anything but this."*

*"Father loved that temple. And the Goddess."*

*"I know he did. And the Goddess left with him, child." Bitterness eclipsed any consolation his words could offer.*

Mauri stayed quiet for a while, but showed no signs of agreeing to eat her meal. Smara pulled her arm gently and the broken toy cart that she had saved as her father's memory slipped from her hands. Smara sighed seeing her pick it up like it were an irreplaceable treasure. "Mauri, I am afraid the high priestess might again lure you away from me. She has, in fact, sent for you a couple of times in the past."

Mauri looked up, a mix of anger and pain in her eyes. "Mahadevi Dhatri sent for me? Why did you not tell me about it, Uncle?"

"Mahadevi indeed! Like I don't know about her farce!" Smara raved. "Your father's bad days started the day she came to Kamarupa." Over the years, Smara's memories of past events had turned more and more vehement. "I met him only a couple of times after the fateful day and found him in total awe of her. What did she give him in return? A life worse than death and a death that he did not deserve!"

Mauri's fists tightened and the pain of her nails digging into her own palms broke the spell of her uncle's narration. "Let me go there one last time and demand answers from her. She lied to me and I need to know why."

"She will have no answers for you, child." Smara shook his head and leaned against the wall. "People make a goddess of her. In truth, she was a puppet in the hands of that Bhauma. Now she is just a minion to those imperial powers. What will she have to say to you, Mauri?"

Mauri felt the familiar contempt for Dhatri rise within her.

"Which embodiment of Goddess will allow her defenceless female followers to be taken away by that Krishna Vaasudeva as his 'brides'?" Smara continued. "She allowed them to be taken away by the killer of your father!"

The name of Krishna made Mauri's eyes turn crimson and tears of rage began to flow.

Smara called out to the maid to bring him the plate containing Mauri's meal and started to feed her. "I really need you to understand why I want to shield you from that temple, that priestess, and anything that had to do with your father's past, Mauri," he said gently.

But she was not listening. All her emotions had got centred on that name. *Krishna Vaasudeva!* Her father's killer.

## Chapter Three

### **Kamarupa – Five years later**

The bells rang in unison, the characteristic resonance reverberating across the temple hall and announcing the main Aarati of the morning's worship. Dhatri carried the flame along the long lines of enthusiastic crowds who had thronged to the shrine. The pilgrim count had gone up significantly in the recent years. The once-spacious temple hall was now insufficient to hold all the pilgrims at once. She had had to increase the number of temple guards to manage the crowds.

It was a good couple of hours before the temple hall cleared up save some enthusiastic pilgrims who stayed back to learn about Shakta ways of worship.

On this day, Dhatri spotted a number of young children. "Time for storytelling rather than the theories of the Shakta tradition!" she smiled to herself.

As if reading her mind, an eight-year-old tugged at her upper garment. "Would you tell us a story Mahadevi?"

The girl reminded Dhatri of someone. Someone she had not forgotten even after all these years. "As you wish child."

She beamed, bending to lift the girl in her arms when another boy of almost the same age called out from the crowd. "Who is greater, Mahadevi? Lord Narayana or the Goddess Parameshwari?"

"It is the Goddess. Isn't it?" the girl chirped.

"No, it is Narayana," the boy countered.

Dhatri laughed aloud. After years of experience in instructing Shakta philosophy, the most challenging part she found was to engage children and also impart the complex dynamics of a chosen deity. She also felt the most alive while telling them stories, trying to quench their zeal, answering their unpredictable volley of questions.

"Now, now, what brought that debate?" she beamed, calling both of them closer.

“In the war against the demon Bhandasura, even the Goddess had to invoke Narayana in his various forms!” the boy said at once. “Which means she needed his help.”

“Idiot! Were you even listening?” The girl nudged him hard. “Narayana had to manifest at the command of Goddess Parameshwari. Literally out of her finger nails!”

The pilgrims who had collected there broke into laughter. But they also looked at the high priestess to ‘resolve’ the debate with her insight. She could hear her own younger self vehemently agreeing with the small girl. But years of Saadhana had given her more than just an attachment to the form of the Supreme she worshipped in the form of the Supreme Goddess.

“The story has a deeper significance.” She addressed not just the children, but everyone present. “Neither did Narayana hesitate to become Her ‘tool’ when Bhandasura presented the ultimate danger to this universe, nor did She flinch from killing the demons Madhu and Kaitabha when they proved a handful for Him by usurping cosmic knowledge. Now what does that tell you?”

“They are friends?”

“No, they are brother and sister?”

“More than that.” Dhatri beamed at the rapt children again. “They are one and the same, inseparable and indistinguishable.”

Dhatri saw them stare at her. The Oneness of Gods and Goddesses was a realisation she had achieved over years and she did not expect them to understand it on the spot. But she prayed that this narration would stay in some corner of their young hearts, to come out and guide them towards realisation when they were faced with relevant life experiences.

“That was the liveliest narration I heard in many years!”

Dhatri turned in surprise. “Kadambari?”

“Greetings, Mahadevi. Glad to see Kamarupa being run the way it suits the high seat of the Supreme Goddess.” The older woman smiled through the wrinkles that only added to the elegance of her radiant dusky hue.

Dhatri nodded at the pilgrims, signalling the end of the session, and turned to Kadambari with a warm smile. She had deep respect for Kadambari. A daughter of a Naga chieftain from the western corners of Bharatavarsha, she had left an abusive husband and joined the sect of Shaktas. Under her guru, a realised Shakta, she had imbibed the essence of the Shakta tradition, and learned to avoid all extreme emotions and remain unaffected by the shadows of her past. It was Kadambari who had first recognized Bhauma for the heinous demon he was, and played a crucial role in assisting Krishna's siege on Kamarupa. There were times Dhatri wished she had had a guru like Kadambari, instead of a zealot like Bhauma, when she had been in dire phases.

After waiting till the others had left, Kadambari continued, "The imperial campaign of Rajasuya has concluded at last, Mahadevi Dhatri. The emperor and empress of Indraprastha seek your presence at the final ritual of Rajasuya."

Dhatri responded with a polite, non-committal smile. An invitation from the emperor could not be rejected easily. But something bothered her about going back to the plains. Dhatri had never set foot beyond the hill of Neelachala ever since she had arrived there almost twenty-five years ago.

"The event would be attended by all the rulers of Bharata, the Rishis, religious gurus and leaders of various clans. You are the high priestess of our order, Dhatri," Kadambari said noting Dhatri's reluctance. "Your presence could make a difference to the hundreds of practitioners still living in fearful seclusion, Mahadevi." She saw Dhatri nod, still uncertain, and added, "Queen Abhaya Dhaarmaseni and Lord Vaasudeva seek to see you there as well."

Dhatri's lips parted at the memory. "The couple who changed everything in my life." She sighed and smiled. "Perhaps, it does help meeting them both too."

Kadambari felt uncertain about how Dhatri felt about the nineteen-year-old maiden who had entered Kamarupa years ago and left the temple town with almost all the women that Dhatri had trained. Blinded by her anger towards the practices of the plains of Bharata, Dhatri had put her trust in the erstwhile lord of Kamarupa Bhauma who had appeared to be a dedicated practitioner of the Shakta order. Little had she doubted his real intentions. But Abhaya's arrival had opened her eyes to some bitter truths. The truth about Bhauma's zealous aim to control the whole of Bharata using religion and wronged women as his tools. The truth

about his subverting the ancient order of Goddess to suit his own interest. The truth about his imprisoning and torturing the women who rejected him. The truth about his façade of love for Dhatri. When Abhaya succeeded in sending a message across to Krishna about Bhauma, the latter had attacked Kamarupa with a meagre force and killed Bhauma, rescuing the temple from his clutches. But, in the process, the world that Dhatri had created for herself and her followers had been shattered to pieces. It was a philosophical defeat for the Mahadevi who had nevertheless accepted it with grace.

But Kadambari viewed the whole episode differently, seeing it as a long-term victory of Shakta lore itself, in rising above the false beliefs propagated by Bhauma. “It has been years since, Dhatri.” She reached out to hold Dhatri’s right hand. “They have nothing but respect and affection for you.”

Kadambari left Kamarupa the next day, leaving Dhatri in deep thought. After a while, the Mahadevi of Kamarupa sent for the head of the temple guard. “Travel down to the foothills to the family of our late commander Mura. I wish to see his daughter Mauri.”

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“No way!”

Mauri looked up, partly startled by her uncle’s stern reply. The guard too seemed to be taken aback.

“We lost enough being associated with that cursed temple town. Can’t have more of it.”

“Lord Smara, you might not be aware, but the Mahadevi brought up the daughter of the late Mura like her own child. Ask her, she has spent more of her waking hours with Devi Dhatri than with her own father. And the Rajasuya is an opportunity for the child to visit the vast plains of Bharata. A chance for learning that we must not keep her away from.”

“What is Rajasuya?” Mauri asked the guard.

“Child, it is the finale of a vast campaign by the King, no, the Emperor of Indraprastha, to unite the land under one rule. It is a spectacle that people of your age should not miss.”

“Stop trying to win her over! For the sake of Mahadeva! She is just fourteen!”

“Fourteen. Do you have any idea what the princesses and noble maidens of this land learn by the time they cross sixteen? You have only kept the child of our late commander in the dark, away from any kind of education!” The guard lowered his tone and added. “Mahadevi Dhatri promises to return her safely within a year during which she would also undertake a pilgrimage to various Shakta temples.”

“Who would attend this Rajasuya?” Mauri interrupted yet again, this time with a far more decisive tone than her uncle had ever seen her using.

“The Kings all across the land, princes and princesses, noblemen and women, Rishis and Rishikas, practitioners of various sects...” The guard started. “Besides, the temple town of Kamarupa also received generous grants from Indraprastha and Dwaraka. Devi Dhatri feels it is a courtesy to thank the emperor and Lord Vaasudeva in person.”

“And what exactly does our child have to do with—,” Smara broke off abruptly as Mauri raised her hand decisively.

“I shall go.” Mauri declared. Seeing the forbidding look on her uncle’s face, her eyes assumed a sternness she had inherited from her father. A sternness that had often made Smara feel helpless!

The guard wasted no time. “I shall come for you by dawn of day after, child Mauri.” He left with a smile.

“Are you out of your mind?” Smara shouted as soon as the guard left.

Mauri frowned “The guard was right!” She snapped. “All you did these years in the pretext of ‘protecting’ me was to keep me away from learning anything worthwhile!”

“Mauri!”

“Don’t you try staring me down, uncle Smara?” Mauri crossed her hands across her chest. “Had father been alive, he would have taught me to use the blade, climb the hill, cut the wood, read and write, and...”

“No learning is worth mingling with those jackals.”

“I don’t care what you think of the Mahadevi.” Mauri declared. “Staying away from Kamarupa has only ruined my one chance of receiving an education.”

She saw her uncle soften and approach her. Mauri knew well his guilt over being unable to save her father's life. She could make him do anything for her just by mentioning her father's name. She smiled inwardly. "I can take care of myself, uncle."

"Think again, Mauri. I know Mura would have taught you a lot. This uncle of yours is such a dimwit that...leave it, I shall call upon teachers of any skill you are interested in. Stay back, child."

"I know you care for me like none do, uncle." Mauri held his arm close to her, another gesture which always won him over. "But I badly want to go to this Rajasuya. I shall return sooner than you can imagine."

She knew he had to give in. Thankfully for Mauri, he did not ask why she wanted to go and watch this Rajasuya so badly. He had missed seeing her eyes flash when the guard mentioned a particular name. He would never know.

